OUR MISSION IS TO SUPPORT THE CHURCH IN HER CHARGE OF PRESENTING EVERY PERSON MATURE IN CHRIST (COL. 1:28).

REFORMED FORUM

SPRING/SUMMER 2024 MAGAZINE

CONFESSIONAL INTEGRITY IN THE WAKE OF THE AUBURN AFFIRMATION

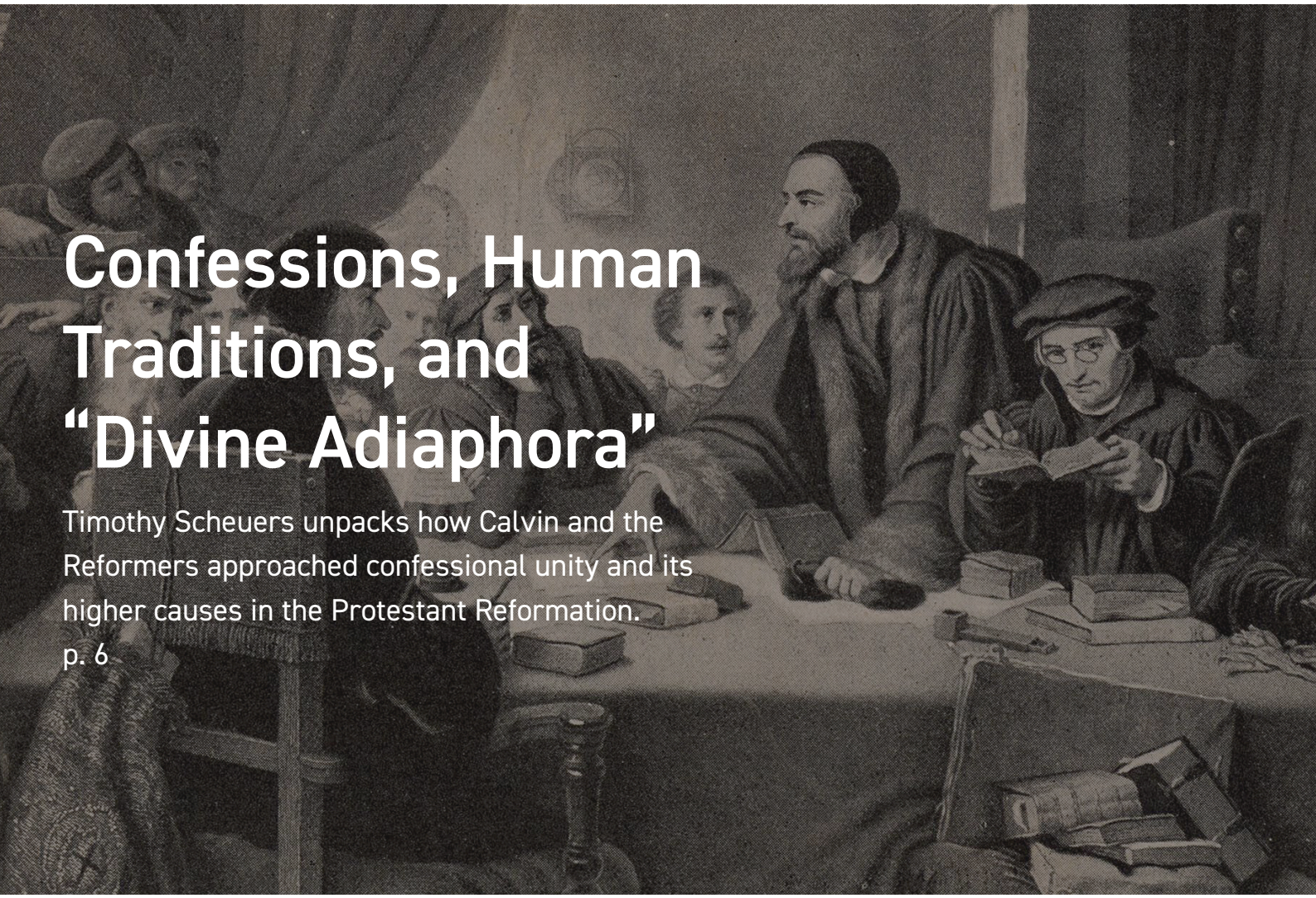
Camden Bucey reflects on the Auburn Affirmation's legacy as a vital call for confessional fidelity and integrity. p. 8

ANIMUS IMPONENTIS AND CONFESSIONAL SUBSCRIPTION

Alan Strange considers how the church receives and understands its confessional standards. p. 11

NEW REFORMED FORUM PUBLICATION

Scott Hatch's book unveils the significance of Van Til's treatment of the Christian's greatest good (*summum bonum*) in the realm of Reformed ethics. p. 15



Confessions, Human Traditions, and "Divine Adiaphora"

Timothy Scheuers unpacks how Calvin and the Reformers approached confessional unity and its higher causes in the Protestant Reformation. p. 6

In a cultural landscape undergoing significant transformation, the church finds itself at a crucial crossroads, echoing the challenges it faced in the early twentieth century. As we mark the 100th anniversary of the Auburn Affirmation this year, we are starkly reminded of the critical need for confessional fidelity in the face of theological liberalism's inclination to prioritize tolerance over doctrinal integrity. This significant anniversary calls us to reaffirm our dedication to the biblical truths that underpin and shape our identity within the Reformed tradition.

In this issue, we include articles that shed light on the nuanced understanding of confessional subscription and its historical context. In addition to my historical piece on the Auburn Affirmation, we include an article by Dr. Alan Strange, which explores the concept of *animus imponentis*, elucidating the conception of confessional adherence. We also include an article by Dr. Timothy Scheuers, wherein he traces the Reformation's approach to confessional subscription, revealing its intricate relationship with the principle of freedom of conscience. These discussions not only clarify what confessional integrity entails but also affirm that the dilemmas confronting the contemporary church echo those of the past. By drawing lessons from historical debates, we equip ourselves to navigate the complexities of faith with wisdom and conviction, ensuring our future is informed by a rich legacy of theological thought and practice.

In pursuit of our Colossians 1:28 mission at Reformed Forum, particularly through our education initiative Reformed Academy, we aim to deepen our collective understanding of these truths, ensuring that Christians are equipped to navigate the complexities of modern theological discourse with clarity and conviction. We are emboldened by our confessional heritage, which has guided the church through centuries of challenges, and we are committed to upholding this legacy in our educational and community-building efforts.

We are profoundly grateful for the financial generosity of our supporters, which enables us to offer rich theological resources and foster meaningful conversations around our historic faith and its application in today's world. As we engage with contemporary issues, we do so with a keen awareness of the balance required between holding fast to our doctrinal standards and addressing the questions of our time with grace and wisdom.

Let us move forward with a firm grasp on the truth and a heartfelt pursuit of unity, embodying both confessional fidelity and integrity. As you read this issue, I hope you find encouragement and strength in its pages, emboldening your efforts to live and proclaim the gospel. In doing so, we not only honor our Reformed heritage but also contribute to a vibrant, enduring witness of the gospel in our world. May this issue inspire us all towards deeper faith and greater unity in our Christian walk.

In Christ,

Camden Bucey
Executive Director

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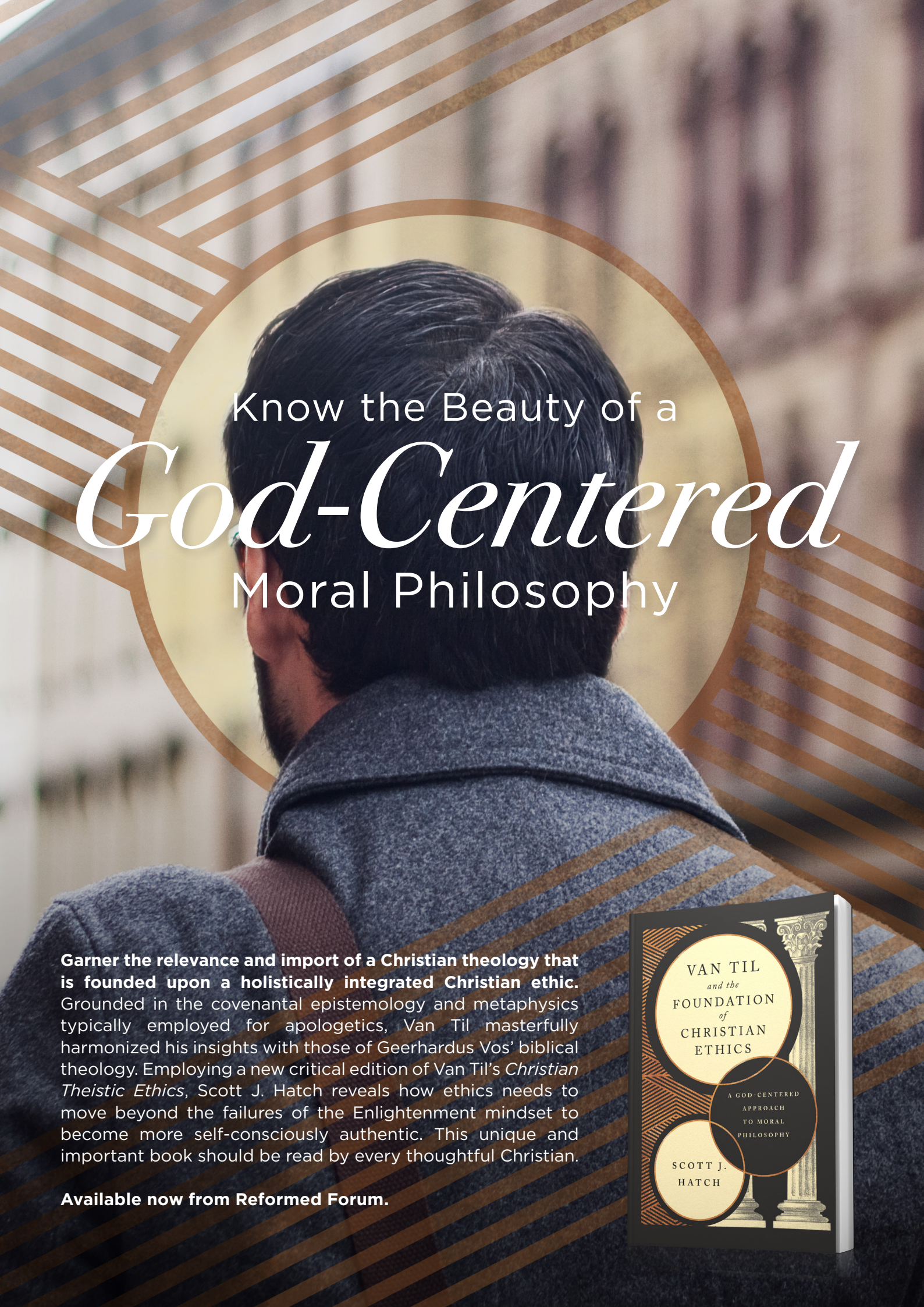
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Garner the relevance and import of a Christian theology that is founded upon a holistically integrated Christian ethic. Grounded in the covenantal epistemology and metaphysics typically employed for apologetics, Van Til masterfully harmonized his insights with those of Geerhardus Vos' biblical theology. Employing a new critical edition of Van Til's *Christian Theistic Ethics*, Scott J. Hatch reveals how ethics needs to move beyond the failures of the Enlightenment mindset to become more self-consciously authentic. This unique and important book should be read by every thoughtful Christian.

Available now from Reformed Forum.



REFORMED ACADEMY UPDATE

RYAN NOHA

To borrow a beloved phrase from the Westminster Confession of Faith 19.7, education and development "do sweetly comply" at Reformed Forum. Generous donors enable us to create and distribute free, on-demand resources for more than 5,500 Reformed Academy students in 87 countries. As the Lord blesses these students and their churches in Christ, they join us in calling upon the Lord to provide for our mission and by contributing their own time, talents, and treasures to support the church's presentation of "everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28).

Reformed Academy Update

We now offer more than twenty, five-hour video courses completely for free in our Reformed Academy. In keeping with the theme of this issue, our curriculum is designed to be *confessionally Reformed* in the best and truest sense: reformed according to Scripture and consistent with the system of doctrine taught therein. Last year, we added eight courses to our catalog that provide biblical instruction to Christians across the full spectrum of levels of education and familiarity with the Reformed faith, from Mark Winder's Christ-centered Introduction to the Pentateuch to Lane Tipton's highly technical Trinitarian Theology of Thomas Aquinas. Notably, these two courses are the first to feature studio lighting and improved set design that we hope will better complement the excellence of the teaching.

We have also taken strides to make our existing courses more accessible and useful for Christians around the world. Thanks to teams of committed and gifted volunteers, we have debuted two new languages in our Reformed Academy—Indonesian and Portuguese subtitles for Introduction to the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til and Introduction to Covenant Theology, respectively. In an effort to meet the growing demand for Reformed Sunday school resources, we are working hard to ensure that all of our Bible study courses come with supplemental materials, including quizzes and handouts with discussion questions. As a capstone to each Reformed Academy course, we continue to prepare companion books; *Introducing the Faith: A Study of the Westminster Shorter Catechism* by Jim Cassidy is nearly complete.

Looking ahead in 2024, we plan to release three additional courses that have already been recorded:

- The Theology of Calvin's Institutes (Books 1–2) by Carlton Wynne;
- The Life of Abraham (Genesis 12–25) by Robert Arendale; and
- Calvinistic Trinitarianism: A Reformed Federalist Alternative to Thomistic Sacerdotalism by Lane Tipton.

All of our faculty members will be back in the studio this year, with Camden Bucey prepared to record an introductory course on Christian apologetics that sets forth the biblical and theological foundations for defending the faith. With the exception of Lane Tipton's Theology of Romans and Will Wood's Worship According to the Pattern: Redemptive History and the Regulative Principle in the Old Testament, our projected 2024 courses will all be geared toward the adult Sunday school level. While never wavering in our theological distinctives, we hope to provide students with additional on-ramps to our more advanced course, podcast, and print materials and to increase our usefulness to pastors worldwide who are looking to robustly Christ-centered materials that are accessible for their sheep.

Development Update

We are so thankful for the Lord's faithful and abundant provision through our many donors. At the close of 2023, saints from across the globe joined our "Planting for the Future" campaign, sowing seeds to sustain and even expand Reformed Forum's support of the church's mission. By God's grace, this was our strongest year-end fundraising effort to date, with 221 generous donors contributing a total of $175,902.

Compared to past levels, giving to Reformed Forum's mission remains strong and consistent. We are greatly encouraged by the steady increase in number of donors and also the rate of donor retention year-by-year. There is even more cause for thanksgiving when we consider the veritable explosion in monthly giving last year. Up from 80 monthly donors in April 2023, we now have more than 130 recurring givers who contribute a total of approximately $10,000 per month.

While we are grateful for the current upward trend in giving, our income from donations—which constitutes 88 percent of our total revenue—still falls short of our annual budget requirements. To maintain our operations at the current level, preserve our dedicated staff, and continue our present range of activities, a substantial increase in financial support is

essential. Therefore, our fundraising efforts for 2024 are strategically aimed at forging relationships with individuals and foundations that are not only generous in their giving but are also deeply committed to fostering the spiritual growth of God's people.

In the end, we take great heart in the Lord and give him thanks in all circumstances. As we pursue our Colossians 1:28 mission through the work of education, development, marketing, publishing, and more, we know that all these things most sweetly comply only as they are oriented to God's glory and aimed at the good of his people. Join our mission today, remembering God's exhortation and promise for those who have set their hopes on him: "They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life" (1 Tim. 6:18–19).

Donate today to support the church in presenting every person mature.

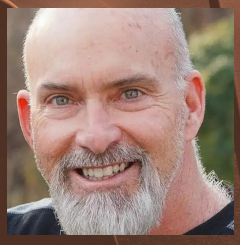


Ryan Noha is Director of Education and Advancement for Reformed Forum.

REFORMED FORUM EVENTS
FROM MAY TO OCTOBER 2024

SATURDAY, MAY 18
ONLINE SYMPOSIUM: THE REFORMATION IN THE FRANCOPHONE WORLD

The speakers are Daniel Borvan, Stephen Davis, Martin Klauber, and David Noe.



https://reformedforum.org/symposium-on-the-reformation-in-the-francophone-world/

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 28
ORDINARY MEANS, EXTRAORDINARY ENDS: WORD, SACRAMENT, AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

Reformed Forum Annual Theology Conference at Hope Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Grayslake, Illinois

The speakers are Camden Bucey, Jim Cassidy, Douglas Clawson, Lane Tipton, and Carlton Wynne.

Registration will be open soon: **https://reformedforum.org/rf24/**

REGULARLY CHECK OUR EVENTS PAGE FOR NEW EVENTS AND MEET-UPS: **HTTPS://REFORMEDFORUM.ORG/CALENDAR/**

CONFESSIONS, HUMAN TRADITIONS, AND "DIVINE ADIAPHORA"

HOW CALVIN AND THE REFORMERS JUSTIFIED SUBSCRIPTIONISM IN AN AGE OF FREEDOM

TIMOTHY R. SCHEUERS

The Protestant Reformation began as an appeal for freedom—in particular, freedom of the conscience from a Catholic penitential system that defined Christian piety in terms of strict adherence to a complicated regimen of human laws, traditional rites, and dubious doctrines. The reform movement took aim at any human ceremony that forced the faithful into a state of perpetual doubt about the security of their salvation in Christ. Advocates for the reformation of the church declared that only God's Word had supreme authority over the believer's conscience; the gospel of Christ's imputed righteousness received through faith alone was the only divine remedy to restore the inward peace of the spiritually sick and sin-worn. Martin Luther's refusal to accede Charles V's demands that he recant his writings at the Diet of Worms in 1521—a stance made explicitly in the name of conscience—was not, therefore, a declaration of rabid individualism or of extreme self-confidence (Luther had in fact agonized, "am I alone wise?"). Instead, his defense was born of the belief that God's Word had priority over all human teachings and was the only infallible source of assurance that sinners like him were loved and redeemed by God.

Luther, and later John Calvin, argued that the freedom of conscience primarily entailed spiritual liberty from false human traditions claiming to bind believers' consciences to unbiblical standards; it did not mean, however, that Christians were free from any and all compulsion to obey church leaders or from practicing "legitimate church observances," much less from continuing to follow God's moral law.[1] Nevertheless, Calvin's reform efforts met with frequent opposition from scrupulous clerics and laypersons who complained that his tactics for consolidating reform were just as injurious to the private conscience as the spurious traditions of Rome had been. And although Calvin and his colleagues insisted that their methods for attaining and preserving confessional unity in Geneva—typically by means of oaths and formal subscription to Reformed confessional statements—were impervious to the same arguments from conscience that had been mobilized against Catholicism, they could not shake the persistent accusation that they had simply traded the peoples' Catholic restraints for an evangelical bridle.

Calvin and the Reformers realized they needed to win people over to their visions for reform. They had to offer a plausible defense for requiring church constitutions that had the appearance of binding consciences to human or quasi-human ordinances. Several historical "vignettes" from the early decades of reform illustrate how Calvin and the reformers sought to answer their critics and resolve this dilemma by appealing—whether explicitly or implicitly—to an alternative type of "tradition" having no specific command in Scripture, yet nevertheless being required of the faithful under certain circumstances.[2]

Basically, Calvin and his colleagues justified their reform measures by distinguishing a special category of church constitution: one distinct from mere human traditions, which frequently bind peoples' consciences to impious behavior (as they alleged to be the case in Catholicism); but also distinct from an explicit command of God's Word, since such observances are not necessary for salvation and, in that sense, do not "place the conscience under religious obligations."[3] Nevertheless, Calvin insisted that such observances—including oaths, confessional subscription, and public confession—are not ancillary but rather essential to authentic piety. Such "legitimas ecclesiae observationes" (legitimate church observances), he writes in his *Institutes* (1559), are required practically so that "in the sacred assembly of believers all things be done decently and with becoming dignity; and that the human community itself be kept in order with certain bonds of humanity and moderation."[4] Such human constitutions, though not explicitly commanded in Scripture, are nevertheless "founded upon God's authority" (mediated through the offices of minister, elder, and magistrate), "drawn from Scripture" (derived from the Reformers' interpretation of various texts), and "therefore, *wholly divine*."[5] Calvin even denied that ordinances necessary for the confession of faith are to be considered "human traditions" at all, because they do not belong to the kind of ceremony that may be refused for the sake of private conscience (adiaphora proper). Instead, insofar as they edify one's neighbor and serve the order and unity of Christ's church in keeping with God's will,

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) 4.10.28 (LCC 21:1206; CO 2:887–88).

2. What follows is excerpted from the conclusion of my recent book, *Consciences and the Reformation: Scruples over Oaths and Confessions in the Era of Calvin and His Contemporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 232–35.

3. *Institutes* 4.10.27 (CO 2:887; LCC 21:1205–1206): "Id tantum semper in istis observationibus excipiendum est, ne aut ad salute credantur necessariae, atque ita conscientias religione obstringant." (But in these observances one thing must be guarded against. They are not to be considered necessary for salvation and thus bind consciences by scruples.) In 4.10.4, Calvin states that, while human religious obligations unlawfully burden the conscience, the holy law of God, "binding only outward works, leaves the conscience free" (LCC 21:1183; CO 2:870).

4. *Institutes* 4.10.28 (CO 2:887–88; LCC 21:1206).

5. *Institutes* 4.10.30 (LCC 21:1207; CO 2:889). Emphasis mine.

such observances are best regarded as divine rather than human, and therefore are not open to the charge that they *harmfully* bind the conscience.[6] These ordinances, as a kind of bond, are not injurious to the conscience precisely "because the whole necessity of observing them respects their general end [of glorifying God and serving one's neighbor charitably], and does not consist in the things commanded."[7] Such ceremonies—not strictly required by Scripture but nevertheless critical to genuine piety under certain circumstances—might be called "divine adiaphora."

Calvin and the leaders of Geneva were not the only Reformers who struggled to define and defend this type of ordinance. In Strasbourg, where Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito faced conscience-driven opposition from Anabaptists and Spiritualists during a critical period of confessional solidification in the early 1530s, the Reformers determined that, while it was wrong to compel someone to believe something against his or her will, an important distinction had to be made between the coercion of the conscience and the necessary regulation of doctrine and piety in a Reformed community. The Strasbourg preachers thus posited a fundamental difference between pushing faith on someone and regulating doctrine for the public good by means of citizens' oaths and a common confession of faith. For Bucer and Capito, the communal rule of charity took precedence over the internal conviction of conscience in guiding one's public confession, a rule that later led them to embrace a more accommodating and pragmatic approach to the treatment of Nicodemite dissimulators than that taken by Calvin, Guillaume Farel, Pierre Viret, and Peter Martyr Vermigli. Indeed, for the French reformers and Vermigli, the rule of charity obligated Nicodemites—secret evangelicals languishing in Catholic territories—to forsake their compromise precisely because it set a destructive example for weaker members of the church. The ceremonies required for the confession of faith were not optional or "indifferent" at all, but rather necessary to render genuine praise to God and to protect the consciences of weaker members who might be scandalized by the witness of Nicodemite dissimulation. In a similar manner, while attempting to establish confessional uniformity in Geneva between 1536 and 1538, Calvin and Farel insisted that their oath-driven reform measures were not burdensome for the populace, since any ordinance that served God's honor, edified one's neighbor, and unified the church ought to be received by prudent individuals with a sound conscience. Similarly, while establishing moral reform in Geneva through the strict oversight of the Consistory, Calvin and his colleagues insisted on the use of oaths and public confession, along with direct appeals to the conscience, to ensure that the impulse of charity, rather than self-interest, would govern the behavior of Geneva's residents. Despite complaints from some of the city's more obstinate inhabitants, Calvin and his Company of Pastors strained to emphasize that their oath- and conscience-driven disciplinary measures were not a violation of personal freedom at all, but manifestly scriptural, edificatory, and in keeping with the love of neighbor. These same commitments guided Calvin's requirement of confessional subscription for professors and students of the Genevan Academy following its founding in 1559. Such ordinances provided the necessary bond to create a school that was committed to the doctrinal standards set forth by the Reformation. Revealingly, the gradual breakdown of these confessional moorings brought trouble to the school after Calvin's death.

In Book Four of his *Institutes* (1559), after devoting several sections to the topic of the right ordering of the church and its relationship to the liberty of conscience, Calvin censures those who mistakenly confuse human traditions with the laws and regulations that are necessary for the order and unity of the church. Following his defense of necessary church constitutions, Calvin poses a revealing question: "What sort of freedom of conscience could there be in such excessive attentiveness and caution?"[8] Critics of Calvin's invasive measures for church reform and spiritual discipline must have thought that very little freedom remained for them! Indeed, Calvin's rhetorical inquiry—nestled as it is amid his defense of practices deemed necessary to reform, in contrast to mere human traditions—indicates that Calvin remained ever-sensitive to the charge that the church constitutions over which he frequently presided represented violations of the freedom of conscience. One does not sense that even Calvin believed he had justified this alternative form of "tradition" to his own satisfaction—much less the satisfaction of others. His treatment of this subject in the *Institutes* reflects an ongoing struggle over this matter: although Calvin wants to affirm that all "human constitutions" *based on* God's word are "wholly divine," he must admit that such ordinances remain essentially human, in that they are "suggested rather than explicitly stated" in Scripture. At the very least, he wishes to maintain they are *more* divine than human because they serve the higher cause of reforming societies and instructing consciences according to the Word of God.[9]



Timothy R. Scheuers (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is Pastor of Congregational Life of First United Reformed Church (Chino, CA) and Adjunct Assistant Professor of History at Providence Christian College (Pasadena, CA). Scheuers' research and publications have focused on the theology and pastoral ministry of John Calvin, as well as various topics of systematic theology.

6. *Institutes* 4.10.27 (LCC 21:1205; CO 2:887).
7. *Institutes* 4.10.5 (CO 2:871): "[L]eges humanas, sive a magistratu, sive ab ecclesia ferantur, tametsi sint observatu necessariae (de probis et iustis loquor), ideo tamen non ligare per se conscientiam, quia tota observandi necessitas ad generalem finem respicit, non autem consistit in rebus praeceptis." (Human laws, whether made by magistrate or by church, even though they have to be observed (I speak of good and just laws), still do not of themselves bind the conscience. For all obligation to observe laws looks to the general purpose, but does not consist in the things enjoined.)
8. *Institutes* 4.10.31 (LCC 21:1209; CO 2:890).
9. *Institutes* 4.10.30 (LCC 21:1207–8; CO 2:889).

Abbreviations:

LCC: John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. The Library of Christian Classics. Vols. 20-21. 1960; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

CO: John Calvin. *Joannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*. Edited by G. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss. 59 vols. Brunswick, 1863-1900.

CONFESSIONAL INTEGRITY IN THE WAKE OF THE AUBURN AFFIRMATION

A CENTENNIAL REFLECTION FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

CAMDEN M. BUCEY

In the dawn of the twentieth century, the Presbyterian Church (USA) found itself at a theological crossroads that would shape its identity moving forward. This defining moment was set against a broader intellectual backdrop where the Enlightenment's emphasis on human reason began to challenge traditional bastions of faith and revelation, casting long shadows over the religious landscape and sowing the seeds for modernism—a movement that would profoundly question the very underpinnings of historic Christianity.

Modernism emerged as a philosophical and cultural movement, diverging sharply from the certainties that underpinned Enlightenment thinking, and challenged the traditional conception of an omnipotent creator. This shift was mirrored in the societal transformations spurred by rapid advancements in technology and industry, which fundamentally altered secular worldviews. The cataclysmic events of World War I further accelerated this transition, deepening the sense of dislocation from traditional beliefs.



Theologically, modernism represented a significant re-interpretation of classical doctrines, refracting them through the prism of nineteenth and early twentieth-century thought. In our Reformed and Presbyterian history, modernism is intrinsically linked with theological liberalism, prevalent in the early twentieth century. This brand of liberalism was characterized by several disconcerting elements and wielded considerable influence over both Catholic and Protestant traditions. J. Gresham Machen critically addressed this in his seminal work, *Christianity & Liberalism*, which was published in 1923, a time when the modernist-fundamentalist conflict was reaching fever pitch as a result of a series of significant theological and ecclesiastical developments that laid the groundwork for this critical moment.

The Fundamentals

One crystallizing moment came with the publication of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, a series of pamphlets sponsored by the Presbyterian layman Lyman Stewart between 1910 and 1915. This expansive project, which comprised ninety essays by sixty-four authors from various denominations, sought to affirm the core tenets of the Christian faith against the rising tide of theological liberalism.[1] These writings laid the groundwork for what would be distilled into the "five fundamentals" at the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly of 1910:[2]

1. Inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures
2. Virgin birth of Jesus Christ
3. Vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ
4. Reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ
5. Actuality of the miracles of Jesus Christ

In this fertile ground of doctrinal assertion and growing dissent, Harry Emerson Fosdick delivered his infamous sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" in 1922. His oration directly contested the core tenets that *The Fundamentals* aimed to uphold, marking a critical moment in the theological conflicts of the era.[3] Fosdick articulated a liberal stance opposing the rigidity of fundamentalist doctrine. He argued that genuine liberalism did not oppose holding traditional beliefs such as the virgin birth of Christ, the inspiration of Scripture, or the second coming of Christ, but opposed the notion that these should be considered the essentials of Christianity. He acknowledged the existence of devout Christians who hold different views on these matters, emphasizing the diversity of belief among faithful ministers, missionaries, and laypeople.

Fosdick also addressed the debate on the inspiration of the Bible, contrasting the view of Scripture as divinely dictated in its original manuscripts with a perspective that rejects this as a static and mechanical theory of inspiration. He expressed the need for an intellectually hospitable, open-minded, and liberty-loving approach within Christian fellowship, one that

1. Even as conservatives sought to affirm these essentials, it sowed the seeds of future conflict, revealing a range of priorities among officers in the Presbyterian Church. Figures like Charles Erdman and Robert Speer, contributors to *The Fundamentals*, would later distance themselves from the hardening stance of fundamentalism.
2. Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. General Assembly, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Office of the General Assembly, 1910), 1031, http://archive.org/details/minutesofgeneral1910pres.
3. For a helpful contextualization of these events, see D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Committee on Christian Education and the Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995), 23–24.

prioritizes the weightier matters of faith over strict doctrinal conformity. Fosdick's plea for tolerance was a call to maintain unity in the church without excluding those who disagree with a particular theory of inspiration, advocating for a broad, inclusive understanding of Christian doctrine that emphasizes love and tolerance over doctrinal disputes.

Many liberals preached all manner of doctrines throughout New York each Sunday. Yet, this one caused such a disturbance given his unique position. Fosdick was a Baptist serving as associate minister and stated preacher of First Presbyterian Church in New York as well as a faculty member at Union Theological Seminary.[4] He was well-known and had published several popular religious books. In his biography of J. Gresham Machen, Ned B. Stonehouse summarized the sentiment among Presbyterian conservatives in the wake of the sermon: "the fact that a minister not even subject to the authority of Presbytery and General Assembly should have used a Presbyterian pulpit to make what was widely regarded as an attack upon the constitution disclosed a situation bordering on lawlessness."[5]

On October 16, 1922, the Presbytery of Philadelphia, led by conservatives under Dr. Clarence E. McCartney, issued an overture to the General Assembly in response to the situation with Fosdick. This overture requested that the Presbytery of New York enforce doctrinal conformity within the First Presbyterian Church of New York City, ensuring that the preaching and teaching there aligned with the established system of doctrine taught in the Confession of Faith.

Several other presbyteries followed suit, which led the 1923 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America to take a firm stance against modernist interpretations of Christianity by reaffirming the five fundamentals of 1910 and requiring that candidates for ministry affirm these in addition to their typical ministerial vows.

The Auburn Affirmation

In January 1924, a group of ministers circulated the Auburn Affirmation as a strategic counter to the 1923 General Assembly's determination, which they perceived as an infringement upon the unity and liberty of the church. Initially signed by 150 ministers and emanating from Auburn, New York, home to Auburn Theological Seminary, the document represented a concerted effort to protect diverse theological perspectives within the church.[6] By May 5, 1924, the number of signatories had swelled to 1,291, indicating that more than one-tenth of the church's ministers were in support of the Affirmation, thereby challenging the necessity of strict adherence to core beliefs of the Christian faith as dictated by the General Assembly.[7]



The Affirmationists, through their document, showcased a discomfort with the perceived rigidity of doctrinal tests based on the "five fundamentals." Their argument for tolerance pivoted on the assertion that the essence of Presbyterianism was not to be found in strict adherence to these particular doctrines but rather in a broader understanding of the confessional standards that had historically defined the church.

Not every Affirmationist disagreed with the points advocated in the five fundamentals. Yet, the thrust of the document was to appeal for tolerance of other views. They argued that the five fundamentals were an extra-confessional, non-constitutional test of orthodoxy. These doctrinal points were "theories" that fell within the doctrinal bounds of the church but were not the only acceptable way to interpret the standards.

The Auburn Affirmation revealed differing views of confessional subscription, revisiting historical debates within the church about the boundaries of theological discourse and the nature of doctrinal affirmation. On one side, it emboldened those who sought a more inclusive church, one that could embrace varying interpretations of Scripture and doctrine. On the other side, it alarmed conservatives, who feared that such openness would lead to a compromise of the church's doctrinal integrity. This age-old debate challenges the very notion of what it means to be a confessional church, questioning whether the confession is a rigid boundary or a guiding compass that allows for a range of theological exploration within its borders.

The theological ramifications of how confessional subscription is understood and applied are profound. A broad understanding of confessional subscription, as suggested by the Auburn Affirmation, allows for a range of interpretations and flexibility within the theological framework of the church. While this inclusivity can foster a diversity of thought and a degree of adaptability to new ideas, it may also lead to a dilution of doctrinal clarity and a departure from traditional beliefs, potentially eroding the integrity of Reformed and Presbyterian doctrine over time.

In contrast, a narrow understanding insists on a more uniform and stringent adherence to the confessional standards, preserving the purity of doctrine and continuity with the historical Reformed faith. However, an overly narrow interpretation may verge on going beyond the teaching of Scripture, unnecessarily binding consciences and excluding orthodox believers from the church.

The tension between narrow and broad views of confessional subscription has been evident throughout American Presbyterian history. The Adopting Act of 1729 and the subsequent controversies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including those surrounding the Auburn Affirmation, illustrate the different approaches to how these standards are to be upheld. There have been advocates of strict subscription, where parties adhere to every detail of the confession, and system subscription, which allows for individual exceptions provided they do not undermine the system of doctrine as a whole. Every church must draw a line somewhere. Some ecclesiastical bodies require all members to subscribe to their doctrinal standards—whether those are strict or more relaxed themselves. Other churches only require confessional subscription of their officers while members take vows that are much broader than the secondary standards of the church.

4. Murray Forst Thompson, *The Auburn Betrayal*, Tracts for Today (Committee on Christian Education, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1941), 8.
5. Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Willow Grove, Pennsylvania: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2016), 303.
6. Thompson, *The Auburn Betrayal*, 10.
7. Thompson, 11. Sources differ on how many ministers signed the document. I reference the tally compiled by Robert S. Marsden, which is included as an appendix in Thompson, 46–60.

Reflecting 100 Years Later

Thankfully, we are presently witnessing a concerted effort to preserve the distinctives of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition in the face of societal pressures and to maintain doctrinal fidelity as the church engages with a variety issues. However, even within conservative circles, we must recognize that we are forced to grapple with new questions not explicitly addressed in the historic confessions. Today's discussions often revolve around how to uphold the integrity of historical confessions while engaging with and ministering to a society that is increasingly pluralistic. While member churches of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) or the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) are not entertaining debates regarding the death of Christ as an atonement for sins or his bodily resurrection, they have struggled with other matters of confessional subscription. For example, the ordination of individuals who hold varying views on creation, the historicity of Adam and Eve, or the nature of same-sex relationships can be seen as parallels to the early twentieth-century controversies. These issues test the boundaries of confessional subscription, as some argue for a strict adherence to traditional interpretations of the confessions, while others advocate for a looser interpretation orthodoxy that allows for a range of understandings within the confessional framework.

For more than four centuries since the adoption of the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort, followed by the establishment of the Westminster Standards, these confessional texts have shown extraordinary resilience and flexibility, shaping theological discourse and church practice with enduring relevance. Nevertheless, the church—as it has been for centuries—is compelled to consider the degree to which confessional documents are prescriptive or descriptive, immutable or adaptable, and how these determinations shape the life and witness of the church in the world.

As we reflect on the centennial of the Auburn Affirmation, we recognize the cautionary tale it presents for today's church, especially in the realm of confessional fidelity. The inclination towards liberal theology, marked by a prioritization of tolerance, has historically nudged the church away from the distinctiveness of historic Christian orthodoxy. This well-intentioned, but ultimately misguided, pursuit of inclusivity has led the church to a point where its message risks being muddled with the ethos of secular culture, thus losing its "saltiness" and the unique savor it is meant to offer the world.

In advocating for a narrow view of confessional subscription, we affirm the necessity of doctrinal precision and integrity. The church should indeed stand firm on its confessional statements, not as a means to exclude, but as a commitment to the truth that sets us apart from the world. Yet, this doctrinal steadfastness must be coupled with a pastoral wisdom that distinguishes between the nonnegotiables of faith and secondary matters where charity allows for diversity.

In my own denomination, we uphold a distinction between the vows taken by officers and those made by general members. While all members, whether officers or laity, are called to adhere to their respective vows, the nature of these commitments reflects their different roles within the church. Officers are required to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, affirming an *ex animo* and detailed commitment to the doctrinal standards of the church.

In contrast, general members are asked to affirm essential biblical truths that undergird salvation and the Christian life. These include believing in the Bible as the Word of God, trusting in the triune God and Jesus Christ's saving work, repenting of sin, acknowledging Christ as sovereign Lord, and promising to live a godly life, faithfully participate in church life, and submit to its government and discipline. This approach ensures that while officers are held to a precise doctrinal standard necessary for teaching and leadership, all members are united in the foundational truths of the Christian faith without requiring a detailed subscription to the confessional standards. Officers voluntarily subscribe to the standards, while general members who cannot in good conscience subscribe to every aspect of those standards yet are nevertheless orthodox and willing to submit to the church's teaching, government, and discipline are not prevented from joining the church.

This is not to introduce a dual standard, but to recognize the different roles within the body of Christ and to ensure that while we do not compromise the truth, we do not burden the conscience beyond what Scripture itself requires. Thus, we attempt to walk the line of confessional integrity—holding fast to our precious heritage and navigating a world in desperate need of the gospel's transformative power.

As we press forward, let our grasp of truth be unwavering and our pursuit of church unity be heartfelt, avoiding the pitfalls into which the Auburn Affirmationists stumbled. It is our allegiance to doctrinal truth, spoken in love, that preserves the church's distinct witness and supports our purpose in the world. For the church to remain steadfast, it must embody both confessional fidelity and integrity. Fidelity demands that we interpret our Standards in the spirit and letter intended by their original authors and as adopted by the church. Integrity means that each person who subscribes to these Standards does so not merely in form but in substance, committing to live out these truths in practice. It is insufficient merely to hold a correct interpretation of the Standards; one must also genuinely adhere to them. A healthy church is contingent upon this dual adherence—an accurate understanding coupled with faithful application. By staying this course, we not only stand on solid ground but also fortify the church's testimony, enabling it to thrive as a pillar of enduring faith and truth.



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ANIMUS IMPONENTIS AND CONFESSIONAL SUBSCRIPTION

ALAN STRANGE

This article derives from two talks given to the Presbytery of Michigan and Ontario of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) five years ago in which I'd been asked to speak on "*Animus Imponentis* [AI] and Subscription to our Doctrinal Standard [The Westminster Standards, adopted in the 1640s and subsequently modified]." What follows intentionally retains its character as an address, though shortened considerably here.

The concern of the two areas (AI and Subscription) might best be described as addressing—

1. how we understand our doctrinal standards (both as given and in terms of AI), and
2. how we express our commitment to our doctrinal standards (the subscrip tion part).

Understanding our doctrinal standards (the Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the OPC) corporately, not just as individuals in the pulpit or the pews, is crucial for churches that claim, as do ours, to be confessional.[1] It is important, first of all, that we properly grasp the *nature* of doctrinal standards: they are assumed to be clear since their expressions remain in our power as a church; our secondary (doctrinal) standards are something, in another words, that we as the church have crafted ourselves (originally and in amending). Because we've written them—unlike Scripture, which we've received by divine revelation—they should set forth with maximal clarity what it is that the church believes that the Scriptures teach in the main, which is what our doctrinal standards are, a summary of the Word in terms of its essential teachings.

Compare this to our view of the clarity of Scripture. Scriptures enjoy perspicuity, or clarity (WCF 1.7): the Bible is clear, in the main, by a right use of ordinary means of grace. In other words, the Word, when faithfully preached and taught, makes at least the way of salvation clear to all, not only to the learned but the unlearned as well. The perspicuity of Scripture does not mean, however, that all things in the Bible are equally clear to all persons, but that the faithful ministry of the Word makes the most basic matters of the faith clear even to the least learned.

We never in our judicatories, of course, permit differences, or scruples, with respect to the Bible since it is the very Word of God. This is not so with our doctrinal standards: they are *our summary* of what the Bible teaches. Why do we have such summaries of the Bible anyway? We have confessions because it's not enough simply to affirm the inspiration, authority, and veracity of Scriptures; we are also able, by the Spirit's illumination, to agree on the doctrine that the Bible teaches. This is in opposition to a creedless fundamentalism that reveres the Bible but demands on preserving the right of all individuals to interpret it as they see fit and fails to agree on its most important teachings. An inspired Bible is useless if we cannot agree upon its primary doctrines.[2]

That the standards should contain maximal clarity is no small part of the current arguments for updating the language of the Westminster Standards, a task currently in process. We understand our doctrinal standard, first, by the words themselves, in their historical context, which is to say, in light of the original intent of the drafters or first adopters and later amenders—ascertained by historical research. For example, understanding the impact of the 1615 *Book of Sports* on Sabbath observance helps explain the meaning of the plural "recreations" in WCF 21.8. And we further understand and interpret our doctrinal standards considering the *animus imponentis*.

Animus imponentis may be defined, according to *Black's Law Dictionary*, as "the mind of the imposing body"—that is, the confessional view that the judicatory imposing an ordination vow holds. The concern of *animus imponentis* is how the church as a corporate entity interprets the doctrinal standards.[3] This reflects that we not only interpret the Scriptures but also interpret the Standards themselves. For example, does WCF 21.5 restrict singing in worship to the 150 Psalms of the Psalter? Some have thought that it does; the OPC corporately does not think that it does in terms of the history of its interpretation. Here you see the *animus imponentis* of the church with respect to this issue.

Thus, our interpretation of the doctrinal standards is not to be singular, merely the view of a given candidate as to the meaning of the Standards, abstracted from the corporate expression of the same. Candidates often misguidedly scruple by declaring something like "covenant is not frequently set forth as testament" (WCF 7.4); yes, in fact, it is, as solid arguments have demonstrated. Even as the Scriptures were given in community to be interpreted in community, so the doctrinal standards were drafted in and are interpreted in community. We also have different levels in our interpretive communities—sessions, presbyteries, assemblies. The General Assembly (GA) is the highest interpretative community, always looking at both the doctrinal standards and the Scriptures themselves, especially the latter in theological controversy (WCF 1.6, 9–10). In the matter of creation views, we came

1. This derives from an earlier talk given to the Presbytery of Northern California and Nevada (OPC) in 2009 (https://pncnopc.org/sermons/lecture-1/) and from the "Report of the Committee on Creation Views (OPC)", esp. Parts II-III (https://www.opc.org/GA/creation.html#Days).

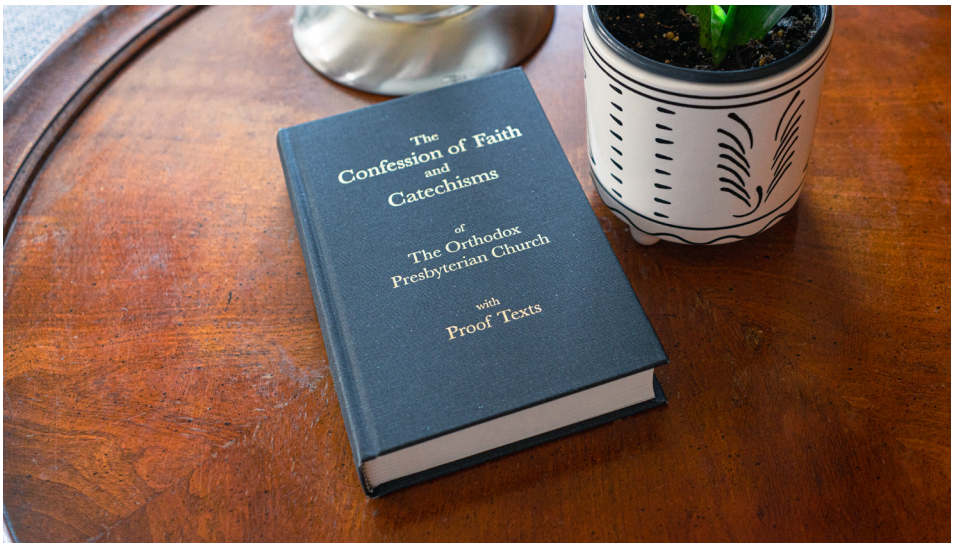
2. This is the burden of Carl Trueman's latest book: *Crisis of Confidence: Reclaiming the Historic Faith in a Culture Consumed with Individualism and Identity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2024); earlier Trueman wrote *The Creedal Imperative* (Crossway, 2012).

3. Charles Hodge, *The Church and Its Polity*, (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1879), 319: Hodge demonstrates that the concept of *animus imponentis* is not a liberalizing one but one that maintains the meaning of the secondary standards as understood by the body imposing the oath and not in some potentially singular or idiosyncratic fashion by the candidate.

to recognize that, both in terms of original intent and *animus imponentis*, the Standards do not prescribe one particular view and proscribe every other possible view—for example, analogical day, day of unspecified length, framework hypothesis, etc.

We've been talking about how we understand our doctrinal standards corporately. And now we need to talk about how we express our commitment to our doctrinal standards—namely, the question of confessional subscription. We could talk about this broadly historically, but let's focus first on the shape of subscription in the OPC. The essay by John Muether is key in this consideration.[4] Muether lays out what Machen meant by "confidence in our brethren"—that is, not a hermeneutic of suspicion but one of trust, fitting given the corporate culture of the OPC, especially with all (or virtually all) of her early ministers coming from Westminster Theological Seminary. Machen was communicating that they were all on the same page, having come out of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUSA), no longer fighting the modernists who want to "take away from the Word." The schism at the third GA (1937), months after Machen's death, however, showed that such confidence may have been too sanguine, as there were those fundamentalists who wanted to "add to the Word."

The OPC does not take or grant "exceptions," which can have the effect, in respect to the judicatory granting such, of creating a confession within a confession. This was like the error of the fundamentalists at the GAs in 1910, 1916, and 1923: insisting on "five fundamentals," a move that arguably undercut demand for a proper commitment to the whole of the Standards. The "taking exception" process described in the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) Book of Church Order (21-4.e-f) is not what is practiced in the OPC. Rather we permit differences to be expressed that do not strike at the vitals of religion or do damage to the system of doctrine set forth in the Scriptures and given expression in the Standards (as John Murray put it).[5] The judicatory hears and decides whether such scruples are allowable, subject to appeal, though largely only in the case of a candidate being approved, not when he is turned down or continued, since



it is hard to prove why someone was rejected.

No part of mainstream confessional American Presbyterianism has denied the right or place of expressing some differences with the Westminster Standards (excepting the Covenanters, perhaps, who do it corporately through the testimony). This has been the history of American Presbyterianism since the Adopting Act of 1729 in which the body as a whole (the Synod of Philadelphia) expressed scruples concerning the expressions regarding the church and civil magistrate in chapters 20 and 23 of the WCF. Then in 1789 and following, certain amendments were made to the Standards in the American church (with the OPC and PCA having the same version of the Standards).[6]

Non-allowable differences tend to be those that violate the system of doctrine that the Scriptures contain and that is given expression in the secondary standards. Some see subscription as requiring that each proposition must be affirmed (Southern Old School, Morton Smith, George Knight), some as each doctrine (Northern Old School, Princetonians), though there is some fluidity here: sometimes every proposition and every doctrine is identified, sometimes distinguished, as by Warfield in his warning against over-strict subscriptionism, noting that none require *ippisma verba* subscription.[7]

The Reformed confessions, for example, tend to be infralapsarian, but we have permitted supralapsarianism (we modify Calvin in the Reformed confessions, see Ken Stewart; look at WCF 3 on the decrees of God[8]). Similarly, the OPC permits eschatological views of historic premillennialism, not requiring the end-time gathering of the Jews, as WLC 191 intimates, in addition to what it says about the civil magistrate. We hear any reservations that a man might have and decide: Is he in bounds or out of bounds? Typically, this decision is based on how the difference expressed impacts the theological system given expression in the Westminster Standards. Is it a mere propositional difference? Does it rise to a doctrinal difference and, if so, how does it impact other doctrines? What are its implications, and can one hold this particular view and hold the system of doctrine in integrity? A man with permitted scruples, which is a corporate determination, may not ordinarily teach such, certainly not as the church's doctrine; he may be permitted to make his view known in some contexts and that it differs from the church's official view.

Generally, sixteenth-century Continental Reformed doctrinal standards, like the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, were received whole cloth, though not without debate in some circles. This raises the question, of course, to what would one take exception in these documents, drawn more narrowly (in terms of soteriology and ecclesiology) than the Westminster Standards. This question is especially relevant for Reformed friends who like to note their fidelity to the doctrinal standards and question the supposed comparative laxness of the Presbyterians. Again, the Three Forms of

4. John Muether, "Confidence in Our Brethren: Creedal Subscription in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church," in David W. Hall, ed., *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 301–310.

5. John Murray, "Creed Subscription in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.," in *Practice of Confessional Subscription*, 247–262.

6. The positions of many, who've sometimes debated, like George Knight, Morton Smith, William Barker, and others, may be found in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*. A helpful essay covering the wider terrain (not only America but elsewhere) may be found in Rowland S. Ward, "Subscription to the Confession," in Ligon Duncan, ed., *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, v. 3 (Scotland: Mentor/Christian Focus, 2009), 77–138.

7. B. B. Warfield, "The Presbyterian Churches and the Westminster Confession," *The Presbyterian Review* (10, 1889), 646–657.

8. Kenneth J. Stewart, *Ten Myths about Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 45–72.

Unity are so focused that one cannot imagine what one would scruple about as compared to the much fuller and broader treatment given to topics in the Westminster Standards.

In the American context, we've made changes in the Westminster Standards a few times and we've always permitted some greater or lesser expression of differences as well. The PCA has now enshrined a bit of a looser approach, arguably, in "good faith" subscription, though there is quite a lot of debate over the precise meaning and application of such. In the OPC, we've tended to practice an "every doctrine," if not "every proposition," sort of subscription without explicitly requiring one particular approach (though James Urish argues otherwise, with respect especially to John Murray).[9] What may pass in some presbyteries may not in others, though we want to respect each other's jurisdiction and judgments.

Here it is summarized: We hear a man's differences and determine whether he can in integrity live and work among us holding such differences. Several things factor into this: Can you hold something that you'll not teach or practice without bitterness? How important is this in the ongoing life of the church? We don't generally regard a man, long among us, who comes to scruple about something in the same way that we might regard a novitiate scrupling about the same thing, say, paedo-communion. (Note: this presbytery was considering a candidate who held paedo-communion views that he vowed not to seek to implement). Presbyters must think through all the implications of any scruple and decide *coram Deo* whether the scrupling brother can labor among us in integrity and enjoy the respect of his fellow presbyters. In the end, confession, which really means "saying the same thing together," is to foster unity in the truth. The demand for uniformity—the allowance of no scrupling whatever—does not promote unity but tends to a sectarianism that is inimical to true doctrinal fidelity and godliness.

9. James E. Urish, "A Peaceable Plea About Subscription: Toward Avoiding Future Divisions," in *Practice of Confessional Subscription*, 207–236.



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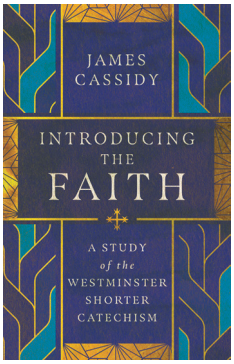
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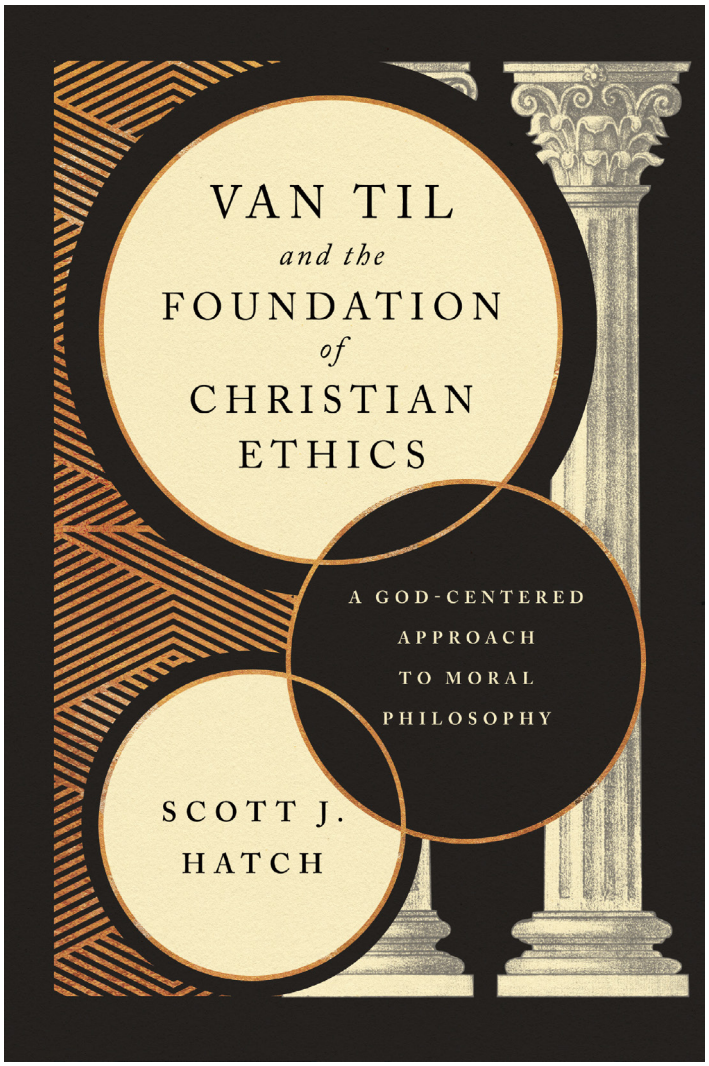
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William Edgar
Professor Emeritus of Apologetics
Westminster Theological Seminary

For understandable reasons, Cornelius Van Til is best known for his contributions to Christian epistemology and apologetics. In contrast, his writings on Christian ethics, and especially metaethics, have been largely overlooked and underutilized, even by those Reformed ethicists who studied under him and acknowledged his influence. This is a great shame because Van Til developed some profound insights on how Christian moral philosophy should be shaped by the distinctive Reformed doctrines of God and man. Scott Hatch has done us a tremendous service by retrieving and expounding these insights for a new generation of Christian thinkers. The two appendices, which document the development of Van Til's ethics syllabus over the early decades of his career, add further value to the volume. While I might not agree with every jot and tittle, this book is in a class of its own as a systematic study of Van Til's approach to Christian ethics, and it deserves to be widely read.

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