

CHRISTIANITIES IN
THE TRANS-ATLANTIC WORLD

Series Editors: Crawford Gribben and Scott Spurlock

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ON BEING REFORMED

Debates over a
Theological Identity

**Matthew C. Bingham,
Chris Caughey,
R. Scott Clark,
Crawford Gribben
and D. G. Hart**



Christianities in the Trans-Atlantic World

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On Being Reformed

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History, Identity Politics, and the “Recovery of the Reformed Confession”

Chris Caughey and Crawford Gribben

Abstract Engaging with the arguments of Clark and Hart, this chapter explores the various ways in which some major Reformed confessions have changed over time. The authors ask whether it is possible for contemporary Protestants to be Reformed in the senses in which the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ecclesiastical assemblies who drafted the original confessional documents—and the members of those churches—understood the term “Reformed.” The authors argue that if being Reformed in this way is not possible, then greater latitude ought to be extended to various contemporary groups which want to self-identify as Reformed.

Keywords Baptist • Presbyterian • Reformed • Puritanism • Early modern Britain • Historical theology

In March 2009, *TIME* magazine listed “the new Calvinism” as one of ten ideas “changing the world right now.”¹ It was, in many ways, the most

¹David Van Biema, “10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now: The New Calvinism,” *TIME*, March 12, 2009.

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significant indicator of the success of the resurgence of Reformed theology that began with the first publications of the Banner of Truth in the late 1950s and has continued more recently among the very different demographic of the “young, restless and Reformed.”² Fifty years ago, the Banner of Truth began republishing older classics in a marketplace in which Reformed theology seemed deeply unfashionable. But a number of books produced by the Trust encouraged readers to believe that the system of theology to which they had been attracted would one day be extraordinarily revived in popular appeal.³ The readers of the Trust’s first publication, Thomas Watson’s *Body of Divinity* (reprinted 1958), could hardly have expected that the movement they were in many respects beginning would five decades later feature on the front cover of *TIME* magazine. It has—but many traditionally minded Reformed Protestants are now wondering whether the “new Calvinism” attracting this unprecedented media interest is in fact the revival of the true religion they had been encouraged to expect. Their difficulty is that “Calvinism” has evolved as it has gone mainstream, and, as even its advocates admit, the “new Calvinism” is quite different from the old. D. G. Hart has recognized that “Calvinism’s original leaders” could not have “predicted or planned the outcome of their initial efforts to reform Europe’s churches.”⁴ For, as R. Scott Clark has noticed, “significant segments within the Reformed communion ... define ‘Reformed’ in ways our forefathers would not understand.”⁵

The resurgence of Reformed theology, and the revolution it has precipitated within the leadership of the movement, has sparked a series of religious turf wars. A number of the theologians have moved to defend more traditional articulations of orthodoxy, denying that the “new Calvinists” have the right to be identified as “Reformed.” The fact that the terms “Reformed” and

²John J. Murray, *Catch the Vision: Roots of the Reformed Recovery* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2007); Colin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008); J. Todd Billings, “Calvinism’s Comeback?” *Christian Century* 126:24 (1 December 2009), pp. 22–25; Josh Burek, “Christian Faith: Calvinism is back,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 27, 2010.

³See, most obviously, Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970).

⁴D. G. Hart, *Calvinism: A history* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 304.

⁵R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our theology, piety, and practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), p. 4.

“Calvinist” are historically loaded is part of the challenge of this debate.⁶ Some of those reacting have gone further, identifying themselves as the “truly” or “confessionally Reformed,” and attempting to police the boundaries of the “Reformed movement” to exclude from its ranks many of the most able and articulate defenders of Calvinistic soteriology, including John Piper, Mark Dever, and other members of such organizations as the Gospel Coalition. Their argument is simple—anyone who denies any element within the Reformed confessions cannot be regarded as “Reformed”—and it is directed most obviously against those Calvinists who are charismatics or who argue against the baptism of infants. So, these polemicists continue, the term “Reformed Baptist” is an oxymoron, however closely a baptistic believer may adhere to Calvin’s soteriological scheme or to an early modern theological symbol in which that soteriology might be embedded, such as the second London Baptist confession of faith (1677/1689). Noting that the “Calvinism” label denotes much more than soteriology, self-identified confessional conservatives have responded to the broader appropriation of “Reformed” identity with criticism and concern.

Part of the difficulty, of course, is that identity boundaries cannot effectively be policed. These charismatic or baptistic “Calvinists” are not the only Christians to insist that they share the “Reformed” identity with those who think it more properly their own. Even such “mixed” communions as the Christian Reformed Church, the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church of Scotland, and the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) claim to be Reformed. For example, a search of the term “Reformed” on the PCUSA website yields 1780 results (though some of these results use the term to refer to the process of change rather than to the theology of the Protestant Reformation).⁷ While their theological terminology is common, there is little doctrinal agreement between liberal or Barthian denominations and their broadly conservative “others”—whether the movement of the “young, restless and reformed,” or those historic or confessionally prescriptive Reformed and Presbyterian denominations, whose members critique the “young” and “restless.” Thus the descriptor “Reformed” has been drawn into a struggle related to broader concerns about religious identity politics in the contemporary United States. And yet the paradox of so much of this discussion is that many of those who are

⁶Willem J. van Asselt, “Calvinism as a problematic concept in historiography,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 74:2 (2013), pp. 144–150.

⁷<http://www.pcusa.org/search/?criteria=reformed>, accessed on July 1, 2014.