

# CATHOLIC AND REFORMED: REDISCOVERING A TRADITION

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The dominant theology in Christian churches in the modern West today is not Protestant, Orthodox, or Roman Catholic. Instead, as sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton have argued, "Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith."<sup>1</sup> In many ways, the religious consumer has become king; in the operative theology of many Christians in the West, confession of the God of Israel, made known in Jesus Christ, must be adjusted to our own sovereign plans for what a deity can and cannot be. If the Bible, or the historic Christian tradition, holds a teaching that leaves the religious consumer with a sour taste, it can be jettisoned because our lives—especially our "religious lives—are our own private affairs to manage.

In this essay, I seek to sketch a theological and ecclesial response to this state of affairs—a response that is both Catholic and Reformed. It is not the only possible response. This proposal is directed primarily to Protestants—giving a call to recover a catholicity that is both biblical and Christ-centered. For a wide range of evangelical and mainline Protestants in the broadly Reformed tradition, I think that this would be a step toward theological and ecclesial renewal that is much more promising than the common alternatives. For Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians, the renewal of Protestants on a Catholic and Reformed path could deepen common partnerships; it could fortify mutual learning among followers of Jesus Christ

as we seek to recover alternatives to the reductionistic theologies that currently colonize contemporary churches in the West. For ultimately, what is at stake is the renewal of the church's true identity as a people who belong to Christ and are shaped by the Spirit to follow in his ways rather than the ways of a consumerist, privatized faith that bows to the self as king rather than to the God of Israel made known in Jesus Christ.

I begin with a word from the Heidelberg Catechism that displays the biblical, Christ-centered vision that is central for a catholic-Reformed identity:

**Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?**

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.<sup>2</sup>

There is nothing remotely all-American about this statement: its starting point is *displacement*—I am not my own, but belong to Jesus Christ, to whom I have been united by the Spirit. This displacement is central to Christian identity, for as Jesus says in Mark's Gospel, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34–35). Instead of myself and my own interests, the Heidelberg Catechism sees the active, saving Triune God at the center of the drama. As Christians, we inhabit a world in which we are adopted children of a gracious Father who is at work in the world, and we are anointed with the Holy Spirit who assures us that this union with Christ will never end and empowers us for service to God, for the sake of Christ's kingdom—loving God and neighbor. All of this is enabled for sinners like us by Jesus Christ, who is the victor over sin and the devil. In many ways, the rest of the Heidelberg Catechism is an exposition of the vision concisely explicated here: it is God-centered, Christ-centered, deeply biblical, serious about our sin, and serious about our redemption.

In order to see how deeply countercultural this vision is from the Heidelberg Catechism, we should consider another, more recent creed. This creed is *not* about displacement to find our life in Christ rather than ourselves. This is the "creed" of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD)—

2. Heidelberg Catechism Q and A 1, in *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2013), 69–70.

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1. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 171.

a widespread set of core beliefs, described by the most comprehensive study ever conducted on the beliefs of American youth. Yet, as further study has shown, the beliefs of youth largely reflect those of their elders.<sup>3</sup> The MTD creed is as follows:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.<sup>4</sup>

The contrasts between this and the Heidelberg Catechism are legion, but for the sake of this essay, I will name just a few to help explain the three-fold name of MTD: the purpose of religion, here, is "moralistic"—it is to "be good, nice, and fair to each other." Unlike the Heidelberg Catechism, this is not set in the context of sin. There is no sense, here, that we are alienated from God on our own and thus need a mediator (Jesus Christ) or divine empowerment to do good (the Holy Spirit). Instead, religion is the sort of thing that tells us to try hard to "be good, nice, and fair"—something fully within our power. Why should we be good, nice, and fair? Because it fits the overall goal of religion, the T of MTD: "to be happy and to feel good about oneself." The central actor in this drama is the trinity of me, myself, and I—religion is about the individual. The self is not displaced—to the contrary, religion is here to build up my self-esteem or it is not doing its job. I am ultimately my own. Who is the God of MTD? Well, if religion is moralistic but we do not need God's help to be moral, and if religion is to make us feel good about ourselves, then it makes sense that we end up with D, a Deistic God: a God who created the world but left it to run on its own, a God "who does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem."

Along with Christian Smith, I sense that an MTD vision has penetrated our culture, as well as our institutions and our churches. In many ways, it has become the shared, operational cultural theology for a diverse range of both Christian and non-Christian Americans. But rather than multiply examples, for the purpose of this essay I want to supplement this portrait with an insight from Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow about a practice that undergirds MTD. According to Wuthnow, "religious tinkering"

has become a widespread religious practice, especially among twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings.<sup>5</sup> Religious tinkerers pick and choose from the Bible and from other sources to find what solves their problems, what fills their needs and makes them happy. MTD already puts the individual and his or her own happiness at the center of faith. This logically leads to the practice of religious tinkering. In the words of Elizabeth Gilbert's bestselling *Eat, Pray, Love*: "You have every right to cherry-pick when it comes to moving your spirit and finding your peace in God."<sup>6</sup>

When we compare these two approaches, it is clear that the widespread functional theology of MTD is neither biblical nor Christ-centered. It is distant from the catholic-Reformed approach to Christian identity reflected in Heidelberg Catechism Q and A 1: "I am not my own" but "belong" to Jesus Christ. I think that many observers would agree that MTD constitutes a crisis for the Western church and that if the church in general and congregations in particular are to experience renewal, they need a substantial *alternative* to MTD.

Moreover, I think that a path out of MTD toward church renewal will involve moving toward a biblical, Christ-centered vision. But what does that really mean? Many today *claim* to be biblical and Christ-centered. But there is *more than one way* to seek to be biblical and Christ-centered. Below, I note a few brief, popular-level attempts to be biblical and Christ-centered that I think are ultimately counterproductive; whether from the ecclesial right or the ecclesial left, they are actually promoting forms of the faith that functionally support and deepen MTD. After that, I describe how a vision that rediscovers the catholic-Reformed tradition—with resources like the Heidelberg Catechism—presents a true alternative to an MTD approach to the faith. The final section of my essay sketches what it means to be catholic and Reformed today—both on a congregational level and in terms of a theological program for further research.

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#### MODERN EVANGELICAL AND PROGRESSIVE CORRELATIONIST APPROACHES

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Some seek to be biblical and Christ-centered by adopting primitivist approaches to Scripture. With these approaches, only the most ancient "original meaning" (that is, "primitive meaning") of the Bible matters—so contemporary readers should do a *leap* over history and the history of interpretation. Why? Because interpreting the Bible is largely about digging

3. Christian Smith with Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11–13.

4. Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162–63.

5. Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 14–16.

6. Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 208.

through the rubble of mistaken “tradition” to find the true meaning, which “the church” has been hiding. We can see this approach in emergent church voices such as Brian McLaren in *The Secret Message of Jesus*. The book’s project is guided by archeological imagery. It is one of “excavation,” “digging beneath the surface to uncover Jesus’ message,” “peeling back the layers of theology and history, seeking to find the core of Jesus’ message,” and uncovering that which church tradition has obscured: “for centuries at a time in too many places to count, the Christian religion has downplayed, misconstrued, or forgotten the secret message of Jesus entirely.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, McLaren thinks he has now *found* the “secret message of Jesus.” But he displays a great deal of suspicion toward the quests of others.

But this primitivist, archeological approach is also displayed in more “conservative” or “evangelical” authors, such as Alan Hirsch. Hirsch has repeatedly argued for a quite novel interpretation of Eph 4:11 as teaching a “fivefold” ministry that is absolutely foundational for the church. In his recent book on the subject, *The Permanent Revolution*, coauthored with Tim Catchim, he shows us what is at stake in this primitivism. They admit that no one advocated this reading of Eph 4—which is, in their view, the truly biblical approach—before the twentieth century and that out of the “many millions of theological books that have ever been written, we cannot find serious exploration of the topic of fivefold ministry as a living and vital piece of the church’s genetic codes.”<sup>8</sup> “How can we explain this? . . . The only conclusion we can reach is that this must ultimately be the work of the Devil.”<sup>9</sup> They go on to explain how the devil has made the historic church ineffective in its ministry through adopting a false interpretation of Eph 4 rather than adopting their own interpretation. Do you disagree with their interpretation of the most “primitive” meaning of the text? Well, then the hermeneutic of suspicion returns—you must be under the influence of satanic deception. Although the rhetoric of Hirsch and Catchim is extreme, their logic of primitivism is actually quite common in evangelicalism today: a new interpretation of the Bible that flies in the face of the history of interpretation is often seen as evidence *for* the novel position rather than evidence against it.

Indeed, similar rhetoric is used from time to time by leading biblical theologians today, such as in the title of a major lecture by N. T. Wright: “How God Became King: How We’ve All Misunderstood the Gospels.”<sup>10</sup>

7. Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2006), 1, 26, 78.

8. Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 6.

9. Hirsch and Catchim, *Permanent Revolution*.

10. Lecture title for his “January Series” lecture at Calvin College in 2012. See <http://www.calvin.edu/january/2012/NTWright.htm>. Wright’s book title on this subject is only a

While there is much in Wright’s corpus of writing that can combat the assumptions of MTD, such rhetoric actually reinforces key aspects of the individualistic, tinkering approach to Scripture that sees novelty as a sign of veracity: implied in the subtitle is that “we’ve all misunderstood the Gospels until I illuminate them for you now.” The history of interpretation—and interpretations in contemporary communities of faith—are being corrected by the bold, individual biblical scholar.

Not surprisingly, the Christ who emerges from primitivist accounts is often one who is “misunderstood” by the tradition, a kind of “revolutionary” whose bold vision was never fully realized. Browsing the stacks of Christian bookstores, one can find books of various ideological directions that cast Jesus in these terms: some books ask us to go “to the side of the Rebel Jesus,” which involves embracing a left-wing social and political agenda; others read Jesus, and the Bible as a whole, in light of so-called conservative values, as in the bestselling *American Patriot’s Study Bible*.<sup>11</sup>

These approaches are what I call “correlationist” in their theological method: they start with our own cultural agenda, questions, and needs, and then *correlate* an answer from the Bible in those terms. Without a doubt, the Jesuses emerging from these correlationist interpretations of Scripture are *relevant*. We dig through—or simply bypass—our exegetical and theological traditions in response to Scripture in order to interpret it in a way that answers *our* questions: How can Jesus help us solve global political problems? How is Jesus significant for the founding of our nation and the establishment of conservative values? In the end, however, these approaches reflect a cultural captivity that moves away from the gospel. Rather than seeing the paradigm for biblical interpretation in the celebration of word and sacrament—as part of a communal journey by the Spirit toward conformity to Jesus Christ—it reduces interpretation to individual historical judgments in which our pressing questions set the agenda. In doing so, it fails to recognize the true context for interpreting the Bible as Scripture—as disciples united to Christ by the Spirit, listening for a word that will transform God’s people into Christ’s image for service and mission. Correlationist approaches seek to be biblical and Christ-centered. But approaches on the left and the right end up funding aspects of MTD: instead of starting with the displacement of the self by reading the Bible from the perspective of those who belong to Christ, they seek out a relevant Jesus that accommodates “me-centered religion,” or they adopt a historical method that champions the “tinkering” judgment

minor improvement on this rhetoric: *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: Harper One, 2012).

11. Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: When the World’s Biggest Problems and Jesus’ Good News Collide* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 227–36. Richard Lee, *The American Patriot’s Bible: The Word of God and the Shaping of America* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

of the individual. Both need to absorb this phrase from the Heidelberg Catechism much more deeply into their prolegomena: "I am not my own . . . but belong to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."

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### THE CATHOLIC-REFORMED ALTERNATIVE

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In contrast, the catholic-Reformed tradition offers a substantive alternative—both to MTD and to today's correlationist approaches. In expositing this alternative, I will begin by describing how the catholic-Reformed tradition seeks to be biblical and Christ-centered.

Rather than starting with the individual who "jumps over" history to read the Bible, a key Reformed conviction about Scripture is displayed in its function: in the communal proclamation of Scripture through word and sacrament, believers are nourished by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. In addition, from a formal standpoint, the exegesis of Scripture provides the material basis for catholic-Reformed theology. Scripture has a higher authority than tradition, and tradition is always revisable in light of the teaching of Scripture; however, that does *not* mean that the catholic-Reformed approach eschews tradition in approaching Scripture. To the contrary, Scripture fits within the broader matrix of God's redemptive work among his people. Scripture is God's chosen means used in uniting his people to Christ by the Spirit and enabling their conformity to Christ as children of the Father.

In contrast to the primitivist and the archeological approaches, the catholic-Reformed tradition does not attempt to approach Scripture as a "blank slate" but actually privileges Trinitarian and Christological convictions to help show us *how* to approach the Bible as *Scripture*. The catholic-Reformed tradition also seeks to read Scripture with Christians of other ages, recognizing the Spirit's work in the past. Doing so helps expose our cultural idols of the present as we seek to be receptive to the Spirit's word culminated in Christ in the Scriptures. In contrast to a correlationist approach, the catholic-Reformed tradition does not read the Bible as the source for answering *our* questions and thus fitting into our own cultural agenda: instead, we receive Scripture as disciples who, by the Spirit, are having our own cultural idols and priorities *displaced*. We "are not our own," but we read Scripture as those who belong to Jesus Christ.

This means that being Christ-centered is not just about finding a "relevant" Jesus, but about losing our lives for Christ's sake. In its Christology, the catholic-Reformed tradition is *catholic*—such that it gives a Trinitarian (Nicene) account that holds to the cosmic centrality of Jesus Christ as the mediator between Creator and creation (Chalcedonian). It also empha-

sizes both gifts received in union with Christ: the acquittal and pardon received through justification, and the new life of sanctification received by the Spirit, being sent for service and mission in the world.

A Catholic-Reformed theology is also a theology of retrieval. Rather than privileging the questions of the present cultural moment and correlating them to the Bible, a theology of retrieval patiently and creatively attends to the texts and traditions of earlier ages, appreciative of the Spirit's work in the past. As it does so, it does not simply seek to "re-pristiniate" the past into the present. Rather, it seeks to allow these voices and practices to reveal the blind spots and overcome the hidden idolatries of the present as it submits to Scripture as the Spirit's word to conform us to Christ. The retrieval of postbiblical tradition is *culminated*, then, in the act of hearing the living God's address anew through Scripture, not vice versa. This retrieval, and its climax in scriptural interpretation, is "biblical" and "Christ-centered" in a way that involves seeing with new eyes and overcoming the fixation with the "new," the "relevant," and the "plausible" according to our present culture.

In light of MTD and the challenges of renewal in today's church, much of what is missing in the correlationist attempts to be "biblical" and "Christ-centered" is a catholic sensibility and a catholic-Reformed sense of the breadth and depth of a dynamic, biblical tradition. But why do I use the term "catholic"? In a basic sense, I refer to our confession of "the holy catholic church" in the Apostles' Creed—a church that is catholic and universal, not by what it has done but by its God-given identity of oneness in Christ, rooted in the teaching of the apostles. By using the term catholic-Reformed, I am suggesting that being Reformed is not an autonomous end in itself but a way to occupy the "holy catholic church." I sometimes describe this dynamic in terms of an underground water table: many Western Christians today think that they do not have to occupy any particular tradition but can pick and choose from many traditions—like digging a hole here and there looking for water. But when one learns to really inhabit a tradition with depth, one can hit the "catholic water table." At that point, Baptists, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Reformed, and Orthodox can all find areas of common ground, even amid real and significant ongoing differences.

But some may wonder—is the "catholic-Reformed tradition" something that I made up? Are there churches today that occupy this tradition? No, I did not make it up, and yes, there are catholic-Reformed churches today. First, I will focus on some historic examples of the tradition.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Reformed theologians self-consciously regarded themselves as "catholic"—they claimed Church Fathers such as Augustine as their own; moreover, they saw themselves belonging to the tradition of the great early ecumenical creeds. The Belgic Confession gives a superb example of this: in its doctrine of God, the Trin-

ity, and Christ it draws deeply on patristic theology and early ecumenical statements of doctrine. In its significant attention to the sacraments, prayer, and worship, it continues the broadly catholic concern of making these practices central to Christian identity, even as it revises aspects of Roman Catholic doctrine on these points. But the Belgic Confession is also clear about its Protestant identity—on salvation, Scripture, the sacraments, and related topics, it is unmistakably Protestant.

This pattern—of drawing on patristic as well as medieval theology while making fruitful use of the history of biblical exegesis—continued to be a strong pattern in the Reformed tradition for centuries. Thus, it is not surprising that Reformed Scholastics continued to develop catholic instincts in their work, that William Perkins titled one of his works *A Reformed Catholike* (1597), that movements such as the Dutch “Second Reformation” drew deeply on medieval theologians such as Bernard of Clairvaux. It should not surprise us that in the nineteenth century, it was a scholar in the German Reformed tradition, Philip Schaff, who undertook the massive project of first editing and publishing an English translation of the ante-Nicene, Nicene, and post-Nicene Church Fathers. Schaff’s colleague at Mercersburg Seminary, John Williamson Nevin, shared an interest in both the Church Fathers and a reappraisal of Calvin and the Reformed confessions; this led Nevin to propose a deeply catholic—and yet deeply Reformed—theology of the Incarnation and the Lord’s Supper to shape his theology of the church. It shouldn’t surprise us that at the turn of the twentieth century, a central figure in Dutch Reformed theology, Herman Bavinck, drew deeply on the Church Fathers and medieval doctors in his four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*—in critical yet appreciative appropriation. Also in the Dutch Reformed tradition, a central advocate of mid-twentieth-century Reformed liturgical renewal was a Mercersburg scholar (Howard Hageman) who speaks of the Reformed tradition as “the Catholic Church, Reformed.” Indeed, as Hageman argues, the Reformed tradition does not claim to “restore” a church that had eclipsed but to reform the historic catholic church, for even “the very name ‘Reformed’ implies continuity. A tree which is reformed is not cut down; it is pruned. Just so with our church; one with the historic church of Jesus Christ, it has been purified and restored by that keenest of all instruments, the living Word of God.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, it was with great precedent that John Hesselink, in his inaugural presidential address at Western Theological Seminary in 1973, used three words to describe the mission of his Reformed seminary: “Catholic, Evangelical, and Reformed.”<sup>13</sup>

12. Howard G. Hageman, *Our Reformed Church* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 1995), 1.

13. John Hesselink, “Toward a Seminary that Is Catholic, Evangelical, and Reformed,” *Reformed Review* 27, no. 1 (Fall 1973): 103–11.

All of this is just a very small sampling of the long tradition of articulating a Christian identity as both Reformed and catholic. Some would rather speak of “ecumenical” here than “catholic,” but I sense that to replace the term “catholic” with “ecumenical” would involve a significant loss since the contemporary ecumenical movement represents some instincts that are catholic and some that are not, in this older sense of the term. Today, theologians such as Kevin Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, myself, and others are seeking to revive the use of this older sense of the term of being “catholic” and evangelical, “catholic” and Reformed—with a prominent example of this pairing displayed in a recently announced fifteen-volume *New Studies in Dogmatics* series, published by Zondervan Academic. As one of the series editors, Michael Allen, describes in a press release, “We believe that the way to *renewal* is through *retrieval* of our *catholic* and *Reformational* heritage.” (emphasis added)<sup>14</sup>

So, is a catholic-Reformed tradition just an abstraction from the ivory tower, or does it have real-life implications for congregations today? I believe that—as a pathway to church renewal—it does have real-life implications, even if some of the routes that I will describe at the end of the essay are scholarly ones for working toward church renewal. Before that, let us explore the congregational implications by comparing two relatively well-known churches: Willow Creek, with its lead pastor Bill Hybels, and City Church of San Francisco, a large and growing urban congregation. Both churches would be considered broadly “evangelical,” but in many ways Willow Creek, and the seeker-sensitive movement it has come to represent, is a quintessential example of a “correlationist” approach to congregational ministry, while City Church of San Francisco is an example of a “catholic-Reformed” approach.

For decades, Willow Creek church has been known for its “seeker-sensitive” programs, which meet the seekers where they are: programs target common “felt needs” in the culture—for example, how to deal with conflict or how to have a positive family life. Promoting the rhetoric of moving beyond the “traditional” church, Willow Creek reoriented the whole idea of “church” to correlate to these felt needs. And scores of churches have followed Willow’s lead. In 2007, Willow Creek completed a self-study to see the results of this approach. It turns out that its programs were not leading to spiritual growth—they were not making disciples. “We made a mistake,” Hybels said.<sup>15</sup> By orienting their programs toward

14. “New Studies in Dogmatics—A New 15-Volume Series in Constructive Theology,” press release, *Koinonia* (hosted by Zondervan Academic), <http://www.koinoniablog.net/2012/11/nsd.html>.

15. To be sure, the full context of this quotation makes clear that Hybels’s response to the problem is an individualistic one that does not appear to recover the centrality of the triune God’s action: “We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and became Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become ‘self feeders.’ We should have gotten people,

felt-needs, they were unintentionally funding central tenets of MTD: that religion is about *me*, meeting *my* needs, and making *me* happy. Theology and doctrine matter more than they realized.

Contrast this with City Church of San Francisco, which also has a proven track record of outreach to the unchurched and is a leader of a network of city-center church plants around the country. At City Church, worship is “seeker-comprehensible”—so technical terms are elegantly explained—but it is deeply catholic and Reformed. Weekly worship includes a proclamation of God’s word together with a celebration of the Lord’s Supper, in the tradition of the early church and Reformers such as Calvin who desired a weekly celebration of the Supper. Rather than trying to “catch up” with the pop culture around it in the strategy of Willow, City Church is unafraid to create its own culture—a culture celebrating creation, the arts, and service to those most vulnerable in the city. City Church is mission oriented, but in a way that sees God’s work through word and sacrament as central to this mission. Its goal is not just to “get people saved,” but to *make disciples*—thus there are numerous opportunities for laypeople to learn about Scripture, doctrine, and the life of prayer, developing their leadership skills for the congregation and the workplace. City Church is “traditional”—with a Sunday liturgy reflecting its catholic and Reformed theology. But it is not “traditional” in a 1950s, Midwest sense of the term. It is a distinctly Reformed church that seeks to draw on the larger catholic tradition of theology and practice for the sake of its mission and witness in the world. The felt needs of the culture do not drive its agenda. Its vision of the action of the Triune God in and through worship, fellowship, and service drives its agenda.

From this example, and by what I have said above, it should be clear that congregational ministry is a central site for the rediscovery of the catholic-Reformed tradition. It is not simply, or even primarily, a scholarly task. This is because of a particular theological conviction: the ministry of word and sacrament is a central site for God’s activity in, through, and to the world. Stated in terms of the “missional church” movement—but in *contrast* to many contemporary visions of the “missional church”—word and sacrament are recognized as the central means by which God carries forward his “mission” to the world. Today’s church needs pastor-theologians who are willing to dig deep into the biblical insights of the catholic and Reformed treasury of teaching and practices, rather than being guided by the latest whims or trends.

Nevertheless, there *is* a significant—and complex—scholarly task for rediscovering the catholic-Reformed tradition today. In the few pages

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taught people, how to read their Bible between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.” Quotation of Bill Hybels in Neil Cole, *Organic Leadership: Leading Naturally Right Where You Are* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 154.

that remain, I will “name” some of the movements with which catholic-Reformed scholars need to be engaged in pursuing the vision that I have outlined:

*Theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) and history of biblical interpretation.* This movement is essential for overcoming the archeological and primitivist approaches to Scripture outlined above. In drawing on the history of exegesis in a Trinitarian, Christ-centered way, TIS engages in “postbiblical retrieval” of patristic, medieval, and Reformation-era approaches to Scripture. But we must also remember that for the catholic-Reformed tradition, God’s word in Scripture always stands above the church and its postbiblical tradition; the living Lord of the church speaks through Scripture to promise, rebuke, assure, and guide his people. In addition, as I see it, the TIS movement is not “against” historical-critical approaches to the Bible; yet on their own, historical-critical approaches are not sufficient for interpreting the Bible *as* Scripture. In the words of New Testament scholar Joel Green: “Any and all methods must be tamed in relation to the theological aims of Scripture and the ecclesial context within which the Bible is read as Scripture.”<sup>16</sup>

*Movements overcoming false polarities in describing patristic and Reformation-era theology.* It is still popular for systematic theologians to make sharp polarities between the Trinitarian theology of the East (Cappadocians) and the West (Augustine), as well as between the theology of Calvin and that of later “Calvinists” or Scholastics.<sup>17</sup> There are genuine differences and contrasts, of course. But careful contextual historical work over the course of several decades of scholarship has shown that the common *sharp* polarities are based upon gross, noncontextual caricatures of Augustine and Reformed Scholasticism, respectively. In my scholarly career, I have been amazed at how this in-depth historical work has been ignored by many of today’s theologians, who have of-

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16. Joel B. Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 125.

17. These are, indeed, two distinct movements among historians of theology. But I pair them together because they share numerous historiographic assumptions, particularly in the way that they overcome false polarities (between Augustine and the Cappadocians, and between Calvin and the Calvinists) in favor of contextual historical accounts that undermine the convenient polarities of recent systematic theologians. Key scholars on the reassessment of the patristic sources are Lewis Ayres, Michel Barnes, Sarah Coakley, and Khaled Anatolios. Key scholars on the reassessment of Reformation and post-Reformation sources are David Steinmetz, Richard Muller, Timothy Wengert, Carl Trueman, and John L. Thompson. For further analysis of the historiographic assumptions involved, see Michel R. Barnes, “Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology,” *Theological Studies* 56, no. 2 (1995): 237–50; J. Todd Billings, “The Contemporary Reception of Luther and Calvin’s Doctrine of Union with Christ: Mapping a Biblical, Catholic, and Reformational Motif,” in *Calvin and Luther: The Continuing Relationship*, ed. R. Ward Holder (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 158–75; and J. Todd Billings, “The Catholic Calvin,” *Pro Ecclesia* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 120–34.

ferred no substantial textual response on either account. In the words of David Bentley Hart:

The notion that, from the patristic period to the present, the Trinitarian theologies of the Eastern and Western catholic traditions have obeyed contrary logics and have in consequence arrived at conclusions inimical each to the other—a particularly tedious, persistent, and pernicious falsehood—will no doubt one day fade away from want of documentary evidence. At present, however, it serves too many interests for theological scholarship to dispense with it too casually.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, in spite of a vast amount of historical documentation to the contrary, the “Calvin versus the Calvinist” thesis remains a widespread assumption among theologians because it is seen as theologically useful.<sup>19</sup> But in my view, it represents a tragic loss of an opportunity: embracing recent contextually sensitive accounts can open up numerous creative and new opportunities for retrieval, reflection, and reconstrual of the tradition. In addition, these historical reassessments are important for a catholic-Reformed vision because they respond to the common caricatures of classical catholic theological positions as well as classically Reformed ones—caricatures will still fill the pages of many books (including textbooks!) today.<sup>20</sup> The point here is not about whether one “likes” Augustine or the Reformed Scholastics. The point is first and foremost a descriptive one—that since these contextual accounts have broken through the common caricatures, theologians need to start telling a different historical story about these figures and movements.

*Non-Reformed theologies of premodern retrieval.* These approaches generally share the goal with a catholic-Reformed approach of using premodern retrieval as a way to expose and destabilize our modern cultural captivities. They come in diverse forms. Often they occur *in response* to modern theologians of various “correlationist” orientations, such as Paul Tillich, Gordon Kaufmann, Sallie McFague, or James Cone. Here is a short list of these approaches: Roman Catholic retrievals, Orthodox retrievals, Radical Orthodoxy, the “new Black theology” (Jennings, Carter, and others),<sup>21</sup> feminist retrieval theologians (Coakley, Tanner, and others),<sup>22</sup> and Afri-

can theologies of retrieval (Bediako, Oden).<sup>23</sup> All of these provide points of difference, yet also areas for very fruitful dialogue and engagement with the catholic-Reformed tradition. For example, one contemporary Roman Catholic theologian of retrieval from whom I have benefited greatly is Matthew Levering. Not only is his work useful in deepening our sense of the depth and viability of the premodern catholic tradition, but it has sharpened my appreciation of the Reformed tradition in particular. As a Roman Catholic Augustinian, Levering’s theological vision illuminates the issues of divine agency, sovereignty, and election, for example, in a way that shares much with classical Reformed voices.

Of course, catholic-Reformed theologians should be in appreciative and critical dialogue with other movements as well, ones that I cannot pursue in this brief essay: the contemporary renewal in Barth studies, social and cultural history as a supplement to the history of theology, the theologies of the global south, and aspects of the missional church movement, to name a few. But these three areas above are especially key for developing a robust practice of *theological retrieval* as an alternative to correlationist approaches.

In the end, what is at stake in pursuing biblical, Christ-centered renewal along a catholic-Reformed path of retrieval? Nothing less than a reality at the heart of the Christian faith. In the words of the apostle Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”<sup>24</sup> In the deeply countercultural words of the Heidelberg Catechism, “I am not my own, but belong . . . to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” We live in a consumerist, tinkering, MTD culture that is endlessly preoccupied with the self, its own needs, its own rights, its own attempts to stand *above* history and tradition. It is a restless age, and Augustine was right in praying that “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>25</sup> The good news of the gospel is that we are not left to the restless, barren, MTD world in which *we* are the center. By the Spirit, we are *displaced*—we enter into a new drama, embrace a new identity—one in which we call God “Abba! Father!” as we find our life *in Christ*—Christ who lives in us by faith.<sup>26</sup> Let us not settle for the “halfway good news” that is correlated and accommodated to our own cultural captivities. Let

18. “The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the Vestigia Trinitatis,” *Modern Theology* 18, no. 4 (October 2002): 541.

19. See Billings, “Catholic Calvin.”

20. See the examples in Billings, “Catholic Calvin.”

21. For an excellent short overview of this movement see Jonathan Tran, “The New Black Theology: Retrieving Ancient Sources to Challenge Racism,” *Christian Century*, January 26, 2012.

22. See especially Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

23. See especially Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); Thomas Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010).

24. Gal 2:20.

25. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1:1, 3.

26. Rom 8:15.

us recognize that our true identity is this: we have been crucified with Christ, and we are not our own; our true life is found in him. For our only comfort in life and in death is that we belong—in body and soul, in life and in death—to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

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## THE ABSOLUTE AND THE TRINITY

Bruce D. Marshall

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### I

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For nearly two centuries Christian thought about the Trinity has been deeply shaped by modernity's great philosopher of the absolute, G. W. F. Hegel. To be sure, even those theologians who have engaged Hegel explicitly, and sometimes at length, have rarely developed their own Trinitarian theologies by way of an exegesis of his texts. Still less have theologians proceeded by a laborious and perhaps fruitless quest for the *ipsissima verba* of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, though that task has recently absorbed considerable scholarly energy. More often than not, Hegel's influence on modern Trinitarian theology has been implicit and indirect rather than openly acknowledged.

Indeed for the most part Hegel's impact on Christian theology has been not merely indirect, but subterranean. His philosophy is notoriously susceptible of quite divergent interpretations, but few Christian theologians have thought it was possible to be a full-blown Hegelian, even when Hegel was read in a way favorable to Christianity. In the end his celebrated equation of the real with the rational leaves no room, Christian readers have usually objected, for the element of mystery so essential to Christianity, or for the faith needed to embrace the Christian mysteries. His lust for a philosophical conquest of the gospel, the urge to subject the Christian revelation, like everything else, to the mastery of his dialectical scheme of spirit's logic and history, has seemed equally

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