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EDITORIAL:

Current Issues in Reformed Evangelical Theology

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What are the key current issues in Reformed Evangelical theology? I cannot pretend to give a full account of trends in the Reformed Evangelical world given my own limited perspective. However, there are three issues that currently stand out to me.

The first concerns "Reformed" and "Evangelical" identity. What makes theology "Reformed" and "Evangelical"? "Evangelical" has different meanings in different parts of the world. For example, Darryl Hart believes that in the USA the word is largely a misnomer.[1] David Bebbington has arguably produced the most influential definition of evangelicalism. He believes it was a "new phenomenon" that arose in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment context signifying Christians with four emphases: the supreme authority of Scripture, the centrality of the cross, a concern for personal conversion, and an evangelistic activism.[2] The difficulty with the positions of Hart and Bebbington (and many others) is that they neglect the historical use of the word "evangelical".[3] The first to use "evangelical" was Luther and the reformers as a description of theology over and against Rome. This "evangelical" theology affirmed the great creeds of Christendom (Apostles' and Nicene) but contrary to Rome affirmed justification by faith alone (*sola fide*), the supreme authority of Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), and the centrality of the gospel (*evangelium*) in both Scripture and doctrine.[4] Taking the word this way enables

1 Darryl G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Prebsyterian; Reformed: Baker Academic, 2007).

2 David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1, 74. See also Uche Anizor, *Evangelical Theology*, ed. Robert B. Price and Hank Voss, Doing Theology Ser. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021).

3 See such a defence in Michael A. G. Haykin (ed.) and Kenneth J. Stewart (ed.), *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008).

4 See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700* (London: Penguin, 2003), 'Introduction'.

one to call pre-eighteenth-century movements like the Reformation and Puritanism "evangelical" and to affirm that modern prosperity theology is not.

What about the title "Reformed"? Is it defined by the five points of Calvinism? Are the "Young, Restless, and Reformed" folks truly Reformed and Evangelical? Can Baptistic theology be classed as "Reformed"?[5] Confusion abounds. But the most appropriate way to to define Reformed theology is according to its history. The "Reformed" tradition arose at the Reformation in opposition to Rome. Yet it was also distinguished from Lutheranism (particularly over the Lord's Supper). And importantly its beliefs were given official definitions in the foundational confessions of the various international Reformed communities such as the Gallic Confession (1559), Scots Confession (1560), Belgic Confession (1561), Thirty-Nine Articles (1563), and the Second Helvetic Confession (1566).[6] To be sure, further theological elaboration and refinement occurred in the later Reformed tradition, codified in later declarations such as the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1547), the Savoy Declaration (1658), and the Baptist Confession (1689). But surely "Reformed" theology is best understood as any system of theology that fits within one or more of the historic and foundational Reformed confessions.[7] If so, Reformed theology is not limited to simply the five points of Calvinism, but also includes the doctrines of revelation, creation, Christology, ecclesiology, and sacramentology, critical to the Reformed confessions. Furthermore, this understanding of "Reformed" theology allows for intramural theological differences over issues like eschatology and aspects of church polity that all fit within the boundaries of the foundational confessions.

The second current issue in Reformed Evangelical theology is how it will receive the monumental achievement of Richard Muller, especially his four-volume *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*.[8] Muller has effectively debunked so much flawed historiography of the Reformed tradition, not least the neo-orthodox reading of Calvin[9] as well as the so-called "Calvin against the Calvinists" thesis.[10] And yet Muller's work is historical theology. It is not systematic theology *per se* but a resource for it. And so it is now for Reformed Evangelical theologians to evaluate the implications of Muller's work for our contemporary context. It is the initial reception of Muller that leads to the next issue.

The third current issue in Reformed Evangelical theology is manifest in at least two recent debates. The first debate arose in 2016 over the eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father in the Trinity (EFS). Hongyi Yang provides an admirable description

5 See the debate in Matthew C. Bingham et al., *On Being Reformed: Debates over a Theological Identity (Christianities in the Trans-Atlantic World)* , (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018).

6 So Richard A Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 4–9.

7 See, for example, Richard A. Muller, "John Calvin and Later Calvinism: The Identity of the Reformed Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology,* ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 130–49.

8 Richard A Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Richard A Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Richard A Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Triunity of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

9 See in particular Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

10 See in particular Richard A Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Muller, "John Calvin and Later Calvinism".

of the controversy.[11] The pro-EFS side argued that God the Son, whilst fully of one divine substance with the Father, has freely chosen to submit in eternity to the Father. It was propounded by the likes of Wayne Grudem, Bruce Ware, Owen Strachan, and Mike Ovey. The anti-EFS side contended that God the Son could not submit in eternity to the Father without compromising his deity and the one undivided will of Godhead. Such a position was argued by Kevin Giles, Glenn Butner, Liam Golligher, and Carl Trueman. The EFS proponents believed their opponents failed to interact with the Scriptures they adduced to prove their case.[12] The other side believed the EFS advocates had failed to understand Nicene theology and its theological reading of key Scriptural texts.[13]

The second debate concerned divine simplicity. The trigger was James Dolezal's book *All That Is In God*.[14] In it, he accused Reformed luminaries such as John Frame, Don Carson, Kevin Vanhoozer, and J. I. Packer that they were guilty of departing from classical theism by embracing "theistic mutualism" whereby God interacts with his world in a way like humans do.[15] In response, someone like John Frame contended that Dolezal has failed to account for Scriptural language that cannot be explained away as simply anthropomorphic.[16]

These two debates reveal, amongst other things, a similar methodological crux. In both controversies one side is accused of biblicism: a naive and private reading of Scripture without recourse to theological tradition. And yet the other side is accused of extra- Scriptural speculations that cannot be proven from Scripture. Which brings me to the third issue: the role and place of "good and necessary consequences" of Scripture.[17] Reformed theology rightly is drawn not just from Scriptural statements but also "what may be truly and certainly proved" from them.[18]. But what is the status of proofs (or logical consequences) from Scripture? And how many "consequences" can we take beyond Scripture before they become speculative and are no longer "good" or "necessary"? Reformed and Evangelical theology needs to explore a clearer understanding and formulation of what precisely constitute "good and necessary consequences" of Scripture.

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11 Hongyi Yang, *A Development Not a Departure: The Lacunae in the Debate of the Doctrine of the Trinity and Gender Roles* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2018).

12 For example, Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology, Second Edition: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 309–313.

13 See especially D. Glenn Butner, *The Son Who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case Against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2018).

14 James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017).

15 Dolezal, *All That Is in God*.

16 John Frame, *On Theology: Explorations and Controversies* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2023), chs. 15–16.

17 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.6.

18 Martin Bucer, *A Brief Summary of Christian Doctrine* 1, Martin Bucer, *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, ed. David F. Wright (Appleford: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1972), 78.

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