WHY WE MIGHT NOT BE AS REFORMED AS WE THINK WE ARE
Exploring Reformed and Covenant Theology
MJ Hosier, July 2011

Introduction: Why a paper on Covenant Theology?

Newfrontiers does not exist in theological isolation. Over the years we have had speakers at our conferences who have represented a wide variety of broadly 'evangelical' spiritualities and theologies – one thinks of the contrast between a Wayne Grudem and a John Arnott, or a Rob Rufus and a Mark Driscoll. Individual churches, and individual members within those churches will also be exposed to, and espouse with varying degrees of enthusiasm, a range of Christian leaders.

In recent years, we have been significantly influenced by "new Calvinists" such as John Piper, Tim Keller and Driscoll. As a consequence of this, and a picking-up of the American "young, restless and Reformed" motif, an increasing number within our ranks would self-consciously refer to themselves as *Reformed*. "Reformed & Charismatic" is now the banner under which many would choose to take their stand.

This self-identification as "Reformed" also reflects a reaction against "Emergent" – the loose collective of writers and leaders who have been following various theological cul-de-sacs over such issues as the gathered church and God's sovereignty. In the UK, this trend was probably most accelerated by Steve Chalke promoting some controversial ideas about the atonement.

The term "evangelical" itself seems increasingly unsatisfactory as what it designates is increasingly imprecise. To paraphrase Dash from *The Incredibles*, "When everyone is evangelical, no-one is." Or, as Carl Trueman puts it,

> What is evangelicalism? It is a title I myself identify with on occasion, especially when marking myself off from liberalism, another ill-defined, amorphous, transdenominational concept. But in a world where there are "evangelicals" who deny justification by faith as understood by the Protestant Reformers, who deny God's comprehensive knowledge of the future, who deny penal substitutionary atonement, who deny the Messianic self-consciousness of Christ, who have problems with the Nicene Creed, who deny the Chalcedonian definition of Christ's person, who cannot be trusted to make clear statements on homosexuality, and who advocate epistemologies and other philosophical viewpoints which are entirely unprecedented in the history of the orthodox Christian church, it is clear that the term "evangelical" and its cognates, without any qualifying adjective, such as "confessional" or "open" or "post-conservative," is in danger of becoming next to meaningless.[1]

Because "evangelical" has become such a fluid term, "Reformed" might seem to offer a more satisfactory shorthand for where we stand on the theological spectrum. This is reinforced by the fact that an increasingly vocal and influential group of Reformed pastors and theologians in the USA represent theological and social positions which many within Newfrontiers would consider important – such as the inerrancy of scripture, the doctrine of hell, the role of men and women, and so on. Fundamentalist and dispensationalist groups may also have similarly conservative views on such matters, but culturally and theologically (because of their social conservatism and tendency towards Arminianism) we would not feel the same sense of connection with them as we do with the Reformed camp. The point of discussion for us here might be to what extent these positions are held as the result of a prior commitment to

[1] Trueman, *Minority Report*, p97

Reformed theology, or whether these positions drive us towards Reformed theology.

For some, these self-defining terms are poorly understood and function primarily as badges of identification with those leaders who happen to be in vogue. It really can be a rather Corinthian, “I like Tim Keller, and I like Terry Virgo, therefore I must be Charismatic and Reformed!” type of thing.

For others, the self-identification as Reformed inevitably leads to a desire to further explore what this theological system represents, and the writings of the more popular new Calvinists quickly leads there. While this will not reflect what the majority of people in our churches are reading, it is important for us to understand how different theological frameworks inevitably affect a wide range of practical issues. For example, the figures who stand behind the new Calvinists very largely share a commitment to Covenant Theology. It is because of this commitment that they adhere strongly to the practice of infant baptism, and without an appreciation of their theological framework it will be difficult for us to engage with them on a subject like this.

It is only a short step from reading a Piper or Mahaney paperback to dipping into Calvin’s Institutes or the works of John Owen. Or people follow the twitter/blog/ conference pathway and are introduced to the likes of Doug Wilson or Michael Horton. Inevitably this leads to stumbling upon the term *Covenant Theology* and the assumption that it is *this* system that is what Reformed Theology really is. The person discovering Covenant theology may find that what he has understood from the pulpit of his local Newfrontiers church about covenant appears thin, and theologically inexact, compared to the systematic depths of those theologians who espouse Covenant theology.

The aim of this paper is to help clarify some of these terms, and unpack their significance for us. Doing this is not merely an exercise in making sure our nomenclature is right – there are a number of reasons why it is helpful for us to consider what Covenant theology is. For example,

- *Pastorally* a number of us have had the experience of people in our congregations getting into Reformed theology and starting to develop ideas that we might not be entirely comfortable with. We need to understand the subject at hand.
- *Theologically* we need to be clear about what we mean when we talk about ‘covenant’. This is a theme that we perhaps do not preach about as much as we should.
- *Ecclesiologically* we should have an appreciation of the implications for church life of understanding the God who makes covenant with his people.

What is *Reformed Theology*?

In seeking to define our terms, probably the safest ground we can stand on in describing Reformed theology is to acknowledge that it is that theology found in the confessions and catechisms of the Reformed churches. These include the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms; the Heidelberg Confession; and so on. And while ‘Reformed’ is often taken to be synonymous with ‘Presbyterian’ we might include the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith[2] (which is based on the Westminster Confession but differs from it on matters such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church government), and the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of

[2] Accessible here: http://www.1689.com/confession.html

England.

What should be immediately apparent is that we should exercise some caution about describing ourselves as Reformed if we are not familiar with these documents, and recognize them as authoritative in some way. I would guess that, almost without exception, all our pastors have a copy of *Grudem* on their shelves. This contains examples of Reformed confessions in the appendices, which it would be good for us to read.

The terms *Calvinism* and *Reformed theology* are often used interchangeably, but again, some caution is necessary here. This caution is required as Calvin was not solely responsible for the development of Reformed theology. Also, Calvinism tends to be associated with the TULIP acrostic,[3] which was itself a systemization of one aspect of Calvin's thought, resulting from the Synod of Dort, rather than his own construct.

To describe oneself as Reformed without some sense of this historical context, therefore, seems to me to be a confusion of categories of a similar order to someone describing themselves as Charismatic simply because their church employs a contemporary band and song projection rather than organ and hymn book.

My sense would be that many people who describe themselves as Reformed are really referring to the fact that they believe in predestination. While predestination is an important aspect of Reformed thought (as it also is to Lutheran and Catholic theologians), it is certainly not the sum total.

What is *Covenant Theology*?[4]

Reformed author Peter Golding makes the bold claim that,

> There is a very real sense in which the Bible imposes covenant theology and thinking on all who receive it as what, in effect, it claims to be – God's witness to God's work of saving humankind for God's glory.[5]

What is a covenant? Grudem defines it as "an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship."[6] This definition reflects the fact that it is written from within the discipline of systematic (rather than biblical) theology, and as such is perhaps rather one dimensional. However, it is a straightforward summary of the framework within which Covenant theology operates.

Calvin makes extensive use of covenant in the Institutes, but *Covenant theology* as such was a later development of Reformation thought. However, so central to Reformed theology are the concepts of Covenant theology that a contemporary theologian like Michael Horton can say,

> While some friends and critics of Reformed theology have reduced Calvinism to "five points," or further still, to predestination, the actual confessions, catechisms, and standard doctrinal works of the Reformed tradition all testify to a far richer,

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[3] Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints

[4] Sometimes also referred to as *federal* theology as scripture views all humans as being either "in Adam" or "in Christ"

[5] Golding, *Covenant Theology*, p188

[6] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p515

> deeper, and all-embracing faith in the God of the covenant. *Reformed* theology is synonymous with *covenant* theology.[7]

Covenant theology views all the teaching of scripture through the lens of covenant. As Horton puts it,

> What unites [all the biblical themes] is not itself a central dogma but an architectonic structure, a matrix of beams and pillars that hold together the structure of biblical faith and practice. That particular architectural structure that we believe the Scriptures themselves to yield is the covenant. It is not simply the concept of the covenant, but the concrete existence of God's covenantal dealings in our history that provides the context within which we recognize the unity of Scripture amid its remarkable variety.[8]

While there are different expressions of Covenant theology, for the sake of this paper, we will assume that when discussing Covenant theology we are dealing with *classical* Covenant theology. This recognizes three overarching covenants,[9] which elucidate and interpret all biblical covenants. It is at this point that we will want to begin to explore the weaknesses of the system as well as its strengths.

1. The covenant of redemption

This is a covenant within the Godhead whereby Christ was elected to be the covenantal representative of the people he would save. Election happens in Christ.

> This is why we are not to search out God's secret decree of predestination or to try to find evidence of it in ourselves, but, as Calvin urged, to see Christ as the 'mirror' of our election… Those who trust in Christ belong to Christ, are elect in Christ.[10]

This covenant is not described as *covenant* in the Scriptures, so some have questioned whether it is a legitimate description. However, from what Scripture does reveal to us of the plan of God in outworking salvation, Covenant theology argues that *covenant* is the appropriate term to use. We see agreement (covenant) between the three persons of the Godhead in the Father promising his Son a people; the Son willingly choosing obedience to his Father in order to win salvation for his bride; the Spirit applying the benefits of salvation to the Church and empowering Christ's people for works of service.

Without this great strategic plan agreed within the Godhead, there could be no salvation for Adam's race. Clearly, this covenant is different from all others, "because the parties enter into it as equals, whereas in covenants with man God is the sovereign Creator who imposes the provisions of the covenant by his own decree."[11]

2. The covenant of works (*creation*)

This covenant was made by God with Adam before the Fall. By it Adam was to be the federal head of the human race, and it operated simply on the basis of obedience or disobedience. As Adam chose the way of disobedience *all* of humanity is counted guilty in him, as our federal head (Rom 5:12-19).

In Eden YHWH gave Adam clear instructions, which he was to obey. When Adam disobeyed, he was cast from Eden (Gen 2:16-17; 3). That Adam was a covenant

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[7] Horton, *God of Promise*, p11

[8] *ibid*, p13

[9] For a fuller, but succinct, explanation of these covenants see Chapter 25 of Grudem's *Systematic Theology*

[10] Horton, *God of Promise*, p79

[11] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p519

breaker, even though the term “covenant of works” is not found in the scripture, is clear from Hosea 6:7: “But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.”

This covenant of works is still in force, in the sense that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). While Adam is our federal head, and all are guilty in him, every man compounds his guilt by repeating Adam’s failure to obey.

Moreover, and very importantly, classical covenant theology sees the covenant with Moses as a reiteration of the covenant of works, and thus distinct from the covenants with Noah, Abraham and David, which are part of the covenant of grace. Other expressions of Covenant theology would view the Mosaic covenant as part of the covenant of grace, but to explore these variations is beyond the scope of this paper.

3. The covenant of grace

Under this covenant all who place their faith in Jesus are saved by his penal substitution on their behalf. Whereas the covenant of works is conditional on the obedience of man, the covenant of grace is unconditional, as it is founded upon the promise of God: “Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises” (Heb 8:6).

Important to note is that for Covenant theology the new covenant is more a *renewal* of the covenant with Abraham than distinctly new. The degree to which one understands the continuity and discontinuity of the Abrahamic covenant with the new becomes crucial when considering issues such as baptism and the nature of the church.

Where does this leave us?

Having given this brief description of covenant theology, I will offer some conclusions before turning to some practical examples.

In our theology and ecclesiology we draw from a wider pool than the Reformed tradition. Something that quickly becomes apparent as one dips into the world of Reformed thought is a deep suspicion, even hostility, towards pietism.[12] (Meaning that even the likes of John Piper and Jonathan Edwards, who we might consider truly Reformed, can come in for severe criticism.) While pietism can lead to significant problems of legalism or an existentialist faith, divorced from the *ecclesia*, we would want to emphasise the importance of a personal *experience* of the Holy Spirit. We would look as much to the likes of Edwards, the Moravians or the early Methodists as we would to Calvin or Luther. We are heirs of the Radical Reformation as much as we are of the Magisterial one. This means we might more accurately describe ourselves as “Experiential Calvinists” than Reformed.

I would argue that having a clearer understanding of the covenantal structure of God’s revelation in Scripture would certainly help us, not least in helping to clarify for our people the distinctions between law and grace, works and gospel. However, the great weakness of Covenant theology is the way in which it emphasises the

[12] E.g., see the essay by Horton in Clark & Kim, *Always Reformed*, “this inner spark, inner light, inner experience, and inner reason that guides mysticism, rationalism, idealism, and pragmatism in all ages is precisely that autonomous self which, according to the New Testament, must be crucified and buried with Christ in baptism, so that one can be raised with Christ as a denizen of the new age.”

continuity of the biblical covenants at the expense of the discontinuities. As we will see below, this becomes a real problem in the case of baptism.

In our ecclesiology we are a hybrid: *Congregational* in the sense that we recognize the autonomy of local congregations; *Presbyterian* in that our churches are led by elder teams, and these teams work in relationship and accountability with other elder teams. To our critics our ecclesiology may look like the mutant love child of confused theology married to historical naivety; to us it is the obvious reading of the NT, freed from the strictures of institutionalism. However, we also run the constant danger of defaulting to a form of *Episcopalism* in which 'apostolic ministry' takes on a centralizing, structural role; but this is a second century model, not a first century New Testament one! What is clear, however, is that our ecclesiology differs from Presbyterianism, which might generally be regarded as "truly Reformed."

If our theology and ecclesiology are at odds with what would often be recognized as Reformed, should we use the term at all? In thinking how to answer this question it is worth noting that there is a significant history of Baptists who would consider themselves Reformed. (Indeed, from the beginning of the English Baptists there were both Calvinist and Arminian Baptist churches.) There is also a strong Reformed tradition within Episcopalism. So it is simply not historically justifiable to argue that to be Reformed must mean being Presbyterian and adhering to Covenant theology.[13]

This being the case, I would say a cautious *yes* to describing ourselves as Reformed. However, just as "evangelical" requires defining, so does "Reformed." In the sense that the term indicates the following – conservative evangelical, big view of God, small view of man, and theologically rooted to the five *solas*[14] it is a helpful term. But is also needs to be made clear that we draw from a broader stream of Reformed thought than simply that of Covenant theology. The big picture painted by Covenant theology is attractive, but not its tight details.

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[13] As P.F. Jensen points out in a useful article in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, there has historically been considerable pluriformity within Reformed theology:

> Reformed theology is not, nor has been, monolithic. It has possessed creative vitality sufficient to encompass diversity within an over-all consensus. For instance, before Dort differences existed on the question of limited atonement. Calvin was somewhat ambiguous, if not contradictory, on the matter, and may have leaned towards universal atonement. His successor Beza opposed the common formula (sufficient for all, efficient for the elect) on the grounds that it weakened the biblical stress on limited, or definite atonement. Dort, in fact, fashioned a compromise agreement between the powerful British delegation's universalizing tendency and the majority's particularizing concern.
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> The development of covenant theology indicates diversity too. Begun with Zwingli, Oecolampadius and Bullinger, developed by Zacharius Ursinus (1534–83) and Kaspar Olevianus (1536–87), the movement came to maturity with Robert Rollock (1555–99) and was further elaborated by Johannes Cocceius (1603–69). While increasingly dominant in the 17th century, not all were covenant theologians in the sense of using the concept to structure their theology. Still more was this so before 1600. Differences existed on the nature of the covenant of grace: was it a unilateral and unconditional imposition by God or a bilateral pact with conditions to be fulfilled by man? Most early covenant theologians had one covenant, the covenant of grace. Later, the idea of the pre-fall covenant of works emerged. From 1648 a third, pre-temporal covenant was proposed. Each suggestion had its adherents. Additionally, diversity existed on questions of piety. Puritanism in old and new England was oriented towards praxis, sanctification and pastoralia, increasingly tending to anthropocentrism. Similar developments occurred in the Netherlands and Scotland. This represented a contrast with earlier Reformed theology and with the more scholastically oriented tradition. This pluriformity did not extend to Arminianism, which was proscribed by Dort for undermining the gratuitous theocentricity of salvation.

[14] *Sola Scriptura* - Scripture Alone; *Solus Christus* - Christ Alone; *Sola Gratia* - Grace Alone; *Sola Fide* - Faith Alone; *Soli Deo Gloria* - The Glory of God Alone

However, as the issues discussed below will demonstrate, a naïve appropriation of the label "Reformed" could lead us up some unexpected alleys…

Practical examples

In the following discussion we consider the implications of Covenant theology for our understanding of:
- Baptism
- Ecclesiology
- Hermeneutics
- Politics & cultural life
- Historical groundedness

In each case it will be seen that Covenant theology presents a fork in the road – sometimes this fork may be worth following, while in other instances we will want to clearly reject it.

Baptism

As those convinced of credobaptism (that is baptism of a believer), it is easy for us to dismiss paedobaptism (baptism of infants) as irrelevant, but this is short-sighted: When someone becomes conversant with covenant theology, paedobaptism *makes sense* theologically within that system.

This means we will need to be ready to defend our case when someone in our congregation asks why it is that Tim Keller baptizes babies? and if Keller is right about so much else, how do we know he is wrong about that? We need to be ready to contend for our position when the person who has been getting into Reformed theology wants to debate with us the impact that the covenant has on our view of baptism.

For instance, Kevin DeYoung is a popular blogger and writer within the 'young, restless and reformed' camp and the kind of author who is starting to get picked up in our churches. He is also a spirited advocate of infant baptism, as in the chapter *Vivacious Baby-Baptizing* in his book on the Heidelberg Confession.[15] We need to be ready to respond to those in our congregations engaging with these kind of arguments and finding them persuasive.

And this means we need much stronger *theological* arguments in support of believer baptism than we have probably been used to employing. We need to be able to demonstrate how it is that believer baptism is a better fit with the covenant of grace than is infant baptism. Stephen Wellum summarizes the issues thus,

> At the heart of the advocacy and defense of the evangelical Reformed doctrine of infant baptism is the argument that it is an implication drawn from the comprehensive theological category of the "covenant of grace,"… In many ways, all other arguments for infant baptism are secondary to this overall line of reasoning. If one can establish the basic continuity of the "covenant of grace" across the canon, then it is the belief of most paedobaptists that their doctrine is biblically and theologically demonstrated. It does not seem to bother them that in the NT there is no express command to baptize infants and no record of any clear case of infant baptism. Rather, as John Murray admits, "the evidence for infant baptism falls into the category of good and necessary

[15] DeYoung, *The Good News We Almost Forgot*, pp130-134

> inference" and ultimately this inference is rooted and grounded in a specific convenantal argument. *Covenant theology, then, according to the paedobaptist, requires infant baptism… Ultimately, if Baptists want to argue cogently against the paedobaptist viewpoint and for a believer's baptism, we must, in the end, respond to this covenantal argument.*[16]

Wellum quotes ex-Baptist Randy Booth who crystallizes the paedobaptist position, "The argument in a nutshell is simply this: God established His church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until He puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of his Church and as such entitled to its ordinances."[17] This leads to the frequent Reformed formula of talking about the children of believers as "covenant children."

At the heart of this debate is to what extent one sees the "new" covenant as continuous and discontinuous with the Abrahamic covenant. If the new covenant is essentially the same as the Abrahamic, then it is correct to see it as a mixed covenant, "which includes within it both the elect (covenant keepers) and the non-elect (covenant breakers) simultaneously."[18] This has significant implications for our ecclesiology! Also, viewing the covenant this way means that it is appropriate to apply the sign of the covenant to all "children of the covenant" just as was the case with circumcision under the Abrahamic covenant.

Wellum argues that Covenant theology flattens those aspects of the Abrahamic covenant which are *national* and *physical* in order to emphasise those aspects which are *spiritual*. Covenant theology rightly emphasises the continuities between the Abrahamic and new covenants, but fails to do justice to the discontinuities. If membership of the covenant happens in the same way under the new covenant as it did under the Abrahamic – by being born to believing parents – then the sign of the covenant should be applied in the same way. But if covenant membership is on a different basis, then so should be the signs attending it. Put another way the question is this, are baptism and circumcision effectively the same?

So tightly do covenantal paedobaptists link circumcision and baptism that Wellum can quote Booth as stating, "This clear connection between the two covenant signs of circumcision and baptism creates a difficult problem for the opponents of infant baptism, for *any argument against infant baptism is necessarily an argument against infant circumcision."*[19]

By contrast, for the credobaptist, the discontinuity between the Abrahamic and New covenants is crucial. The prophetic hope was of a new covenant in which *every* member of the covenant "knows the Lord." This is what Jeremiah sees, and the writer to the Hebrews turns to Jeremiah's prophecy to demonstrate what Christ has accomplished. Because of what Christ has done "the people of the new covenant are *all* those who have the law written on their hearts, *all* of whom know the Lord salvifically, for *all* of them have experienced the forgiveness of sin."[20] And this means that all members of the new covenant are those who have entered it by faith, so to apply the sign of the covenant to those who have not expressed this faith is mistaken.

The problem for the credobaptist, however, is that both Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews

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[16] Wellum, in Schreiner & Wright, *Believer's Baptism*, pp97-98 (emphasis mine)
[17] *ibid*, p101
[18] *ibid*, p105
[19] *ibid*, p123 (emphasis Booth's)
[20] *ibid*, p147

8 are contrasting the new covenant, not with the Abrahamic, but with the "old" – the law of Moses. Seeing this can actually strengthen the argument for the continuity between the Abrahamic and new covenants – if it was the Law that was a temporary and conditional covenant, distinct from the covenant of grace, then of course we should baptise our children just as Abraham circumcised his sons!

However, the way that the new covenant operates is different from the operation of the Abrahamic covenant. For example, that Paul does not consider baptism as simply *replacing* circumcision can be inferred from the fact that he does not say this to those of the circumcision party. Paul could have saved himself lots of trouble with the Galatians if he had been able to say, "Baptism is the same as circumcision" but instead he states, "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything" (Gal 5:6) – while clearly baptism does!

The *continuity* between the Abrahamic and new covenants is seen in that the promise to Abraham was of many descendents and a blessing to all nations. This promise has now been fulfilled in Christ. Under the promise, Abraham's physical descendents, in the male line, bore the mark of the covenant. The *discontinuity* is seen in that under the new covenant all those who respond in faith, whether "Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female" (Gal 3:28) receive the sign of the new covenant in baptism. God now generates his offspring spiritually, not physically. For the people of Israel marriage and child-bearing were essential, as this was the mechanism by which the covenant was advanced. In contrast, new covenant people are free to marry or not, as the covenant depends on new birth, not biological increase.

The manner in which Covenant theology flattens out the discontinuities in the covenants leads Wellum to argue that "we should place a moratorium on 'covenant of grace' as a category when speaking of the biblical covenants and the relationships between them." Instead, we should focus on the unfolding plan of God revealed in the various covenants. Using the terminology of "one covenant of grace" results, claims Wellum, "in a reductionism which has the tendency of fitting Scripture into our theological system rather than the other way around."[21] In fact,

> A truly *covenantal* approach to Scripture, preserving the proper biblical emphasis on continuity and discontinuity between the covenant communities of the old and new testaments, as well as between the covenant signs, demands an affirmation of believer's baptism.[22]

And Grudem notes that, "in the discussion of baptism, the phrase 'covenant community' as used by paedobaptists often tends to function as a broad and vague term that blurs the differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament on this matter."[23]

It is at this point that we can perhaps most clearly see the limitations of compressing all the biblical covenants within the overarching category of the covenant of grace.

Before we leave the subject of baptism a final piece of biblical evidence much cited by paedobaptists should be considered. This is the great crescendo in Peter's Pentecost sermon, "For the promise is for you *and for your children* and for all who are far off" (Acts 2:39). One of the strengths of the paedobaptist view is that it emphasises the importance of family – it emphasises the *for your children* aspect of our faith; and this has deep appeal. And there is a challenge in this for us – as we too

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[21] *ibid*, p127

[22] *ibid*, p160

[23] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p976

want to emphasise the importance of family. So, does Acts 2:39 provide grounds for infant baptism?

Calvin claims that it does saying,

> This passage therefore sufficiently refutes the Anabaptists who deny baptism to the children of the faithful while they are still infants, as though they were not members of the Church. They attempt evasion by giving an allegorical meaning, and interpreting children as those who are spiritually begotten. But this gross presumption is of no profit to them.[24] [25]

But is it in fact Calvin who is being presumptuous? The key here seems to be with our interpretation of the word *promise*. What is this promise? who is it for? and how is it received? Wright states that,

> The promise is specifically the promised new age inaugurated by the Holy Spirit (2:33), an age which is not marked by ethnic boundaries but by regeneration and commitment to the Lord (2:17-20). It is a promise of forgiveness for all who call on the name of the Lord (2:21).[26]

Surely Peter does not have infant baptism as a replacement for circumcision in mind here, but is declaring that the promise is for all who believe – whether those in the crowd, their children, or for those far off. As Barrett puts it, "Potentially, from its beginning the church was a universal society and its message was addressed not to Jews only but to distant races."[27] Or as Barth expresses it, "This promise applies to their children, since it is for all Israel…It is hard to see where…there is any place even for the idea of infant baptism, let alone for any permission or command to administer it."[28]

However, if we are clear that Peter's Pentecost sermon is not an instruction for infant baptism, we still need to deal with the charge often levelled against credobaptists that we are not consistent – that we do not treat our children as though they are unsaved, but effectively regard them as covenant members, just as do paedobaptists. This charge has particular stickiness when applied to those churches that make a practice

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[24] Calvin, *Acts 1-13*, p82

[25] The role of Heinrich Bullinger in formulating covenantal paedobaptism should also be noted. As Andy Johnston points out in personal correspondence: "Bullinger really was, in many ways, the 'guru' & founder of covenant theology - see McCoy & Baker*, Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger & the Covenantal Tradition*. Bullinger's influence is massively under-estimated by most people today, largely because, after his death it was Calvin, rather than Bullinger, who became the dominant figure in Reformed circles. However, in the 1550s & 1560s Bullinger & Zurich were arguably just as influential as Calvin & Geneva. Bullinger's enduring legacy (with his very strong emphasis on covenantal theology) came largely through the Second Helvetic Confession (1641). E.g., "ANABAPTISTS. We condemn the Anabaptists, who deny that newborn infants of the faithful are to be baptized. For according to evangelical teaching, of such is the Kingdom of God, and they are in the covenant of God. Why, then, should the sign of God's covenant not be given to them? Whey should those who belong to God and are in his Church not be initiated by holy baptism? We condemn also the Anabaptists in the rest of their peculiar doctrines which they hold contrary to the Word of God. We therefore are not Anabaptists and have nothing in common with them."
The Second Helvetic Confession was enthusiastically endorsed by the Church of Scotland & thus Bullinger's influence was an abiding one on the English speaking Churches. Even before then, however, many English Protestants went to Zurich during the Marian persecutions of the 1550s and adopted many of Bullinger's views.
I would argue that it was Bullinger, in particular, who was the defining Protestant theologian of paedobaptist perspectives. Anabaptism had first reared its head in Zurich and it was there, fist under Zwingli and subsequently, under Bullinger that the Anabaptist perspective was 'repudiated.'"

[26] Wright, in Schreiner & Wright, *Believer's Baptism*, p245

[27] Barrett, *Acts 1-14*, p155

[28] Barth, *CD IV.4*, p184

of baby ‘dedications’.

Historically, the ‘founder’ churches of Newfrontiers did not have baby dedications, precisely because of these concerns. However, over recent years more and more of our churches seem to be doing so – not least for ‘missional’ reasons. The reality is that there is nothing like a dedication/christening to get unbelieving relatives to church! In order to counter the charge that we are in effect christening our children, but without using water, we need to be careful to define what our dedication services are for. Giving thanks for babies that have been born to church members is a real gospel opportunity. It enables us to speak about the significance of parenting and the value of family, which then gives opportunity to express something of our ecclesiology in what the nature of local church life should be like. It also enables us to make clear that we do not regard the infant as ‘saved’ but that as a congregation we are taking the responsibility to help the parents instruct the child in the gospel in the hope that it might one day respond in faith and be baptised.

We then need to be consistent in our teaching about parenting, and in the children’s ministry our churches run. A constant battle is to keep children’s work from descending into mere moralism, where the assumption is made that ‘church children’ are believers really, and what they need to be taught is how to behave. Children’s work should be at least as gospel saturated as our preaching to the adult congregation. We need to be clear that anyone who has not responded in faith is not yet regarded as numbering among the covenant people of God.[29]

And when someone responds in faith, we baptise them!

Ecclesiology

Is the church a mixed community, made up of the elect and reprobate? Or can a local congregation genuinely consist only of the elect? This distinction lies at the heart of the ecclesiological differences between Baptist and Reformed churches, and (as discussed above) is reflected most obviously in differences in baptismal practice.

In the Baptist tradition, membership of a church is restricted to those who have made a profession of faith, and that faith is recognized by the rest of the congregation. Baptism stands as the key moment when an “appeal of faith” is made. So, in the Baptist tradition, while a continuity is seen between Israel and the church, there is also a clear discontinuity, as Israel was a mixed community.

At the anecdotal level, what this means in practice is that many of us will be aware of thriving evangelical Anglican churches which have a large number of christened, but not evidently regenerate members in their congregations. The great advantage of this ecclesiology is that it makes the ‘front door’ to church life much larger and doesn’t require congregants to experience crisis points in joining the church. The great disadvantage is that people may attend church regularly for years and consider themselves part of the covenant people of God, without actually ever having an experience of new birth.

This has implications for our understanding of how salvation happens, and how it is recognized as having happened. With a missional approach the ecclesiology afforded by Covenant theology allows a low-pressure, low-embarrassment

[29] It is beyond the scope of this paper, but the implications of this for when we allow children to celebrate the Lord’s Supper should also be considered.

exploration of faith – a frog in the kettle conversion, as it were. By contrast, a Baptist ecclesiology demands a moment of public confession and appeal of faith, which makes response more challenging.

A challenge of consistency is then presented to those of us with a Baptist ecclesiology in terms of whether we admit to church membership those who have been baptised as infants, rather than as an act of their own faith. This would seem to be a matter for the elders of local churches to decide, but the decision taken does speak volumes as to how seriously we take believer baptism, and the nature of the church. If we admit into membership those baptised as babies we communicate the message that what we believe about believer baptism is flexible. Also, it means we are relying on an appeal of faith made not in baptism, but by some other mechanism. In Acts it seems clear that believer baptism is the mark of entry into the church (E.g., Acts 2:41; 10:47) and in the epistles *baptism* is used as shorthand to describe the whole conversion experience (E.g., Rom 6:4; Gal 3:27). The tendency to compromise on who we admit to membership is understandable as we have all had the experience of excellent people wanting to join us who regard their baptism as infants and subsequent confirmation as sufficient declaration of faith. To keep such people from membership can seem churlish and legalistic. However, many of us have also had the experience of those who have been christened/confirmed wanting to join us who clearly *need* to come to the humbling point of public confession of faith in baptism. To embrace one and exclude the other only multiplies our pastoral dilemmas.

The way in which we define membership of the church is important because it conditions how we practice church discipline, and how we understand our prophetic mission to the world. Calvin was not exactly slack about church discipline, and discipline is maintained within Presbyterian churches by a system of adherence to the Confessions, and appeal to church courts; but church discipline makes much more sense within a Baptist ecclesiology. If membership of the body is limited to those who have been baptised as believers, making an appeal of faith, then it is beholden on the body to self-discipline, in a way which isn't the case in a mixed community. As Mark Dever points out, this was precisely the habit of Baptist churches of an earlier generation, when, before the Civil War, Southern Baptists excommunicated nearly 2 percent of their membership every year![30]

If our ecclesiology follows along this path it also demands of us that we are cautious in using language such as "belonging before believing." While wanting to make our churches welcoming to all we should be careful to maintain the distinction of church membership. Membership is for those who have been baptised, and have submitted to the discipline of the church. It carries rights and responsibilities that mere attendance does not. As Dever challengingly puts it,

> What we actually need to do is to close the front door and open the back door! If we really want to see our churches grow, we need to make it harder to join and we need to be better about excluding people. We need to be able to show that there is a distinction between the church and the world – that it means something to be a Christian.[31]

That the local church should not be a mixed community seems inherent in NT descriptions of what the people of God are and do. We are to proclaim Christ's excellencies and do this precisely because we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession." Peter describes the

[30] Dever, *Nine Marks*, p179

[31] *ibid*, pp170-171

church thus because the church comprises those who *are* God's people, who *have* received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10). In this Peter is drawing the dis/continuities of the covenant together, as he rephrases Exodus 19:5-6. In the Exodus account the emphasis is on the obedience of the people, in order to maintain the covenant. In the epistle the emphasis is on what God has done – he has had fulfilled the covenant! Entrance into this relationship with God is by faith, and is open to all, regardless of ethnicity or sex. One can imagine the power of Galatians 3:28-9 being proclaimed at a baptism in the first century, as women and non-Jews were declared to be true children of Abraham, and part of the people of God.

Once again, it seems that the emphasis of Covenant theology on the continuity of the covenant diminishes the wonder of the discontinuity – that entrance to the Church is now a matter of the Spirit, not the flesh.

Of course, in arguing for the local church to be a company of the faithful we would not deny that God alone knows for certain who are reprobate and who elect. But we would want to claim that believers are able to "discern the body" and that admitting someone to baptism is the first evidence of this. Thus at this point we must differ from Covenant theology and claim once again that a truly covenantal approach to Scripture leads us to understanding the nature of the church to be different from that of Israel.

Hermeneutics

In response to the question, What is covenant theology? J.I. Packer states,

> The straightforward, if provocative answer to that question is that it is what is nowadays called a hermeneutic…It is a hermeneutic that forces itself upon every thoughtful Bible-reader...[32]

In the same essay Packer goes on to claim that,

> The gospel of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame…the Word of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame…the reality of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame.

We make much of the fact that we are "under grace, not under law" but I wonder what often we mean by this; and more significantly, what our congregations understand by it? Do most 21st century Britons feel a sense of living "under law"? What does this mean for those who have never felt obligated to the law of Moses? Moreover, how do we teach our churches to read their Bibles, when so much of the Old Testament is commands? Do our people end up simply equating law with the OT and grace with the NT? And if so, what do they then do when they encounter parts of the NT that read like law (E.g., Eph 4:25-29)? What value does the OT have, other than providing outlines for typological sermons?! And does the law still have any normative value for Christians?

It is here that Covenant theology can help us as the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace provides a hermeneutical grid within which to place all of Scripture. Within this grid the Mosaic law is a covenant of works, a reiteration of the covenant with Adam, and conditional. The covenant with Abraham

[32] Packer, *Introduction to Witsius*

(and with Noah and David) is grace, and unconditional. Salvation is always about grace, through faith (the point of Heb 11); the covenant of works is about staying in the land and visibly demonstrating what it means to be the covenant people of God. That the covenant of works is impossible to keep (despite being easy! Dt 30:11-14) is evidence that a different kind of covenant is needed – that it is the covenant of grace that must be relied on.

This hermeneutical grid also helps us to understand how "law" operates in its broader sense than the law of Moses. So, for instance, when the NT issues commands, it is "law" but keeping these commands is never the means by which we are saved – it is not works. As Horton puts it, "The Old and New Testaments do not differ in the slightest in issuing commands, so we cannot simply equate the former with law and the latter with promise."[33] By the same token, there is plenty of gospel in the OT.

In clearly articulating the distinction between law and grace, works and gospel, I personally find the language and structure of Covenant theology helpful. It helps us understand how the Mosaic law is part of our story (and not without grace), yet clarifies the fact that our salvation rests on the completed work of Christ. It helps us see how commands given in the NT do not "bring us under Law" again. However, these points can also be made clearly without reference to the system of Covenant theology.

Another significant debate within Reformed theology it is worth us considering is as to how the law applies to the Christian – a debate that was very live at the time of the Reformation. The classic position of Covenant theology is summed up in the Westminster Confession and a recognition of three types of law – the *ceremonial*, *social* and *moral*. In this division the Westminster divines were following Calvin who claimed the moral law provides a rule of life for the believer,

> For conscience, instead of allowing us to stifle our perceptions, and sleep on without interruption, acts as an inward witness and monitor, reminds us of what we owe to God, points out the distinction between good and evil, and thereby convicts us of departure from duty. But man, being immured in the darkness of error, is scarcely able, by means of that natural law, to form any tolerable idea of the worship which is acceptable to God. At all events, he is very far from forming any correct knowledge of it. In addition to this, he is so swollen with arrogance and ambition, and so blinded with self-love, that he is unable to survey, and, as it were, descend into himself, that he may learn to humble and abase himself, and confess his misery. Therefore, as a necessary remedy, both for our dullness and our contumacy, the Lord has given us his written Law, which, by its sure attestations, removes the obscurity of the law of nature, and also, by shaking off our lethargy, makes a more lively and permanent impression on our minds.[34]

In this Calvin was at odds with Luther, who considered all the law to be redundant for Christians. Instead, Luther relies on the concept of natural law to define what is morally appropriate, which opens a whole other can of worms.[35] But whether the threefold division of the law itself is legitimate is highly debatable. As Schreiner points out,

> Indeed, it is quite difficult to distinguish between what is "moral" and "ceremonial" in the law. For instance, the law forbidding the taking of interest is clearly a moral mandate (Exod. 22:25), but this law was addressed to Israel as an agricultural society

[33] Horton, *God of Promise*, p175

[34] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.VIII.1

[35] Schreiner offers a helpful summary of the differences between Calvin and Luther on this point, *40 Questions*, pp97-99

> in the ancient Near East. As with the rest of the laws in the Mosaic covenant, it is abolished now that Christ has come. This is not to say that this law has nothing to say to the church of Jesus Christ today.[36]

Horton skirts over these problems and follows Calvin in appealing to both the ongoing requirements of the moral law, and natural law,

> While the civil and ceremonial laws pertain exclusively to the theocracy and are no longer binding, the moral law is still in force. It is not only clearly elucidated in the pages of Scripture; it is inscribed in the conscience of every human being.[37]

The weakness of this position is that (as pointed out by Schreiner) the moral law is not necessarily so clearly elucidated in scripture as all that; and the appeal to conscience – or natural law – is fraught with difficulty.

In his discussion of natural law, O'Donovan argues that it is not surprising that many societies have values which are broadly "Christian" if epistemologically there is a divine law. But this fragmentary living of the natural law is not the basis for doing ethics. For example, if a culture affirms marriage that is not a false affirmation but neither is it the basis for us to talk about marriage; we talk about marriage from the basis of Christ's revelation. O'Donovan calls this knowledge "misknowledge" as it misses the ability to be applied to the full picture of human existence.[38] "True knowledge of the moral order is knowledge 'in Christ'."[39]

For Paul, ethical life is a consequence of "walking by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16). It is this sensitivity to the Spirit that reveals the knowledge of Christ to us (1 Cor 2:6-16), and keeps us from gratifying the flesh. However, even though this is clearly Paul's expectation, it does not keep him from issuing "law" to the churches! In such cases our assumption must be that the Holy Spirit was revealing these commands to the apostle; where these NT commands reflect OT "moral law" this merely demonstrates the consistency of God's revelation over the course of salvation history.

Covenant theology speaks with clarity about what the obedience of Christ has achieved for us; both his *active* and his *passive* obedience,

> In a very real sense, we are saved by works: Christ's. Yet we receive this salvation by faith in his saving work on our behalf. So the law is upheld – and not only the law, but the covenant of works, which commanded, "Do this and you shall live." Christ did fulfil the divine requirements and was raised to the right hand of the Father. Because of his victory, we too will be vindicated at the great cosmic trial. We already have God's word on it in the gospel of free justification, which belongs to us even now, as confirmed by our baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper.[40]

Working within the hermeneutical grid provided by Covenant theology does help us in making sense of our reading of the OT. In removing the confusion that the OT is "law" while the NT is "gospel" and in demonstrating the continuity in the covenants, much that would otherwise be obscure comes into clarity. However, the problems raised by the imposition of an artificial division of the law of Moses into the moral, civil and ceremonial should give us pause in adopting Covenant theology at this point.

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[36] Schreiner, *40 Questions*, p90

[37] Horton, *God of Promise*, p180

[38] O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, p88ff

[39] *ibid*, p85

[40] Horton, *God of Promise*, p173

Politics & cultural life

It is worth considering this subject within a paper on Reformed and Covenant theology both because it was a subject of considerable interest to the Reformers, and because it is currently a hotly debated subject in Reformed circles.[41]

This subject has particular relevance for us in Newfrontiers as we are increasingly focussing on the way in which we should develop a vision for our communities, as well as our churches. What is becoming identified by the shorthand label of "the Everything agenda" will be profoundly shaped by our theological presuppositions on these issues.

It would be a mistake to think of Reformed theology as monolithic. Instead, a number of significantly diverging positions can be identified within it, and this is perhaps in no area more obvious than in approaches to culture. On the one hand there are those Covenant theologians who are culturally pessimistic, and have a 'two-kingdoms' theology; while on the other there are those who are culturally optimistic and have a 'transformative' theology.[42]

In those nations (such as the UK) that are heirs of the Reformation, having some understanding of these different perspectives will help us. However, even in the nations we are working in that do not share this heritage it will nonetheless be helpful to do this historical homework, as it will have a determinative effect on how we seek to build churches in those contexts.

A key distinction between the different Reformed viewpoints is whether a theology of cultural engagement is seen as being grounded in the work of Christ in *creation*, or the work of Christ in *redemption*. Do we see our cultural engagement as being an outworking of the creation mandate to rule, subdue and steward? Or as a statement of our eschatological hope in a world made new? While we would want to emphasize both these aspects, the distinction between them are at the root of the divisions between those Reformed authors and bloggers that we might stumble upon.

Those who place emphasis on the work of Christ in creation see the church's mission as the personal renewal of sinners. Christians do not go to the workplace in order to 'transform culture' but as a working out of the creation mandate. This position is very similar to Lutheranism with its theology of vocation and the two kingdoms, and is referred to as *Reformed two kingdoms theology* (or R2K for short). Daryl Hart, a vocal advocate of this position, expresses it like this,

> The two-kingdom approach to Christ and culture is superior to neo-Calvinism because it is based on the doctrine of vocation… The two-kingdom approach recognizes the diversity of callings both among Christians and institutions. Not every Christian is called to be a banker or a Republican. Not every Christian is called to oppose national health care. Not every Christian is called to a holy vocation (the Christian ministry). A "secular" calling is not inherently sinful and is actually good

[41] As well as Reformed approaches to culture the other major perspectives emerging from the Reformation (Lutheranism and Anabaptism) should also be noted in any thorough discussion of this subject.

[42] Perhaps the two best examples of these contrasting positions are D.G. Hart (www.oldlife.org) of Westminster Seminary, and Doug Wilson (www.dougwils.com) of New Saint Andrews. Hart, especially, can be somewhat sharp, but both authors share the considerable virtue of being amusing. I suspect that Wilson would reject the designation "neo-Cal" preferring to style himself a "medievalist." Wilson also represents the Federal Vision, a position that has been widely rejected as error, bordering on heresy, by the wider Reformed community. (For a succinct critique of the Federal Vision see Ligon Duncan's chapter in Downes, *Risking the Truth*.)

> in the sight of God. Not every institution is called to administer justice. In fact, the church's calling is to minister forgiveness – not exactly what the Bible says is the work of the magistrate.[43]
>
> The kingdom of Christ is the visible church. God rules elsewhere. But his rule there is not redemptive. In culture, the arts and politics his rule is creational.[44]

In contrast, those who place emphasis on the work of Christ in redemption argue for the Christian transformation of culture. There are many shades of this, from what we might characterize as the 'Keller position' to a far more radical post-millennialism that believes "thy kingdom come" means that the rule of Christ must be seen in every area of human experience. This approach is very motivating, encouraging as it does Christians to invest in culture, especially in mercy ministry and politics. However, at its more radical edge it can lead to the deliberate establishment of separate Christian organizations in every sphere of human experience. As VanDrunen expresses it, "Today Reformed intellectuals frequently assert that Christ's kingdom penetrates every legitimate social institution, and ordinary Reformed people found goat-breeding societies on a "Reformed basis" and wrestle with how to develop college football programs in accordance with a Reformed world and life view."[45]

We, surely, would want to place strong emphasis upon our eschatological hope, but does this approach run the risk of us falling into the mistakes made by the American religious right? Could it make us exclusive, and creators of a sub-culture where we only deal with 'Christian' education, businesses, music, plumbers, etc.?

VanDrunen helpfully poses five questions that highlight the areas of difference between neo-Calvinists and two kingdoms Covenant theologians:[46]

1. What are we to make of the doctrine that the origin and nature of the civil and spiritual kingdoms are grounded respectively upon the Son's distinct mediatorship of creation and redemption?
2. Does the covenant with Noah in Genesis 9 represent a distinct covenant of common grace, or is it part of the overarching covenant of grace? (I.e., does it apply to all people, or just to people of the covenant?)
3. What has changed about the state and its authority and legitimacy with the death and resurrection of Jesus?
4. How can a Christian live consistently while pursuing the non-violence of the kingdom of God but participating in the coercive structures of government? What about concrete moral questions such as self-defence against an intruder?
5. How can a dualism be avoided that draws an unhelpful line between the "spiritual" and "material"?

Further reflection upon these questions might be fruitful for us, for while the debate might seem somewhat esoteric, it clearly has considerable significance for how one approaches cultural issues. While there are some in our movement who are temperamentally and theologically more inclined towards Anabaptism, it seems to me that the main ground of debate for us is whether we are more neo-Calvinist or R2K – and positioning ourselves somewhere in-between is probably where we will be most

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[43] Accessed at http://www.whitehorseinn.org/archives/53.html

[44] Accessed at http://oldlife.org/2010/12/07/what-makes-neo-calvinism-biblical/

[45] VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, p4

[46] VanDrunen*, Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, pp429-32

comfortable.[47]

Historical groundedness

The desire for a sense of connection to church history can be problematic and polarizing for us. As a "new church" movement our bias is towards the contemporary and a suspicion of tradition. It is not unusual to hear sentiments along the lines of, "People talk about church history, but they don't go back far enough – our church history is the book of Acts!" This kind of statement produces rousing *Amens!* in some, but causes others to wince.

Among those in the latter camp there is often an *emotional* need to connect with previous generations of the faithful. For these people it is not sufficient to say, "Read Acts." They want to know where their heritage comes from, just as there are those who like to be able to trace their family tree back through the generations – to connect the chain of faith back to the book of Acts. Those of this frame of mind also tend to respond strongly to the aesthetic dimension of life – what buildings look like matters to them, and what music sounds like matters. While there is at times no doubt a degree of Pharisaical desire for middle-class respectability contained within this attitude, we should not dismiss all manifestations of it as spurious.

As well as this emotional need for historical connectedness there is a *theological* rationale for it. Often it is an appreciation of historic failures and triumphs in the church that serve to warn us from current dangers and spur us on to greater exploits of faith. To imagine that the history of the church between Acts 28 and the present day is of little relevance to us is remarkably naïve, and potentially dangerous. Is there any contemporary heresy or theological innovation that 2,000 years of church history cannot usefully instruct us in? And the extent to which we do engage with church history is often very narrow, picking just a few choice examples from the Reformation, Great Awakening and the Victorian missionary advance – ignoring the fact that,

> Anyone who has spent any time looking at the attitude of Luther, Calvin, and company on the creeds of the early church, and the traditional language for expressing theology, knows that the phrase 'no creed but the Bible' can only be applied to these men in the qualified sense that Scripture is the sole ultimate authoritative epistemological source and criterion for theology, not that there is nothing of use to be found in the church's tradition of creedal statement, theological formulation, and doctrinal discussion.[48]

In considering these issues the distinction between *tradition* being the living faith of the dead while *traditionalism* is the dead faith of the living is helpful. Tradition is not necessarily something to be afraid of![49]

Tradition becomes increasingly important as our wider culture is increasingly disconnected from its historical roots. The much observed social dislocations of the past 50 years have left many people in a state of emotional and relational dissonance. At a popular level the reaction to this is witnessed in such things

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[47] This middle ground is represented by the recent contributions of the likes of Andy Crouch (*Culture Making*) and James Davison Hunter (*To Change the World*).

[48] Trueman, *Minority Report*, p111

[49] Note 1 Cor 11:2 "I commend you because you…maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you."

as the increasing interest in plotting ones family tree and seeking to answer the question, "Who do you think you are?", in membership of the National Trust, and the number of history programs on TV. In the evangelical world it has been manifest in the surge of interest in such things as Celtic spirituality, and by those non-conformist evangelicals who have converted to Anglicanism, and those evangelical Anglicans who have converted to Catholicism or Orthodoxy.

That anyone should make such a move might be perplexing to us, but reflects the desire in many people to connect to a church that feels more rooted, solid, and historically justifiable (and where there is a more obvious appreciation for beauty) than the looser narrative of our own evangelical traditions. It is easy for us to dismiss such moves as merely misguided and irrelevant, but we may be wiser to mine the theological traditions available to us. Covenant theology offers exactly one such possibility; as Carl Trueman expresses it,

> Reformed Orthodoxy… offers precisely an ancient-future faith. The great works of Reformed Orthodoxy and the impressive catechisms and confessions of the sixteenth century are all built upon positive reception of the ancient creeds and even the best of medieval theology… Reformed Orthodoxy gives you the best of the Christian creedal tradition, combined with vital Protestant insights such as justification by grace through faith, and the centrality of assurance to Christian experience… The loss of historical rootedness and identity which evangelicalism seems to have experienced has left us vulnerable to the attractions of Rome and Constantinople; but it does not have to be that way. Evangelicalism has sold its birthright; we should reclaim it before it is too late.[50]

Because Covenant theology offers an avenue to a more historically grounded faith its appeal will be increased to those who begin along the "Keller trail." Rather than regard this as a potential threat we could ourselves engage more rigorously with the Reformed tradition at this point and make use of it in our context.

In recent years there has been a shift in our leadership training courses to the more "practical" elements of understanding church growth dynamics, personality profiling and so on. Perhaps we should devote more time to historical theology? Perhaps it would be no bad thing if in our churches we made occasional use of the Nicene Creed, or had some familiarity with the Heidelberg Confession? Or if we distributed copies of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith among our congregations, as Spurgeon did at the New Park Street Chapel? Perhaps demonstrating our historical debt would actually strengthen our current ecclesiology rather than undermine it? If we became more self-consciously Reformed in this way might we both satisfy the emotional needs of some in our congregation and guard against error creeping into the church by lack of a basic theological grid?

As we mature as a movement perhaps this is an area where we can find the "radical middle" – that space where we avoid the mistakes of the institutional church which, "is often blind to the great gulf between the church's profession and its possession, and to its own institutionalism and self-interest in keeping the status quo."[51] While also avoiding the mistakes of renewers who "often have no sense of history (or force history into an ideological framework) and too easily identify God's purposes exclusively with their side in the renewal debate. They are typically naïve concerning institutional and sociological realities and blind to the institutional dimensions of their own movement."[52]

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[50] Trueman, in Downes, *Risking the Truth*, pp38-39

[51] Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit*, p273

[52] *ibid.*

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