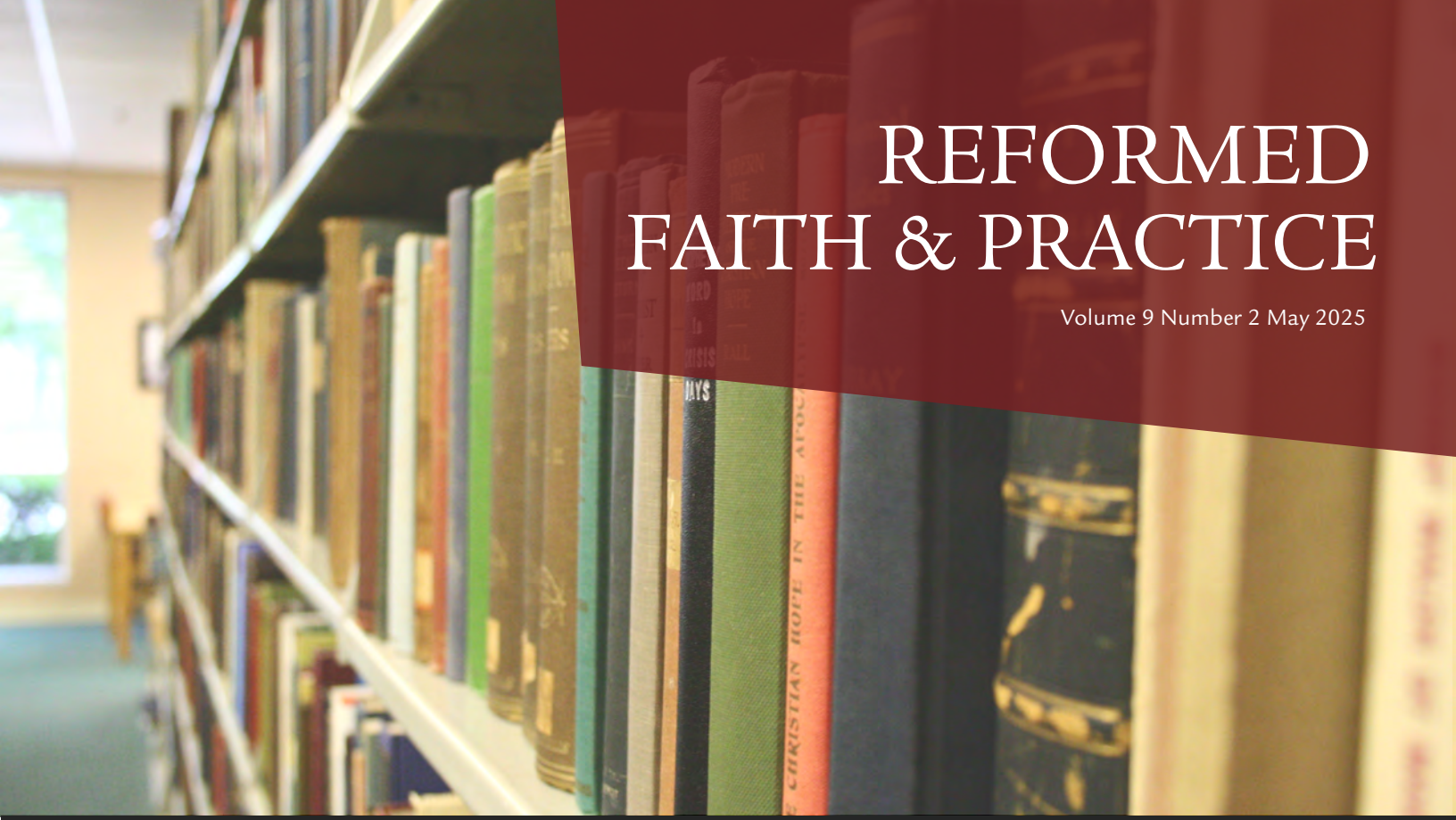




REFORMED FAITH & PRACTICE

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Reformed Catholicity: Decennial Reflections

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Reformed Catholicity – Decennial Reflections

In late 2015, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* was published. We began that book with the lines: “We rejoice in the fact that this book is not suggesting a new path but is offering analysis of what we see occurring around us already. So we give thanks for friends and exemplars of Reformed catholicity and of renewal through retrieval” (vii). A decade has passed. The world seems a very different place in many respects. Our joy and gratitude remain the same as there are still many encouraging trends in Christian theology, particularly as practiced in the Reformed tradition. Translations and critical editions make access to key texts increasingly possible for theologically interested readers. Journal articles and monographs continue to offer nuanced engagement of any number of topics, figures, and trajectories. A host of exegetes study Scripture with the benefit of engaging richly with its reception by the church through the ages. A range of series and dogmatic projects model the use of retrieval in a host of ways. It is a time to harvest in terms of theology in a Reformed and catholic vein.

We are gratified that the language of Reformed catholicity has encouraged many, challenged others, and been developed in a range of ways.¹ We take hope in observing with thanks the many inspiring things afoot in the world of Christian divinity. Hope marks theological practice in as much as God provides many to hear his Word and testify thoughtfully before the world. Rather than the authors seeking to offer an update to the manifesto, this journal issue includes seventeen reflections that seek to consider the book and what now needs saying regarding the practice of Reformed catholicity for this and future years. With so many theological resources available, we continue to need guiding lights to help us make principled progress. These essays provide perception, direction, and wisdom that serve well in that regard. For these friends and exemplars and their thoughtful engagements found in this journal issue, the authors are grateful.

Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain

¹ For survey and analysis, see especially now J. Todd Billings, “Reformed Catholicity,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (ed. Michael Allen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 330-351.

Reformed Catholicity as a Generative Theological Vision

J. Todd Billings
Western Theological Seminary, Michigan

Michael Allen and Scott Swain's *Reformed Catholicity* marked a turning point in the ongoing conversation about renewing a catholic and Reformed theological tradition, clarifying its doctrinal, ecclesial, and exegetical dimensions.

As a theological program, Reformed catholicity has shown remarkable promise. Though I contributed the Afterword to *Reformed Catholicity*, my own work has since developed a Reformed and catholic sensibility in directions I did not anticipate—on sacraments and church, providence and lament, and resurrection hope.¹ More broadly, the past decade has also seen impressive historical scholarship contributing to a Reformed and catholic theological vision. This historical scholarship highlights the catholicity of Reformed thinkers from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as some in the modern era. As such, Reformed catholicity should not merely be a “Protestant version” of the twentieth-century Roman Catholic *ressourcement* movement. Rather, its impulse aligns with the Reformation's own commitments: biblical interpretation, catechesis, discipleship, and the translation of patristic and medieval works. The Reformers consistently honored the “ancient fathers” as “chosen instruments of God,” as the *First Helvetic Confession* states, even as they remained deeply aware of their fallibility. Whether in the sixteenth or seventeenth century or in the “orthodox and modern” approach of Herman Bavinck at the turn of the twentieth century, this instinct has yielded significant theological fruit.

What are the implications of a Reformed and catholic sensibility for contemporary scholarship, and where might it develop further? In 2022, I published a chapter on “Reformed Catholicity” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Christian Theology*, exploring those questions.² By inhabiting the Reformed tradition toward catholic ends, this approach challenges persistent deficits in the modern theological imagination. It also invites us to hear old voices in new and perhaps surprising ways. For example, within a theocentric framework, figures like Lemuel Haynes (1753–1833)

¹ See J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* (Brazos Press, 2015); *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table* (Eerdmans, 2018); *The End of the Christian Life: How Embracing Our Mortality Frees Us to Truly Live* (Brazos Press, 2020).

² See J. Todd Billings, “Reformed Catholicity,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Michael Allen (Cambridge University Press, 2022) 330-351.

and others in the Black ecclesial tradition exemplified Reformed catholicity in ways with profound theological and social implications. While Reformed theology, like any tradition, has at times been distorted to justify injustice, these voices serve as crucial counterpoints, illuminating trajectories that remain deeply relevant today.

For the remainder of this essay, I will not revisit the portrait of Reformed catholicity and its possibilities from my chapter but will instead focus on a pressing issue: the ecclesial fragmentation of the visible church today, including within the broader Reformed communion. While its historical, cultural, and sociological dimensions have been studied, its theological implications remain surprisingly underexplored in recent scholarship.

The issue extends beyond denominational and congregational splits to a deeper challenge. Across both denominational and nondenominational settings, whether “progressive” or “conservative,” many Christian communities within the broadly Reformed tradition are marked by pervasive alienation and mutual contempt.

This problem is not new. As Joseph Small observes, it is a “paradox...deeply embedded within the Reformed tradition. From the beginning, Reformed churches have articulated deep commitment to the unity of the whole church, working for visible forms of unity among separated churches. And yet Reformed churches have always been susceptible to internal partitions, schisms, and ongoing fragmentation.”³

At the same time, these divisions take on new expressions today, which I see firsthand as a seminary professor. My students come from conservative, mainline, and nondenominational backgrounds. Yet, sadly, one of their most formative and widely shared experiences is ecclesial fracture, division, and alienation. Too often, contempt for theological opponents is mistaken for spiritual discernment. At denominational gatherings, modern variations of the Pharisee’s prayer abound: “God, I thank you that I am not like *this* unenlightened person or *that* one.” This posture, tragically, transcends denominational lines, fostering suspicion and distrust even among members of the same communion.

Today we often frame this problem in terms of polarization, a path of identity formation based on perceived threats rather than core convictions. This is valuable. But what makes the problem *theological*? And what does it have to do with catholicity?

Though “catholicity” is not a biblical term, it expresses a deeply biblical reality—the unity of God’s people in Christ. The New Testament repeatedly emphasizes this oneness. For example, in Ephesians 2, Christ’s death and resurrection put hostility “to death,” between Jews and Gentiles, reconciling both to God “in one body through the cross.” Unity is not merely an aspiration but a reality God has accomplished. Ephesians 4 underscores this. The unique work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit brings divided peoples into the one household of God: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” The reality of God’s work defines the shape of our human work—to live in his household “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:2–3).

³ Joe Small, “Traditions: Reformed,” *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan (Oxford University Press: 2021) 153–154.

While these chapters from Ephesians have played a crucial role, historically, in a Reformed vision of the church, this vision of God's work and calling for the church is so distant from the lived experience of many today that it risks being dismissed as an abstract, otherworldly reality. Myriad forces drive contempt rather than *koinonia* within the visible church today. This deserves careful theological and sociological analysis. What would it mean to *hear* and *obey* God's word through passages like these in Ephesians, when we have become invested in the self-sorting of late-modern politics of identity, defining ourselves by who or what we are against, and clinging to others with shared affinity?

The concern for the *visible unity* of the church should not be left solely to ecumenical organizations or to traditions that embrace what Gavin Ortlund calls "institutional exclusivism"—the idea that "the real church of Christ is restricted to one visible, institutional church with its own unique hierarchical structure."⁴ At its best, the Reformed tradition has no interest in institutional exclusivism; since its opening generations, it has been united in theological confession, while adapting to various expressions in prayer, worship, polity, and institutional structure.

At the same time, the Reformed distinction between the visible and invisible church should never justify failing to live under God's Word. The call in Ephesians to "bear with one another in love" is not an abstract principle, but a call to life within the messy, concrete reality of the covenant community, the visible church. This is precisely why humility, gentleness, and patience are necessary.

Reformed confessions, such as the Belgic and Westminster Confessions, reflect this reality by drawing on the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43). They insist that the church is a mixed body, where the elect and hypocrites are intertwined in ways beyond our epistemic grasp. Our age is obsessed with drawing rigid lines: "The mainline church is completely dead." "Conservative churches don't know the real good news." In contrast, Westminster reminds us that even "the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error"—and that we are called to the difficult, humbling task of pursuing unity with patience and love.

Can Reformed catholicity offer a vision, not just for retrieval but for ecclesial renewal—one that resists the fractures of our time and takes seriously the imperative to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"?

This question is both theological and existential, and it has profound implications for the witness of the church today.

Reformed theology can and should articulate a fulsome and nourishing doctrine of *koinonia* in Christ. But if congregations in the Reformed tradition are known by their animosity rather than humility and patience, the scarcity of their fellowship rather than their unity, then the witness of the church to the gospel is tarnished. Indeed, as John Calvin said in a letter to Thomas Cranmer, when "the members of the Church [are] severed, the church lies bleeding."⁵ Whether or not a

⁴ Gavin Ortlund, *What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always-Reforming Church*, Zondervan, 21.

⁵ In speaking about the divisions among the evangelical churches, Calvin wrote "This other thing also is to be ranked among the chief evils of our time, viz., that the Churches are so divided, that human fellowship is scarcely now in any repute among us...Thus it is that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding." Quoted from Small, "Reformed," *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, 155.

congregation belongs to a denomination, with patience and humility, we are called to seek a catholic and Reformed vision for renewal that resists the fashionable fractures of our time, seeking to live into the “one hope of our calling,” finding ways to “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” in our theology and practice.

Reformed Catholicity in Trinitarian Perspective

**Gerald Bray
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Where is the church heading in the third millennium of Christianity? One thing is certain – nowadays no denomination can live as an island unto itself. Whether we like it or not, we are connected with each other, not least in our opposition to the forces of secularism, as well as other religions and ideologies, that challenge our assumptions and drive us together in a search for common solutions. The divisions of the past will not disappear overnight, but one way or another, all Christians are now engaged in a quest for theological unity, or “catholicity” as it is often called. How should we who have inherited the Reformed tradition go about this?

In my view, the best place to begin is to think in terms of the Persons of the Trinity and their work.

As far as God the Father is concerned, all Christians agree about him and his work. Jesus taught his disciples to call God their Father, and to pray to him in that way, something that the Jews found unusual and even scandalous. Christians also emphasize that the Father is both the Creator of the universe and the Redeemer of humankind. There are disagreements about the extent of redemption, but nobody now claims that the Creator is a different (and inferior) God to the Redeemer, as the second-century Gnostics thought.

When we turn to God the Son, we also find general agreement among Christians of all kinds. As the ancient Creeds proclaim, the Son is fully God and fully man, who suffered and died for our sins. He then came back from the dead and ascended into heaven, where he sits at the Father’s right hand, pleading for our forgiveness on the strength of the atoning sacrifice that he made for us in his blood. The centrality of the Lord’s Supper in all Christian communions reminds us that there is a fundamental consensus that transcends confessional boundaries. Disagreements arise concerning the relationship between God’s sovereignty in the election of those who are to be saved and the nature of human “free will”, but the churches all agree that God is in control and that human beings are not robots. Finding the right way to hold these two things together is difficult, but in practice we usually manage to do so, even if there are paradoxes that we cannot fully explain.

It is when we turn to the Person and work of the Holy Spirit that serious differences arise among the major Christian traditions and that catholicity is hard to achieve. On the one hand, there is the question of the Spirit’s relationship to the Son. Everyone agrees that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, as John 15:26 states. But does he also proceed from the Son? The Western churches (Roman Catholic and Protestant) say that he does, whereas the Eastern Orthodox churches disagree. Controversy over this has raged for over a thousand years, and no quick-fix resolution is in sight. But ecumenical discussions in recent times have demonstrated that the two traditions differ because they start with different assumptions about the divine unity, and there is some hope that if a new paradigm can be devised to replace these, the

division that has resulted from them might be overcome. In any case, it is now often admitted that both sides want to say essentially the same thing about the Holy Spirit but are still seeking an intellectual framework that can do justice to both perspectives. That may take time, but the sting has gone out of the controversy, and there is now a genuine desire to find a truly catholic solution to it.

It is when we come to the work of the Holy Spirit that we discover the greatest problems for true catholicity. At the time of the Reformation, there were furious debates about the sacraments, the power of the church and the nature of the ministry, all of which reflect different understandings of the work of the Holy Spirit. To put it simply, does the Spirit work primarily through external means – rites, ceremonies, offices etc. – or does he work primarily and directly in the heart and mind of individual believers? For example, does a person become a Christian by being baptized, or is it necessary for him/her to have a meaningful spiritual experience that we would normally call “conversion”? Roman Catholics and Orthodox generally agree that all baptized people are Christians, though they admit that many of them are “lapsed” or purely nominal in their profession of faith. Protestants generally have a more negative view of these nominal Christians – to them, such people are *de facto* unbelievers and need to be converted to a living faith.

Today, widespread secularization has led to greater sympathy among Roman Catholics and Orthodox for the Protestant position, making the differences between them and Protestants less substantial than they might appear, but consensus is still some way off. This is where Reformed Protestants have a real contribution to make. They want to maintain a balance between the internal and external work of the Holy Spirit, stressing the importance of spiritual experience without denying or bypassing the ministry and witness of the institutional church. To create an artificial conflict between these two aspects of our faith is a denial of true catholicity. People who go through the motions, who say and do all the right things, but who show no signs of the Holy Spirit at work inside them are not living the Christian life. Emotional enthusiasm without rational stability is not good enough either. There must be a common faith, a shared experience, an interpretation of spiritual gifts (as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14) in which all can participate and from which all can benefit.

It would be naive to say that there is a simple formula for achieving this ideal – there is not. The debates of centuries cannot be resolved overnight, and in any case, perfection is unattainable in this life. But what Reformed Christians can do in the search for true catholicity is plead for an orientation of our thoughts and discussions that seeks to achieve this balance in appropriate ways today. Traditions are useful but they cannot become so fixed that they prevent reforms that are needed for the gospel to be proclaimed effectively in our generation. Radicalism is also a welcome challenge, but the past cannot simply be sacrificed in the interests of the future. True catholicity must seek the perspective of eternity, which is the mind of God. Reformation and catholicity can and will go together if we are faithful to the calling of God and receptive to his grace at work in our lives and in his church.

Three Fresh Prompts for Practicing Reformed Catholicity

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When I was early in my ministry, I was serving on the candidates and credentials committee of my presbytery and thus participated in numerous interviews of ministerial candidates and transfers. One of the common questions we asked was, “What types of theology books do you enjoy reading?” On one occasion a ministerial transfer retorted, “I only read *Reformed* authors.” As I reflected upon that comment, I wanted to ask a follow-up question, “Who do the Reformed authors you read cite?” My mind drifted back to works written by John Owen (1616-83) and how he frequently cites patristic and medieval theologians.¹ The same is true of John Calvin (1509-64).² Many people read the works of Reformed authors and do not recognize that early modern Reformed theologians did not wipe the slate clean, grab their Bibles, and start from scratch to build the Reformation. Some well-informed writers make this very claim.³ The twentieth-century Reformed tradition saw the Protestant Reformation as being *sui generis* and virtually re-writing all theology thus giving the impression that all that went before the Protestant Reformation was darkness whereas all that followed was light. As common as this misguided narrative is, history tells a different story. Recent developments on three different fronts reveal that the tradition of the twenty-first century has a different outlook upon the patristic and medieval past.

The first positive development has arisen with retrieval. Unlike the twentieth-century, Reformed theologians of the twenty-first century labor in the wake of the Oberman-Steinmetz-Muller revolution. These three historians shined much-needed light upon the Reformation and showed that it was not a movement aimed at discontinuity with the past but that there were also significant continuities. Rather than seeing each period of history as a silo, separated from the previous period, historians like Heiko Oberman proved that each period grows out of the previous cradle of history.⁴ Each period grows out of the soil of previous periods. No period of history arises *ex nihilo*. David Steinmetz showed the connections between the Reformation and its past by highlighting the exegetical continuities with the patristic and medieval periods.⁵ Richard Muller has noted that the Reformation did not re-write all of theology. In fact, Muller observes that the reformers altered the doctrines

¹ See, e.g., Christopher Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen* (Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

² See, e.g., A. N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999).

³ E.g., John Frame, *History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2015), 174.

⁴ Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 19-20.

⁵ E.g., David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

of justification, sacraments, church, among others, but “they did not alter the doctrine of God, creation, providence, and Christ, and they maintained the Augustinian tradition concerning predestination, human nature and sin. The reform of individual doctrines, like justification and the sacraments, occurred within the bounds of a traditional, orthodox, and catholic system which, on the grand scale, remained unaltered.”⁶ Given the catholic nature of the Reformation, theologians of the twenty-first century have sought to retrieve Reformation teaching in its fullness—not a shallow scraping of Reformation doctrine but one that digs deep to study its medieval and patristic roots.

A second key development revolves around publishing. The twenty-first century Reformed tradition has benefitted from an embarrassment of publishing riches previously unavailable to earlier generations. Today we live in the wake of the publication of works like Francis Turretin’s *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Petrus Van Mastricht’s *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, *The Leiden Synopsis*, the translation by the Emmaus Center of the works of Aquinas, which includes not only a diglot of his *Summa Theologica* but also Thomas’s biblical commentaries. But to this coterie of texts, we can also add the translations of the works of Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) and Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). In addition to these newly translated texts is the St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press Popular Patristic Series. While the twentieth-century Reformed tradition had access to many works of the church fathers in the Ante-Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers set edited by Philip Schaff (1819-93), for many Reformed theologians these works were irrelevant. But with these newly translated texts, readers have been able to see catholic roots of the Reformation from a front row seat. While there is a host of positive quotations that we could draw from these newly translated texts, Bavinck’s observation about the catholicity of the Reformed tradition is both insightful, emblematic, and timely. Bavinck believed we needed to take advantage of

our communion and fellowship with generations past. That is why more attention is paid in this work to Patristic and Scholastic theology than is often the case in a Protestant dogmatics. Irenaeus, Augustine, and Thomas do not belong exclusively to Rome; they are Fathers and Doctors to whom the whole Christian church has obligations. Even the post-Reformation Roman Catholic theology is not overlooked. In general, Protestants know far too little about what we have in common with Rome and what divides us. Thanks to the revival of Roman Catholic theology under the auspices of Thomas, it is now doubly incumbent on Protestants to provide a conscious and clear account of their relationship to Rome.⁷

⁶ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 97.

⁷ Herman Bavinck, “Foreword to the First Edition (Volume 1) of the *Gereformeerde Dogmaiek*,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 9-10.

Bavinck's observation brings us to a third development and relates especially to footnotes. How often have readers passed over footnotes and ignored them—in so doing, they give the lion's share of their attention to the main body of the text. Yet, some of the best parts of a book come in the footnotes. This truth is especially relevant as it pertains to the retrieval of catholicity. Despite the loud protestations of some Reformed theologians who truly believe the Reformation was *sui generis*, footnotes reveal a commitment to catholicity not easily ignored. The recently annotated edition of Stephen Charnock's (1628-80) *Existence and Attributes of God* provides a perfect example. In his opening discourse on the existence of God, Charnock writes: "The book of creatures is as legible in declaring the being of a God as the Scriptures are in declaring the nature of a God."⁸ What authority does Charnock cite to support this claim? Charnock works from Scripture, but he approvingly cites Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, "Whether it can be demonstrated that God exists?"⁹ He also positively cites the Thomistic insight, "Faith supposes natural knowledge, as grace supposes nature."¹⁰ Following the footnote footpath enables readers to see firsthand the catholicity of the Reformed tradition.

In following the footnotes, we can "stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is" (Jer. 6:16). We can dig deep into the patristic and medieval heritage of the Reformation. We can learn and continue to give thanks to God that the teachers Christ has given to the church in the wake of his ascension are not restricted to one period of history but that they are present throughout (Eph. 4:11-13). Acknowledging Reformed catholicity can give us a greater appreciation for the faith once delivered to the saints as we seek to teach future generations of the glories of our triune God.

⁸ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols., ed. Mark Jones (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), I:46.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (repr.; Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948), Ia q. 2 art. 2.

¹⁰ Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, I:46.

Theology in Context: A Reformed Catholic Vision for Anglicanism

Justin S. Holcomb

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In a world increasingly marked by fragmentation and polarization, the church serves as a sign and witness of the unity given in Christ—grounded in the gospel and rooted in the historic faith. Reformed Catholicity offers the Anglican Communion a theological approach for maintaining this unity—retrieving its catholic heritage while remaining faithful to the biblical, Christ-centered, and evangelical convictions at the heart of its historic witness. Having seen firsthand how this “theological sensibility”¹ enriches Anglican theology, worship, and mission, I am convinced that Reformed Catholicity is not only a retrieval of the past but also a fruitful and promising path for the church’s future.

Reformed Catholicity provides a theological approach that upholds *solā Scriptura* while emphasizing the necessity of retrieving the catholic tradition for the renewal of the church. This model is particularly well-suited to Anglicanism, which has historically embodied this vision—upholding the sovereign authority of Holy Scripture as the rule for faith and life, proclaiming the gracious promises of God, and preserving a deep commitment to the church’s historic confessions, creeds, and worship.

The Anglican Communion, however, faces significant theological and ecclesial challenges: growing doctrinal fragmentation, contested views on biblical authority, and the challenge of maintaining unity across a global church. How can Anglicanism recover its theological coherence without sacrificing its catholicity?

Anglicanism stands at a moment of renewal, where reclaiming its confessional heritage is not a nostalgic exercise but a means of strengthening the church’s mission, evangelism, worship, discipleship, and theological education.

Reformed Catholicity and the Anglican Commitment to Retrieval

A central insight of Reformed Catholicity is that theological retrieval is not mere nostalgia or antiquarianism but a constructive theological approach—a means of drawing on the past to deepen the church’s theological clarity in the present. This vision is not foreign to Anglicanism; rather, it aligns closely with its foundational commitment to theological and liturgical retrieval.

Anglicanism has practiced a “ruled reading”² of Scripture, guided by the creeds, the *Book of Common Prayer*, and the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. These historic resources do not function as rivals to Scripture but as faithful expressions of its teaching. Article VIII explicitly affirms the Nicene, Athanasian, and Apostles’ Creeds as binding because they can be proved “by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture.”

¹ Michael Allen and Scott Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 12.

² Ibid., “A Rule Reading Reformed: The Role of the Church’s Confession in Biblical Interpretation,” chapter 4 (pp. 95-116).

Anglican theology, therefore, has never sought to dismiss tradition but to subject it to biblical authority while valuing its role in shaping doctrine and worship.

Reformed Catholicity offers Anglicans a renewed theological framework. This approach engages patristic, medieval, and Reformation theology not as static traditionalism but as a means of ensuring doctrinal fidelity, biblical clarity, and faithful spiritual formation. As Allen and Swain emphasize, *sola Scriptura* is not a rejection of tradition but a call to interpret Scripture within the wisdom of the historic church.

When Anglican theology veers toward being uncritically progressive or historically untethered or defined by cultural assumptions, Reformed Catholicity provides a path forward—one that recognizes Scripture's ultimate authority while embracing the wisdom of the church's historic confessions and theological traditions.

Reformed Catholicity as a Foundation for Unity in Diversity

A primary challenge for the global Anglican Communion is maintaining theological and ecclesial unity without suppressing the diversity that arises from its broad cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and geographical reach.

Reformed Catholicity encourages Anglicanism to root its catholicity in biblical fidelity and apostolic witness—not institutional uniformity. *Historically, Anglicanism has modeled this approach: its unity is not based on strict doctrinal conformity at every point* but on a common confessional core found in the Creeds, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Articles.

This vision of catholicity, rooted in retrieval, serves as a corrective to the theological fragmentation within Anglicanism today. When Anglican dioceses or provinces drift from their historic theological commitments—whether toward doctrinal minimalism, theological revisionism, or ecclesial isolationism—Reformed Catholicity offers a steady path forward. It provides an approach to Anglican unity that is not rooted in institutional structures alone but in the church's shared theological and biblical heritage.

With 85 million members across 42 autonomous provinces, Anglicanism is marked by vast theological, cultural, and liturgical diversity. Some provinces lean toward low-church evangelicalism, others toward Anglo-Catholic sacramentalism, some charismatic expressions of worship, and still a few others toward progressive theological revisionism. The retrieval model of Reformed Catholicity—anchored in confessional fidelity while allowing for appropriate diversity in expression—offers Anglicanism a path toward recovering a theological identity rooted in historic Christianity rather than being fragmented by doctrinal revisionism.

Theology in Context: A Global Reformed Catholic Vision

Rather than simply applying theology to cultural contexts, Reformed Catholicity calls the church to exegete Scripture and its doctrines together from distinct cultural backgrounds. It resists the temptation of "contextual theology" that merely adapts doctrine to cultural pressures and instead insists on "theology in

context"³—an approach that acknowledges cultural distinctives while maintaining biblical and theological fidelity.

The Anglican Communion, with its presence in numerous cultural and linguistic settings, is uniquely positioned to embody this vision. *Theology in context* means recognizing that biblical truths are mediated through different cultural-linguistic horizons, while remaining universally authoritative. Even at an interpersonal level, doctrines such as original sin, Christ's vicarious atonement, or the Trinity can be misunderstood because of divergent experiences. How are sin and atonement heard in a shame-based culture as opposed to one that is individualistic and relativistic? How is the biblical teaching of one God in three persons received in a culture shaped by rigid monotheism, as opposed to one influenced by polytheistic traditions or secular individualism? The church's mission depends on addressing these complexities, not by diluting doctrine, but by expositing it in ways that maintain its biblical integrity across cultures.

At the same time, *theology in context* resists the illusion of a "theology from nowhere." Every culture has biases, and only by acknowledging them can we test them against the authority of God's Word. Some of these biases offer helpful correctives to other cultures. Others must be challenged. This is why retrieval is essential—not only retrieval of biblical teaching but of the wisdom of the great teachers of the past, many of whom were from the Middle East and Africa. The Reformation itself was a retrieval movement, seeking to return to the wells of the Jewish prophets and apostles while drinking deeply from the wisdom of early Christian theologians.

This approach resists the reversal of the authority of Scripture and culture. The goal is not an African theology, an Indian theology, an American theology, or any other culturally bound theology, but a catholic and evangelical theology that examines the unique cultural obstacles and insights that shape our reception and interpretation of doctrine. We do not need a "theology of liberation" tailored to specific sociopolitical concerns (with its myriad sub-groups) but a theology of the Trinity, Christology, ecclesiology, soteriology, and eschatology—rooted in Scripture and enriched by diverse voices within the church.

By embracing this approach, the Anglican Communion can offer a theological vision that is neither reactionary nor accommodationist but deeply biblical, confessionally grounded, and globally engaged.

The Future of Reformed Catholicity in Anglicanism

Anglicanism appears to be at a moment when theological retrieval is necessary for renewal. If it drifts into doctrinal incoherence, it risks losing the very theological framework that has sustained it for centuries. Reformed Catholicity offers a way forward—one that is deeply biblical, confessionally rooted, and missionally engaged.

Reformed Catholicity is not about nostalgia. It is a theological approach that anchors the church in the gospel, strengthens its faithfulness to historic confessions, and equips it to navigate the complexities of a global and culturally diverse church.

³ Michael S. Horton, Elizabeth W. Mburu, and Justin S. Holcomb, eds., *Prophet, Priest, and King: Christology in Global Perspective* (Zondervan, 2025), xiii-xiv.

The Existential Dimension of Reformed Catholicity

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I'm grateful for Allen's and Swain's fine book, *Reformed Catholicity*. I don't have much to quibble with. My own life and ministry has been dedicated to promoting the "authority of apostolic Scripture . . . within the context of the apostolic church." (1) With Allen and Swain, I agree, wholeheartedly, that "tradition is the church's stance of abiding in and with apostolic teaching through time;" indeed, that "Church dogmas provide instead a divinely authorized interpretive key for unlocking the treasures of God's Word, a blessed hermeneutical pathway into Holy Scripture" (34, 113). In terms of the book, the chapter that I found (and continue to find) most helpful is chapter 5, "In Defense of Proof Texting." May we recognize afresh Scripture's "*own use*" of itself and thus promote every attempt to see "theology and exegesis working hand in hand and side by side" (128, 137).

Some ten years after *Reformed Catholicity's* publication, I think it's worth reflecting on (1) broader trends relating to the book's vision and (2) a constructive suggestion for amplifying its vision. Regarding broader trends, my sense is that the contemporary landscape is so fragmented that it's difficult to map where opposition to such an approach might be. I long ago gave up trying to map (in my mind, anyhow) the field of contemporary systematic theology, namely because I don't know what it would mean to speak of a field. What I do know, and am encouraged by, is the work of individual theologians who continue to promote in quite distinct ways Allen's and Swain's vision. On the Roman Catholic side, I am always edified by Matthew Levering's work, and on the Protestant side, Steven Duby's work, among others, stands out. But broader trends are extremely difficult to describe, and so I'm content to say that a significant number of living theologians go on, in quite different ways, doing what Allen and Swain commend.

My one constructive suggestion, having recently re-read the book, is that its vision for reform is something of an intellectual one. While I concur that the way to renewal is through retrieval—the riches of catholic doctrine as received through the Reformed heritage—I couldn't help but think that the place of "thick practices of catholic traditioning" is a bit underdeveloped (83). Reformed catholicity is as much indicative of a method as it is a way of life. The reformed catholic embraces "a theological sensibility" to be sure, but that sensibility is anchored explicitly in meditative prayer and prayerful hearing of the written Word within the context of the proclaimed Word and Sacrament (121). "Wise reading and faithful living" don't simply anchor reformed catholicity but are its very wellspring, food, and drink (67). Piety, in other words, is not simply a byproduct or corollary but what gives rise to the sensibility in the first place. I long to recite the Nicene Creed not simply because it unlocks God's Word for me (and countless others) but because it also presents the faith in relationship to which I seek to die daily. The way to renewal is retrieval, but retrieval assumes that I'm ready to be taught by God's Word and listen to those whom God has blessed with exemplary ears to hear that same Word.

If the church is to demonstrate “the transparency of its idiom to the teaching of the sacred writings,” then the sacred writings must be our food and drink (107). Given that the sacred writings are foreign territory to most church goers (and a fair number of church leaders), what is “needed” more than ever is loving immersion in Scripture, especially Old Testament Scripture as that which God authors and through which God speaks words of promise. “*The Bible’s own use of the Bible*” is a great place to begin teaching the Scriptures with a view to serving and loving the God who is their source and *telos* (128).

Last, but not least, a vision of reformed catholicity that is frontloaded by piety will give rise to works of theology wherein there is little, if any, attention as to whether it is a work of theology or exegesis. Theology must not only take exegetical form but itself constitute our exegetical labors. Exegesis is how theology is done. Even more systematic (that is, ordered) treatments one step removed from Scripture ought to assume a shape that is constrained on every side by sacred Scripture. In this time of deep scriptural ignorance and apathy, theology ought to work, prayerfully, with the Scriptures and therewith those doctors of the church catholic whose most eminent contributions are, generally, commentarial in nature. Theology is not simply commenting on the sacred page but also the means of entering into the riches of the page itself.

I hope and pray that the gifts that Allen and Swain have been blessed with continue to encourage mortification and vivification in the Gospel as it is presented to us in sacred Scripture. Reformed catholicity is a gift to the church, a reminder to give thanks to God for the catholic and Reformed heritage with which he has so blessed us. Reformed catholicity is also a call to pray, and to sit before our Lord’s feet, learning the Scriptures with him, until they become our precious food and drink, world with end. Amen.

Reformed Catholicity and the Need for Dogmatics Today

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The Evangelical Theological Society has contributed valiantly to the defense of biblical inerrancy and its members have produced impressive summaries. For the most part, though, evangelical systematic theology has been of the “catalogue-of-Bible-doctrine” variety. Moreover, there have been significant debates in ETS over elements of classical theism (even among conservative non-open-theists) as well as over the doctrine of the Trinity. For twentieth-century Protestant theologians—across the conservative-liberal divide—attitudes toward “scholasticism” ranged from mild disregard to solemn warnings. The reason Protestant scholastics were so great, in my opinion, is exactly the reason esteemed conservatives expressed wariness: namely, their deep connection to the whole tradition of Christian theology, including patristic and medieval sources. Thus, sixteenth and early seventeenth-century orthodoxy represents a sort of *ressourcement* that simultaneously gave specific texture to distinctive confessional systems while exhibiting remarkably informed engagement with the whole tradition of Christian theology. They also interacted constructively and polemically with a wide range of contemporary philosophical, philological, and exegetical sources.

In some ways, what we’re beginning to see in mostly confessional Reformed circles today resembles the spirit of the *ressourcement* theologians of the twentieth century like Henri de Lubac. Russian Orthodox exiles in Paris such as Vladimir Lossky pioneered a similar vision, often in conversation with de Lubac’s circle. From these towering figures emerged a new generation, including John Meyendorff, Andrew Louth, John Zizioulas, and many others. *Ressourcement* differs from repristination by drawing reflectively on traditions directly, many of which had been forgotten or buried in second-hand “manual-theology.”

Reformed *Ressourcement*

Renewed interest in this heritage among Protestants was initiated particularly by Karl Barth. “Protestantism”—what Barth calls “Neo-Protestantism”—is not Christianity at all. “It is heir,” he said, “not so much to the Reformers as to the left-wing opposition that the Reformers had to fight against. Unbroken threads undoubtedly lead us from the Anabaptists to Pietism, Zinzendorf, and Schleiermacher, and from the Radicals to the Socinians, the Remonstrants, the Rationalists, and Schleiermacher again, and then from Schleiermacher to ourselves.”¹ After reading Calvin and the Reformed scholastics as he lectured at Göttingen, Barth encountered “the mysteries of specifically Reformed theology.”² Having once described Protestant scholasticism as “an empty canal,” he found himself, as he put it,

¹ Karl Barth, *The Gottingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen; trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 211.

² Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth*, 129.

“visibly in the realm of the Church.”³ Even in the *Church Dogmatics* he went so far as to declare, “Fear of scholasticism is the mark of a false prophet” (CD I/1, 279). As we know, Barth travelled far from the shore of Reformed orthodoxy, but he engaged it. “We are a generation that has to learn again, sometimes even by name, what are the presuppositions that a Thomas, an Augustine before him, and a Calvin after him could quietly take for granted...Is not the word ‘dogmatics’ an ominous one, a bogey that causes the children of light as well as the children of the world to shudder?”⁴ Yet, he adds, “None of the laughter or head shaking of our contemporaries and none of our faintheartedness ought to keep us from at least realizing the task...We have to consider the fact that ‘in some way’ we have to speak about *God*. The question puts a pistol at the breast of theologians and through them at that of public...One can well understand why even theologians prefer an undogmatic Christianity.”⁵ However, “every theologian has to be a dogmatician.”⁶ Liberal theology in the wake of Kant laughed at Barth as a dilettante for this insistence. Theologians can summarize what a particular religious group believes (*Glaubenslehre*), but Barth bravely called his project *Church Dogmatics*.

And right from the beginning of the *Church Dogmatics* (I/1), Barth shows his debt to Herman Bavinck, especially to the “*Deus Dixit*,” that grounds all supernatural theology. And through the translation work of recent years, Bavinck may be as well-known in the English-speaking world as he was in his native Holland. John Webster told me that he felt Bavinck represented the most up-to-date interaction with modern theology and culture of his day from a classic Reformed perspective. In this context, we cannot forget the pioneering work of Richard Muller, who encouraged a wide revival of interest in Reformed scholasticism, including fresh English translations of Latin works. By coming in closer contact with this tradition, we go deeper into the broader catholic heritage that they held in high esteem.

The State of Dogmatics Today

There was nothing like a Tyndale House, Cambridge, for dogmatics in the UK or in the US., but Gunton and Webster created the closest thing to it. And the *International Journal of Systematic Theology* was the fruit of this remarkable partnership. Moreover, the reign of the Neo-Thomist manualist tradition since the First Vatican Council was challenged by Henri de Lubac and others in the mid-20th century. Their motto was *ressourcement*: returning to the sources of Scripture and the church fathers. At the same time, Russian Orthodox exiles in Paris such as Vladimir Lossky pioneered a similar vision, often in conversation with the Roman Catholic *ressourcement* theologians. Out of this circle came the influential works of John Meyendorff, Andrew Louth, John Zizioulas, and many others.

³ Cited Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, 304.

⁴ Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, 4.

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, 5-6.

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, 6.

Gunton and Webster modelled the importance of working groups to help foster theological growth. Colin Gunton does not get enough credit as a formative influence on the revival of dogmatics by making King's College London a center of *ressourcement* theology that included John Zizioulas, among many others. Leaving his post as Oxford's Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, John Webster became the Chair of Systematic Theology at King's College, Aberdeen, where another rich *ressourcement* conversation emerged. I had familiar conversations with Webster during this period and was privileged to participate in his St. Mary's conversation with a paper where biblical scholars like I. Howard Marshall interrogated my thesis exegetically. Professor Marshall told me he never missed these colloquia and he expressed how influential the interdisciplinary conversation was to his own research. The *St. Andrews Encyclopedia of Theology* is another offspring of this interdisciplinary and interconfessional conversation. Perhaps the richest fruit of the Gunton-Webster partnership was the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*. Its first issue in 1999 flew the flag of dogmatic renewal, drawing Reformed voices to the dogmatic conversation alongside a range of others. Although there was no ETS member who contributed to this maiden voyage, things are changing dramatically.

Kevin Vanhoozer has led the way in enriching theological hermeneutics. There is a renewed vigor for what Michael Allen and Scott Swain call "Reformed Catholicity." Under their leadership, the *New Studies in Dogmatics* is a major contribution to this trend. Zondervan Academic has taken a leading role in publishing serious dogmatics conferences, such as the Los Angeles Theology Conference and Theo Global. Swain's work on Trinitarian theology is as exegetically anchored as it is seriously engaged with contemporary theologians, especially Robert Jenson. Baptists are joining the great conversation especially through the efforts of scholars like Matthew Barrett. On and on I could go.

Being Reformed, Being Catholic

What can we do better to nurture this flowering enterprise? First, Reformed Catholicity should be *Reformed*. This encompasses those who embrace the Three Forms of Unity, the Westminster Standards, and the Thirty-Nine Articles. There is a somewhat analogous Evangelical Catholic movement in Lutheran circles. Baptists are joining the great conversation especially through the efforts of scholars like Matthew Barrett and his Center for Classical Theology. At the beginning of his famous book, C. S. Lewis says that "Mere Christianity" is the hallway where we mingle together, learn from each other, and welcome new guests. But we can't live in the hallway; for that, there are different rooms. These different rooms are churches, where we are warmed and fed. That's what *church* dogmatics means. There are twin dangers on this score. One danger is to aim at a generally evangelical dogmatics that I have described above. But the other danger is to exaggerate our agreements with medieval thinkers; the Reformation was not a return to Aquinas but to the New Testament. The deeper we're rooted in our own confessional heritage, the more we will have to contribute and also to learn from others.

Second, precisely as Reformed, we need to become more catholic, growing in our engagement with other traditions from the depth of our own confessional

convictions. The hallway is important. This includes not only interacting with people of other confessions but with our brothers and sisters around the world. Even in the United States, Reformed theology is for the most part, ethnically and culturally, a subset within white evangelicalism. The reasons for this are beyond my scope, but they should be addressed as part of this greater experience of Reformed catholicity. Together with Bishop Justin Holcomb and Elizabeth Mburu, I am privileged to be involved in Theo Global conversations that challenge me to grow out of the Western monologue and learn from Christians in the Global South. Among the latter, there is still a tremendous need to break out of regional theologies that are too influenced by post-colonial theory and often critical of Western resources that are enriching. Yet among Western scholars, there is still a tremendous need to relate no longer to these brothers and sisters as simply beneficiaries of Western Christianity rather than colleagues in a common task. There are evangelical biblical scholars and theologians in the Majority World who bring a wealth of history, cultural vantage points, and scholarly depth to the family reunion. Speaking from the *deepest* convictions of our own confession, we will be equipped for this ongoing work of mutual edification and admonition.

Reformed Catholicity: Challenge, Not Consumerism

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Approximately fifteen years ago, I attended a conference on historic Christian worship, hosted by a large church with a primarily academic audience of pastors and church leaders. The aim was to retrieve historic worship practices for the contemporary church. While I encountered many thoughtful presentations, one moment stands out. During lunch, a passionate congregant remarked that members of the church traveled up to two hours weekly to participate in a liturgy they considered “more biblical” and “more historic” than what was available in their local Bible Belt communities. When I inquired whether other churches in the same denomination existed along their commute, I was told that while many did, none upheld these preferred historic practices. The idea that traveling over 100 miles to church might itself be a historical anomaly seemed unnoticed, as did the potential challenges this posed for other essential Christian practices.

Contemplating this conversation and the trends of theological retrieval, I received the invitation to reflect upon Michael Allen and Scott Swain’s *Reformed Catholicity* with great interest. The introduction to that book identifies the movements and ideas that coincided with my own theological formation. I appreciate the book’s careful account of the school of Christ, emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit in shaping readers of scripture within the church. I resonate with its nuanced defense of *sola Scriptura* against both radical Protestant distortions and recent Roman Catholic apologetic misrepresentations. I also value its measured construction of the *regula fidei* and its emphasis on scripture in dogmatic work. Todd Billings’s afterword, with its critique of contemporary consumerism in theology, remains a timely and challenging reflection. Although the example of a particular congregation in the afterword has not aged well, Billings’s critique of “correlationism” in theological retrieval remains an important caution.

That admonition notwithstanding, there are encouraging signs of theological renewal that avoid the trap of consumerism. Two notable trends in English-speaking theological circles are worth highlighting. First, the return to patristic sources and modes of scriptural interpretation has led to renewed interest in theology proper. Scholars are revisiting the essence, attributes, and Trinitarian nature of God, drawing on traditional interpretive practices that engage deeply with scripture. Second, recent translations of medieval and early modern texts, previously available only in Latin, have revitalized interest in the thought of figures beyond Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. These figures are being engaged not only as systematic theologians but as exegetes who wrestled with scripture’s meaning in their own historical contexts. Theologically, these trends reflect a broader effort to reclaim the richness of the Christian tradition, integrating voices from across time, including both the Reformers and their predecessors.

While these developments are promising, it is crucial to recognize that the healthy pursuit of catholicity can still be sidetracked by the contemporary idolatry of consumption. Far too often, modern theological retrieval proceeds as if the past exists

primarily to affirm pre-existing desires, rather than to challenge and enrich contemporary assumptions. It is unavoidable that present concerns shape historical inquiry, but the proper use of historical sources requires careful attention to their contexts.

A clear example of this challenge is found in recent treatments that juxtapose the ideas of Calvin and Aquinas without addressing the historical debates that led to their respective positions. Too often, modern theologians make the mistake of interpreting these figures as if they were writing in a vacuum, without considering the historical and theological contexts in which their ideas were formed or the process of their reception. Without attention to these contexts, such studies risk distorting the very ideas they seek to explore.

Similarly, historical retrieval often fails to engage with the complexity of historical categories and periodizations. Terms like “evangelicalism” or “the Enlightenment” frequently are employed with little regard for their contested nature or the ongoing debates surrounding their meaning. Similarly, when theologians invoke the “Enlightenment,” they often assume a uniformity of thought and a historical clarity that no serious historian would (ought to?) claim. The same issue arises with the category of “secularization.” While works like Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* have made significant interventions in this field, many still take secularization as a given, ignoring the complex and contested nature of this concept.

These examples of “presentism”—reading the past through the lens of contemporary concerns—undermine the integrity of theological retrieval and too frequently betray a consumeristic impulse. Though it is natural for present-day questions to inform historical inquiry, the risk is that the past becomes a mere tool to confirm or satiate modern assumptions. As we engage with the Christian tradition, we must remain open to the possibility that the figures and movements of the past may challenge and reshape our theological priorities, rather than merely serving as a backdrop for our own agendas.

This concern leads me to reflect on current conversations regarding “Reformed Catholicity.” While I am cautiously hopeful about the future of this dialogue, I wonder if we are sufficiently attentive to the challenges of engaging the past on its own terms. If we are to be truly catholic in our theological outlook, we must listen more attentively to the voices of the past, including figures who may have been overlooked or marginalized in the traditional canon of Reformation theology.

One question we might consider is whether our theological seminaries are sufficiently attentive to the historical richness of the tradition. Are they offering a deep enough engagement with the past, relative to the emphasis placed on contemporary trends in other academic disciplines? And if we are to be genuinely catholic, do we need to broaden the range of voices to which we listen? It is not enough to simply return to the usual figures, such as Augustine, Aquinas, and the Reformers. While these figures remain foundational, there are other important voices in the history of Christian thought and practice that deserve more attention.

For example, figures like Francis Grimké, a 19th-century African American pastor-theologian, offer valuable insights that are often neglected in theological circles today. Grimké’s contributions are not merely of historical interest but carry theological weight that can enrich our understanding of the Christian tradition. His

theological insights, shaped by the unique experiences of African American Christians, provide a corrective to the often narrow perspectives that dominate theological discourse. I am not advocating for Grimké's inclusion merely on the basis of cultural or political concerns but because his thought represents a neglected dimension of the Christian tradition that warrants more serious consideration.

I am grateful to Michael Allen and Scott Swain for their efforts to encourage a more robust engagement with the Reformed tradition's catholic roots. Their work helps to foster a theology that listens not only to the Reformers but also to the broader Christian tradition. As we continue to retrieve and engage with the theological past, let us remember that true catholicity requires us to move beyond our own assumptions, allowing the voices of past thinkers to shape and challenge our theological reflection. The road ahead is one of both retrieval and renewal, and I look forward to the fruit of this ongoing labor, inspired by the marks of catholicity and holiness in the church operating hand in hand.

The Promise of Reformed Catholicity for Christian Ethics

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Many of the most pressing challenges facing the church today are ethical in nature. New questions constantly arise in relation to technology, medical ethics, politics, social ethics, sexuality and gender, and much more. In such a situation, there is always a danger that Christian ethics reduces itself to somewhat frantic, anxious, and reactive modes of engagement. Without deep and broad roots, in Scripture and the Christian tradition, theological ethics will lack a coherent and textured account of moral reality and so will lack vigor and purchase on the questions facing Christians today. The recovery of a Reformed catholic moral theology is therefore a matter of the greatest importance.

It is a truism that contemporary Roman Catholic moral theologians and philosophers are generally more sophisticated than their Protestant counterparts. The best of their work has deep roots in classical philosophy, patristic and medieval moral theology (particularly Augustine and Aquinas), and in more recent papal encyclicals. Pope John Paul II was a fine moral philosopher, Pope Benedict XVI an eminent dogmatic and moral theologian, and both devoted sustained ethical attention to Scripture, tradition, and life in the modern world. Roman Catholic moralists can thus draw on a vibrant, living tradition of ethical enquiry.

Within the academy, theological ethics is a highly fragmented discipline. It is commonly assumed that Protestant ethics has always rejected consideration of virtue and happiness and focused exclusively on an ethics of divine command. This reading of the tradition is often influenced by Barth, and academic ethics of a more conservative Protestant type has been somewhat dominated by a flowering of very fine scholarship on Barth's monumental, but idiosyncratic, moral theology.

Among evangelicals, recent advances in dogmatic theology have not always made their way into treatments of ethical topics. Evangelical ethics has tended towards a somewhat naive biblicism that has sought to derive ethical teaching directly from Scripture, but with little, or only rudimentary, attention to dogmatic categories and historical moral theology. At times – not least in debates about the relationship between male-female relations and the eternal relations of the Father and Son – it can appear that the ethical tail has been wagging the theological dog so vigorously that the poor creature has been left dizzy and confused.

Nevertheless, there are encouraging signs of a rediscovery of a Protestant moral theology that accords more closely with the proposals made in *Reformed Catholicity*. Working from historically-oriented, catholic-spirited, but resolutely Protestant perspectives, Oliver O'Donovan and John Webster have both produced constructive ethical writings of the highest intellectual and spiritual distinction.¹ Scholars influenced by the historical method of Richard Muller have begun to devote attention

¹ Webster's late essays on moral-theological themes are particularly companionable to the vision set out in *Reformed Catholicity*. See John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012); John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology. Volume II: Virtue and Intellect* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

to post-Reformation Reformed ethics. Building on the pioneering work of Stephen Grabill,² there is a burgeoning cottage industry of commentary on and translation of Reformed texts dealing with natural law, especially in the series *Studies in Early Modern Economics, Ethics, and Law*. Manfred Svensson and David Sytsma are doing important work on early modern Protestant moral philosophy.³ Bruce Baugus has written a rich study of the biblical and historical roots of Reformed moral theology.⁴ Increased attention is being given to teaching on virtue in the Reformed tradition, a small example of which can be found in *Reformed Catholicity* itself, in the section on the infused habit of grace (38-41). Finally, mention must be made of the ongoing translation into English of Petrus van Mastricht's *Theoretical-Practical Theology*. Not only will the final volume comprise a summary system of Reformed moral theology, but at every stage Mastricht demonstrates the practical uses of each doctrine in a Reformed system of theology.

There are, then, green shoots and early fruits in the garden of Reformed catholic moral theology. Nevertheless, it remains under-cultivated and overgrown. What might be needed for further work in tending the garden? Here there is space to pursue only one suggestive line of enquiry, which arises directly from the discussion of the rule of faith and biblical interpretation in *Reformed Catholicity* (108-118).

Allen and Swain note that the rule of faith is classically accompanied by the rule of love (107), but do not develop here an account of the latter. Following their lead, I offer a sketch of how a Reformed understanding of the rule of love relates both to reading Scripture and to deliberation on concrete ethical questions. As with the rule of faith, the rule of love is not an alternative to, or an artificial imposition on, Scripture. Rather, Christ himself teaches that Scripture is the source of the rule (Dt. 6:4-5; Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:34-40). The twofold love command relates directly to the two tables of the Decalogue, and so summarises the moral law, and shows an outline of that in which a virtuous life consists. However, the summary requires unpacking, first in the precepts of the Decalogue, and then in far greater detail in the moral teaching of the whole Bible.

It is important to emphasise that the rule of love does not operate in isolation from the rule of faith. To be faithful to the scope, sequence, proportions, and systematic coherence of Scripture's teaching, moral theology must be treated in relation to dogmatic theology, and every Christian doctrine has moral applications (Mastricht is here exemplary). To love God, we need to apprehend the being, attributes, persons and works of the God who has first loved us. To love our neighbors, we must know who and what our neighbor is, and who and what we ourselves are. This requires a grasp of the origin, nature, powers, acts, limits and ends of human creatures in their relation to God, their highest good. It also requires

² Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

³ Most notably Manfred Svensson, *Aristotelian Tradition in Early Modern Protestantism: Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Commentaries on the Ethics and the Politics*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

⁴ Bruce P. Baugus, *The Roots of Reformed Moral Theology*, Reformed Historical-Theological Studies (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2022).

knowledge of the devastating effects of sin on human agency, and how it is restored in Christ and by the grace of the Spirit. This ordered relationship of the rule of faith and the rule of love is exemplified in Reformed moral teaching and preaching of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and not least in the way that historic Reformed catechisms, having treated the articles of faith, proceed to expound how believers are to live, through expositions of the Decalogue.

The foregoing is no more than a gesture, an invitation to further labor in Reformed moral theological *ressourcement*. There is a great need and opportunity in our day for the ongoing recovery and application of Reformed catholic moral theology, from basic catechesis through to the most advanced theological research. Practical-ethical reason needs to be oriented to reality by dogmatic and moral-theological contemplation. Only then is it ready to deliberate, in the light of all the riches of Scripture's teaching, on the circumstances, challenges, and opportunities of life today. Moral theology, and the church's catechetical instruction, cannot predetermine the detailed conclusions of deliberative reason. However, a recovery of well-proportioned Reformed catholic moral theology would give the conceptual categories needed for faithful living amidst the social, ethical and political complexities of our day. Thus, equipped by the church's teaching ministry, believers could learn to order their lives wisely to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

A Journey, Personal and Institutional, Toward Theological Renewal

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“All theology is autobiography,” the adage notes. My theological sensibilities and judgments are no exception. With what is certainly imperfect self-awareness of my own story, I’m thankful for the opportunity to engage in a reflection on the always-stimulating work of my friends’ manifesto, *Reformed Catholicity*. The tenth anniversary of this book providentially corresponds to my twentieth anniversary of being a professor of New Testament studies and almost exactly thirty years since starting seminary. I will use these four timeline moments – 1995, 2005, 2015, and 2025 – to organize my observations on the vision outlined in this excellent book.

In the mid-1990’s, I began my Master of Divinity studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, arguably the premier evangelical seminary at the time. Attempting to drink from a fire hydrant is an apt description of what this non-theologically trained young man experienced. I received a great education under the auspices of what we would now call “Big Tent Evangelicalism” – unity in the essentials, charity in the non-essentials. Creedal orthodoxy was what united the diverse group of faculty and students. This generous commitment to historic (Protestant) Christianity via the Evangelical Free Church of America grafted into me a DNA that has remained. I’m glad.

Yet this unity within diversity did not lack tensions. Particularly, the theologians and the biblical scholars at TEDS lived in a Jets and Sharks *West Side Story* relationship, each confident in the superiority of their cultural worlds and wary of the other’s. Rarely was there any open conflict, but there were skirmishes rumored and real. I experienced the problematic disjuncture between theology and biblical studies that Allen and Swain identify.

For whatever reasons, I found a place on the New Testament side of the street and headed into PhD studies in Scotland confident our gang were the ones *really* doing academic Christianity rightly, unlike those “proof-texting” theologians. With an undiagnosed arrogance comparable to a 19-year-old would-be Marxist attending university on daddy’s dime, my world was about to be rocked. St. Andrews in the early 2000s was one of the places where a lot of light and heat were generated in what later became known as the Theological Interpretation of Scripture movement, one branch of the *ressourcement* that was occurring as Modernity broke down. If fire-hydrant-drinking marked my time at Trinity, cognitive dissonance and worldview-expansion describe my time at St. Mary’s College. The Church Fathers and other theologians were no longer embarrassing uncles, but people to learn from.

When I began teaching in Louisville in 2005, I re-entered a conservative evangelical world where I was comfortable doctrinally and ecclesially, but where I quickly realized that my hermeneutical sensibilities had become somewhat out of sync. This was not because I had become “liberal” as sometimes happens with doctoral education, but because I had prayed to un-receive in my heart Descartes, Gabler, and others. The problem was mine. The ways I had been taught to study the Bible in my own seminary years were not bad or wrong, just insufficient for an integrated reading

and practice of Scripture in the life of the Church. I realized that ironically, much of evangelical hermeneutics had unknowingly adopted the devastating posture of the Enlightenment, creating a chasm between biblical studies and theology. This chasm, I came to see, was wider than the modern evangelical “biblical theology” movement was able to sufficiently span. I set out to model for my students a way of reading Scripture that was rooted in creedal fidelity, rigorous textual study, and openness to the insights of theologians both ancient and modern.

Ten years into this journey, *Reformed Catholicity* appeared, articulating well what had been shifting in much of the confessional Christian world and offering a way forward. That way forward included looking backward toward retrieval without a flat-footed or shrill attempt at repristination of some supposed golden past. The communion of (all) saints is not merely a confessional line but should be a humble commitment.

Allen and Swain offered an ecclesially-situated, Christological, pneumatological, and creedal vision for reuniting biblical and theological studies. Their subtitle offers promise for *both* theological and biblical studies and, indeed, both disciplines needed help. For some three hundred years in the West, man had tried to put asunder what God had forever joined. Unfortunately, many theologians and biblical scholars pursued this divorce whole-heartedly. In recent decades, however, the Enlightenment expanders that had been artificially inserted between biblical and theological studies have been cracking and crumbling. The question and desiderata are whether these two fields will square up seamlessly when they snap back together after so many centuries apart.

I found Allen and Swain’s final chapter, “In Defense of Proof Texting,” particularly challenging and beneficial as one who has tried to navigate an intellectual life in the “divide between biblical and theological studies in the modern academy.” Aquinas and Calvin represent a reformed catholicity that models both rigorous biblical exegesis with theological commitments that go well beyond biblicism. As a biblical scholar working in the wake of Modernity, I still find it difficult to do biblical studies in the academic world with theological sensibilities. It often feels like trying to graft a tree onto a light pole. Nonetheless, I have sought to find this narrow path, aware I still have much to learn from trained theologians.

As we stand at the quarter point of the 21st century, whence and wither with reformed catholicity? It is amazing to see how much has changed for the good in the last thirty years. A more theological reading of Scripture, the serious study and utilization of the history of interpretation, and appreciation for patristic and pre-modern hermeneutics have become much more standard fare at academic conferences and bookstalls. The Overton Window has shifted in the right direction. A legion of studies about the problems of modernity and the methodologies needed for renewal have poured forth. But as Allen and Swain note, we now need more examples of what this reconciliation looks like, not mere explorations of what it could be.

The pulpit has usually done a better job of keeping these worlds together than the academy. In the publishing world, there have been several commentary series seeking reproachment between biblical and theological studies, but their success has been mixed at best. Both theologians and biblical scholars still have much to learn from each other and the methods of these two worlds often don’t easily square. This is

made more difficult by the sheer mass of things to know in our era of incredibly specialized knowledge. Even with a PhD in New Testament Studies and twenty years of professorship under my belt, I still feel quite insecure when I teach outside of my specialization in the Gospels, such as in Pauline studies, let alone attempting to understand the world of systematic theologians.

Nonetheless, I think the reformed catholic retrieval is well under way. I'm hopeful as I sense our adolescent phase is finally passing (and isn't it a necessarily awkward phase for any human growth?) and, at least in the confessional Christian world, we are entering a season of young but maturing progress in moving forward with Christ's witness in the world. I'm thankful for *Reformed Catholicity* and the ongoing work of Allen, Swain, and others as we seek to learn once again to read Scripture in and for the Church.

Trinitarian Theology and Reformed Catholicity

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With its programmatic outlook, its cross-disciplinary venturesomeness, and its broad, journalistic reportage of (then-) current trends in theology and church life, Allen and Swain's little book *Reformed Catholicity* (2015) has a lot going on. Without denying the book's explanatory helpfulness as a guide to the times, or its power as a manifesto for a movement of sorts, I want to direct attention to the fact that *Reformed Catholicity* is in fact mostly a book about Scripture. It is first and foremost an entry in the bibliography of bibliology, a book about the Bible.

This is worth emphasizing ten years on because both then and now, the theological reading public is easily distractable. Nearly anything will turn our heads. The notion of retrieval, though safely buried in the book's subtitle, can easily draw disproportionate attention. It raises truly fascinating questions about history and contemporaneity, about cultural powers of transmission and reception, about tradition and traditions (in Yves Congar's formula). Meanwhile up in the main title, the frisson of adding the adjective "Reformed" to the noun "Catholicity" is intentionally arresting. The juxtaposition invites us to align with Team Reformed and/or Team Catholic, to declare whether one or both ought to be uppercased or lowercased, and to work out a theology of ecumenical positioning. All of this, along with other matters of "theological culture" are really present in the book, and in their own way worth pondering. Allen and Swain in fact deliver an incisive set of observations on 2015's theological culture, and (especially) excellent guidelines for how to encourage a more faithful theological culture in church and academy.

But none of this retrievalish-ecumenical-cultural material has any solid basis or staying power except insofar as it is related to the Bible as the word of God. What is it that we are retrieving, receiving, transmitting, explaining, and forming interpretive cultures around? Scripture. The answer is characteristically Protestant, and *Reformed Catholicity* delivers it fittingly, in the form of a doctrine of Scripture. Two of its chapters retrieve (yes) the traditional Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* with greater amplitude than conventional wisdom expects; the final chapter defends (the right kind of) proof texting as an effective, and inherently apostolic, technique for signaling the vital relationship between biblical interpretation and doctrinal judgements. It is in service to this biblical core that Allen and Swain deploy all the other elements of Reformed Catholicity—both the book and the ongoing project.

In other words, the ongoing project of Reformed Catholicity is an outworking of what John Webster (to whom the book is dedicated) called "the domain of the word" of God. Will Protestant theology take seriously the charge to receive Scripture responsibly, and behave as befits a church to whom this word has come? Will it equip itself with an appropriate understanding of the church as the creature of the word, of its public teaching as a confession of the fullness of the faith, and of the long tradition of biblical interpretation as an extended engagement with the biblical text itself? These remain live questions. How has this project ("a theological sensibility, not a system") fared since the manifesto's publication? There are reasons to be

encouraged, especially from the point of view of systematic theology and specifically trinitarian theology.

The year 2016 was something of a stress test for evangelical commitment to the traditional lines of the doctrine of God, as a wide-ranging controversy broke out over a dense cluster of issues in trinitarian theology. Different publics no doubt learned different lessons from the struggle. But to hazard a generalization, many students were awakened from their slumbers by the very fact that a disagreement existed. Neglected facets of trinitarianism (eternal generation, inseparable operations, appropriations) gained prominence, as teachers poured out first blogs and then books to provide a deeply catechetical re-introduction of the doctrine of God along traditional, Nicene lines. In the edited volume *Retrieving Eternal Generation* (Zondervan Academic, 2017), numerous authors canvassed the biblical, historical, and doctrinal case for this cornerstone doctrine. Adonis Vidu published an unprecedented monograph on inseparable operations (*The Same God who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Eerdmans, 2021)). Finally, the large volume edited by Matthew Barrett, *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God* (IVP Academic, 2024) manages to be simultaneously the broadest coalition of writers and topics, and also the most focused on settling the original controversy, especially refuting overly social trinitarianism and any eternal functional subordination of the Son.

About five years after the outbreak of that controversy, 2022 brought a kind of *annus mirabilis* for evangelical trinitarianism, with a trio of remarkable books: R. B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman's *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Baker Academic, 2022); Steven Duby's *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Baker Academic, 2022); and Glenn Butner's *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God* (Baker Academic, 2022). It is hard to imagine a set of books that could more powerfully carry out the aspirations of Reformed Catholicity in the doctrine of God than these. They all three display exegetical care (but especially Jamieson and Wittman, a New Testament/systematics team), philosophical seriousness (but especially Duby, with enviable scholastic chops), and ecumenical sensibility (but especially Butner, with an impressive command of the literature).

What are the future prospects of Reformed Catholicity in this area? Does this theological sensibility have the power to articulate a well-developed doctrine of God that is both reformed and catholic? Again, there are auspicious signs. The next steps will be in developing even stronger habits of reading the Bible with the theological depth it calls for. Kevin Vanhoozer's comprehensive *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Zondervan Academic, 2024) is a kind of master synthesis of the hermeneutical program, while a number of commentators are emerging who are both competent and confident to carry out theological interpretation at a high level: consider Michael Morales' two volumes on *Numbers* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary series, 2024) and Steven Duby's *Habakkuk* (T&T Clark International Theological Commentary series, 2025). As this movement of Bible interpretation matures and draws more practitioners, the time will be ripe for a fuller articulation of trinitarian theology that better catches the cadences and tones of the Bible's own way of speaking. Such a consummation, devoutly to be

wished, will be a fitting result of a principled and large-minded championing of the Protestant doctrine of Scripture as the source of true and enduring catholicity.

Reformed Catholicity and the Pastor: Virtues and Postures

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I remember vividly my first encounter with Allen and Swain's *Reformed Catholicity*: it was during the final year of my doctoral program, on a train trip from Cambridge back to St. Andrews in midsummer. The volume had just been published, and upon the recommendation of some of my fellow postgraduates I'd picked up a copy to supplement the work of retrieval that I was currently undertaking myself in my thesis-writing. It was a gorgeous British summer day, and my window seat on a largely empty train car provided an especially halcyon setting for theological reflection. But it wasn't just Northumberland's sun-drenched landscape that stirred me that afternoon. The project that Allen and Swain expounded was something that I had been searching for myself, a need that was as yet unarticulated and inchoate in my own mind: a careful Reformed account of the place of and need for tradition as a part of God's ongoing communicative work of upholding and strengthening the Church through His Word. *Reformed Catholicity* provided all that and more.

I have returned to *Reformed Catholicity* in the ten years since its publication, but it might go without saying that no other setting has given me quite as idyllic conditions for reflection. Since leaving doctoral work and returning to pastoral ministry, I've needed to squeeze subsequent encounters with *Reformed Catholicity* and texts similar to it into my schedule, fitting them between session meetings, pastoral care appointments, presbytery gatherings, and sermon and teaching preparation. The contrast is indicative of a not insignificant challenge: modern pastoral life often provides adverse conditions for theological work. Which brings me to the rub. How can pastors not just admire the constructive proposal that Allen and Swain present in *Reformed Catholicity*, but actively participate in it? Which is to say: what are the corresponding postures and virtues that are needed to sustain retrieval within the Church?

Reformed Catholicity begins by identifying ecclesial tradition not merely as creaturely reflection on divine revelation but as the product of the missions of the Triune God. "A Reformed theology of retrieval must help us to perceive the process and products by which the church receives and transmits apostolic teaching not simply as human cultural activities and artifacts but also as fruits of the Spirit" (25). Tradition must be situated within the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit, not as a deracinated work of the human intellect. Thus we can understand tradition as one part of the "creaturely social co-efficient"¹ of the mission of the Spirit.

It is important to emphasize a particular clause in that previous sentence: tradition is *one part* of the "creaturely social co-efficient" of the mission of the Spirit. Tradition is neither forged nor transmitted in a vacuum. Both persons and institutions are essential elements of the Spirit's mission. They are essential as those who are *objects* of that work, caught up in the Spirit's sanctifying work; but they are also essential as those who are *instruments* of that work, called and commissioned by

¹ John Webster, "In the Society of God': Some Principles of Ecclesiology," *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology Volume I* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2016), 177. Quoted in Allen and Swain, 34.

God, including participation in the preservation and continuation of tradition: “By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Timothy 1:14).

In our own times, there is a reflexive impulse to yield that work of preserving and continuing tradition to the academy—professors, universities, and seminaries. But *Reformed Catholicity* demonstrates that instinct is only half right.² Certainly we can affirm with gratitude the fruitful theological work of those who find their primary social location within the institution of the academy, as the citations of Webster, Hütter, and Billings (and indeed Allen and Swain’s authorship) confirm. But alongside those references are also the names of those who worked out their location primarily within the local church—Luther, Calvin, Owen—as well as confessional documents that emerged from Church councils—the French Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and more. The Reformed Catholic project is an ecclesial project that is not only *for* the Church but one that also emerges *from* local churches and must be cultivated *within* local churches, and in what space remains I’d like to consider briefly some virtues and postures that are necessary to sustain that vision.

Pastoral Virtues. If tradition is the ongoing work of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, then there are corresponding pastoral virtues that are necessary to sustain that work. Unity requires pastoral *patience* in order to negotiate doctrinal disagreement and difference without the kind of hasty dismissiveness that prematurely forecloses upon disagreement (within a local church, a denomination, or even across traditions). Holiness requires pastoral *courage* to address doctrinal deviance or drift with resolve in an age where theological conviction can be dismissed as dogmatism. Catholicity requires pastoral *humility* so as to listen charitably to voices from others whose insights are out of step with our own times. And apostolicity requires *studiousness* so as to train attention upon the foundation of the Scriptures and those who have gone before us in reflecting upon its witness with the intentness which each deserves. Reformed Catholicity requires pastors to cultivate these virtues in order to sustain a lively relationship with tradition.

Traditioned Reasoning. Creeds and confessions serve the Church in numerous ways.³ But too often they are understood only as boundaries that provide denominational definitions. They are not less than that, but they are much *more*. Creeds and confessions are expressions of a kind of theological reasoning that is more than simple up or down subscription to a doctrinal standard. The Apostles’ Creed is a form of Trinitarian reasoning that demonstrates the importance of both inseparable

² In this way, *Reformed Catholicity* is in tacit agreement with the impulse of the pastor-theologian movement and the desire to return to a more balanced relationship between Church and Academy with respect to theological work. See Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015); Todd Wilson and Gerald Hiestand, eds., *Becoming a Pastor Theologian: New Possibilities for Church Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

³ Carl Trueman suggests the following uses of Creeds and Confessions: delimiting the power of the Church, succinctly summarizing faith, moral guidance, appropriate discrimination between membership and office-holding, representing the ministerial authority of the church, demonstrating expectations for maximal doctrinal competence, relativizing the present, defining traditions in relation to one another, and maintaining corporate unity. See Carl Trueman, *Crisis of Confidence: Reclaiming the Historic Faith in a Culture Consumed with Individualism and Identity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 143-173.

operations and the doctrine of appropriations. The Westminster Standards are not merely a doctrinal checklist but also a coherent philosophy of ministry. Reformed Catholicity requires us to move beyond superficial engagement with tradition and instead to immerse ourselves in a form of traditioned reasoning.⁴

Institutional Care. Traditions require institutions in order to prolong their existence. Institutions require tradition to remain faithful to their vocations. But all too often in our anti-institutional age institutional life is at best a grudging duty and at worst a disposable platform. Reformed Catholicity requires a corresponding spirituality of institutional life that emerges from the local church and moves up to a regional gatherings of a presbytery, diocese, or classis all the way to the synod, the assembly, communion, or convention. This is a “spirituality” because these concrete forms of the visible church are themselves the fruit of the Spirit’s work, that “creaturely social co-efficient” of the divine mission. Reformed Catholicity requires us to attend to and participate in the councils of the Church—and relationships, norms, and cultures concomitant with those institutions— as the means by which the Spirit cares for the Church.⁵

Reformed Catholicity represents not just a theological vision for the Church, but a theological vision that emerges from the Church and that must also continue to be sustained and developed from within the Church. Essential to that work is the pastor-theologians who lead local congregations as stewards of the deposit of faith. If that leadership is to be faithful, then the virtues and postures above must accompany that theological vision as it moves into the next decade and beyond.

⁴ See, for example, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016).

⁵ On this, see Gordon T. Smith, *Institutional Intelligence: How To Build an Effective Organization* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017); Hugh Hecla, *On Thinking Institutionally* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Catholicity Involves History and a Globe

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When I first read *Reformed Catholicity* (hereafter *RC*), it labelled something of which I felt a part, but had no idea formally existed in the Reformed world, not unlike a toddler who suddenly comes to realize that they have a middle name. It unveiled intentional efforts my professors, from various (mostly Protestant) institutions, had made in drawing their students toward texts of Early Christianity. So, while I expect most of the contributors to this issue will start from the vantage point of educators, my original gratitude comes from reflection of my time as a student.

As a historical theologian (I think that is what I am), the description of thirteen movements was very helpful. It unpacked nuances between conversations that, I had assumed were parallel streams coming from the same fount (such as the *ressourcement* movement leading to, what *RC* calls “nouvelle théologie” and “*Ressourcement Thomism*”). In particular, the description of “Theological Interpretation of Scripture” (TIS) highlighted my own ignorance, for careful historical work is being done in what I had incorrectly categorized as a purely exegetical movement. What the *ressourcement* did for Roman Catholics around the time of Vatican II, with its emphasis on Scripture and the Fathers, TIS was doing for Protestants, emphasizing historical and theological implications of exegesis. I have long encouraged students of Biblical Studies toward TIS as an exegetical method, and was thrilled to see ways it has already been drawing from the streams of the history of interpretation. Rather than view the discipline of history as able to converse with a particular exegetical method, this book has enabled me to explore, with students, how the history of interpretation can be part of the TIS method.

On the other hand, when considering retrieval and proof-texting (chapters 1 and 5 respectively), while I agree with the substance of the argument, I question the result. Among historians, the biggest gripe against retrieval is similar to biblicists regarding proof-texting. Too often, the context is ignored to validate the assumptions the reader brought to the text. Allen and Swain respond to those critiques convincingly with regard to Scripture in Chapter 5. They show that in good theological work, even if it is not always explicitly explained, careful exegetical work has historically been behind the proof-text. This requires that careful exegesis continue to be important for theologians in years to come. Similarly, good work of retrieval demands that careful historical work be done. However, in Roman Catholic circles, I have heard more than one scholar bemoan that while von Balthasar or de Lubac knew the Patristic period, for example, and it informed their theology, their students rarely draw from the Early church, save through the filter of von Balthasar or de Lubac. Without demanding that all theologians be specialists in biblical studies and historical theology, the continuity of habits and principles outlined by Swain and Allen will only continue if students of theology continue to be well-versed in disciplines that the modern guild has separated. *RC* returns to the expectations the Church used to have of its pastors, but for this movement to continue, it needs

professors to be more conversant in the often-siloed disciplines of Bible, theology, *and* history.

Lastly, a throw-away line in Billings' afterword deserves comment. He states that, "catholic-Reformed theologians should be in appreciative and critical dialogue with other movements as well..." a list which includes "the theologies of the global South" (160). This seems to suggest that it was not happening at the time it was published, but I believe it had actually existed for quite some time. For example, in the paragraph prior, Billings mentions African theologies of retrieval, noting, among others, Oden's work. However, in *How Africa Shaped Christianity* Oden argues that the confessional tradition of theology started, among other places, in Africa, so the work of retrieval with African theology, is in many ways, a return to its own roots, not to something foreign. By reading Augustine, for example, one is reading African theology, and one can describe the work of retrieval as returning, among other things, to African theology. This is not to discount modern African theology, but rather to highlight that Christianity has depended on African theologians throughout the centuries. Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, Augustine, and others contributed to and walked in the stream of tradition from which the work of retrieval is being done, and noting this work dispels any notions that the work of global theology has not always been a part of the tradition of the Church, or should be an addendum to the work of retrieval. The work of recognizing theology from history is the same kind of habit in the work of recognizing theology from the wider geographical panorama of the global church. For example, further afield, but closer to my own neck of the woods, Prof. Theo Donner, who was a student of Henry Chadwick at Cambridge, has been teaching at a Protestant seminary in Colombia, South America since 1983. Hundreds of Spanish-speaking students have passed through his classes, and many more have read his books, an effort that has, for years, engaged in the kind of work that this book describes as retrieval, but for a global context. Today, this can also be seen in younger Reformed scholars, like Dr. Daniel Eguiluz from Peru, who considers ecclesiology through the lens of Calvin's reception of Cyprian of Carthage. These are only two of many examples, but like any engagement with theologies of the Global South, there are often huge efforts already being made of which the academy in North America and Europe is not cognizant. Not unlike the toddler learning their own middle name, I hope that the *RC* movement will increasingly notice work already being done by excellent global scholars that is amplifying its influence. Though these scholars may teach in different languages, they are already hoeing parallel furrows in this same garden, and walking over to learn from their progress may be a helpful next step in better understanding the influence of this movement.

One Warning, Two Hopes

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It is hard to overestimate the influence of the slim but tightly argued manifesto, *Reformed Catholicity*, by my colleagues, Michael Allen and Scott Swain. As I suggested in a review of the work in 2016 for the *Journal of Reformed Theology*, they have succeeded in offering a distinctly Protestant case for theological retrieval that advances, rather than nullifies, a proper understanding of Scripture as the *principium cognoscendi* of the church's doctrinal witness. Alongside attending to the rule of faith and the church as the elicitive principle of theology, Allen and Swain also make their case from a close reading of texts like Psalm 145, Acts 15, and authoritative voices of the ancient, medieval, Reformational, and modern eras. Protestantism does not merely warrant but also mandates a catholic sensibility with respect to the reading of holy Scripture.

Since then, Reformed evangelicals especially have developed a healthy suspicion of Biblicist readings that isolate particular texts from their history of interpretation, and evangelical systematic theology is enjoying a particular kind of revival, nurtured by a realization that attending to the traditions of the church provides an illuminating path forward from some of our present doctrinal and philosophical ills. I suggest that these trajectories are due in no small part to the influence of Allen's and Swain's efforts. Complementing this manifesto, Allen and Swain not only provided a companion volume of essays that showcases a Reformed catholic account of the loci of theology (*Christian Dogmatics*, Baker Academic) but also edit the *New Studies in Dogmatics* (Zondervan) and the *T&T Clark International Theological Commentary* series, all of which offer some of the best examples of Protestant catholic sensibilities. As such, I continue to be grateful for this influence, and the reflections I offer below suggest some ways to advance further these paths of reckoning with Scripture and traditioned reflection.

The reflections are threefold: first, a warning, and then two hopes.

As with any work of significance, its influence downstream may not reflect the width, depth, and breadth of the kind of call envisioned in the work. As such, a revisiting of the vision captured here may be useful to those engaged in evangelical theological retrieval. At times, one wonders if there was a subtle narrowing of what 'catholicity' means or entails, with talk of there being a (singular) 'Great Tradition', rather than a pluriform one – and that 'tradition' usually signifies merely a commitment to 'Christian Platonism', Thomism, or a 'Reformed Thomism', which often functions to mitigate other strands or witnesses. Whereas 'Reformed catholic' is meant to be a call to engage the whole of the church's witness to Scripture, past and present, it could now function as an isolation of one particular strand of that witness. I would suggest that one way we can avoid such a narrowing would be to drop such monikers and opt for *traditioned* readings and sensibilities (and 'Reformed catholicity', in any case, functions well enough to alert one to both the breadth and depth of tradition). I have suggested for a similar sort of move for the neo-Calvinist tradition, resisting the call to reduce it merely to be 'Kuyperian', or even 'Bavinckian',

so as to appreciate the breadth of the whole from Kuyper to, say, G. C. Berkouwer, Herman Dooyeweerd or, in the global context, Shao Kai Tseng. Neo-Calvinism, at its best, is also another permutation of the Reformed catholic sensibility, provided it is viewed also in the round.

In other words, Reformed catholicity should be a field in which multiple viewpoints can fruitfully dialogue and disagree within the context of traditioned discourse. It should encourage, rather than mute, attending to and dialoguing between, say, Aristotelians and Platonists, Franciscans and Dominicans, Bonaventurian, Scotists and Thomists, particular Baptists and Presbyterians, analytic and non-analytic theologians, and so on, while attending to the variegated influences of the whole tradition on each distinct locus of doctrine. Examples abound. Aaron Denlinger's *Omnes in Adam ex pacto Dei*, Richard Cross's *Communicatio Idiomatum* and *Christology and Metaphysics in the 17th century* come to mind as exemplary works of historical theology in this regard, whereas John Webster's and Ian McFarland's books come to mind in contemporary dogmatics, and Jesse Couenhoven and William Wood produce capably in a more analytic vein. Irenic disagreement and creedal unity, that, is, alertness to the tradition's unity-and-diversity, rather than myopia, should be the pathway and outcome of a Reformed catholic sensibility.

With that warning in view, my first hope is that a call to be 'catholic' should also recognize that the Spirit continues to work in the church today, as much as the past. The same God who guides the church in the past is at work in the whole church at the present. As such, the call of Reformed catholicity should nurture an attitude of gratefulness for the present *and* the past, recognizing that, though there are major breakthroughs through controversy that led to the formulation of the creeds and confessions of the church, there has been no golden age this side of the fall and before Christ's return. As John Webster was in the habit of saying – we are tempted to identify all of our ills with Descartes or Kant when it was laid decisively on Adam's feet. I would thus hope that a catholic sensibility would continue to nurture a vital eagerness of mind regarding the Spirit's work in the present moment. This was, of course, Herman Bavinck's emphasis throughout his entire career. In his view, the theologian must be "a child of his own time" and refuse the "easier" route of making "the past one's own, for this lies at some distance."¹ (This should also involve attending now to the global context of the church's witness, and Horton's, Mburu's, and Holcomb's *Theology Together* series, which explores Christian doctrines in global perspective, comes to mind as especially promising in that regard.)

Finally, I also hope to see a thicker description of doctrinal development, for an account of theological development from a Reformed catholic sensibility seems to be under-explored. *Semper reformanda*, as applied to doctrine, was more of a 19th century designation rather than a Reformational one (due, actually in part to the influence of Herman Bavinck, as Cameron Clausing's *Theology and History in the Methodology of Herman Bavinck* has shown), and it holds a kernel of truth – if Scripture is the norming norm and the church's witness is a normed norm, there is in principle an account of doctrinal development at our disposal – one that is neither Biblicist or Roman.

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Foremost Problems of Contemporary Dogmatics: On Faith, Knowledge, and the Christian Tradition*, trans. Bruce Pass and Gerk de Kok (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2024), 2.

Allen and Swain themselves are exemplary witnesses to the sketch envisioned here. May the influence of *Reformed Catholicity* continue to increase.

Teaching In, With, and Under the Christian Church

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I've been working hard recently on a global history of doctrine and, while speaking and writing about its practical significance, thinking once again about what it means to catechize the faithful in families, congregations, and schools in communion with the saints (past and present, near and far). I oppose what some call "the right of private judgment." I do not think it helpful to encourage individuals to think for themselves in matters of faith and practice, to interpret and hand on the faith once delivered with bespoke idiosyncrasy.¹ "Constructive" doctrinal "moves" often annoy me; I usually find them negligible, sometimes heterodox. Telling students in seminaries to write their own theologies, or statements of faith, is a recipe for trouble, in my estimation. I want pastors and people to conform to the authorized teachings of their churches, to preach, pray, and sing with the rest of Christ's body "until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13, NRSV).²

In the main, I'm a fan of retrieval theology. It can help us counteract such modernistic practices and ground each other in the best of church history. But in the wrong hands—and without the right guidance—retrieval can also prove to be a bit precious, peculiar, even quirky. It can call forth revisions to Christian faith and practice that separate students from the catholic tradition. It can generate an attitude toward the tradition that is presentist, arrogant. It can cover for the lazy as they cherry-pick the past, taking texts out of context and using them to one-up siblings in the Lord instead of learning together with them humbly, attentively, and teaching God's people in κοινωνία with the church.

Perhaps a word about the ways in which "retrieval theology" arose in the wake of "constructive theology" will help me make this point. Constructive theology emerged as a movement in the late twentieth century under the leadership of scholars at institutions like Vanderbilt and Harvard Divinity School. These liberal theologians contended that the ancient Christian structures of authority had long since collapsed and that their job as Christian teachers was to let people know, deconstruct the doctrines that were based on old authorities and used to confine and control other people, and retrieve from the ruins choice fragments of Scripture and tradition they could use to build new "models" of God, constructing more liberating pedagogical tools for their people in the present. Constructive theology was invented as a form of

¹ This should go without saying, but perhaps it bears repeating: A commitment to the Scripture principle, or to *sola scriptura*, does not entail the right of private judgment. I agree that the Bible is the only norm that ought to norm our Christian faith and practice. It is best interpreted and applied, however, in communion with the saints.

² I unpack these claims in Douglas A. Sweeney, *The Substance of Our Faith: Foundations for the History of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023).

liberation theology intended to succeed older biblical, creedal, and confessional theologies.³

Retrieval theology is a far more traditional approach to catechesis. Its name was coined recently, partly in response to constructive theology, for a loose set of attitudes, practices, and methods that predate the term itself. While constructive theologians retrieve useful fragments from the margins of church history, employing them to reconstruct liberating understandings of God in pursuit of social justice for the oppressed, retrieval theologians rehabilitate the classic texts of mainstream churches, using them to substantiate contemporary versions of traditional dogmatics. They do so in the manner of the history of ideas, engaging texts and doctrines as transhistorical units from the Bible and tradition, treating them as if they have a life of their own that continues to inform Christian teaching today (a method now passé in academic history departments, where ideas are interpreted primarily in relation to their own historical contexts).⁴ But like their liberal colleagues in constructive theology, retrieval theologians often criticize, update, and revise the texts and doctrines they engage from the past. This sets at least their best-known practitioners apart from most older theologians, who taught within the boundaries of their churches and confessions and had less freedom to venture forth on their own. Retrieval theologians often serve quite faithfully in orthodox churches. But their own “constructive moves” in response to the classics are the best-known features of their teaching ministries.⁵

I contend that the doctors or teachers of the church should teach in, with, and under the authority of the church—and resist the temptation to revise and “improve” upon their churches’ instruction on their own or by virtue of their academic guilds. Every once in a while, our churches’ rightful leaders will reach collective decisions to revise our confessions or catechetical tools. But this should not happen in every generation. And when it does occur, the revisions should result from a lengthy time of prayer and discernment by supermajorities of clergy from many different cultures informed by new research, historical developments, and global perspectives on Scripture and tradition.

³ The leading programmatic works in constructive theology are Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, eds., *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985; orig. ed. 1982); Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, eds., *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*, A Project of the Workgroup on Constructive Christian Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); and Laurel C. Schneider and Stephen G. Ray, Jr., eds., *Awake to the Moment: An Introduction to Theology*, The Workgroup on Constructive Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

⁴ The “history of ideas” was pioneered by Arthur Lovejoy, who taught at Johns Hopkins University and founded the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. He laid the intellectual groundwork for this way of making good use of intellectual history in Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936); and Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1948).

⁵ The leading programmatic works in retrieval theology are John Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Darren Sarisky, ed., *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal* (London: T & T Clark, 2017).

Scott Swain and Michael Allen represent the very best of Reformed-catholic teaching. *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* is a gem. My prayer is that this book will yield real catholicity among the Reformed—and will rein in the more freewheeling kind of academic work that also goes by the name of retrieval. This latter sort of retrieval is more selective in relation to the catholic tradition, more beholden to contemporary academic trends. It collects small fragments or units from the past and deploys them in support of its own constructive moves. Occasionally, we do need minority Christian voices to call church leaders to account for the sins of their ecclesial communities, and to advocate for changes in church teaching that support reformation. These occasions, though, are rarer than many now think.

For all-too-many leaders, the main event in teaching is one's own contribution to contemporary discourse. For Allen and Swain, by contrast, the main event in teaching is transmission of the faith in a learned, traditional, orthodox manner, well-informed by creeds and confessions, the rest of the catholic tradition, and the realities we face in the present. May their tribe increase.

The Complexity of Divine Simplicity: A Test Case for Reformed Catholic Retrieval

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Since “Reformed catholicity” began to emerge over the past two decades, several of my students have surfaced a practical question that impinges on catholicity: Can we approach earlier modern theologians like Søren Kierkegaard or Herman Bavinck in terms of “retrieval”? Or is that approach inherently oriented around pre-modern materials? Another practical question impinges on Reformed identity: Can theologians count as “Reformed” apart from any confessional subscription, simply by virtue of appeals to *sola scriptura* and certain figures or themes? Or, if confessional subscription is ingredient in Reformed identity, to which confession(s) and with what minimal form(s) of church order? Many academic theologians are accountable to multiple statements of faith—as parachurch employees, congregational members, and perhaps ordained clergy. The intersections of these statements and those forms of accountability can be complicated. Academic contexts may broaden theologians’ expected intellectual engagements while congregations may narrow their confessional standards—or vice versa.

Divine simplicity provides a prominent test case within some recent sectors of “Reformed catholic” retrieval. My employer, Wheaton College, does not reference the doctrine in its Statement of Faith. My congregation, Immanuel Presbyterian Church (EPC), requires subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith for ordination as an elder, although not for church membership. The Westminster Confession 2.1 affirms that God is “without body, parts, or passions,” but it does not use the word “simplicity” and it does not specify a theoretical definition. Meanwhile, strands of neo-Calvinism that shaped some of my teachers—via both Dutch Reformed philosophy and Westminster biblical theology—have criticized “scholastic” doctrines of God or even rejected divine simplicity. Sometimes such cases may be confessionally underdetermined, but here the Belgic Confession explicitly characterizes God as “simple” in its first article. Sometimes such cases reflect ignorance or misunderstanding of traditional teaching—hence the efforts at retrieval. Yet it is sobering to encounter the emerging tensions between some advocates of Reformed catholicity and influential theologians from the previous evangelical generation.

Without naively hoping to resolve such tensions in short compass here, I wonder if the test case of divine simplicity points toward a few contours of authentically Reformed and catholic retrieval.

1. *Judgments about divine perfections like simplicity often accompanied, however implicitly, the “Nicene orthodoxy” of the ecumenical creeds and/or later Protestant confessions.* Their straightforward rejection undermines, perhaps unintentionally, basic biblical teaching. An instructive earlier example, now widely acknowledged so that it may shed light on current cases, would be the venerable B. B. Warfield’s critique of the eternal generation of the Son. Given his explicit Trinitarian orthodoxy, a heresy trial would be inappropriate, as would the failure to appreciate his

profound theological contributions. But the damaging effects of his biblicist and rationalist error must also be acknowledged; pastoral discernment would probably prevent the churchly teaching of his view on eternal generation even if it merited academic discussion or occasionally necessitated churchly inoculation.

2. *Advocates for retrieving such “classical” concepts are sometimes more philosophically rigid about their formulation, or less rhetorically charitable toward their detractors, than is warranted.* The likes of “Christian Platonism” or Thomistic “metaphysical” concepts may not be essential to the Reformed catholic retrieval of a doctrinal judgment like divine simplicity. Indeed, it may be anachronistic to overload the requirement of specific formulations or subsequent entailments onto earlier, more general affirmations. Affirmation of divine simplicity may not preclude all forms of “relational” or “social” Trinitarianism, or at least it may not prevent them from contributing insight. Otherwise, globally considered, claims to “catholicity” may ring hollow.

3. *Although some “neo-Calvinist” thinkers have made unguarded critiques of so-called “classical” theism, sola scriptura still authorizes possible reform of the medieval Catholic heritage.* Some strict versions of simplicity seemingly preclude intratrinitarian divine love. Some scholastic accounts render it pastorally difficult—as some neo-Calvinist critiques recognize—to speak of God acting in history. When our theological speech struggles to incorporate the dynamism of the biblical narrative and the diversity of biblical genres, perhaps a metaphysical system has become domineering. Perhaps more attention—on all sides—to the analogical character of theological language could forestall both the rejection of divine simplicity and the rigid reduction of its complexity.

4. *Greater attention to confessional contexts and church order may be important for Reformed catholicity to flourish theologically.* Evangelical and broader academic contexts are not churches with synods and courts. Straightforward rejections of a confessional judgment like divine simplicity should be confronted. The threshold and form of such confrontations, however, need discernment. It would not necessarily be appropriate to initiate a heresy trial for a critique of certain versions or unintended consequences of a doctrine like divine simplicity. It might also be inappropriate to imply in broader evangelical or academic contexts that an opponent’s view borders on heresy if one would be unwilling to initiate such a trial in a churchly setting. Admittedly, confessional Reformed churches have their unseemly histories of heresy-hunting church trials in potentially kangaroo courts. However, the enlarging tent of “Reformed” catholicity should not shelter overheated rhetoric and overgeneralized allegations that, at their best, confessional church politics would preclude.

Reformed catholic retrieval efforts have been spreading into broader evangelical and academic spaces. It is not yet clear how fully, say, the advocacy of Thomistic metaphysics will cohere with Baptist ecclesiology. At the same time, all church politics have been struggling with new technological challenges for obeying the Ninth Commandment. Thus, part of the complexity of divine simplicity is

contextual. Yet part of its complexity is also conceptual: What counts as an entailment or a denial thereof when its confessional apparatus is quite modest?

The aspiration of “catholicity” requires retrieving the biblical heritage of “classical” theism that is, to some degree, entailed by Nicene orthodoxy and expressed in Reformed confessions. Yet the aspiration of “Reformed” catholicity requires retaining the evangelical heritage of freedom to reform the church—its formulations of its teaching and its loving respect for its teachers—according to the Word of God.

A Tin of Plaudits (and Three Challenges) for a Tenth Anniversary

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The traditional tenth anniversary gift is tin. It's an appropriate symbol. Tin is known for its durability and flexibility and used in solder for creating a permanent bond between pieces of metal that would otherwise be disconnected. So, I suggest, is the concept of Reformed catholicity, a notion that has connected past to present and endured for a decade.

Protestants rightly protest their unfortunate caricature as rugged individuals who have a divine right to interpret the Bible for themselves. Scott Swain and Mike Allen did not invent the term "Reformed catholicity," but in retrieving it they have made a significant step forward in addressing what Christian Smith has termed the problem generated by the naïve biblicism of such hermeneutical individualism: pervasive interpretive pluralism.¹

Whereas Roman Catholics put to use their own *ressourcement* energies recovering sacramental theology, Reformed catholicity recovers the theology of the word, namely, *sola scriptura*. It is a bold and exciting venture. Protestants shouldn't retrieve just because everyone else is combing the beach with metal-detectors looking for precious booty. Allen and Swain are on stronger ground when they give a properly dogmatic account for retrieving catholicity: the "deepest warrants for a program of retrieval are trinitarian and christological" (18).

I have been an enthusiastic supporter of this proposal since Baker Academic first solicited my opinion as to whether or not to publish it and endorsement (which I was happy to provide). In a certain sense, "Reformed catholicity" is the answer to my lifelong question, "What does it mean to be biblical?" Indeed, it has led me to modify my own understanding of "first theology," which I now think involves not only God and Scripture, but also the church.

What, then, is Reformed catholicity? It is an attempt to be biblical (and maintain *sola scriptura*) by being ecclesial, that is, by interpreting Scripture in, for, and with the communion of saints. The appeal for reading in ecclesial context is not a limp postliberal appeal to the authority of interpretive communities. Rather, it is a robust Protestant appeal to the mission the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, deputized by the risen Christ to enable the church rightly to hear and receive the Word and to minister biblical understanding – the "proper effects of his pedagogical grace" (45).

One might see *sola scriptura* as Reformed catholicity's formal principle and the ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions as its material principle, with *semper reformanda* serving as the explanation of the order in which the two principles properly relate. The catholic tradition frames and nourishes Reformed theology; Reformed theology re-centers and furthers the catholic tradition; the authoritative Scriptures simultaneously stretch and delimit the contours of catholicity.

¹ See Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011).

In his “Afterword,” Todd Billings challenges catholic-Reformed scholars to engage with the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS). I think Allen and Swain are already doing that. Indeed, Reformed catholicity sets out a distinctly Protestant approach to TIS, a way of integrating the Word of God with the Spirit of God and the Church of God.

My own work is replete with harbingers of Reformed catholicity, but lacks the close conceptual and dogmatic analyses that Allen and Swain provide. In *The Drama of Doctrine*, I identified the canon as the divinely approved means by which God exercises his authority in, and over, the church, adding that “It is primarily in the church’s reading of Scripture that the risen Christ, through his Spirit, exercises his lordship over the church.”² Theology, I said, is a function of two principles: the canonical, which acknowledges Scripture as God’s authoritative word, and the catholic, namely, the acknowledgement that no one interpretation of Christianity – no single contextualization – is equal to or can replace the canon. We need the whole people of God, extended through space and time, to grasp the fullness of God’s word: “The gospel designates a determinate word; catholicity, the scope of its reception.”³ Or, as I stated it a few years later in another book: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who wholeheartedly affirm both canonicity (the supreme authority of Scripture as a rule for Christian faith and life) and catholicity (the divinely appointed nurturing role of the church and her consensual tradition).”⁴ I said similar things in *Biblical Authority after Babel*: “The best Protestants are catholic Protestants – people centered on the gospel but also alert to how the gospel has been faithfully received across cultures and centuries.”⁵

I see three challenges ahead for those who, like me, wish to pursue something akin to Reformed catholicity as an alternative to either (individualist) biblicism, (communitarian) traditionalism, or Roman Catholicism.

The first challenge is to justify, then specify, the force of the “Reformed” qualifier of a term that means universal. “Which catholicity?” and “Whose catholicity?” are valid questions. A case in point: the Lutheran theologians Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson produced their own manifesto, *The Catholicity of the Reformation*, twenty years before *Reformed Catholicity*.⁶ They also co-founded the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology in 1991. More recently, the Center for Baptist Renewal has produced a manifesto for Evangelical Baptist Catholicity.⁷ What,

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 124.

³ Ibid, 27.

⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers & Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples Through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 201.

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 199.

⁶ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *The Catholicity of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁷ <https://www.centerforbaptistrenewal.com/evangelical-baptist-catholicity-a-manifesto> (accessed Jan. 30, 2025).

if anything, is the difference between the Baptist, Lutheran, and Evangelical qualifications of catholicity and the Reformed catholicity advocated by Allen and Swain? The follow-up question is whether Reformed theologians agree amongst themselves about what catholicity means, and entails.⁸

Given the centrality of *sola scriptura*, a second challenge is to articulate a Reformed understanding of Scripture's literal sense. Erik Lundeen has recently shown that, while the Reformers agreed that the literal sense alone could establish doctrine, they nevertheless disagreed as to what actually constitutes the literal sense.⁹ My own "reformed catholic" proposal (yes, I use the term) is that it involves loving attention to the letter of the text, an acknowledgement of divine authorship and of canonical context, a focus on Christ-centered redemptive history, and a willingness to have one's interpretation corrected by the text.¹⁰

A third challenge follows from the two preceding. It's the perennial problem of providing a non-circular epistemic criterion, or rule, for determining whose reading of the Bible's literal sense counts as a legitimate instance of true catholicity. The South African theologian Dirk J. Smit calls this the "deep contradiction" of Reformed theology.¹¹ It is generated by the claim that, on the one hand, Scripture alone is the supreme authority, and by the acknowledgement that we have no access to a supreme authoritative arbiter that could determine which of the many possible interpretations is the correct one, on the other.

I for one do not believe that Reformed catholicity requires what Yuval Harari calls the fantasy of an infallible interpreter.¹² Harari thinks the world had to wait for modern science before it had a "self-correcting mechanism," namely, the willingness to submit theories to any number of empirical tests. I submit, however, that Reformed catholicity may indeed incorporate such a self-correcting mechanism, when right-minded and right-hearted readers, in prayerful humility, are open to the movement of the Spirit, even (especially!) when it goes against settled opinion, and when they commit to engage in earnest exegetical conversation: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15:26).

⁸ See Willem van Vlastuin, *Catholic Today: A Reformed Conversation about Catholicity* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).

⁹ Erik Lundeen, *The Reformation of the Literal: Prophecy and the Senses of Scripture in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2025).

¹⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What it Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024), 181.

¹¹ Dirk J. Smit, *Essays on Being Reformed: Collected Essays 3* (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2009), 306.

¹² Yuval Noah Harari, *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* (New York: Random House, 2024), 71.

Retrieval and the Center of (Reformed) Catholicity

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In their manifesto for Reformed catholicity, Mike Allen and Scott Swain pursue a distinctly Protestant way of inhabiting Christian tradition and its interpretive wisdom.¹ The project is one for which we should be grateful, since it embodies a theologically serious hope for catholicity rather than a wistful longing for unity on just any grounds. In this short reflection, I highlight but two of the many relevant features from their manifesto that merit continuing elaboration and work from those of us sympathetic to its aims. Specifically, I reflect briefly on the notion of “retrieval” and the ideal of “catholicity,” respectively.

1. *Retrieval*. Allen and Swain eloquently situate the project of retrieval within the architecture of classic Reformed scholastic principles. Hence, theology is communicated to us from the uncreated wisdom of the Trinity (theology’s ontological principle), through Christ and his inspired word (its external cognitive principle), and illuminated by the Holy Spirit among the society of the faithful (its internal cognitive principle). The temporally and socially mediated use of this renewed reason, tradition, is an instrument the Spirit employs to aid our apprehension of God’s written Word. It is therefore an “elictive” principle of theology.²

This notion of retrieval is irreducibly theological: it rests not upon sociological and critical analyses of “traditions” as mere cultural and political artifacts, but upon the Trinity’s works of election and apocalypse.³ And it does so without surrendering distinctly Protestant ecclesiological emphases. The redemptive and sanctifying missions of the Son and Spirit beget and animate the church’s renewed reason to operate within an eschatological space, in which the church’s hearing is not closed and finished but open to the Word’s grace and judgment. The church that hears the Word is militant, not triumphant, so her hearing remains incomplete: “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

All of this is helpful and important for contemporary efforts at retrieval to remember. Thankfully, Allen and Swain rightly refer to retrieval in passing as “process

¹ Michael Allen and Scott Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Baker Academic, 2015); Scott Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and its Interpretation* (T&T Clark, 2011); Michael Allen, *The Fear of the Lord: Essays on Theological Method* (T&T Clark, 2022). See also the companionable reflections on catholicity by Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Daniel J. Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account* (IVP Academic, 2015); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Brazos Press, 2016).

² Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 36. In this vein, when Brad East, *The Doctrine of Scripture* (Cascade Books, 2021), 81, speaks of Scripture’s clarity as a “liturgical clarity,” he says something valuable and true. However, East risks confusing the orders of being and knowing when he makes Scripture’s clarity *dependent* on its “catholic” use.

³ In all these respects, they take up a central occupation of the late John Webster, who was concerned throughout his career with articulating a theological, and coherently Protestant, account of tradition.

of remembrance.”⁴ As an act of sanctified memory, retrieval has a twofold relation to forgetfulness. First, there is a culpable form of forgetting that loses sight of the primary love defining Christian obedience in relation to God and neighbor (Rev. 2:4-5; cf. Jer. 18:15). In this sense, forgetting is synonymous with disobedience. There is a way of neglecting the wisdom of Christian tradition that is an act of ingratitude and irreverence to the Lord for his works of illumination and sanctification. The opposite of this is the psalmist’s prayer: “I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old” (Ps. 77:11). And such remembrance occurs as one generation commends God’s works to another (Ps. 145:4). Retrieval happens amidst spiritual amnesia. And part of a responsible theology of retrieval is a sober assessment of its particular exigencies: what has been forgotten and why? Future work in this respect might benefit not only from genealogical accounts of doctrinal and cultural change, but perhaps even more from attention to liturgy. We have heard that to retrieve the fourth century doctrine of the Trinity, we must recover fourth century cultures of reading Scripture. Why not also the expression of both within the liturgy? The liturgical expression of *homotimia* may not suffice to establish the doctrine of the *homoousia* between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But surely such a doctrine is incomplete without it. May some of theology’s amnesia owe to a liturgical deficiency?

Second, there is a necessary form of “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Phil. 3:13). This is not a summons to some naïve belief in the inevitability of human or ecclesiastical progress. The church in the present stands in the same relation to sin and grace as the church in the past. Not everything is worth retrieving, and some things are worth forgetting—traces of unfaithful attention to God’s Word. Good doctrinal developments are as possible and real as deteriorations. The saints of ages past need us as much as we need them (Heb. 11:40). Hence, it may therefore be the case that some things must burn to expose the “charred roots” underneath the sediment.⁵ Only thus can the church explore different paths amidst her journey in the present that proceed organically from the same roots. Indeed, the danger of retrieval—one that some contemporary advocates have not always successfully avoided—is that it’s possible to listen so much to the past that we fail to listen now, mistakenly forfeiting our duty to obey the living and *present* Word. The hearing of saints past can no more substitute for our own than can their obedience. Theological responsibility requires us to attend to the “sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim. 6:3), so that we may pass on “that which alone possesses originality.”⁶ And that original Word confronts the church now and summons her to present acts of obedience.

⁴ Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 13.

⁵ Without affirming the whole argument, see here Philipp W. Rosemann, *Charred Root of Meaning: Continuity, Transgression, and the Other in Christian Tradition* (Eerdman, 2019). As Rosemann argues, not all “transgressions” of tradition are the faithful wounds of a friend. What characterizes true transgressions is the affirmation of the center and therefore limits. For Reformed catholicity, this center is (ontologically) the Holy Trinity and (cognitively) the Word interpreted with the Lord’s Prayer, the Decalogue, and the Apostles’ Creed.

⁶ John Webster, “Theology and the Order of Love,” in *Rationalität im Gespräch: Philosophische und Theologische Perspektiven*, ed. Markus Mühling *et al* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 175-185 (181).

2. *Catholicity.* What centers Reformed catholicity's project of retrieval is God's Word, and this is a generative source for reflecting on catholicity itself. The church's catholicity is dependent on the catholicity of its Lord, requiring us to deduce the church's catholicity from the mysteries of the Trinity and incarnation. And these mysteries come to us in God's Word.

Here there is strong overlap with Roman Catholic accounts of catholicity, as Matthew Levering has shown. On matters such as the church's pilgrim state, its dependence on Christ, and the centrality of the Word, there is much agreement between Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants.⁷ The key disagreement seems to be less about the fact of the church's quantitative and qualitative catholicity than about the manner of the church's present participation in the Lord's catholicity. As Levering suggests, Protestants and Catholics can pursue catholicity as equals because they are both pursuing "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:23). Catholicity of any sort, Reformed included, therefore requires that we receive the Word who authors our catholicity. We will do so the more we attend to the means the Spirit employs to bring the Word to us and us to the Word.

The question facing those who would pursue the project of Reformed catholicity is therefore whether we will not simply look to the theologians of the past, but do what those same theologians did, at their best: heed the Word of God and thus have something worth handing on.

⁷ Matthew Levering, "Catholicity and the Catholic Church: Protestant Concerns and (Roman) Catholic Perspectives," *Pro Ecclesia* 32/3-4 (2023): 219-246.