

Hanns Lessing | Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda (Eds.)

in collaboration with

**Anna Case-Winters, Margit Ernst-Habib, Gemma King,
Henry Kuo, Andreas Müller, Dirk J. Smit**

Receiving Nicaea Today

**Global Voices from
Reformed Perspectives**



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EVANGELISCHE VERLAGSANSTALT
Leipzig

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2025 by Evangelische Verlagsanstalt GmbH · Blumenstr. 76 · 04155 Leipzig
Printed in Germany

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This book is printed on ageing resistant paper.

If you have any questions about product safety, please contact info@eva-leipzig.de.

Cover: Kai-Michael Gustmann, Leipzig
Typesetting: Dev Kumar (Meecodes), India
Printing and Binding: BELTZ Grafische Betriebe GmbH, Bad Langensalza

ISBN 978-3-374-07974-2 // eISBN (PDF) 978-3-374-07975-9
www.eva-leipzig.de

Preface

1700 years on, the Nicene Creed continues to touch churches all over the world. The Reformed family of churches celebrates this milestone and joins the rest of the ecumenical movement in marking how the Council of Nicaea and its product the Nicene Creed has shaped the life of the church.

Part of the Reformed heritage is to take God's gifts to the church through the ages and engage in a critical appraisal of what these gifts mean to us in the present tense. This character in the DNA of the Reformed Communion mirrors the character of the Berean Christians described in the seventeenth chapter of the Acts of Apostles who «[...] welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so». (Acts 17.11). Therefore, we offer this volume in this spirit of renewing our welcome of this 1700-year-old creed with critical review.

In the twenty-first century, we are confronted with divisive issues in the church. We are also confronted with ways in which the church is challenged in its mission. The church has not always lived up to its calling to understand mission as God's means of transforming the world, and therefore has often found itself complicit in the death-dealing forces of injustice and evil in society. For example, what does it mean to say, «We believe in one God [...] maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible?» What implications do we draw from it when the forces of the world act as if only some things are under God's domain, and the church is often found supporting the powerful in destroying God's creation or not being good stewards of God's creation?

In this volume *Receiving Nicaea Today: Global Voices from Reformed Perspectives*, Reformed theologians, together with theologians from the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Methodist, Lutheran, and Anglican tradition, have engaged in critical reflections on the Nicene Creed as it communicates to us in the present tense. As a Global Communion that has journeyed through mission, colonization, resistance,

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and renewal, we receive the Nicene Creed as a living confession that sustains the struggle for justice of all whose suffering and hope bears witness to the living God. It is in these contexts that Nicaea must speak anew if it is to be truly confessed today. Therefore, this volume has approached Nicaea with a post-colonial liberative lens and a rereading from the margins. It also brings insights which connect Nicaea to the current urgent ecological, political crises to make it a living confession for the world. As we give thanks to God for these 1700 years, we hope these reflections will lead us to new levels of commitment in our faith, so that what we believe in will have a profound impact on our actions in the world today.

The Reformed Confessions developed in the last century are consistent with the Nicene Creed. Each of them has a «We believe [...], and therefore we [...]» movement. Reflections on the 1700-year-old Nicene Creed in the present tense also strengths this move. What we believe impacts how we analyze current day issues and what we sense as God's call and how we respond to it through our actions.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches is very grateful to each of the contributors to this volume. We give thanks to God for your time and insights that you have shared in this book. We are very grateful to our colleague Hanns Lessing who is providing good leadership in our Communion and Theology programmes and whose vision and hard work has brought this volume to birth.

This year as we celebrate the 1700th birthday of the Council of Nicaea which yielded the Nicene Creed, the WCRC is also celebrating 150 years of its life and witness as Reformed World Communion. We have challenged ourselves to persevere in our witness no matter how challenging the circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is in this spirit that we offer this volume in the hope that 1700 years of the Nicene Creed will inspire us to persevere in our faith and witness to be even more relevant to the times in which we live.

Setri Nyomi

Interim General Secretary – WCRC

Appreciation

This book project would not have been possible without the enthusiastic support of many people. The idea for the book was born at a meeting of the Strategic Programme Planning Group of the WCRC. All the editors have accompanied the theological work of the WCRC for many years.

We thank the group of editors, comprising Anna Case-Winters, Margit Ernst-Habib, Gemma King, Henry Kuo, Rathnakara Sadananda, and Dirk J. Smit, for developing the idea of a living reception of the Nicene faith and offering their global networks for the search for potential authors and accompanying authors in the different sections of the book.

We especially express appreciation to Rathnakara Sadananda for his tireless efforts to give shape to the emerging voice that the book presents.

We appreciate the enthusiastic support that the project received from the authors. Almost everyone whom we approached committed immediately. The different perspectives that the authors provided improved the project considerably. We are grateful that half of the authors are from the Global South and express our appreciation for the commitment of all the contributors to decolonialize theology. It is because of this commitment that the book can present a global reception of the Nicene tradition.

We thank our intern, Gemma King, who coordinated the logistics of the project.

The project could not have been completed without the technical support that we received.

We thank our publisher, the Evangelische Verlagsanstalt in Leipzig, Germany, for their encouragement, support, and technical accompaniment throughout the process.

We express our gratitude for the meticulous copy-editing of Jessica Prakash-Richard of *TheoEdits* in India, and thank Dev Kumar of Meecodes, India, for the book design.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches is blessed by this theological network and proud of the results of this work.

Hanns Lessing
Executive Secretary for Communion and Theology
World Communion of Reformed Churches

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List of Abbreviations

AACC	All-African Conference of Churches
ACK	Anglican Church of Kenya
AIM	African Inland Mission
AIPRAL	Alianza de Iglesias Presbiterianas y Reformadas en América Latina
ANC	A New Creed
ATR	African Traditional Religions
CCCS	Congregational Christian Church Samoa
CCT	Church of Christ in Thailand
CEC	Conference of European Churches
CHRISCO	Christ Coworkers Church
CICC	Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CoS	Church of Scotland
CSI	Church of South India
CWM	Council for World Mission
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
DRMC	Dutch Reformed Mission Church
EARM	East African Revival Movement
EASM	East African Scottish Mission
EFT	Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand
EPC	Evangelical Presbyterian Church
FAST	Faatuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi
GAC	General Administrative Committee
GKI	Gereja Kristen Indonesia
GMS	Gospel Missionary Society
HC	Heidelberg Catechism
ICC	Indonesian Christian Church

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IECLB	Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil
IRD	Interreligious Dialogues
JC	Justinian Code
JPRC	Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Committee
KMT	Kuomintang
KYODAN	The United Church of Christ in Japan/ Nihon Kirisuto Kyōdan
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex
LGBTQIA	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Aromantic, or Agender, (sometimes also includes Allies)
LMS	London Missionary Society
MCK	Methodist Church in Kenya
MTC	Malua Theological College
NC	Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed
NCCK	National Council of Churches of Kenya
NEAR	Nurturing, Educating, Advocating, and Resourcing
NIFEA	New International Financial and Economic Architecture
NPCC	Newer Pentecostal Churches
OPC	Orthodox Presbyterian Church
PCA	Presbyterian Church of America
PCEA	Presbyterian Church of East Africa
PROK	Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea
RCA	Reformed Church in America
REET	Ecumenical Network for Theological Education Foundation
RGC	Redeemed Gospel Church
ThC	Theodosian Code
UCC	United Church of Canada
UCC	United Church of Christ
URC	United Reformed Church
URCSA	Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa
USPG	United Society Partners in the Gospel
WARC	World Alliance of Reformed Churches
WCC	World Council of Churches
WCRC	World Communion of Reformed Churches

Receiving Nicaea Today: Global Voices from Reformed Perspectives

Celebrating Nicaea 1700

The 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea is more than a commemorative milestone – it is a *kairos* moment, a Spirit-stirred invitation to re-encounter the triune God and to re-examine the covenantal faithfulness of the Church in a wounded and waiting world. For the Reformed tradition, this is not a ritual of nostalgia but a liturgical provocation – a call to interrogate, discern, and renew the very grammar of our believing.

Yes, Reformed churches celebrate the Nicene faith – but not uncritically. Celebration is not separation from reality. Reformed hermeneutics receives such anniversaries not as closures of doctrinal certainty, but as openings – opening spaces where theology must be re-tested in the fire of Scripture, re-voiced amid the cries of history, and re-shaped in the pulse of mission.

Our tradition offers a simple yet searching two-fold discernment:

1. Does the Nicene faith – along with the tradition that has grown from it – still bear faithful witness to the self-revealing God of Scripture, as known in Christ, and made alive by the Spirit? That is, can the theological formulations of Nicaea still be held as truthful echoes of God's liberating Word, as confessed in the testimonies of prophets, apostles, and the crucified One who lives?
2. And does the language of the Creed remain capable of expressing the living, dynamic self-disclosure of God as encountered in the ruptures of history and the urgency of now? Can the old formulations still sing in the

tongues of oppressed peoples, still breathe in the dust of exile, still stir in the dreams of the displaced, and still be heard in the cries of the earth?

These are not merely academic questions, but ecclesial, spiritual, missional priorities. They are the heartbeat of a tradition that insists: *God is still speaking, the church is still listening, and the creed must still be reformed for the sake of the world God so loves.*

John Calvin, ever the careful reformer and passionate theologian of discernment, offered a wise and enduring principle for engaging the decisions of councils – not with blind allegiance, but with faithful vigilance. His method was both rigorous and reverent, marked by spiritual humility and theological clarity. Calvin wrote:

Whenever the decree of a council is produced, the first thing I would wish to be done is to examine at what time it was held, on what occasion, with what intention, and who were present at it; next I would bring the subject discussed to the standard of Scripture. And this I would do in such a way that the decision of the council should have its weight and be regarded in the light of a prior judgment, yet not to prevent the application of the test which I have mentioned. (*Institutes IV, 9, 8*)

This posture – neither dismissive nor deferential – is the heartbeat of Reformed theological engagement. It is a method that honours tradition without enshrining it, and it is precisely this approach that guides Reformed churches as they mark the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. Nicaea 1700 cannot be a celebration of orthodoxy frozen in time, but of faithfulness forged in history – of a creed continually brought to the testing ground of Scripture, community, and context.

We revisit Nicaea with gratitude, but also with courage – critically examining the content of the Creed, the imperial conditions under which it was forged, the process of its formulation, and the living faith it has nurtured and challenged through the centuries. We ask again, with Calvin, not only *what* was said, but *why*, *how*, and *to whom* – bringing every word to the measure of the Gospel.

For Reformed churches, this is not doctrinal submission – it is confessional responsibility. It is our conviction that the Spirit – not the emperor – is the interpreter of truth, and that the Word of God must not be entombed in ecclesial chambers, but become flesh again in occupied territories, trembling congregations, exiled and excluded peoples, melting glaciers, and the exploited earth.

All Reformed churches, in diverse ways, affirm the Nicene Creed as a truthful and faithful witness to the triune God. Some affirm it with judicial weight; others,

shaped by noncreedal traditions, hold it with spiritual reverence while resisting its institutional codification. For some, the classical creedal form feels too abstract – too far from the language of the poor, the disinherited, the everyday believer. Yet all are bound together in the living tradition of the Reformed faith, which celebrates the triune God, not as a distant dogma, but as a communion of love revealed in history.

This tradition draws from the deep wells of the early councils – Nicaea (AD 325), Constantinople (AD 381), Ephesus (AD 431), Chalcedon (AD 451) – and is shaped by the rich chorus of the Reformed confessions and the living voices of contemporary faith declarations like Barmen (1934), Belhar (1986) and Accra (2004). It is not a single note repeated through time, but a dynamic symphony of discernment – where theology breathes, reforms, and rises again in each generation, always leaning toward the liberation of God’s people and the healing of God’s world.

With the bold confession of «*We believe*» at the heart of the Nicene Creed, the Reformed tradition affirms that faith is never a solitary possession, but a communal belonging – a covenantal act of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. This ‘we’ stretches beyond individual experience into the vast communion of saints – across centuries and continents, across memory and hope, across the visible and the unseen. In this creed, the gathered, worshipping body of Christ proclaims its shared trust in the triune God – a trust that binds the Church in faith and mission, in unity with believers past, present, and yet to come.

For Reformed communities, the Nicene confession is not merely recited; it is lived. It becomes a teaching tool in catechesis, a liturgical rhythm in worship, a theological compass in ecclesial life. Especially in its Christological and Trinitarian affirmations, the Creed grounds the Church’s faith and challenges its imagination – calling the Reformed faithful to reflect, express, and embody their discipleship with clarity, courage, and care.

Yet to confess «*We believe*» today is to do more than affirm unity. It is to interrogate the history behind the voice. Who said «we», and who was never invited to speak? Who was excluded from the councils? Who was silenced in the formulation of faith? To echo the Creed uncritically is to risk amplifying centuries of erasure – of indigenous cosmologies pushed aside, of women’s wisdom dismissed, of queer bodies criminalized, of Christ domesticated into imperial decorum.

Thus, in the Reformed tradition, to reconnect with Nicaea is not to cling to static orthodoxy, but to enter a dynamic process of reformation – where doctrine is

not discarded but discerned anew. The 1700th anniversary is not a celebration of doctrinal perfection, but a *kairos* of theological courage. Nicaea 1700 is not a pedestal; it is a protest, not a relic; but a reawakening, not a closure; but a threshold into deeper communion and more faithful witness, a protest, and a prayer.

We revisit Nicaea to unearth – not entomb – its liberating core. Christology and Trinitarian theology must be reclaimed as confessions of divine communion, not instruments of domination. *Homoousios* must resonate not with imperial metaphysics, but with the Galilean who stood with the oppressed, was executed by the State, and rose again as the firstborn of a border-crossing people.

Ecumenically, Nicaea has long served as a bridge, but too often, guarded by gatekeepers of doctrine, gender, race, and power. Let this moment of commemoration be transfigured into a moment of radical hospitality, where «We believe» becomes a polyphony, not a unison – a chorus of the beloved community rather than the dominant voice.

While this anthology articulates a Reformed emphasis, its approach is ecumenical and wants to stimulate a fresh conversation about the relevance of the Nicene Creed for the church today. Thirty-seven scholars from around the globe not only from the reformed family but also from the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican, and Orthodox traditions collaborate together to engage with Nicaea, in a prophetic re-entry – a *kairos* moment to let the creed breathe again from the wounds of the world and the witness of the crucified.

Vast majority of Christian communions see themselves in the Nicene tradition. The living commemoration of the Council of Nicaea cannot be confined to a confessional project but emerge as an ecumenical inspiration to re-engage with the Nicene faith together. Therefore, the contribution from authors who engage with the Nicene Creed from Roman-Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, and Anglican Communion traditions is greatly appreciated.

This book unfolds as a global polyphonic theological journey, receiving Nicaea not as a relic of imperial orthodoxy, but as a living confession re-voiced from the margins. Six dynamic sections guide this re-engagement – each shaped by the Reformed commitment to *semper reformanda*, justice, and the liberating Word.

Reformed Hermeneutics and the Authority of Creeds

This section explores how Reformed hermeneutics receives creeds as open invitations to living confession. It asks: how has the Nicene tradition formed us – and

how must it now be reinterpreted to shape a liberative, faithful future? Here, Scripture, context, and the cries of the oppressed come together in discerning, confessing, and reforming the church's witness.

Nicaea and the Empire

Here, we enter the imperial corridors of the fourth century – Constantine, Athanasius, Arius, and the in-between. The essays interrogate the political-theological roots of the Creed and its imperial entanglements, asking: what was – and is – at stake when theology and power collide?

Scriptural and Theological Hermeneutics of the Nicene Faith

This section offers a critical analysis and evaluation of the theology of the Nicene Creed, with particular attention to its relationship to the testimony of Scripture and its adaptation within both historical contexts and contemporary pluralism. It explores what was theologically at stake at Nicaea and reflects on the lessons learned, in order to discern the continuing relevance of the Nicene faith for the Church's self-understanding and mission today.

Nicene Influence on Reformed Synodality and Church Governance

Exploring how the Nicene legacy informs Reformed polity, this section asks how ecclesial authority must be collaborative, non-hierarchical, and critically self-aware. It challenges simple binaries with Spirit-led collective discernment.

Confessions and Contemporary Witness

Focusing on Reformed confessions from the Reformation to Accra and beyond, this section probes how contextual confessions shape theology that liberates and transforms, guided by history, community, and mission.

From Creed to Confessing: Worship, Teaching, and Mission

Finally, this section explores how the Nicene faith animates liturgy, discipleship, and mission –challenging empire, nationalism, and ecological injustice, and embodying a just, joyful witness to the triune God in a broken world.

Receiving Nicaea Today: The Meaning of Receiving

The anthology is titled “Receiving Nicaea Today”. Receiving is not merely a passive acceptance of the Nicene faith, but radical engagement – where faith is re-voiced, re-membered, and re-situated through communities that have long been silenced. Reception involves rising into a sacred struggle from the margins of the empire to experience liberation and resurrection.

Scripturally, reception is a process that begins not with human initiative but divine disruption. Receiving is, therefore, radical openness to God’s gracious initiative. To receive, then, is to embody God’s liberating presence in context – in struggle, in exile, in movement of the people and the planet.

Receiving is also an act of reclaiming agency. It is what the poor, the colonized, the queer, and the displaced continue to do: claim the right to interpret, embody, and proclaim the Gospel on their own terms. Reception is also memory at work. The empire fractures memory and teaches the oppressed to forget their dignity. But to receive is to *re-member* what the empire has dismembered – to recover indigenous wisdom, ancestral theology, and suppressed stories of resistance. Reception thus, is to contest theologies of control to re-situate ‘truth’ and reinterpret ‘continuity’. Finally, to receive is to hope. It is to risk rupture, misunderstanding, and marginalization, believing that even broken traditions carry seeds of life. Reception, then, is not just assent but incarnation, not an echo but an uprising, not the end but a beginning, a rising together to life.

Receiving Nicaea Today: The Meaning of Nicaea

The heart of the Nicene faith is the Triune God – one in substance, coequal, coeternal. But from the margins, this is not metaphysical math; it is divine mutuality. The Trinity is not hierarchy, but a communion of love. It resists domination and invites solidarity. Nicaea is a confession of divine relationality and shared power – rooted in the Triune communion of justice and love. Therefore, to affirm faith in Trinity is to confess a God whose life is shared, whose love is just, and whose image calls forth communities of radical inclusion.

Nicaea is also a wounded site of theological violence which was forged not only in theological conviction, but imperial compromise. Convened under Constantine, it became a tool to consolidate empire, exclude dissent, and sanctify colonial expan-

sion. Therefore, the confession of the Nicene faith is a reminder of the Church's painful complicity, and thus a call to lamentation, repentance, and reparation in a movement towards liberation.

Confessing Nicaea is re-voicing. Reformed theology insists that tradition is not frozen but is fermenting. Nicaea must be received as a living inheritance arising from encounter with the liberating God who walks with the enslaved, the exiled, and the crucified. Therefore, to confess Nicaea is to let the wounded speak to experience an unfolding journey of liberation to receive, to discern, to struggle, to reclaim, to reinterpret the living faith in context. It is the joy of the oppressed reclaiming God's promise. It is the song of new beginnings, sung in minor key, rising from the soil of wounded lands. It is the birth of new life. It is theology's true starting point – where the Word is not just heard, but received, and rises to life.

Receiving Nicaea Today: The Meaning of Today

'Today' is not an ordinary moment, but a *kairos* – a sacred disruption where history and heaven collide. It is the day of reckoning, the hour of hope, the now of justice. Today, the world groans, capitalism extracts, and the empire persists. Theologies bless bombs. The Church, too often, is tempted to nostalgia or neutrality. But the Spirit will not wait. Today is the moment to live out what is required, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

'Today' is also critique and a mirror. Therefore, today is a call to remember rightly, not for sentiment, but for resistance. Memory is sacred when it tells the truth, when it remembers Jesus not as celestial prince, but crucified peasant; when it names stolen lands, lynched bodies, persecuted prophets, and colonized scriptures. Thus, 'Today' is Reformation in motion, *Semper Reformanda*.

'Today' is also Eucharist; a broken loaf in a broken world; a foretaste of joy amid injustice: Today, not tomorrow, not after orthodoxy is perfected, in the agony of the empire, in the company of Christ; today is the fullest expression of incarnational solidarity envisioning a new world. 'Today' is therefore not a pause, it is a pulse of the future breaking in. 'Today' is not just time – it is testimony of Spirit breathing through brokenness; and the crucified Christ saying, even now, «Behold, I am making all things new».

The Global Voices from Reformed Perspectives: The Meaning of Reformed

To be Reformed is to live a theological rhythm – grounded in Scripture, stirred by the Spirit’s unsettling presence, shaped by communal confession, and continually reformed by the cries of the earth and the voices of the wounded. To be ‘reformed’ is to inherit a tradition not as a fortress but as a fire handed down – not for preservation but for transformation. It is a movement of critique and communion.

Born in the turbulence of the sixteenth century Reformation – through Calvin’s clarity, Zwingli’s courage, and the people’s longing – the Reformed movement insists that God’s sovereignty is not domination but freedom in embracing vulnerability, that Christ is not the possession of the empire but the crucified and risen companion of the poor, and that the Church must be a community of Word and sacrament, justice and love. But this movement did not stay European, it travelled – through mission and migration, resistance and resilience – and became a global, polyphonic witness.

To be Reformed is therefore, to be ecumenical to the core – walking with Christ, seeking communion with all who follow Christ, and with all that is created in and through Christ, yearning for justice, reimagining creeds, and speaking faith from the fractures of history. It is to declare *status confessionis*, not when institutional systems are threatened, but when the Gospel is betrayed, when racism kills, voices are silenced, the planet burns, and the empire baptizes violence and conquest.

This book is not merely an anthology. It is a communion of voice – global, diverse, fierce, and faithful – rising not to echo sameness, but to embody covenantal diversity, to affirm unity in difference, and to seek communion free from coercion and control. They do not speak about Nicaea from a distance, but speak through it – from scars, from songs, from silence. They compose a polyphony of postcolonial critique, prophetic courage, ecological imagination, and liberative hope. They reclaim Nicaea not as relic but as rhythm of life, alive with struggle and Spirit. They sing not in unison, but in harmony – carrying diverse textures, timbres, and tongues – all longing for a faith that can rise from the margins and breathe anew into a fractured world.

Together, these voices ask: Can the Nicene faith still be good news for the wounded and the waiting? Can it be reimagined as a wellspring of life, for the whole world God so loves? This book is their bold and beautiful polyphonic harmony rising from the margins daring to believe that the Nicene faith can still become good news for all creation.

Reformed Hermeneutics and the Authority of Creeds

Introduction

The Nicene Creed, uttered in the voice of «We believe», has long been regarded as a cornerstone of Christian orthodoxy. But in the Reformed tradition – shaped by the fires of protest, the urgency of contextual truth-telling, and the unrelenting call to be *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* – this creed is not a monument to be polished but a living threshold to be crossed with discernment, struggle, and prophetic imagination. The essays gathered in this first section take us into the deep waters of that engagement, exploring how Reformed hermeneutics, rooted in both Scripture and suffering, reads the creeds as invitations – not impositions – to rediscover, reformulate, and re-voice the liberating heart of the gospel.

At stake is not merely doctrinal continuity but the living tradition of the Church itself. How has the Nicene tradition shaped the Reformed faith? How might it still? How should it? What does it mean to confess the triune God not from the thrones of power, but from the margins of empire, from the exile of injustice, from the burning edges of today's crises? These are not academic questions. They are ecclesial, existential, and eschatological. They are the kind of questions that call forth a hermeneutic of confession, not of preservation.

In his illuminating essay, *The Hermeneutic of Confessing in the Reformed Tradition*, **Hanns Lessing** opens the section with a compelling exploration of a confessional logic that resists ossification and insists on remaining dynamic, responsive, and alive. Drawing from Rowan Williams' reading of the Nicene era and Karl Barth's theology of confessions, Lessing presents a vision of Reformed confession as historically responsive, contextually anchored, and spiritually courageous. Nicaea, he reminds us, was never a moment of settled certainty – it was a site of theo-

logical wrestling under imperial shadow. So too were Barmen, Belhar, and Accra. These confessions did not echo the past; they erupted from the present – naming heresies of racism, nationalism, and economic injustice not merely as errors of doctrine, but as violations of the gospel.

Confession, then, is not a backward glance. It is a prophetic gesture. It is the community's act of speaking truth at a kairotic time, always provisional, always discerning, and always oriented to the God who calls, disrupts, and liberates. For Lessing, a Reformed hermeneutic of creeds means reading Nicaea through the cries of our age, grounding all doctrinal affirmation in Scripture and lived experience, and holding it open to reform under the Spirit's movement. Creeds are not timeless verdicts but timely verdicts – offered in history, accountable to Scripture, and accountable to the communities that suffer.

Heleen Zorgdrager's profound contribution, *Reformed Wrestling with the Spirit: Navigating Nicaea 325 and Beyond*, invites us into one of the most underexplored tensions in Reformed theology: the marginalization of the Spirit. Drawing on Sarah Coakley's work, Zorgdrager shows how Nicaea's placement of the Spirit as 'third' led to a historical and theological sidelining of pneumatology – especially in the West. Within Reformed theology, this has manifested as a paradox: an expansive vision of the Spirit's presence in creation and community, alongside a restricted confinement of the Spirit to word and sacrament.

Zorgdrager pushes us toward a recovery of Spirit-led hermeneutics, rooted in the groaning and praying of the Spirit in Romans 8. Here, the Spirit does not simply 'apply' salvation as a final step in a patriarchal hierarchy but breathes as a coequal presence in the divine dance. Reclaiming such pneumatology means resisting not only ecclesial rigidities but also the social hierarchies they mirror and uphold. In this vision, creeds must be read not merely with intellectual assent, but with Spirit-breathed openness – discerned in prayer, lament, embodiment, and community. The Spirit does not freeze orthodoxy; She sings it anew in every context, especially from the underside of history.

Philip Vinod Peacock, in his stirring essay *Viewing the Nicene Creed from the Lens of Justice*, continues this work of reimagining. He refuses to read the creed as an imperial script locked in time. Instead, he unfixes it – prying it open through feminist, queer, and liberation theologies to reveal its subversive and justice-bearing potential. He shows how the Nicene formula «begotten, not made» was once used to justify royal legitimacy and hierarchical order – but also how it can be revoiced to dismantle those very hierarchies. For Peacock, the creed must become not

a fortress but a field – where gender binaries, theological exclusions, and doctrinal controls are unravelled in favour of relationality, plurality, and shared becoming.

He urges us to see the divine image not in abstract metaphysics or doctrinal precision, but in the full diversity of the human community. The Trinity, re-read through the lens of justice, is not a hierarchy of divine persons but a model of mutual empowerment, radical equality, and non-dominative communion. Theology, in this frame, is not about control – it is about co-creation, love, and struggle.

Together, these three essays reveal the power – and the responsibility – of Reformed hermeneutics in engaging the creeds. They remind us that to confess is not merely to repeat, but to wrestle. That creeds are not boundary-markers of the faithful, but invitations to reimagine what faithfulness looks like in a world groaning for justice. That Reformed theology, when truest to its roots, does not protect tradition from change, but insists on its transformation in the light of God's liberating Word and the cries of the world. These essays help us discern how the Nicene faith can still shape our doing of theology – how it might guide our confessing, our witnessing, our re-forming – so that the Church does not merely repeat what it once believed, but becomes what it is called to be: a community of truth, justice, and Spirit-breathed love.

The Hermeneutic of Confessing in the Reformed Tradition

Hanns Lessing

In Byzantium at the end of the fifth century, theological debates were not just for professional theologians. More than sixty years after the Council of Nicaea, Gregory of Nyssa – who, along with Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus, became famous for his contributions to the development of the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity – reported wild discussions all over the city:

The narrow streets, the marketplaces, the squares, the alleyways: the whole city is full of that kind of people. You can find them among those who deal in clothes, money changers, the men who sell us food. If you would ask someone about money, he would philosophize about the Begotten and the Unbegotten; if you inquire about the price of a loaf, you are told by way of reply that the Father is greater (cf. John 14:28) and the Son subject to Him; if you ask, «Is my bath ready?» the other person quotes you a definition about the Son having been created out of nothing.¹

Gregory did not like the turmoil, but his observations clearly indicate that the debate over which theological concepts could guarantee salvation in Christ was deeply rooted in the minds and hearts of the lay people. This debate began long before the Council of Nicaea and has yet to be fully resolved. Significant streams of Christianity in the East and West have affirmed the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, but significant portions of world Christianity have always either rejected the Nicene language or have not related to the tradition.

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio De Deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, [Oration on the deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit], *Patrologia Graecae* 46: 557.trans. Meredith L.D. Riedel, in “Photios’s Hermeneutic for Wisdom Literature in Amphilochia 9 (2021),” in *Receptions of the Bible in Byzantium Texts, Manuscripts, and their Readers*, ed. Reinhart Ceulemans Barbara Crostini (Uppsala Universitet, 2021), 101 n.40.

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Reformed theologians have played an active role in the debate. The vast majority of voices unequivocally affirmed the Nicene faith. However, the Reformed tradition has always had reservations about the imperial framing of the creed, in which the emperor guaranteed the validity of Christian symbols. This tension led to a particular hermeneutic of confessing that engaged the confessional tradition in the present tense, seeking to affirm its truth claims in response to contemporary challenges. This chapter will explore the Reformed hermeneutic of confession in three steps:

1. The article starts with an overview of the confessional hermeneutics presented by British theologian Rowan Williams, who served as Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 to 2012, in his book *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*.² Reformed people often pride themselves on the conviction that to be Reformed is to be ecumenical. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin an exploration of the Reformed hermeneutics of confessing with an outside position that applies Reformed hermeneutics to encourage an ecumenical debate.
2. The second section discusses Williams's interpretation of the Nicene faith in relation to Karl Barth's description of the characteristics of Reformed confessions.³ The analysis will focus on Barth's use of Calvin's concept of the «divine compact» in particular.
3. In the Postscript (Theological) to his book on Arius, Williams relates the Nicene debate to the controversies that led to the Barmen Declaration and provides a structural analysis of the parallels between these two processes. The third section of this chapter will use this analysis as a lens to reconstruct the hermeneutics of confessing in the contemporary confessions of Barmen (1934), Belhar (1986), and Accra (2004).

Theology for a Church in Crisis

In his book on Arius, Williams delves into the deeper layers of the Nicene debate that captivated people in the fourth century. This analysis reveals a dynamic that

² Rowan Williams. *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 2001).

³ Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions: 1923*, trans. and annot. Darrel L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

will guide the church as it attempts to come to terms with today's theological crises. He makes three critical observations:

1. Williams's Postscript unambiguously calls for a critical interpretation of the relationship between the church and the Roman Empire. The controversies that emerged before, during, and after the Council of Nicaea made it clear that the church was far from as unified, self-consistent, or established as Eusebius of Caesarea's account of Emperor Constantine's role at the council suggested. The prevailing notion of the Constantine church as the baptized *oikoumene* under the emperor, who was himself under the logos, did not align with the actual circumstances on the ground. Following its official recognition, the church came to the realization that its relationship with the empire had not resolved the questions surrounding the church's distinctive identity and mission. The extensive debate surrounding the appropriate nomenclature to characterize Jesus Christ's relationship with God revealed that the employment of a *deus ex machina* on the throne was incapable of resolving its inherent internal contradictions.⁴
2. In light of this situation, Williams emphasizes the distinct theological character of the debate. The dispute about the Nicene language was not a controversy between conservatives and progressives. The primary voices in Nicaea were unmistakably conservative. They firmly agreed that the theology of the church began in the language of worship. This language rightly conserves metaphors and titles that are both ancient and ambiguous. But their conservatism did not stop there.⁵ In a situation where the empire embraced the church, the church had to be careful not to be completely absorbed. This required the development of an independent theological language that allowed the articulation of theological truth claims without reference to imperial power. The church had to move from the loyal and uncritical repetition of traditional formulas to something more exploratory and constructive to achieve this goal.⁶ The citizens of Byzantium clearly wanted to understand their beliefs and experiences in the church. They used a «doctrinal hermeneutics» that demanded the re-imagining and re-creation of the old symbols and rituals in times of crisis.⁷ In their attempt to come to terms with the new dispensation, the question was not whether new

⁴ Williams, *Arius*, 236f.

⁵ Williams, *Arius*, 235.

⁶ Williams, *Arius*, 235.

⁷ Williams, *Arius*, 237.

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conceptual language should be used. Instead, the question was «What kind of innovation would best serve the integrity of the faith?»⁸

3. For Williams, this discovery of the significance of theology was a significant contribution of the Nicene debate to the church. It was in the controversies before, during, and after Nicaea that the church developed an understanding of the significance of theological discourse for its self-understanding and faith:

Although the radical words of Nicaea became, in turn, a new set of formulae to be defended (intelligently or unintelligently), the actual history of the Church in the succeeding centuries shows that some kind of doctrinal hermeneutics had come to stay; continuity was something that had to be re-imagined and re-created at each point of crisis.⁹

Following this history, Williams discovers that the theological constellation of the debate in and around Nicaea reappeared in other crises in which the church had to re-examine its faith and mission.

Williams demonstrates the continued relevance of the Nicene call for theological renewal. He compares the Nicene debate with the theological controversies in German Protestantism when Adolf Hitler took power in 1933 and detects clear similarities in the theological constellations of the main actors. These parallels raise important historical and conceptual questions. Williams cautions his readers that the analogies might be far-fetched and emotionally loaded in an unfair way.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he proceeds with the comparison to demonstrate the significance of the theological wrestling with the Nicene crisis for the church today.¹¹

Williams' exploration of the theological constellations in Nicaea and Barmen identifies four parties. Two parties represent classical approaches. The other two propose the introduction of a new theological language. On the classical side, he sees an opposition between conservatives who propagated a ritualized adherence to established truths and those groups that campaigned for a church that would be synonymous with the national culture.

In Williams' analysis, these classical approaches proved to be insufficient to guide the church in times of crisis because they did not satisfy the need for clarity that was demanded in the debates that led to the Nicene Creed and the Barmen Declaration. Williams concludes:

⁸ Williams, *Arius*, 235.

⁹ Williams, *Arius*, 237.

¹⁰ Williams, *Arius*, 237.

¹¹ Williams, *Arius*, 237.

The debates represent a recognition by the church at large that theology is not only legitimate but necessary. The loyal and uncritical repetition of formulae is seen to be inadequate as a means of securing continuity at anything more than a formal level; Scripture and tradition require to be read in a way that brings out their strangeness, their non-obvious and non-contemporary qualities, in order that they may be read both freshly and truthfully from one generation to another. They need to be made more difficult before we can accurately grasp their simplicities.¹²

Two new theological streams gained prominence in the theological debates around Nicaea and Barmen in response to the increased demand for theological clarity.

In both debates, one of the new parties sought to confirm the traditional faith of the church by recourse to philosophical thinking. In the Nicæan controversy, Arius took a firm stance against any concept of God that claimed that God was created. This was a widespread belief in the multireligious world of late antiquity. In the context of the persecution of Christians under Diocletian (AD 303–311), his motive can also be read as a critique of emperor worship, which deified the emperor. In response to these challenges, Arius proposed Neo-Platonist language that described God as a pure singularity who, as a matter of principle, was beyond human comprehension.¹³

From this epistemological point of departure, creation and redemption are understood as arbitrary acts of God that are disconnected from God's own being. For the sake of strict monotheism, Father and Logos-Son could not be of the same essence. Arius explained the creation and salvation in Jesus Christ like this: the uncreated Father created an independent being, the Logos-Son. The Son created the world, and he was the mediator between the eternal God and the transient world. In Arius' radical monotheism, the Son is the first creature of the Father. That is why Arius insisted that there was a time when the Son was not:

We acknowledge One God,
 alone unbegotten, alone eternal,
 alone without beginning, alone true,
 alone having immortality,
 alone wise, alone good,
 alone sovereign, judge of all, governor, and provider,
 unalterable and unchangeable,
 just and good,
 God of the Law and the Prophets and the New Testament;

¹² Williams, *Arius*, 236.

¹³ Williams, *Arius*, 242.

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he begot an only begotten Son before time and the ages,
through whom he made both the ages and all that was made [...].

But the Son, begotten apart from time by the Father,
and created and founded before the ages,
was not in existence before his generation,
but was begotten apart from time before all things,
and he alone came into existence from the Father. [...]

Therefore, he thus has his being from God;
and glories, and life, and all things have been given over to him;
in this way God is his beginning.
For he is over him, as his God and being before him.¹⁴

This theological framing had enormous consequences for the believers' faith. Arius' attempt to secure God from any analogy with earthly authorities led to an apotheosis of God's absolute power in which salvation was by mere fiat and could be withdrawn at any time.¹⁵

Unlike many others, however, Williams does not reduce Arius' contribution to the Nicæan debate to his role as a heretic. He sympathizes with Arius' approach and defends him against the unfair polemics of Athanasius and others. At the same time, he firmly opposes the arbitrariness of Arius' understanding of creation and redemption, and probably also his concept of power.

In Williams' interpretation, Arius' demand for conceptual innovation set the Nicene debate in motion. Athanasius and others accepted this challenge and responded with theologies that adhered more faithfully to Scripture.¹⁶ But without Arius' provocation, there probably wouldn't have been a Council of Nicaea, and we would not have an established tradition of theological innovation to come to terms with crisis moments of the church.

William's approach is straightforward: the church must cherish theological provocations. To reinforce his point, he doesn't shy away from provocations and compares Arius to Emanuel Hirsch, who, at the time of the Barmen Declaration, was one of the most controversial theologians in Germany.¹⁷

¹⁴ "Letter of Arius and His Followers to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria (318–320)," in *Athanasius. Epistle de Synodis* 16, tran. G. Thompson, accessed July 19, 2025, <https://www.fourthcentury.com/urkunde-6>.

¹⁵ Williams, *Arius*, 240.

¹⁶ Williams, *Arius*, 235.

¹⁷ Williams, *Arius*, 237.

Like Arius, Hirsch wanted to save the church's theology from becoming irrelevant by accepting a modern philosophical understanding of truth that rejected any form of knowledge of the transcendent. From this viewpoint, any attempt to get into a relationship with God, other human beings, or even with oneself appeared to be completely incomprehensible. For Hirsch, this observation was a challenge and an opportunity alike because this deficit in the scientific understanding of truth created an opening for a renewed theological language.¹⁸

Hirsch tried to fill this void in the scientific understanding of truth by exploring the mystery of the encounter between man and God and man and man. This application of the concept of mystery allowed him to go beyond scientific understanding without having to abandon its significance for modern life.¹⁹

However, during the National Socialist take-over of power, Hirsch used this concept of mystery to advocate complete allegiance to Adolf Hitler. Hirsch became a theological advisor to Imperial Bishop Ludwig Müller. In this position, he fervently opposed the Confessing Church. Critics, therefore, draw a line between Hirsch's theology, his ardent support of National Socialism, and the ideology of the German Christians.²⁰

On the other side of the theological spectrum, Williams points to the position of Athanasius (AD 328–373), whom he provocatively compares with Karl Barth.²¹ In Williams' interpretation, Athanasius had responded to Arius' challenge that the pre-Nicene Trinitarian language required conceptual innovation of a kind that was similar to Barth's transformation of German theology in the 1920s.

Athanasius rejected Arius' attempt to separate God's being from God's doing. He insisted that there was no conceivable gap between God as God acts towards us, as the Father of Jesus Christ, and that activity in and by which God is eternally what God is. God is knowable solely because God is active; what can be said of God can be said because God (utters) himself as Word or Son.²²

¹⁸ Eckhard Lessing, *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen evangelischen Theologie von Albrecht Ritschl bis zur Gegenwart*, Vol. 1, 1870–1918 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2000) 59.

¹⁹ Lessing, *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen evangelischen Theologie*, 61.

²⁰ Cf. Alexander Grau, "Ein protestantischer Theoretiker der Moderne," *Deutschlandfunk*, November 3, 2013, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/ein-protestantischer-theoretiker-der-moderne-100.html>.

²¹ Williams, *Arius*, 237.

²² Williams, *Arius*, 238.

Likewise, for Barth, theology had no power over what it speaks because it is essentially the response to God's free address. This address is not arbitrary but expresses God's eternal self-determination as the Trinity.

Williams' interpretation clearly emphasizes that God the Father acts in history through God's saving Word. This allowed Athanasius and Barth to confidently sustain their belief in a spiritual authority that is not answerable to secular rulers. Their belief was firmly grounded in God's nature, as the external Father of the one from whom and in whom the church exists.²³ In both instances, the new language that Athanasius and Barth suggested had the character of a declaration of independence that set the church free from the embrace of politics and culture. The Barmen Declaration interpreted this new consciousness as a call to resistance against the Nazi regime.

As influential as the Nicene Creed has been in the history of the church, Athanasius and the other contributors to the Nicene language could not bring closure to the debate. Athanasius engaged in a situation in which the traditional language of the church could not adequately express the sameness of God's acting and being. The Nicene concepts that describe the divinity of Jesus Christ are the fruits of this energetic and conflictual wrestling with the question:

[We believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Son of God,
the only-begotten of his Father,
of the substance of the Father,
God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,
begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father.²⁴

The commotion among the citizens of Byzantium demonstrated the ongoing vitality of the debate. Until today, the language of the Creed has often been seen as too complex and inaccessible to satisfy believers' needs for spiritual clarity and guidance for the mission of the church. The practice of repeating the creedal text without a renewed engagement with its driving questions has not helped to keep the Nicene faith alive. In Williams' interpretation, the Nicene tradition has been successful not so much through its language but through its ability to inspire fresh theological thinking to sustain the church during periods of crisis.

²³ Williams, *Arius*, 239.

²⁴ Cf. The text of the Nicene Creed in the appendix.

Like the citizens of Byzantium at the end of the fourth century, Williams only offers a tentative judgment on the relevance of the Nicene text. He calls for a hermeneutics of engagement with the theological questions and warns against a hermeneutics of repetition of the texts.

In this spirit, Williams concludes the Postscript (Theological) with a call to critics and affirmers of the Nicene Creed alike:

Even those who believe, as I do not, that Nicaea represented a damaging or mistaken shift in the history of doctrine are bound to consider how it has shaped and continues to shape Christian speech and prayer. As for those content to affirm the faith of Nicaea, they too have questions to answer as to the nature of doctrinal continuities, questions which the very fact of a doctrinal crisis in the fourth century presses upon us.²⁵

The Characteristics of Reformed Confessions

In connecting Athanasius with Barth and the Nicene Creed with the Barmen Declaration, Williams, in a remarkable ecumenical spirit, referred to the hermeneutics in which the Reformed tradition engages with creeds and confessions. Reformed theology was never satisfied with what Williams calls the «loyal and uncritical repetition of traditional formulas» but called for a hermeneutics of engagement that responds to the pressing challenges of today.

Karl Barth, who, in the twentieth century, had an enormous influence on the theology and praxis of Reformed confessions, systematized the Reformed understanding of confessions in his 1923 *Theology of Reformed Confessions*. In this book, Barth identifies five significant characteristics that mark the role of confessions in the Reformed church. These characteristics are in close alignment with Williams' understanding of doctrinal hermeneutics, which engages with the crises of the day.

1. Reformed confessions are the *products of local processes*.

They do not look for affirmation by the empire and the imperial church as visible expressions of their catholicity. Catholicity was accorded to them because their content was relevant to other churches that adopted them in response to the challenges that they experienced. Reformed confessional texts, therefore, cannot be regarded as «ecumenical confessions» in the established sense.²⁶

²⁵ Williams, *Arius*, 244.

²⁶ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 1.

The Catholic and Lutheran understanding of symbols was based on the belief in the spiritual and worldly unity of Roman-Christian-German Europe. The Swiss Reformers, however, strived for local confessing churches. These churches proved and defended the truth of their confessions solely through their connection to Holy Scripture. They did not do so by formally connecting them to a universal church or a normative exposition of Scripture. For the Reformed, the legitimate pathway to universality was the pathway of particularity.²⁷

The reasons for this lack of desire for official ecumenical affirmation were historical and theological. Not only was the connection of Zurich, Geneva, and Strasbourg to the Roman Empire much weaker than that of the Lutheran churches in the electorates in Germany, but the Swiss also had no heart for the idea of the empire and its united church. From the very beginning, Zwingli and Calvin had broken with historical Catholicism in a different way from the Lutheran Reformation in Germany. While Luther and Melanchthon wanted to bring about the victory of the Reformation through a general council, Calvin remained sceptical. For him, the universality of faith was not something that a council could establish but a gift of God that the church had to receive continuously.²⁸

2. Reformed confessions are *expressions of the freedom of the churches to testify to their faith in a particular situation*.

Each Reformed confession is a singular work. There is neither a united Reformed confession nor a united interpretation of Reformed confessional texts. The early Reformed confessions emerged from local debates that strived to ground their confessions upon holy Scripture alone.

This common grounding defines the confessional freedom of the particular churches in their relationship with each other. In this spirit, many Reformed church orders emphasize that «no church shall claim authority or dominion over any other».²⁹ For this fellowship of free churches that respected and affirmed each other's different confessions, Calvin coined the phrase «godly compact».³⁰

In his introduction to the *Geneva Catechism of 1538*, Calvin emphatically urges pastors, magistrates, and people of Geneva to commit themselves to such a compact:

²⁷ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 11f.

²⁸ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 10.

²⁹ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 12f.

³⁰ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 14.

But if we desire to prove our obedience to Christ our Leader, we must enter into a godly compact among ourselves and foster mutual peace, which he not only commends to his own, but also inspires in them. Why? Ought not the enemy also, the devil himself, to shoot his arrows to make us achieve reconciliation? For even if he is a beast of many heads, still we see, don't we, how he would hunch himself into a thick wedge to attack Christ's kingdom? If in the prince of hatreds, factions, schisms, this is agreement, how much more tightly is it fitting for us, who contend against him on behalf of the King of Peace, to join purposes and forces? To this end this sort of combat urges us.³¹

3. Reformed confessions are public *testimonies of faith* that respond to a specific challenge of the faith.

They do not claim the historical authority of a symbol in the Roman Catholic or Lutheran sense. For Calvin, a confession was a «testimony of the inwardly conceived faith», in which nothing should be included other than the «most authentic truth of Scripture, devoutly composed of choice and solemn words».³²

This character defines the status and authority of confessions. As testimonies of inwardly conceived faith, confessions do not claim historical authority. Barth quotes the *Second Helvetic Confession*: «The catholic faith is not given to us by human laws, but by Holy Scriptures, of which the Apostles' Creed is a compendium».³³

From the beginning of his work in Geneva, Calvin made it clear that, based on this principle, he found the Athanasian and Nicene creeds unappealing and suspect. He felt that he was dealing with idle speculation and redundant wordiness. He refused to sign the Athanasian Creed, for he had pledged faithfulness to God and not to the symbol of Athanasius.³⁴

However, in the Institutes of 1536, he was more lenient and conceded that he might not reject the terminology of these confessions as a way to describe the biblical truth. Still, for his person and use, they had nothing more than historical value. This perspective was not the end of Calvin's journey with Trinitarian theology. In the *Gallican Confession*, drafted by Calvin in 1559, he confirmed that the church confessed the «Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creed, because they are in accordance with the Word of God».³⁵

³¹ I. John Hesselink. *Calvin's First Catechism. A Commentary. Featuring Ford Lewis Battles's Translation of the 1538 Catechism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 5.

³² Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 17.

³³ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 17.

³⁴ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 17.

³⁵ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 18.

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In Reformed understanding, however, such an affirmation could never be final. Many Reformed confessions emphasize that testimonies of faith are texts of human origin and, therefore, prone to error. What is given and revealed in Scripture must, therefore, not be confused with what one subsequently confesses. Scripture remains Scripture, unique, incommensurable, one of a kind. The Reformed confessions, hence, did not claim a higher level of holiness for the ancient church's symbols but denied such a claim.³⁶

4. Reformed confessions are *open to corrections from Scripture* and do not claim absolute authority.

They were intended as improvable and replaceable offerings, always open to instruction and correction from Scripture. Barth quotes the Bern consensus of 1532 as an example:

If anything were presented to us by our pastors or others which might lead us closer to Christ and in the power of God's Word be more supportive of common friendship and Christian love than the views presented here, we will gladly accept it and not block the course of the Holy Spirit. For it is not directed backwards to the flesh but always forwards towards the image of Christ Jesus, our Lord.³⁷

This provision emphasizes the personal character of confessions. It is human beings who are wrestling with each other about the correct interpretation of Scripture in a given situation. The confession and the confessor cannot be separated. If things are proceeding correctly, the confession stands or falls with the stance of the confessor.³⁸

5. Reformed confessions *call for commitment* and do not demand obedience.

Confessions are testimonies of the inwardly conceived faith, but they have the character of public statements. With the acceptance of a confession, a community becomes a «godly compact».

In Barth's eyes, however, this compact was fragile and depended on the commitment of each individual believer. If this commitment was lacking, everything was left to chance. Without faith commitment, it was really not all that important whether the church had an old confession or a new one or none at all. Where the

³⁶ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 19f.

³⁷ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 24.

³⁸ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 31.

commitment dwindled, the «godly compact» ceased to exist. In this case, the only way to reestablish the eucharistic community was to convene a new synod and formulate a new confession.³⁹

The Hermeneutics of the Confessions of Barmen, Belhar, and Accra

It is at this last point that the trajectories of Williams and Barth connect. Williams' point can be summarized in Barth's language: A collapse of the early church's godly compact provoked the debates that finally led to the Nicene Creed and, 1,600 years later, to the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*. In these moments of crisis, new theological language was required to sustain the church's mission.

Barth's affirmation of confessions as theological instruments to respond to crises inspired churches all over the globe to engage in processes of confessing. This chapter will explore three confessions that guide the vision and mission of the World Communion of Reformed Churches today, namely, the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934), the Confession of Belhar from South Africa (1986), and the Accra Confession, adopted by the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 2004. The newer confessions closely relate to the earlier ones, but they differ in context, theological method, and the witness that they call for.

This chapter researches how the three texts apply the Nicene hermeneutics of confessing. The analysis focuses on the letters that accompany the confessions and introductions and explain the approach to confessing in the given situation.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen⁴⁰

The Barmen Declaration was published with a preamble and a postscript that gave reasons for the need for an act of confession, explained the Declaration's character, and called Christians in Germany to commit to its affirmations and rejections.

Surprisingly, the preamble opens with a quote from the constitution of the German Evangelical Church, which the Nazi Government had approved only a few months ago. What, at first glance, might seem like a rather odd move, at second

³⁹ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 37.

⁴⁰ Cf. the text of the *Theological Declaration of Barmen* in the appendix.

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glance, appears as a paradigm for a hermeneutics that moves from repetition to confessing.

In 1933, the Nazi led German Evangelical Church propagated a national church in close alliance with the Nazi state. Article 1 of the Constitution, however, still used classical language to describe the theological basis of the church:

The inviolable foundation of the German Evangelical Church is the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is attested for us in holy scripture and brought to light again in the confessions of the Reformation. The full powers that the church needs for its mission are hereby determined and limited.

What the Barmen Declaration now did was to take the classical formulation seriously and build a new confessing language upon it. In the process, it also affirmed language from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed:

We, the representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and united churches, of free synods, church assemblies, and parish organizations united in the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church, declare that we stand together on the ground of the German Evangelical Church as a federation of German confessional churches. We are bound together by the confession of the one Lord of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

In a third step, the preamble publicly declares that the very government that had approved the constitution endangered the basis of the church as defined in Article 1:

We publicly declare before all evangelical churches in Germany that what they hold in common in this confession is grievously imperiled, and with it the unity of the German Evangelical Church. It is threatened by the teaching methods and actions of the ruling church party of the «German Christians» and of the church administration carried on by them.

By rejecting the enforced conformity with the Nazi state, the confession, in a language that reminds of Calvin's warning of the ceasing of the «godly compact», wanted to reestablish the church's theological identity, independent from the government:

This threat consists in the fact that the theological basis on which the German Evangelical Church is united has been continually and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles, on the part of the leaders and spokesmen of the «German Christians» as well as on the part of the church administration. When these principles are held to be valid, then, according to all the confessions in force among us, the church ceases to be the church and the German Evangelical Church, as a federation of confessional churches, becomes intrinsically impossible.

This renewed embrace of the theological identity of the church also allowed an ecumenical breakthrough. Lutheran, Reformed, and united churches were deeply divided in their understanding of the function and role of confessions. But threatened by the Nazi take-over, they were able to speak with one voice and discovered that, at the moment when the Gospel itself was threatened, principles were at stake that weighed more than confessional identities.

The six theses of the Barmen Declaration unfolded the theological basis of the church. Like Athanasius and his fellow campaigners during and after the Council of Nicaea, they proposed a language that grounded the church in Scripture and its confessing nature. It was this renewed theological identity that allowed the church to reject state interference.

Since the German churches were deeply divided in their understanding of confessions, the text adopted at the Confessing Synod in Barmen could not be called a confession. In today's Germany, the formal authority of the text is only expressed in vague terms at the national level. But the postscript of the Declaration bypasses this obstacle to the authority of the Declaration by calling for faithful acceptance of the affirmations on the basis of the confession's theological principles:

The Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the acknowledgement of these truths and in the rejection of these errors the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a federation of confessional churches. It invites all who are able to accept its declaration to be mindful of these theological principles in their decisions in church politics. It entreats all whom it concerns to return to the unity of faith, love, and hope.

The Belhar Confession⁴¹

The Belhar Confession has its roots in the struggle against apartheid and confronts the sin of racism and its theological justification by Reformed churches. The confession was formally adopted in 1986 by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC). In recent years, the confession has been received by churches in southern Africa, North America, and Europe.

The Confession of Belhar draws from the Barmen Declaration and the Reformed confessional tradition. The Accompanying Letter opens with a theological description of the situation that calls for a confessing response to the crisis in South Africa:

⁴¹ See. the text of the *Confession of Belhar* in the appendix.

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We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the Church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. We are aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is so threatened as to be at stake. In our judgment, the present church and political situation in our country and particularly within the Dutch Reformed Church family calls for such a decision.

The following sentences distinguish the confession from other texts produced by church and theology:

Accordingly, we make this confession not as a contribution to a theological debate nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand.

The second paragraph of the letter emphasizes that the authority for such a confession can only be the Word of God. Confessions have to recognize that the confessing act cannot be separated from the confessor. The confession also judges those who adopt the confession:

We are aware that the only authority for such a confession and the only grounds on which it may be made are the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. We do not wish to serve any group interests, advance the cause of any factions, promote any theologies, or achieve any ulterior purposes. [...] We do not make this confession from God's throne and from on high, but before God's throne and before other human beings.

The third paragraph marks a decisive shift from the imperial framing of the Nicene tradition. Confessions reject false doctrines, but they do not have the authority to condemn people. Confessing is aimed at liberation:

This confession is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches. We proclaim it against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion that threatens the gospel itself in our church and our country. Our heartfelt longing is that no-one will identify themselves with this objectionable doctrine and that all who have been wholly or partially blinded by it will turn themselves away from it [...]. Our church and our land have an intense need for such liberation.

The Belhar Confession expresses itself in the classical format of Reformed confessions. It opens with a declaration of faith in the triune God and affirms the description of the holy catholic church. Multiple scriptural references back up every section of the confession. This method points to a particular scriptural hermeneutics. The references are not presented as scientific truth that would close all conversation. They are signposts for the church's discernment.

The Belhar Confession engages the false gospel that justified the ideological foundation of the apartheid system in three major articles under the headings *Unity*, *Reconciliation*, and *Justice*. Following the example of the Barmen Declaration, each article begins with an affirmation, which is followed by the rejection of false doctrine.

The exposition of the affirmations, however, differs from the Barmen Declaration. While the affirmations in the Declaration can be read as testimonies of the inwardly conceived faith (cf., e.g., the affirmation in thesis one: «Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death»), the Belhar Confession binds faith and ethics together. It stresses that God's gifts are also obligations and presses for the visibility of the confession in the life of the church.

In emphasizing the visibility of the church's commitment, the Belhar Confession takes up a critique of the Barmen Declaration. While many people cherish the clarity, with which the Declaration rejects the capture of the church by the Nazis, critics point to the Declaration's silence in the face of the persecution of the Jews and the maltreatment of all opposition against the totalitarian state. In the light of these blatant injustices, the Declaration's focus on the integrity of the church's proclamation might appear self-centered. In taking up this critique, the Belhar Confession emphasizes that the confession must become visible in the witness of the church. –Article 2 on *Unity* makes the call:

that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe; that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted.

Article 3 on *Reconciliation* makes it clear that failing to make reconciliation visible in the life of the nation contradicts God's gifts

because the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity.

Article 4 on *Justice* affirms that

in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God

and calls that the

church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged.

Article 5, at the end of the confession, reflects upon the consequences that the church will experience if it lives out its call to make its faith visible:

We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the Church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

The Accra Confession

The Accra Confession that the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches adopted in 2004⁴² is based on the theological conviction that the economic and ecological injustices of today's global economy require a faith response.

The Accra Confession follows the Belhar Confession in its insistence that the church is called to live out its witness in the challenges of today's world and, therefore, calls for faithfulness to God's covenant (§ 15). The Accra Confession stands in the tradition of the Barmen Declaration and shares many of the commitments that are expressed in the Accompanying Letter to the Belhar Confession: i.e., the need to confess anew when, in a specific situation, the heart of the Gospel is at stake (§16); the conviction that the authority for such a confession can only come from Scripture as the Word of God (cf. the affirmations in §§17–32); and the recognition that the confession as well as the confessors stand under the judgment of God's justice. ACCRA, therefore, demands that the church acknowledge its complicity in the injustice. (§34).

However, the theological method of the Accra Confession differs from the earlier confessions. While Barmen and Belhar follow a vertical format and open with references to Scripture and doctrine, the Accra Confession follows a lateral approach that proceeds from human experience to human witness. This structure is based on the See–Judge–Act method from Latin American theology of liberation. The Accra Confession translates the See–Judge–Act language into a Reformed idiom: *Reading the Signs of the Time, Confession of Faith in the Face of Economic Injustice and Ecological Destruction*, and *Covenanting for Justice*. This lateral structure

⁴² Cf. the text of the *Accra Confession* in the appendix.

has the advantage that it is open to the experiences of people and creation, which, in vertically structured confessions, often only enter as an afterthought.

Critics, however, have denounced this approach as a contradiction to the Nicene tradition and accused the Accra Confession of turning away from the theological basis for the church that would allow it to denounce ideology and power from first principles that transcend the political discourse.

This critique, however, does not do justice to the method of the confession. Accra is different from other confessions in that it integrates the discernment of what is at stake into the text of the confession itself. The confession was, therefore, not published with an accompanying letter like Belhar, but it shares the story that led the World Alliance to proclaim the confession in the confession itself: Accra responded to an urgent call of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC's) African constituency that was strengthened by the encounter of church-sponsored injustice during the visit to the dungeons of the slave forts in Elmina and Cape Cross in Ghana:

Gathered in Accra, Ghana, for the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, we visited the slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast, where millions of Africans were commodified, sold, and subjected to the horrors of repression and death. The cries of «never again» are put to the lie by the ongoing realities of human trafficking and the oppression of the global economic system. (§ 3).

The discernment of the “Reading the Signs of the Times” chapter is complex. It not only analyses economic injustice but also engages the ideological and theological arguments that are brought forward to justify or resist the current economic order. The discernment, therefore, does not only analyse the economic situation but also seeks to understand God’s call to action. As a result, this discernment does not take a neutral position but calls for the church to take a side:

We see the dramatic convergence of the economic crisis with the integration of economic globalization and geopolitics backed by neoliberal ideology. This is a global system that defends and protects the interests of the powerful. It affects and captivates us all. Further, in biblical terms such a system of wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor is seen as unfaithful to God and responsible for preventable human suffering and is called Mammon. Jesus has told us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon (Lk 16.13). (§ 14)

However, such discernment, as well-researched as it may be, does not yet have the authority of a confession as long as it cannot demonstrate that the witness of

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Scripture supports it. Only if this theological basis is established can the church proclaim the discernment as God's Word.

Therefore, it is essential to recognize that the Accra Confession, like any other Reformed tradition, engages Scripture to test the discernment of economic injustice. The confession follows the example of Barmen and Belhar and examines every rejection in the light of an affirmation of God's gifts:

We believe in God, Creator and Sustainer of all life, who calls us as partners in the creation and redemption of the world. We live under the promise that Jesus Christ came so that all might have life in fullness (Jn 10.10). Guided and upheld by the Holy Spirit we open ourselves to the reality of our world.

We believe that God is sovereign over all creation. «The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.» (Ps 24.1)

Therefore, we reject the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism and any other economic system, including absolute planned economies, which defy God's covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life. We reject any claim of economic, political and military empire which subverts God's sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God's just rule." (§§ 17–19)

Unlike Belhar, however, the Accra Confession does not integrate the obligations that make God's gifts visible in the life of the world into the exposition of the affirmations. Following the See–Judge–Act methodology, this integration takes place in the section on 'Covenanting for Justice'. Also, here, it is crucial to note that the confession provides the hinge that connects the 'Reading of the Signs of the Times' with the call for 'Covenanting for Justice'. As the discernment needs to be tested in the engagement with Scripture, all acts of covenanting stand under the judgment of God's justice:

We commit ourselves to seek a global covenant for justice in the economy and the earth in the household of God. We humbly confess this hope, knowing that we, too, stand under the judgment of God's justice. (§§ 33–34)

Conclusion

Confessions are expressions of the living faith. Rowan Williams follows Karl Barth's insistence that the need to confess arises in response to a particular challenge to the Gospel. In each confessing moment, the church has been saying, *«we, here, now,*

and for the time being, want to understand in this particular way, not the articles of faith, but the Word of God given alone in Scripture».⁴³

The confessions that are discussed in this chapter demonstrate the potential of the confessing faith for theology and witness of the church. Barth and Williams trace the origins of this understanding of confessions back to the Council of Nicaea without concealing the ambiguities of the Nicene tradition. For both theologians, the debates that led to the confessions are almost as important as the confessional texts themselves. Barth describes the link between the discernment and text in the early Reformed confessions:

The stringency with which they were acknowledged in the earliest years, and the unquestioned and universal acceptance with which they were immediately received, were based upon the *seriousness* with which, at decisive times, Reformed Christians determined that they must confess, and upon the *vitality* of the knowledge out of which the confession emerged. (This is true apostolic authority [...] which is not built upon place or persons, and this is derived from sacred scripture) [Bohemian Confession (1609)]. [...] The commitment to the confession as a binding *juridicial* act was, in terms of its substance, a secondary matter of merely external order.⁴⁴

The need to confess arises when the «godly compact» in a community becomes fragile and a crisis demands renewed commitment. In such situations, the church is called to move beyond the secure patterns of tradition. Such exercise is risky. Despite a careful reading of the signs of the times and scrupulous scriptural testing, some language that arises will later be declared false or even heretical. Nonetheless, Barth and Williams agree that the church should take the risk. The possibility of failure should not lead to stronger policing of the theological discourse. On the contrary, both theologians call for a hermeneutics of confessing that continuously tests the traditions of the church in the light of Scripture and discerns the new language that is coming up in situations of crisis.

The confessions of Barmen, Belhar, and Accra embrace the Nicene faith. But they interpret it in the Reformed tradition, which is determined to liberate confessions from the imperial framing introduced by the Council of Nicaea. Confessions do not have authority because they are enforced by empires, but because of the persuasiveness of their claim to proclaim God's Word in a given situation.

⁴³ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 23. Cf. also, Karl Barth, "The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed (1925)," in *Theology and Church*, trans. Louis P. Smith (London: SCM Press, 1965), 112–135, esp. 116.

⁴⁴ Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 31.

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As one can see in the development of modern confessions from Barmen to Accra, churches in the twentieth century became increasingly aware that their mission could not be restricted to a narrow focus on individual salvation. In confrontation with totalitarian and unjust structures, churches were forced to articulate their theological truth claims without reference to imperial power. In such moments, the confessing witness of the church could not be anything other than an intervention into history. The confessions of Belhar and Accra made this implicit notion of the Nicene Creed and the Barmen Declaration explicit and insisted on the visibility of the confessing commitment in the church's witness.

If one follows the journey of Reformed Christians from Barmen to Accra, one sees that the circle of the church's witness is continuously widening: Barmen engages the relationship between church and state, Belhar calls for the visibility of the church's witness in the entire life of the nation, and Accra, finally, focuses on the whole creation.

None of these confessions remained unchallenged. Like Nicaea, the modern confessions strove for clarity and unity in situations marked by high levels of polarization. Confronted with the problem of what to prioritize higher, the confessions opted for clarity in the hope that the truth would eventually prevail and lead to a unity grounded on the Gospel.

The commotion among the citizens in Byzantium is clear evidence of the controversial nature of processes of confessing. A living hermeneutics of confessing creates a robust culture of engagement because the participants feel that their highest faith convictions are at stake.

Reformed people sometimes look enviously at the orderliness and hierarchical courtesy that mark the atmosphere in other Christian communions. But few would want to renounce the energy and sincerity of the practice of Reformed discernment. For us, who do theology in the Reformed tradition, the commotion is a sign of trust in the living God who «gathers, protects, and cares for the church from the beginning of the world and will do to the end».⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The Confession of Belhar, Art. 1.

Reformed Wrestling with the Spirit: Navigating Nicaea 325 and Beyond

Heleen Zorgdrager

The Holy Spirit has always retained a more prominent place in the Church of the East than in the West. This is evident in what scholars allude to as the *filioque* addition to the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople by the Latin Church, that was rejected by the Eastern Church. Eastern theology appeared less inclined to bind the Spirit exclusively to Christ and granted the Spirit a relatively independent position. While the Spirit proceeds from the Father as ‘one God’, the Spirit is conceived as active and effective in all of creation. A second example of the more prominent position of the Spirit in Eastern theology is the emphasis on the Spirit’s role in the Eucharist. It is only after invoking the Holy Spirit that the consecration of the sacraments take place.

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware and others warned not to exaggerate the difference between East and West on the issue of the *filioque*.¹ Much of the controversy might be more in the area of semantics than in any basic doctrinal differences. Recent ecumenical dialogues show that it is possible to overcome the rigorist position. A good example is the joint declaration on the *filioque* of Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians from North America: “The Filioque: A Church Dividing Issue?: An Agreed Statement.”²

¹ Bishop Kallistos Ware, in *Diakonia* no. 6 (1985), quoted in Elias Zoghby, *A Voice from the Byzantine East: A Handbook for Inter-Church Relations* (Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1992), 43.

² “The Filioque: A Church Dividing Issue?: An Agreed Statement”, Statement of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation, last modified October 25, 2003, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/filioque-a-church-dividing-issue>.

Notwithstanding such ecumenical attempts of finding common ground, we cannot deny that in Western classical theology the Holy Spirit has received significantly less attention than in Byzantine tradition. Authors reflect this relative neglect of the Holy Spirit through vivid metaphors. The Spirit is called «faceless» (Walter Kasper), a «shadow figure» (John Macquarrie), the «poor relation» in the Trinity (Norman Pittenger), the «unknown» or «half-known» God (Yves Congar), the «forgotten» God (Elizabeth A. Johnson), and – my favorite – the «Cinderella» of the Trinity (Nicola Slee).

For several decades now, a reappraisal of the Spirit is going on in mainstream Roman Catholic and Protestant theology. This reappraisal was necessitated by realities such as the ecological crisis, the growth of the charismatic and Pentecostal movement, globalization and migration, the «material turn» with its focus on embodied agency, and the intensified encounter with other religious and indigenous traditions. Feminist, womanist and queer theologians have contributed substantially to this renewed attention to the role of the Spirit.³ New insights, daring visions, innovations of church life and practices, and liberating actions of (black) women, queer folks, people with disabilities and other marginalized groups are acknowledged to spring from the Holy Spirit who gives life, creates, sustains, liberates, heals, and allows for organic connections with deeply engrained epistemologies. The Spirit empowers to say ‘no’ to principalities and powers and to see possibilities for renewed life in the future. The Spirit is (re)discovered as the vital force present within and amid the personal and political struggles people find themselves in.

Nicaea 325 and the Spirit as ‘third’

This ‘turn to the Spirit’ calls for a re-evaluation of the achievements of the first ecumenical council of Nicaea in AD 325. Clearly, the Holy Spirit was not high on the agenda of the conciliar meeting. The doctrinal debates were on the relationship of the Father and the Son, and not on the role and nature of the Spirit. Challenged

³ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (New York: Fortress Press, 1999); Linda E. Thomas, “The Holy Spirit and Black Women: A Womanist Perspective,” in eds. Jenny Daggers and Garce Ji-Sun Kim, *Christian Doctrines for Global Gender Justice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 73–88; Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (Chestnut Ridge NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002); Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003); Patrick S. Cheng, *Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011).

by the Arian position, the first ecumenical council attained consensus on the Christological issue of the divine nature of God the Son and his relationship to God the Father. The early version of the Nicene creed barely mentions the Spirit. After the confessional-liturgical affirmations of the *homoousios* of the Father and the Son there is a very short statement on the Holy Spirit: «and [we believe] in the Holy Spirit».⁴ More detailed explanations would only come half a century later.

In what came to be known as the creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (AD 381) it is read: «and [we believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets».⁵ These textual amendments are attributed to the council of Constantinople, as clarified by the *acta* of the fourth ecumenical council at Chalcedon in AD 451.⁶ Most probably various versions of the later authorized creedal text were already in use in liturgies. Thus, in the creed of Nicaea-Constantinople the consubstantiality (*homoousios*) of the Spirit was confirmed, alongside several explanatory details.⁷

Both Eastern Orthodox and Western Trinitarian traditions find normative orientation in the Nicaea-Constantinople conciliar affirmations. It is not the aim of my chapter to further inquire about the reasons why, in the subtle doctrinal balancing between unity and diversity of the divine persons, the Spirit has retained a more prominent position in the Eastern Church.⁸ Instead, I am intrigued by the approach of the Anglican feminist, patristic, and systematic theologian Sarah Coakley, who shifts our attention to what happened in the process leading up to the first council of Nicaea. She points to how certain decisions of Nicaea-Constantinople impacted both East and West and how both have suffered consequences in their Trinitarian theologies, despite the relatively more acknowledged position of the Spirit in the East. Coakley explores what happened to the diversity of lived traditions of the Spirit of the early church.

As Eduard Schweizer aptly formulated: «Long before the Spirit was a theme of doctrine, the Spirit was a fact in the experience of the church».⁹ The Spirit was

⁴ See the text of the *Nicene Creed* in the appendix.

⁵ See the text of The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the appendix.

⁶ John N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd edition (London: Longman, 1972), 323–331.

⁷ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Baker Academic, 2018), 37–67.

⁸ For the post-Nicene debates see the influential study of Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹ Eduard Schweizer, “pneuma, pneumatikos,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 6:396.

already embedded in worship, liturgy, prayer life, ministry, in an abundance of mystical-charismatic experiences of men and women, both individual and communal, and reflected in contemplative and ascetic writings of church fathers. In her book *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (2013) the first volume of a planned systematic theological tetralogy, as well as in multiple articles and lectures,¹⁰ Sarah Coakley narrates a different story of the theological journey of the Holy Spirit in the early centuries up to the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, as well as after the councils. It is the story of a Spirit-led minority tradition of Trinitarian theology that was sidelined, with serious implications for the post-conciliar church and theology. Coakley holds the thesis that the doctrinal decisions of Nicaea-Constantinople specified the relations between the persons of the Trinity in such a way that the Spirit was defined as 'third' in the processional order, and this implicitly led to a certain type of trinitarian theology being favored over another as 'orthodox'.

In this chapter I will present Coakley's view and bring her into dialogue with some significant Reformed theological voices. Where is Reformed theology in this picture of the role of the Spirit? Is the verdict of a relative neglect and devaluation of the Spirit's role and work also applicable to Reformed engagements with the Spirit? In my view we can speak of a particular Reformed way of wrestling with the Spirit. I will depict the pneumatological ambivalence in Reformed tradition first – an ambivalence that is also present in the *Institutes* of John Calvin. In a second step, I present Coakley's nuanced but critical interrogation of Nicaea-Constantinople and the developments thereafter, and her hypothesis of a Spirit-led trinitarianism in the early church. Finally, I will turn to an alternative Reformed voice on the Spirit, namely Friedrich Schleiermacher, who tends also to prioritize the Spirit in his much underrated and neglected Trinitarian design. What would be the potential of Schleiermacher and Coakley for an ecumenical pneumatology today that will inspire people to perceive God amid creation, to experience God under earthly living conditions, to receive and embrace a novel vision of life in fullness that resists the values and principles of a world «fallen among thieves» (Luke 10.30; John 10.10) and leads into life in

¹⁰ Among them Sarah Coakley, "Prayer, Politics, and the Trinity: Vying Models of Authority in Third-Fourth-Century Debates on Prayer and 'Orthodoxy'," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66, no. 4 (2013): 379–399; "The Spirit in the Trinity: Mystical Theology," lecture, Vancouver School of Theology, 5 October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8O9SdjevV-vY>; "On Desire and Gender," lecture, Harvard Divinity School, 3 June 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhJWpR6_8i0.

communion with God, fellow human beings, and the more-than-human nature – safe, empowered, and dignified?¹¹

Reformed Wrestling with the Spirit

There is something highly paradoxical in the Reformed tradition's engagement with the Holy Spirit. If one looks at *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*,¹² a separate chapter on pneumatology will not be found, while there is one on all other loci of systematic theology.¹³ It is also well-known that the Reformed theologian Karl Barth did not touch upon the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in his *Church Dogmatics*. Does it indicate a certain unease with the work of the Spirit in Reformed theology? However, on the other hand, we encounter a surprising frankness and even a warm embracing of the Spirit in Reformed theology as well. When searching to characterize Reformed theology, and giving expression to what gives this tradition its vitality, a theologian like David H. Jensen posits that the central drive behind all has been a theology of the Spirit.¹⁴ He argues that Reformed tradition resists defining its «common core» in a single uniting confession, liturgical-devotional text such as the Book of Common Prayer, or an ethics (such as pacifism). Reformed scholars have tried to describe a «common core» by appealing to essential tenets or an overarching theme such as covenant theology, or in a pattern of habits and traits which could be called a 'Reformed ethos'. These attempts, however, all fall short, according to Jensen. Instead, he considers a theology of the Spirit as the powerful, if often unarticulated, drive that made theology inherently open to the confessional plurality that characterizes the Reformed churches. He also names it as the animating force behind Reformed theology's politically engaged understanding of the Reign of God.

¹¹ Michael Welker, *Gottes Geist. Theologie des Heiligen Geistes* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2015, 1st ed. 1992), 306.

¹² Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology* (Oxford Academic, 2020), online edn, *Oxford Academic*, 8 October 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198723912.001.0001>.

¹³ An exception is the chapter on "John Owen's *Discourse on the Holy Spirit*," authored by Suzanne McDonald 266-279. This chapter is located in Part II, Texts, whereas Part III, Topics and Themes, lacks a separate treatment of the Spirit.

¹⁴ David H. Jensen, "Reformed and Always Being Reformed: A Tradition of the Spirit?" in *Always Being Reformed; Challenges and Prospects for the Future of Reformed Theology*, ed. David H. Jensen, 3-20 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 4.

He admits that this is a perhaps surprising outlook on Reformed tradition:

Rarely has Reformed Christianity been described as a tradition of the Spirit. The stereotype of the tradition is that it is too preoccupied with order, too suspicious of winds that quickly get carried away. Calvin was wary of enthusiasts, Westminster guards against spiritual excess, Barth was suspicious of pietists. Each generation in the Reformed tradition, it seems, has been cautious of granting the Spirit too much ground. Pneumatology is the slipperiest of doctrines in the tradition, and, as a result, often gets short shrift in the tradition.¹⁵

Be that as it may, Jensen points to the fact that theologians such as Calvin and Schleiermacher have been described as theologians of the Spirit.¹⁶ He suggests that one can read the entirety of Calvin's Book III of the *Institutes* as pneumatology.¹⁷

To substantiate his proposal to consider the Reformed tradition from the perspective of a theology of the Spirit, Jensen clarifies how Reformed theology has provided parameters for contemplating the work of the Spirit, linked to six doctrinal areas. The Spirit works in the areas of Scripture, of the unification of the believer with Christ, of both individual and corporate faith, of the sacraments, of the transformation of the person in the work of sanctification, and – in what Jensen calls ‘the most comprehensive note of Reformed articulations of the Spirit’¹⁸ – in its intimation as divine presence in creation. As for the latter, he underlines, with Jürgen Moltmann and others, that a theology of the Spirit needs to be creation-centered, allowing us to see the presence of God in all things. He deems it a genuine Reformed posture to affirm this: «If we ask where the Spirit is active, the answer is *everywhere* in creation».¹⁹ Jensen refers to the Nicaea-Constantinople creed where the Spirit is appraised as «Lord and Giver of life» and to Calvin's view of the Spirit who is «excepted from the category of creatures, but transfusing into all things his energy».²⁰

¹⁵ Jensen, “Reformed and Always being Reformed,” 11.

¹⁶ See for Schleiermacher as a Trinitarian theologian who begins with the Spirit, besides the famous suggestion of Barth, also Del Colle, R., “Schleiermacher and Spirit Christology: Unexplored Horizons of The Christian Faith,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1 (1999): 286-307, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1463-1652.00020>; Theodore Vial, *Schleiermacher: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Shelli Poe, *Essential Trinitarianism: Schleiermacher as Trinitarian Theologian* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2017) and Heleen Zorgdrager, *Theologie die verschil maakt. Taal en seksedifferentie als sleutels tot Schleiermachers denken* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum: 2003).

¹⁷ Jensen, “Reformed and Always being Reformed,” 11, footnote 20.

¹⁸ Jensen, “Reformed and Always being Reformed,” 14.

¹⁹ Jensen, “Reformed and Always being Reformed,” 14–15.

²⁰ John Calvin, *The Institutes of The Christian Religion* 1.13.14.

Tension Between Expansive and Restrictive Understanding

The bold proposal of Jensen together with his awareness that Reformed theologians have always been «cautious of granting the Spirit too much ground» is helpful for understanding the nature of wrestling with the Spirit in Reformed tradition. Perhaps it is best described as two strands that have always provoked and challenged each other in an unresolved tension and thus impacted the further history and development of a Reformed doctrine of the Spirit. On the one hand, the creational breadth of the Spirit's activity is emphasized, and, on the other hand, the Spirit is strongly linked to Word and Sacrament. An expansive and a more restrictive view of the Spirit's work stand in a strained relation. «Reformed articulations of the Spirit are thus», Jensen writes, «marked by striking particularity (connecting Spirit to Word and Sacrament) and unbounded by any particular (as Spirit is discerned in all life)».²¹

With a closer look at the work of the Spirit in relation to the Bible, so to speak in the hermeneutical inner circle, Jensen detects a similar tension. Reformed tradition confesses the Spirit as both the author and interpreter of the Word. If the pole of authorship is emphasized, it could lead and has led in tradition to a sacrosanct use of the source of Scripture, bordering at fundamentalist ways of reading and interpreting the Bible. If the pole of interpreter (*testimonium Spiritus sancti internum*) is emphasized, much more space *can* emerge for a Spirit let loose in the world, indwelling in traditions, science, culture and human experience, and for dynamically integrating these sources in reader-response, context-informed approaches to the biblical text.

Though the unbounded nature of the Spirit is confessed, Reformed have also carefully delineated some bounds to discern the work of the Spirit. Reformed confessions (up to Belhar and Accra) can be read as guides to discerning the Spirit.²² The World Communion of Reformed Churches has 'discerning' as one of its key verbs: Discerning, Confessing, Witnessing, and Being Reformed Together. Communal discernment is identified as a foundational principle in Reformed theology. Discernment is understood as a corporate, Spirit-led process that involves the entire church community.²³

²¹ Jensen, "Reformed and Always being Reformed," 15.

²² Jensen, "Reformed and Always being Reformed," 18.

²³ "The Power of Discernment in Christian Witness: Discerning God's Call for the Future," 25 February 2025, <https://wcrc.eu/the-power-of-discernment-in-christian-witness-discerning-gods-call-for-the-future/>.

Discerning the Spirit was a central theme in the Reformed-Pentecostal dialogue on Mission, 2014–2020.²⁴ In delineating the ways of empowerment by the Spirit, from the Reformed side, the need for communal, careful discernment was strongly emphasized:

36. [...] Power is expressed in various dimensions, such as spiritual, ecclesial, emotional, psychological, cultural, political, economic, and military. Hence, we believe that we need careful discernment (Romans 12:2) a) of the understanding of empowerment, b) of the social context of empowerment, and c) of past shortcomings. This discernment regarding power is guided by God's authority (1 Cor 12:10), as a self-emptying power that brings wholeness to life (Phil. 2:5-11).²⁵

37. [...] All claims to empowerment require discernment in connection and keeping with God's mission. [...] ²⁶

Rationalizing Tendencies

Two more areas of Reformed wrestling with the Spirit can be pointed out. The first is in the field of liturgical theology and pertains to the reduction of the work of the Spirit to intellectual understanding and to one-sided emphasis on moral meaning at the cost of emotions, affects and embodiment. Shannon Craigo-Snell calls it the «rational slant of Calvinism».²⁷ The focus on Scripture involved a shift away from experiencing the divine through the body, through sight, touch and ingestion. Overly rational Calvinism participated, according to Craigo-Snell, in generating a disintegrated theological anthropology in which the mind is set as guard over the unruly emotions, will, and body. She identifies the roots in the Reformation and its subsequent enmeshment with modern epistemology, in particular Descartes and Locke. By elevating reason above all other human faculties Reformed tradition helped paving the way for rationalizing modes of 'othering' that became productive in upholding chattel slavery and colonialism.

²⁴ "Called to God's Mission: Report of the Third Round of the International Dialogue between Representatives of the World Communion of Reformed Churches and Representatives of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, 2014–2020." *Reformed World* 69 no.1 (2021): 117–148.

²⁵ "Called to God's Mission," 129.

²⁶ "Called to God's Mission," 129–130.

²⁷ Shannon Craigo-Snell, "Reforming Calvinism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Calvin and Calvinism*, eds., Bruce Gordon, and Carl R. Trueman, Oxford Handbooks (2021); online edn, *Oxford Academic*, 14 July 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198728818.013.30>.

Although already Calvin had affirmed that Christian faith is about «tasting of the goodness of God», the correction of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) was needed who insisted on knowing the spiritual truth through «the sense of the heart».

Craig-Snell concludes that, for Reformed faith to remain a vital and nourishing tradition, it will need to develop more integrative Christian disciplines and practices. With Talal Assad (and with Sarah Coakley, as we shall see), she affirms that affections can be formed and sustained through such disciplines of devotion and prayer.²⁸ Practices of worship and devotion are needed that make God ‘real’ for the people.

Also, Michael Welker, who worked extensively on a biblical, realistic theology of the Holy Spirit ‘from below’, from the perspectives of witnessed experiences of the Spirit, criticizes the rationalizing tendencies in Western-style theology, including in Karl Barth. A reductionist presentation of the Spirit, he argues, is the result of a dominant Aristotelian identification of spirit with reason, intellectual reflection and self-reflection. This sort of dualizing thinking of spirit and matter, together with a Hegelian totalitarian-metaphysical conception of the Spirit, impacted Protestant pneumatology in a detrimental way. For Welker, the event of the «outpouring of the Spirit» (Acts 2) points in a different direction: «The outpouring of the Spirit and the efficacious actions of the Spirit, in general, are an essentially multipolar rather than bipolar event».²⁹ By this he means that the Holy Spirit is to be understood first as the multifaceted unity of perspectives on Jesus and of spoken and lived testimonies of him. He understands the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* as the activity of God in and through which the witnessing voices of the Bible refer to God’s presence and glory, and as the multipolar response to the Word of God that is heard, received and bears fruit in multiple contexts. This multipolar understanding leads Welker to the view of the Holy Spirit as a *public* person: the Spirit actualizes the public work of Jesus Christ in its rich complexity. The Spirit is the power that recognizes, revitalizes and preserves the Body of Christ in the community that embodies the selfless love of Christ in the world.³⁰ Welker stresses that the rule of

²⁸ Craig-Snell, 619–620. Reference to Talal Assad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 138.

²⁹ Michael Welker, “God’s Spirit, the Human Spirit, and the Outpouring of the Spirit,” in *Leaning into the Spirit: Ecumenical Perspectives on Discernment and Decision-making in the Church, Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds., Virginia Miller, David Moxon and Stephen Pickard, (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019), 23–38, 27.

³⁰ Welker, *Gottes Geist*, 286–288. He considers here the kingly office of Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Christ is not limited to ‘word and sacrament’ alone. Christian humanism also influences other religious and secular forms of practiced love and compassion while also receiving strong impulses from them.³¹ We hear resonances with the intuition behind the notion of ‘common grace’ from the works of neocalvinist theologians Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck.³²

With his elaborated pneumatology Welker accentuates the continuous generation of novelty and newness out of the inner depths of God.³³ He does not speculate on an immanent Trinitarian being of God.

Federal Theology Prioritizing Father and Son

Speculation on an immanent Trinitarian being of God, however, is present in a second area that reveals the problematic relation of Reformed theology to the Spirit. It is the Reformed scholastic doctrine of the divine decrees.³⁴ Did the decree to elect come *before* or *within* the decree to create and permit the human fall into sin? A solution was thought to be found in the so-called federal theology, with its focus on the *foedus* or covenant of God with creature, proposing that the saving works of God *ad extra* were themselves predicated upon a covenant within the divine life itself.

In this doctrinal conception, the divine being is the original, eternal covenant. Francis Turretin (1623-1687) depicts the covenant of redemption as a pact or agreement between the Father and the Son in their immanent Trinitarian being.³⁵ The covenant of grace is the outworking of the fruit of the covenant of redemption in time by application of the Holy Spirit on the church.

Covenantal theology has been extremely powerful in the history of Reformed churches, also harmful in its excluding effects and closeness to racist and ethnic ideologies. For the topic of this chapter, I notice that first and foremost dogmatic

³¹ Welker, “God’s Spirit, the Human Spirit,” 31–32.

³² “All that is good and true has its origin in this grace, including the good we see in fallen man. The light still does shine in the darkness. The Spirit of God makes its home and works in all the creation.” In: “Herman Bavinck’s Common Grace.” trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 1, 51, <https://bavinckinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Herman-Bavinck-Common-Grace.pdf>.

³³ Michael Welker, “Der schöpferische Geist, Kreativität und Neues in Gott,” *Evangelische Theologie* 78 (2018): 339–348.

³⁴ Katherine Sonderegger, “The Doctrine of God,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*, eds., Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, Oxford Handbooks (2020); online edition, Oxford Academic, 8 Oct. 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198723912.013.25>,

³⁵ Sonderegger, “The Doctrine of God,” 398.

attention is given to the Father and the Son, whereas the Holy Spirit's task is that of applying and mediating the fruit of the divine covenant to human beings. Although Turretin also calls the Spirit a «cause together with the Father and the Son»,³⁶ it is not clear what exactly the causal work of the Spirit would have been.

John Calvin: Distinction of Order in the Trinity

Calvin for whom the knowledge of God, far from empty speculation, «takes root in the heart»,³⁷ goes for an integral approach. In the *Institutes*, he aims to hold together a focus on the Spirit's creational work and a strong linking between the Spirit and Scripture. Does he succeed in keeping the two together?

Initially, yes. Scripture itself, he states, ascribes this office of the «Giver of life» to the Spirit, both in the creation story in Genesis 1 and in the sending of prophets (Is 48.16): «his [the Spirit's] being diffused over all space, sustaining, invigorating, and quickening all things, both in heaven and on the earth».³⁸ The Spirit «transfuses into all things his energy». And only after this appraisal of the Creator Spirit, we hear about the regenerating work of the Spirit in the believers: «In like manner, by means of him we become partakers of the divine nature, so as in a manner to feel his quickening energy within us».³⁹

Problems arise when Calvin unfolds his view on the Trinity. In relation to Romans 8, the key text in Coakley's argument for an alternative tradition of a Spirit-led trinitarianism, Calvin ends up in the opposite direction. For him, Romans 8 evidences the *filioque* including conceiving the Spirit as 'third' in order. He argues that Romans 8 is the clue for attributing to the Father «the beginning of action, the fountain and source of all things; to the Son wisdom, counsel and arrangement in action, while the energy and efficacy of action is assigned to the Spirit».⁴⁰ From this «distinction of order» Calvin derives that «the Father is being considered first, next the Son from him, and then the Spirit from both». Does the Creator Spirit get lost along the way?⁴¹

³⁶ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. and ed. G. M. Giger and J. T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Press, 1992) 165. Quoted by Sonderegger, 398.

³⁷ Calvin, *Instit.* 1.5.9, quoted in Sonderegger, 393.

³⁸ Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.14.

³⁹ Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.14.

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.18.

⁴¹ An alternative possibility to this vanishing of the Creator Spirit behind the Spirit of elec-

With his saying that «the Father is being considered first», Calvin holds to the monarchy of the Father:

The Scriptures teach that there is essentially but one God, and, therefore, that the essence both of the Son and Spirit is unbegotten; but inasmuch as the Father is first in order, and of himself begat his own Wisdom, he, as we lately observed, is justly regarded as the principle and fountain of all the Godhead. Thus God, taken indefinitely, is unbegotten, and the Father, in respect of his person, is unbegotten.⁴²

Calvin calls on the authority of Augustine: «But it is far safer to rest contented with the relation [of Father and Son] as taught by him, than get bewildered in vain speculation by subtle prying into a sublime mystery».⁴³ Augustine famously described the Spirit as the bond of love between Father and Son, and between God and humanity. Other metaphors he uses for the Spirit are ‘communion of Father and Son’, ‘shared love’, and ‘gift’. This is the Trinitarian tradition in which Calvin finds his home. He does not want to go beyond Augustine.⁴⁴

Coakley on Spirit-led Trinitarianism

Sarah Coakley narrates a different story of the theological journey of the Holy Spirit in the early centuries up to the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, with serious implications for the post-conciliar church and theology, as well as for the position of women in the church. This is how her alternative story goes:

In the early church we can find a distinctive approach to trinitarianism. This approach was founded explicitly in demanding spiritual practices of prayer, contemplation, and personal transformation. It characteristically appealed for its

tion and regeneration is offered by Margit Ernst-Habib in her revision of the Reformed doctrine of election. Election, grounded in the divine decree, she argues, is not an event between Father and Son only, but happens in the communion of Father and Son with the Holy Spirit. The grace of the Holy Spirit in electing human beings is always and everywhere a Creator Spiritus, a life-creating and life-enabling Spirit, who creates *ex nihilo*. But, she emphasizes, also that preservation and conservation of created life, the *creatio continua*, is an act of grace of the Creator Spiritus, because without it everything would perish. See Margit Ernst-Habib, “‘Erwählt in Christus durch den Heiligen Geist.’ Pneumatologische ReVisionen einer reformierten Zentrallehre,” in *Unsere grossen Wörter: Reformatorische ReVisionen*, eds., Matthias Felder and Magdalene Frettlöh, (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2022), 187–205.

⁴² Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.25.

⁴³ Calvin, *Instit.* 1.13.19.

⁴⁴ Katherine Sonderegger speaks of the “conventional,” or even “predictable” way of Reformed confessions and teachings of the divine nature and the triune God, 390.

scriptural inspiration to Romans 8 with its Spirit-initiated account of prayer. It focused on the invitation to the pray-er to be drawn by an intervention of the Spirit into intimate incorporation into the life of Christ. The prayer-based approach to Trinitarian thinking was, as Coakley contends,

[...] implicitly different in its emphasis and starting point from that which started more extrinsically from the issue of the Son's status vis-à-vis the Father (as inflected particularly via the Logos Christology of John), and only then turned afterwards to fit the Spirit, as third, into the homoousion picture.⁴⁵

As Coakley argues, it was the linear Johannine-based approach, and not the Spirit-led approach of Romans 8, that became, after Nicaea especially, more normatively associated with conciliar and 'orthodoxy', and thus protected by episcopacy. Coakley sees the radical equality of the Spirit compromised by the historic conciliar treatment of the Holy Spirit, for it defined the Spirit as a 'third' in the processional order. In the conciliar disputes from Nicaea through to Constantinople the reflection was dominated by a linear structure from the Father to the Son to the Spirit. The relationships in the Godhead became a logical if not ontological hierarchy. Everything leads back to the Father as sole source and cause. It became the normative creedal model. The main axis is that of the Father and the Son/Logos. In the order of salvation, the Son has to go so that the Spirit may come. The Spirit joins as a third.

The alternative, prayer-based, yet neglected minority tradition of the Holy Spirit emphasizes a radical equality of the persons. It is fully accounted for in Scripture. The key scriptural basis is Romans 8:14–30 where the apostle Paul describes how the creation has been groaning for redemption as in the pain of childbirth, and «we ourselves groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to divine sonship [...] We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit itself intercedes for us through wordless groans» (Rom 8.26). Prayer is imagined by the apostle not as a monologue but as joining of a conversation, an ongoing divine dialectical conversation, in an incarnational embodied space.

Coakley speaks of the practice of prayer as an intensely embodied activity, in which the desiring person experiences the relationship with God as the source and goal of all desire. In ecstatic or contemplative prayer, the person who longs for communion with God, will experience that she arrives at her limits, that she is drawn into a crisis of not-knowing and not-seeing, where all language, ratio-

⁴⁵ Coakley, "Prayer, Politics, and the Trinity," 380.

nality and control cease. In that void it may happen that God's own desire takes over, that «the Spirit itself intercedes for us through wordless sighing». This is, according to Coakley, the experiential basis of the doctrine of the Spirit. Here the Spirit is experienced as radical divine. The discovery of the Spirit, which ultimately leads to conceiving of God as Trinity, is not a product of the study, but a “spiritual necessity sweated out in the exigencies of prayer.”⁴⁶ In the surrender to the logic of divine love, a human being becomes a self that can graciously give room to others. The Spirit intervenes, purifies and ‘breaks’ our desire to possess, to use, to control, and makes the human desire free to align gracefully with God's desire.

Coakley argues that in the ascetic or mystical tradition the radical equality of the Spirit with the other two Persons was lived, experienced and practiced. We find such reflections on the believer's encounter with the life of God in the Montanist movement of the second century.⁴⁷ The Montanists focused on a certain loss of control to the leading experiential force of the Spirit, and on an entry into a realm beyond words, whether glossolalic or otherwise. The Montanist prophet spoke in ecstasy. Montanism was condemned by the emerging institutional church as ‘heresy.’ Coakley suggests that the church might have had problems with the experiential priority they gave to the Spirit because of the political implications on the one hand (it challenged ecclesial authority with a higher revelation possible) and sexual and gender implications on the other hand (it released women into positions of power and authority). Coakley's thesis is that the early Montanists with their ecstatic prophecies gave the Spirit «a bad name» and this discouraged explicit or apologetic use of a trinitarianism giving experiential priority to the Spirit; however, this alternative approach to the Trinity was not silenced but would take on different forms in church fathers like Origen, Tertullian, and Irenaeus.⁴⁸ In their works, in particular in their more contemplative-ascetic texts, Coakley finds evidence for a reception and continuation of the Romans 8 tradition. They granted less specific experiential effects of the Spirit and manifested no sectarian tendency, yet they continued to develop a theory of prayer and contemplation as an incorporative participation within the very life of the Trinity.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and Self*, 12.

⁴⁷ Coakley, “Prayer, Politics, and the Trinity,” 383; *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 121–126.

⁴⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 126

⁴⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 142.

The Arian controversy, already addressed in Nicaea, came to its end in Constantinople AD 381 with the Cappadocian insistence on *homoousios* of the Spirit alongside Father and Son.⁵⁰ Coakley writes

[...] the more demanding incorporative rendition of the Spirit à la Romans 8 which we witnessed in Origen came to sit somewhat uneasily alongside obedient assent to the new achieved orthodoxy of 'three persons in one substance'.⁵¹

That formal creedal equality achieved in Constantinople in AD 381 was bought with a certain price. The tradition of the Spirit-led, «incorporative» Romans 8 approach to trinitarianism was sidelined. The tradition remained alive in social locations, always on the edge of the established church. The monastic movement kept the «subtle alternative» most vibrantly alive.⁵² A manifested power-of-prayer to perfect and transform, kept on challenging the new forms of episcopal power mandated both by imperial support and by a post-Nicene understanding of orthodoxy as submission to creedal assent.⁵³

Coakley's opinion on the authority of the conciliar creeds is that they must stand as historical creeds but it is our job as theologians «to expand» these conciliar agreements.⁵⁴ We can go *beyond* them, in retrieving spiritual traditions, present in the most distinguished church fathers that allowed women to exercise religious agency and freedom. Coakley understands 'orthodoxy' neither as mere creedal correctness, nor as imposed ecclesiastical regulation. For her, orthodoxy is a project of *théologie totale*, the longed-for horizon of personal transformation in response to divine truth. At the horizon of true orthodoxy, she sees theology, spirituality, and ethics as fully united.⁵⁵

Thinking Forward with Schleiermacher Beyond Nicaea

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is increasingly considered by contemporary scholarship a Reformed theologian. His work bears the main contours of Reformed tradition. Shelli Poe highlights two characteristic Reformed features in Schleiermacher's

⁵⁰ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 134.

⁵¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 134.

⁵² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 135.

⁵³ Coakley, "Prayer, Politics, and the Trinity," 389–397.

⁵⁴ Coakley, "The Spirit in the Trinity," lecture.

⁵⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 89–90.

dogmatic work, *Der Christliche Glaube (Christian Faith)*.⁵⁶ First, the dogmatic theology he unfolds is anti-speculative, in line with Calvin. It opposes any tendency to make considerations about God apart from the world, as both are given only together in human consciousness.⁵⁷ Secondly, his theology is deeply Trinitarian in structure. Schleiermacher intendedly wanted to contribute to a Protestant doctrine of the Trinity measuring the scientific standards of his time and serving the ecclesial context of the uniting church in Prussia. The focus is on the love and wisdom of the living God, mediated by the Spirit in the Body of Christ, the church. The important place of the Spirit and the church in mediating the Word/Christ is characteristically Reformed.

Famously, Schleiermacher called the doctrine of the Trinity the «coping-stone» of the whole, fittingly summed up at the end of the book (§ 170.1). But far from devaluing the importance of theological attending to the Trinity, we should consider this concluding reflection as an interpretative key for the whole work, as Poe suggests, and I was on the same track before.⁵⁸ Then an intriguing possibility looms: Within the Reformed tradition, Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*, read backwards, holds out the possibility of a Trinitarian theology that begins with the Spirit.⁵⁹

Are we finding in Schleiermacher's theology an alternative approach to the Trinity, what Coakley has called «a Sprit-led approach»? Can the 'father of modern theology' be seen as a major and modern representative of a minority tradition sidelined by the councils of Nicaea-Constantinople, a Christian strand that continued to emphasize the radical equality of the Spirit and its leading role both in prayer-based life and in reflection on who God is?

The answer needs to be nuanced. With the same persuasiveness it can be argued that Schleiermacher's theology is profoundly christocentric, as has been stated by many scholars. There is no either/or in this case. Indeed, Christology undergirds all of Schleiermacher's dogmatic theology. John 1.14 is the key text, the «Grundtext».⁶⁰ But as Christ is communicated and embodied ('*nachgebildet*')

⁵⁶ Shelli M. Poe, "Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*", in *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*, eds., Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, Oxford Handbooks (2020); online edn, *Oxford Academic*, 8 October 2020, accessed 2 May 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198723912.013.20>

⁵⁷ See also Sonderegger, "The Doctrine of God," 401.

⁵⁸ Zörgdrager, *Theologie die verschil maakt*, 372–375.

⁵⁹ Poe, "Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*," 325.

⁶⁰ In a letter to K.H. Sack, 9 April 1825: 'Das Wort Joh 1,14: Wir sahen seine Herrlichkeit u.s.w. ist der Keim alles Dogma und gibt sich selbst für nichts anderes, als für die in Rede übertragene Affection.' *Aus Schleiermacher's Leben. In Briefen*, eds., L. Jonas and W. Dilthey (Berlin 1858-1863. Reprint: Berlin/New York, 1974) Vol. 4, 334f.

in the shared love of the church in and through the Holy Spirit, there can be no discrepancy but only full congruency between Christ and the Spirit. In a dynamic mutuality and essential equality, Christ and the Spirit explain each other. As much as we can read Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith* in a christocentric way, we can do it in a pneumacentric way. Schleiermacher himself considered it a serious option for the structure of his dogmatic theology to begin with the Spirit/the Church.⁶¹

So, given our question in this chapter, how does Schleiermacher conceive of the role and place of the Spirit in his approach to the Trinity?

In the guiding principle § 170 of Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*,⁶² he states that the essential features of the Christian life are «posited in the essential features of the doctrine of the Trinity». With this, the reality of redemption stands or falls. The divine being in the person of Christ and in the Spirit of the church have to be absolutely equal, and these two have to be equal with divine nature as such (§ 170.1).

True to his conviction that dogmatic theology should not transgress the limits of the actual Christian-religious consciousness in mere empty speculation, he rejects the doctrine of an immanent Trinity. He shares with Calvin the insight that we can only know God as revealed in our lived experience of how God is toward us. However, he draws a further conclusion for the doctrine of the Trinity: we can only retrospectively reconstruct and reflect, by way of a summarizing attempt, the threefold divine activity in relation to creation.⁶³ Shelli Poe carefully analyzes, «although Schleiermacher himself explicitly draws out only love and wisdom as essential to the divine being (§165),⁶⁴ his *Glaubenslehre* lends itself to a triune formulation of the divine essence as causality, love, and wisdom». ⁶⁵ These essential features correspond with the stages of created life: the beginning of creation, the completion of creation, and the progressive perfection of creation. Now we can read backwards through the lens of an ecclesial pneumatology. Divine love corresponds with redemption as the love

⁶¹ In the second open letter addressed to his friend Lücke: "Ich hätte gewünscht, es [die Glaubenslehre] so einzurichten, dass den Lesern möglichst auf jeden Punkt hätte deutlich werden müssen, dass der Spruch Joh 1,14 der Grundtext der ganzen Dogmatik ist." "Zweites Sendschreiben an Lücke," *Friedrich Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 1/10, 343.

⁶² Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith: Two Volumes, A New Translation and Critical Edition*, trans. Terrence N. Tice and Catherine L. Kelsey (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

⁶³ § 170, second part: "however, in its ecclesial formulation this doctrine is not itself an expression that immediately conveys christian self-consciousness but is only a combination of several such expressions", Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* Vol. 2, 1019.

⁶⁴ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, Vol 2, § 165, 1002.

⁶⁵ Poe, "Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*," 319.

of Christ shared in the church, while divine wisdom is revealed in the connection between the love of Christ and the church willing to expand the reign of God (both the themes of Part 2 of the *Glaubenslehre*). Divine causality is revealed in the power of new life found in the church, which the Christian self-consciousness experiences as identical with the living divine activity with which God governs the created world as a whole (the theme of Part 1 of the *Glaubenslehre*). In this creative and innovative way, in a reverse mode, Schleiermacher brings all the parts of his *Glaubenslehre* together in a theology of the Spirit.

Now for our goal it is not enough to evidence that it is possible to read Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* as a theology of the Spirit. We also need to go back with him in history, to understand Schleiermacher's wrestling with the Trinitarian doctrine as it had been established from the creedal affirmations of Nicaea onwards.

In 1822, shortly after the publication of the first edition of the *Glaubenslehre* 1821/1822, Schleiermacher published a major text titled «On the Contrast between the Sabellian and the Athanasian Conceptions of the Trinity».⁶⁶ In it, Schleiermacher discloses his theological sympathy for the position of the pre-Nicene Sabellius, who was excommunicated as a heretic by Callixtus in AD 220. As motivation for his research of the pre-Nicene discussions on the Trinity he referred to the shortcomings in the established ecclesiastical conception of the doctrine of the Trinity. He was of the opinion that, in order to escape the so-called Sabellian way of presentation, the church had done «too much». For the purpose of positing the twofold union of the divine being with the human nature «an eternal twofold separateness in the divine being [Father and Son] was posited,» as we find in the Nicæan teaching.⁶⁷ This motivated him to examine in detail what was actually problematic and worrying about the Sabellian way of presentation, and to analyze how the approach of Sabellius in fact resisted all kinds of Arian reductions of the divine in Christ and in the Spirit.⁶⁸

Sabellius would have been the first to use the term *ομοούσιοι* to designate that the members of the Trinity were of the same being.⁶⁹ The established church doctrine assumes a purely immanent and originally separate Trinity in the Godhead,

⁶⁶ “Über den Gegensatz zwischen der Sabellianischen und der Athanasianischen Vorstellungen von der Trinität,” in *Friedrich Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 1/10, 223–306. First published in *Theologische Zeitschrift*, Berlin 1822.

⁶⁷ Der Christliche Glaube 1821–1822, *Friedrich Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 1/7, § 190 Zusatz, 370–71.

⁶⁸ *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (KGA) 1/10, 225.

⁶⁹ KGA 1/10, 290.

Father, Son and Spirit from eternity.⁷⁰ Sabellius contends that the Trinity exists only in relation to the different types and spheres of efficaciousness of the Godhead: the Godhead is world-governing as the Father, redemptive in the person of Christ which makes God known as the Son, and sanctifying in the community and unity of the believers which makes God known as the Spirit.⁷¹ If this is the real difference between Sabellius and the church doctrine since Nicaea, Schleiermacher asks, what then makes the teaching of Sabellius irreligious? The Father, in Sabellius' view, is not the source of the Godhead for the Son and the Spirit. His opponents called this a blasphemy. Well, if that is the case, then it is a blasphemy against the Son and the Spirit if these are not immediately, but only through a third (the Father), taking part in the unity of the Godhead, as the main church doctrine formulated.⁷² Schleiermacher goes for a radical divine equality. He theologically rehabilitates the so-called modalist theologians Noetus, Beryllus, and Sabellius. With them he concurs that the Son is not the Logos as preexisting eternally as different from the Father, but the Son is the «Logos *who became flesh*». Only after the incarnation, and even more strictly: only in reciprocal explanation of the *Urbild* through a plenitude of *Nachbildungen* in the church – mind Schleiermacher's historic-empirical approach! – can one speak of Christ as the Son, as a particular revelation of the divine being. For Christian doctrine it means that the Son is distinguished as different from the Father (and from the Spirit) only after the full explication of the Christian-religious consciousness at this moment in time, as he demonstrated in *Christian Faith*. Beryllus and Sabellius were right, in Schleiermacher's view, to call the Father, the Son, and the Spirit just a particular circumscription (περιγραφή) of the divine being.⁷³

So where did Nicaea go wrong? In the Alexandrian Christology, Schleiermacher explains, two elements were in tension with each other: the subordination of the Son to the Father, and the divinity of the Son as the hypostasized Logos. The Arian part gave up the view of the hypostasized Logos in order to maintain the subordination of the Son to the Father, while Athanasius and his allies elevated the hypostasized Logos as the divinity of the Son in order to achieve the equality of being. They distanced themselves as much as possible from the Arian view of subordinationism, yet wanted to keep the difference of the Persons. To solve this conundrum the difference between being (ουσία) and hypostasis (υπόστασις) was

⁷⁰ KGA 1/10, 297.

⁷¹ KGA 1/10, 297.

⁷² KGA 1/10, 298.

⁷³ KGA 1/10, 266, 267, 273, 276f.