

## Introducing Constructive Calvinism

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Some visitors to this website will have read the official statements and documents of the church (click on “About Us” and “Who We Are”). These express what we believe, who we are (the Mission Statement), what we practice (the Ecclesial Core Values), and what we cultivate (the relational core values). Underlying our documents is a fresh constructive approach to our Calvinistic heritage—one rooted in history but applicable to the present. Other of you may have read in more academic articles and chapters about “constructive Calvinism,” and are looking for a simpler introductory sketch of its main emphases. You’ve come to the right place! What follows is an introduction to constructive Calvinism, albeit one written with the specific ministerial, pastoral and missional work of the church in view.

Rooted in Scripture and expressive of Christian, Protestant and Reformed orthodoxy, constructive Calvinism sees the need for ongoing reformation according to God’s Word. Far from signaling a departure from the Reformed faith, constructive Calvinism seeks the renewal of the original intent of the reformers; namely, the return of the church to the simplicity and vibrancy of the apostolic era. By peeling back layers of extraneous tradition and inordinate emphasis on external forms, constructive Calvinists seek to propagate and defend biblical Christianity in ways relevant and effective to the present. This adeptness requires:

*1. The reestablishment of the supremacy of Scripture.* For all our repetitions of the Reformation slogan *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), an increasing number are sensing that our tradition is turning as much to history as to Scripture for the guidance of our faith. Please don’t misunderstand me. I am not seeking to pit the notion of *sola Scriptura* against history, for the Reformers were rooted in history (such as the use of the church fathers) and lauded Bible-based tradition. What I am concerned to point out is exactly what the Reformers protested against; namely, history’s trumping of Scripture’s supreme authority. Remember how Luther bravely pronounced his conscience captive to the Word of God. His critics called this hubris, denying that one monk could challenge fifteen hundred years of the church’s history and thought. But it was Scripture that gave Luther his authority, and it gives us the authority today when our traditions are accorded authority *en par* with Scripture regardless of whether they accord with it or not.

This, of course, does not mean that we abolish all tradition or say that all traditions need amending. That’s how relativists and iconoclasts think. Nonetheless, as those calling ourselves Protestant and Reformed we have a duty to keep our traditions before the light of Scripture. Even those traditions reflecting biblical principle can nevertheless become enmeshed in the confusion between the principle itself and the preferences surrounding its application. By going back to Scripture we are better able to clear the confusion and the hampering of the work of the gospel. Yet it is the return to Scripture that attests whether or not our resistance to change is a form of spiritual rebellion or idolatry or not. That said, changes genuinely scriptural build on those many biblically-demonstrable insights previously given to the church. In effect, the principles of Scripture remain even where the necessity of the times calls us to adapt their practical application.

2. *The reestablishment of the balance of Scripture.* The Reformed tradition has been strong on the divineness of Scripture and the oneness of the gospel. It is the former which ensures the latter. How else could 66 books written over a period of 1600 years speak so harmoniously about the good news of Jesus? Yet Scripture possesses a humanness as well. In breathing out on “holy men of God” (2 Peter 1:21 [KJV]) the Spirit moved them to write the very word of God, and yet in a way consistent with their own backgrounds, writing styles, readerships etc. In consequence of this, Scripture contains an authorial diversity and with it an array of distinct yet harmonious perspectives on the one gospel. These multiple perspectives reflect the fact that the gospel is so rich in content that no author can encapsulate everything there is to know about it, not even under the inspiration of the Spirit. Only God, who knows all things perfectly all of the time, can keep the entirety of the gospel before him and see it perfectly all at once.

Although the recovery of the humanness of Scripture leaves untouched the chief tenets of our Reformed faith, it challenges the theological methods used to express what it means to be Reformed; in particular, the way we logically order the doctrinal themes of Scripture. In consequence of this, the recovery of the humanness of Scripture raises questions about the shape and feel of some of our historic documents, although perhaps less so the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, 1561; Heidelberg Catechism, 1563; and the Canons of Dordt, 1618/19) than the Westminster Standards. I am thinking especially of the inadequate attention paid to the unfolding of God’s truth from the old to the new covenant eras and the authorial diversity of the New Testament. Too often we find in our historic standards the cohesion of the system of theology taking precedence over the distinctive statements and figures of speech (etc.) of Scripture. As a result, the historic standards tend to be strong on making doctrinal connections, but the texts used as proof are not always convincing. Thankfully, it is very rare that Reformed subordinate standards claim or state something unbiblical, although we may legitimately question on times the way they arrive at things. In short, our historical documents echo a high view of Scripture but not always a high use of them. While they remain excellent documents useful for teaching and for summarizing the faith we believe, they fall short of the Holy Scriptures. Not only are their words not the product of the extraordinary operation of the Spirit, they tend to possess but one genre, and lack the full content and literary richness of Scripture.

To some readers these words may be shocking, but I don’t think they would be to the reformers themselves. Here’s a modern rendering of the words of the compilers of the Scots Confession of 1560: “. . . if any man will note in this our confession any article or sentence repugnant to God’s holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity’s sake to admonish us of the same in writing; and we upon our honor and fidelity, by God’s grace do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from his holy Scriptures, or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss.”

The supremacy and balance of Scripture explains why the norm of expository preaching has become a core value of our church. I am fully aware that some may fear that in making this step we are in danger of losing touch with specific theology of our tradition, as that theology is summed up in the heads or points of doctrine contained in the creeds and confessions. Yet, we have anticipated that danger at Seventh by introducing the intermittent study of our historic documents to our Elder District study groups. Not only does this way of proceeding free pulpit usage for direct proclamation of the Word on its own terms (and there are multiple reasons for doing this), it affords attendees of the groups a discussional format in which the biblical content of our historic documents can be better learned and digested.

3. *The reestablishment of the centrality of the gospel.* The history of the Reformed tradition has sadly been marred by many a division. We have not always been able to maintain a passion for truth without becoming contentious about doctrine and church-related issues. Part of the problem has been an inability to prioritize the importance of the various aspects of our belief and practice. Reared on stories of the courage of our heroes of the faith, we too have wanted to make our stand for truth. Yet in modeling the Reformers we sometimes forget that they were beset by the pressures of their contention and living at a very harsh time in history. Accordingly, they were sometimes overly aggressive about matters, which, with hindsight, were not so critical to the cause of orthodoxy and Protestant unity. If we follow their lead in this regard, as we have generally done, we shall continue to miss out on the visible unity they were keen to nurture among Protestants and the Reformed.

In praising God for the renewed publication of Reformed literature over the last half century and the resultant renewal of interest in Calvinism, we must develop all the same a sensitivity to the fact that we no longer live in Christendom or the modern era (c.1789-c.1950). We live in what is called the postmodern era. We need therefore to balance concerns internal to the church with those challenges from without. Returning our focus to the gospel is one way we can approach both. In preventing issues from obscuring Christ and his cross we must nevertheless remember that the Holy Spirit has been operative in the church since the Reformation. While we have not grasped all the reformers taught, and have sadly left much behind, God's Spirit has continued to shed light on the truth, bringing further facets of it into view. I think, for example, of the growing interest in the Fatherhood of God, our union with Christ his Son, and our adoption as his sons. In time these fresh emphases will help us to balance better the juridical and relational (expressly familial) aspects of the gospel, just as Scripture does.

It is this enriched understanding of the faith we need to apply to the internal discussions of the church, but also to the pluralism of postmodernity, whether in the form of secular progressivism, Islam, or the new age. etc. While we maintain in our discussions with Roman Catholics the Protestant stance on the supremacy of Scripture, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Lord, Savior and Head of the Church, the unrivalled saving power of the cross, the sacraments and the nature of the church, we recall that in the array of unbelief today we share many of the same concerns as Roman Catholics, and for all our critical differences in regard to the gospel, we agree that it is the answer to the dehumanization of a supposedly secular society.

4. *The reestablishment of the catholicity (universality) of the church.* Whereas the Reformed faith was formulated in the somewhat parochial world of sixteenth-century Europe, we live it out in the globalized city of the present century. Yet, bunkered down in our churches, lamenting society from out of its hearing distance, we too often continue to operate on the basis of a long-lost parochialism. Still obsessing about rivalries centuries old, we have yet to capture the emphasis Jesus placed on his Kingdom and its global extension (Matt. 28:18-20). Meanwhile, gospel collaboration across denominational and national boundaries falls short of its potential.

One of the benefits of Seventh's independence is that our circumstances encourage collaboration. Our contribution to the agenda of Christ improves when we cooperate with others in the work of mission. But isn't it still the case that we think of the differences that separate us from other bodies rather than the commonalities? This can be seen in the Reformed rivalries within Grand Rapids, and the keenness to distinguish Reformed (i.e., continental Reformed) from Presbyterian (English speaking). The longer I am Reformed the more convinced I am that the global context of our day must impact the way in which we

view our tradition and the church at large. If I am right, why should we not use Scripture to fuse the continental and English-speaking strands of the Reformed tradition, utilizing the best of the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards to state afresh the Reformed faith for the day and the challenges in which we live?

Evidently, the World Reformed Fellowship (WRF) to which Seventh belongs expresses something of this globalization. Interestingly, the Fellowship's theological commission has been working on confessional matters with a view to the expression of the faith within our twenty-first century context. While there may be some room for the discussion of a Fellowship's role in compiling a confession, surely the attempt is worthy. Conservative denominations have not proven biblically and theologically creative in this regard. To use an analogy drawn from "the beautiful game," these denominations have been good full backs but ineffective strikers.

I could go on! Enough to say that, although there are many uncertainties in our day, God's Word and Spirit remain the safest means by which we can face the future. Joining a denomination would certainly introduce changes at Seventh, but it is currently by no means clear that significant advantages would accrue. Denominations have their own challenges. What membership of the WRF gives us is a meaningful relationship to the wider church while affording us the freedom to think through what it means to be Reformed (reforming) today. In this process our Mission Statement and Ecclesial Core Values are helpful as expressions of the direction of Seventh's ministry. May God grant us the grace to fulfill it with increasing effectiveness!