

# **Confessions of a former Strict Confessionalist**

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## **Introduction**

How does one relate to God in this world? To the church? What should a Christian do in order to glorify God? All of these are questions that I struggle with, especially after I have been awakened to the things of God by the Spirit of God. Having brought up in staid traditionalism, I was exposed to Charismatic influences. It is admitted that there are many biblical problems with the Charismatic movement, and the particular strain that I was eventually exposed to, the Third Wave New Apostolic Reformation, is heretical. Yet, for someone raised in staid traditionalism, this was a breath of fresh air. In particular, it cannot be denied that, through focusing on the imminent and the practical, Charismatic Christianity preserve an important aspect of Christianity, which is that Christianity has to be practiced and not relegated to mere cognition. Christianity is a whole person faith. The idea that one can be Christian in mere intellect and custom is not biblical.

As a biblically deficient movement, Charismatic Christianity left me feeling dry over time. God graciously led me to Reformed teaching and Reformed theology. Through seeing the latitudinarian approach in much of Singapore Christianity, I was led to reject New Evangelicalism, which I see as the movement allowing false teaching like the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) to infiltrate the church. In a sense, I became a Fundamentalist, Fundamentalist in approach not in doctrine. If New Evangelicalism is marked by toleration of false doctrine under the guise of charity and respectful disagreement, then the reaction is to be strict on doctrine. Laxity of doctrine is spiritual adultery, leading to spiritual destruction applauded by those going to heaven under the guise of charity. It was evidently clear that New Evangelicalism is a movement of spiritual negligence on the part of its pastors at best, so the way to combat it is to be its opposite.

I notice quickly of course that Fundamentalism does not work, noting the problems and church wreckages it has caused. If everything is important and one must separate from other Christians on almost every doctrine, then everyone will eventually form a church of one. Yet it is evidently clear that New Evangelicalism does not work either. The so-called triage method promoted by Albert Mohler, when I heard about it, does not work either. "Triage" presumes that one can rank doctrines in order of importance, but where is this ranking found? Who gave us this ranking list, and upon what basis should we grant that list authority? "Triage" is basically an intellectual version of New Evangelical compromise, allowing pastors to feel less guilty or not guilty while being indifferent about other people going to hell.

## The Promise of Confessionalism

New Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism are a dialectical pair, with the one feeding into the other. Those who reject New Evangelicalism veer Fundamentalist, while those who reject Fundamentalism veer New Evangelical. It is a zero-sum game either way, and in no way is Christ's church and Christians properly served. Believers are destroyed by false love and unity under the banner of triage or whatever term New Evangelicals use. Christ's sheep are broken by fundamentalist attack dogs slashing the sheep they were meant to protect, guide, and feed. While wrestling with this dialectic, I came to hear of Confessionalism, which holds itself to be a third way in the dialectic.

What is the allure of Confessionalism? Confessionalism asserts that the problem with evangelicalism is that it does not have a true center of unity. Evangelicalism fails in its struggle to be coherent and proper because it is in some sense a false construct. By rejecting the historic creeds and Christian confessions, and trying to create a pan-"Protestant" movement, Evangelicalism cannot truly function as a Christian church. "Evangelicalism" as a movement must be deconstructed, argues historian D. G. Hart, because it has become a "seemingly large and influential religious body, but it lacks an institutional center, intellectual coherence, and devotional direction."<sup>1</sup> Hart in that book was focusing on the New Evangelicals, but the issue of a true center of unity or lack thereof affects the Older Evangelicalism as well. The only difference is that Old Evangelicalism had denominational legacy and thus had a more stable identity despite their trans-denominational slant. The dialectic between doctrinal separation and doctrinal compromise exists because there is no real substantive center in evangelical churches. All claims to be centered on the "Gospel," whether of the older evangelicalism, the New Evangelicalism, or the New Calvinist version (e.g. TGC) have failed because the words "the Gospel" have no substance in and of themselves. Over time, as it has been shown time and again, a unity "around the Gospel" results in either doctrinal splits or doctrinal compromise and eventual apostasy. The former comes as one group found to their astonishment that error and heresy lies within the camp, and sought to eradicate it, as for example Charles Spurgeon and the Downgrade Controversy, and the various modernist-fundamentalist controversies of the early 1900s. The latter is seen in the evangelical moderates collapsing to the forces of Liberalism in the PCUSA and other mainline denominations. It is seen also in the modern horror story that is The Gospel Coalition (TGC), as it is currently capitulating to the anti-Christian lies of LGBTQ+ and wokeness.

Confessionalism's promise therefore is to re-orientate doctrines around a core, forming something that looks like "triage" without the triage. Instead of asking questions about what doctrines are core and what are not, believers are to understand the form of sound words (2 Tim. 1:13) and link themselves to the historic Christian faith. Christians link themselves to the historic Christian tradition, choosing the historic

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<sup>1</sup> D.G. Hard, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 176

Confession that they hold best approximates to that tradition, the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3). Christians unite around a common Confession of faith and the historic creeds of the church. What the Confession states is core; what it does not, there is room for disagreement.

Of course, this does not solve every problem. There is a sense in which we argue from the Confession for logical deductions from that Confession. There is a sense in which inferences from the Confession partake in the derived authority of the Confession for us, yet are less authoritative than the Confessions themselves, especially when the inference is not direct. Nevertheless, the promise of Confessionalism is an escape from the dialectic between New Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism. In it, the believer can rest, more assured in the truths of Scripture and protected from wolves.

### **Into strict confessionalism**

Reformed theology is rigorous, and precisely the type of spiritual food that appeals to one starved of biblical truth. It was not fast before I encountered what I now recognized as strict confessionalism, particularly as mediated by one of its foremost proponent R. Scott Clark.

In his book *Recovering the Reformed Confessions*,<sup>2</sup> Clark argued for his idea of confessionalism, utilizing his expertise in historical theology to buttress his claims. According to Clark, situating the Reformed churches (in the United States) in the sideline denominations,<sup>3</sup> the divisions in the Reformed churches comes about because people are tempted towards two errant paths: The “Quest for Illegitimate Religious Certainty” or QIRC, and the “Quest for Illegitimate Religious Experience” or QIRE.<sup>4</sup> QIRC is “the pursuit to know God in ways he has not revealed himself and to achieve epistemic and moral certainty on questions where such certainty is neither possible nor desirable.”<sup>5</sup> QIRE is the “quest to experience God apart from the mediation of Word and sacrament.”<sup>6</sup> Utilizing these motifs, Clark addressed the issues of 6/24 creationism and theonomy under the motif of QIRC, and revivals and emotive worship under the motif of QIRE. The main point of Clark’s argument against 6/24 creationism is not whether it is right or wrong, but that the issue is not an issue addressed by the Reformed tradition in a way that excludes other views. In other words, with the Reformed confessions as boundary markers, we must not draw boundaries more tightly than them, leaving room for disagreement. Clark points out the diverse ways Reformed theologians have addressed scientific issues in the past, in order to

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<sup>2</sup> R Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: 2008)

<sup>3</sup> “Sideline” as opposed to the “mainline” (the big historic Protestant denominations that have veered apostate in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), and the “borderline” (those that shuttle between the two) [*Ibid.*, 1-2]

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-36

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 39

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-2

buttress his assertion that 6/24 creationism is not a proper boundary marker but one imported from rationalistic fundamentalism.

Clark's view of confessionalism, where the Scriptures are foundationally the ultimate source of authority, while the Reformed confessions became the secondary standards norming our faith, practice, and life, sounds indeed like that of confessionalism proper, and indeed it mostly is. Strict confessionalism is however lurking behind the scenes, when one reads between the lines, something I failed in my earlier days. For example, it sounded charitable to not want to draw narrow boundaries on the issue of 6/24 creation, which both the OPC and the PCA Creation Reports agreed upon.<sup>7</sup> It seemed helpful to warn against moralism, and call for Christians to return to historic Reformed worship. The problem comes however when we question the use and breadth of these categorizations (QIRC, QIRE) and how it relates to differences among the Reformed who hold to the Reformed confessions as well.

On the issue of 6/24 creationism for example, Clark gives the impression that those promoting 6/24 creation are using this as a boundary marker to throw Christians out of the church if they do not hold to 6/24 creation. There does not seem to be any discussion of the diverse ways one can or cannot hold to a belief in 6/24 creation and its application in the church context. In fact, on this issue, Clark shows a shocking ignorance of the modern creationist movement, citing Ronald L. Numbers' false history asserting a Seventh-Day Adventist origin for modern day creationism.<sup>8</sup> He then asserts that "proponents of 6/24 interpretation have been unable to explain the *theological* reason for making the 6/24 interpretation a standard of orthodoxy."<sup>9</sup> That Clark has not seen even one theological reason for such shows his ignorance of the writings and teachings of Young Earth Creationism. One can agree or disagree with these reasons, but for Clark to claim that there has been *no* theological reason ever given for making the 6/24 interpretation a standard of orthodoxy is a bad sign.

My focus on 6/24 creation is not to litigate whether 6/24 creation should be placed into the category QIRC per se, but rather to make it clear that there is no real discussion over whether the categories apply to any one thing and thus how one should place anything in any category. In other words, QIRC and QIRE are broad categories that Clark can use to place anything he disagrees with as long as he can link those doctrines or teachings to something resembling "rationalism" or "pietism." The categories function as a rhetorical sleight-of-hand enabling Clark to discount anything he does not like as either QIRC or QIRE, hoping that the smear or association is

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<sup>7</sup> Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *Report of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation* (2004), accessed at <https://www.opc.org/GA/creation.html> (Oct 17 2023); Presbyterian Church of America, *Report of the Creation Study Committee* (1999), accessed at <https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/digest/studies/creation/report.html> (Oct 17 2023)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 49-50; Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knoff Inc., 1992). But see e.g. Andrew Sibley, "The Victoria Institute—the forerunner of modern creation science organizations," *Journal of Creation* **36** (2): 112-115 (Aug 2022). Accessed <https://creation.com/victoria-institute> (Oct 17 2023)

<sup>9</sup> Clark, 48

enough to tar whatever he dislikes with the label of being contrary to the Reformed Confessions, without any argument over why that is so.

In my time over at Westminster Seminary California, Dr. Clark was a major topic of discussion among the students. While strict confessionalism calls for charity towards others who are Reformed, calling for unity around the Reformed confessions, one starts to suspect unity was not the goal here. Clark had asserted in his book that “it is not a belief that the Bible is true which makes one a fundamentalist; rather it is the belief that one’s interpretation of Scripture is inerrant which qualifies one as a fundamentalist.”<sup>10</sup> Interacting with Dr. Clark, one gets the impression that he views his own interpretation of the Reformed tradition as inerrant, which qualifies him as a “Reformed fundamentalist” I guess. Dr. Clark absolutely detests Douglas Wilson, John Frame, and who knows how many other enemies he has. This is not to say that Wilson or Frame are right or wrong, but I find it really strange that the idea of returning to the Reformed Confessions can go hand in hand with such vitriol and hatred.

The suspicion that strict confessionalism is something separate from and going beyond confessionalism emerges as I read the book *On being Reformed: Debates over a Theological Identity*.<sup>11</sup> In this book, Chris Caughey and Crawford Gribben wrote an essay essentially arguing that there is no such fixed identity of being “Reformed” in such a way that certain “Truly Reformed” (TR) people can use to exclude others from the Reformed tradition. Rather, there is indeed a Reformed tradition, but one that proceeds as branches of a tree throughout history, a “theological family tree” as it were.<sup>12</sup> In their response to Caughey, Gribben [and Matthew Bingham], [R Scott] Clark and [D.G.] Hart argued that there is a real Reformed tradition and identity that is determined not by scholars but by the churches,<sup>13</sup> and therefore Reformed identity is real and what they see as attempts by the other scholars to deconstruct the Reformed tradition have failed.

The problem with reading such a book is that there are valid points all around, and certainly Clark and Hart are correct in claiming the Reformed tradition is real and Reformed churches are the living legacy of what it means to be Reformed. But on the other hand, there is a deeper problem at play here, which ties in with one of Caughey and Gribben’s main point: the diversity among those that call themselves Reformed. If “Reformed” just refer to the body of Reformed teaching in the Reformed tradition, and “Reformed” is determined by the church, why not “Reformed” as defined by the PCUSA? After all, they are a church with a “Reformed” tradition of sorts. Of course, we can assert that the PCUSA has apostatized and so on, but those are not part of

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 45

<sup>11</sup> Matthew C. Bingham, Chris Caughey, R. Scott Clark, Crawford Gribben, D.G. Hart, *On Being Reformed: Debates over a Theological Identity* (Christianities in the Trans-Atlantic World; Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

<sup>12</sup> Chris Caughey and Crawford Gribben, “History, Identity Politics, and the ‘Recovery of the Reformed Confession,’” in *ibid.*, 20-1

<sup>13</sup> D.G. Hart, “Baptists are Different,” in *ibid.*, 66; R Scott Clark, “A House of Cards? A Response to Bingham, Gribben, and Caughey,” in *ibid.*, 81

the criteria given by Clark and Hart. If the argument is made that they deviate from the “substance” of the Reformed faith, how do we find this substance as a canon within the Reformed “canon” of its own tradition, without at the same time assuming this “substance” to be truly its substance? Clark’s and Hart’s rejection of theocracy as part of the “substance” of the Reformed faith,<sup>14</sup> for example, presupposes that theocracy is a part of ethics not doctrine, instead of it being part of the third mark of the church (right discipline), a position which I personally agree but which has not been proven by either of them. After all, would Calvin or the Magisterial Reformers hold that theocracy is merely an ethical issue? I sincerely doubt it!

All this is to say that arguments for a “Reformed” identity, as defined by Clark and Hart, argue in a circle. Something is or is not “Reformed” because it is or is not part of the substance of the Reformed faith. Something is or is not part of the substance of the Reformed faith because it is traced to the Reformed Confessions. Something in the Reformed Confessions is part of the substance of the Reformed faith because it is traced to the Reformed churches and tradition. Something that is traced to the Reformed churches and tradition is Reformed, but other teachings or practices traced there are not, because ... it is or is not “Reformed”? It can be seen here that attempts to claim a “Reformed” identity in the manner Clark and Hart do, even if individual points concerning various doctrines are correct, cannot work.

This is not to claim that confessionalism is wrong, but rather that this book makes clear Clark and Hart’s project of strict confessionalism, even if and where they get various things correct, does not deliver on their promises. Strict Confessionalism asserts definite ways of being confessional, promises unity and biblical fidelity around adherence to said principles, yet in the end it sorely disappoints.

## **The failure of strict confessionalism: Racism and the failure to love**

### **Racism and the Reformed Tradition**

With the main expression of the Reformed tradition currently in North America, the Reformed tradition unfortunately must struggle with American history, specifically the history of slavery and racism. Americans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century fought a civil war to end slavery, but ending racism proved more elusive.

During the American civil war, it is undeniable that Southern Presbyterian theologians like Robert Lewis Dabney promote racism under the Reformed banner. While I am not one of those who will reject everything someone says merely because of gross sin and wickedness, Dabney’s racism still needs to be called out and rejected. Unfortunately, Dabney continues to be promoted without qualification, and his ideas live on in the movement called “Kinism,” mediated by people such as R. J.

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<sup>14</sup> Clark, “A House of Cards?,” in *ibid.*, 85

Rushdoony,<sup>15</sup> the father of the right-wing fringe movement Christian Reconstructionism, with which kinists have a natural affinity to. While not disagreeing with everything that the movement advocates for, the fact of the matter is that the Reformed tradition historically has a problem with racism from the right.

“Kinism” can be stated as the view that the “races” of the world are ordained by God to be kept separate, and thus the mixing of peoples and most definitely inter-racial marriages (miscegenation) are sinful. Spoken or not, it comes with the view that the “white race” is superior and should not be led by the “lesser races,” a view that permeates parts of Reformed Christianity in the US, even those not overtly kinist, despite it being verbally denied. In my experience, while one can certainly be members of and serve in Reformed churches, if one is not white ‘culturally,’ it is almost impossible to be treated equally and to be taken seriously. The white man’s burden continues to be a problem in many American Reformed circles, and the idea that non-whites are to be patronized instead of treated with respect as equals is something I have personally experienced.

#### American racism from the left

If one thinks right-wing racism is bad, the left-wing version is even worse. After all, society has made most expressions of right-wing racism unacceptable in much of modern society. Embraced by liberals who believe they are really open-minded, loving, and tolerant, and most definitely ‘against racism,’ left-wing racism became popular as Critical Race Theory erupted into the scene after the election of Donald Trump in 2016 as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. It seems that the key to solving the real problems of racism, the consequences of racism, and the Democrat mismanagement of America’s major cities, was to blame “white supremacy,” attack “whiteness,” demand reparations and affirmative action, and call for all forms of special treatment of “People of Color” (POC), which they interpret through Marxist lens to apply only to non-whites who are “oppressed” (so ‘Asians’ do not qualify). Suddenly, you have those more liberal-minded Christians in the Reformed camp embracing aspects of Critical Race Theory and calling for the need for “racial justice.”

As with most theories, Critical Race Theory as a theory can be critically analyzed and engaged with, not rejected outright. However, the essence of Critical Race Theory is racist and antithetical to biblical Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Critical Race Theory sees everything in racial categories, and attacks the very notion of “color-blindness,” the idea that one

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<sup>15</sup> Perry Wilkins, “Rushdoony’s Kinism,” *Faith and Heritage* (Jul 1, 2012). Accessed <https://faithandheritage.com/2012/07/rushdoonys-kinism/> (Oct 23, 2023)

<sup>16</sup> For books against the current manifestation of Critical Race Theory in the Woke movement, see e.g. Voddie T. Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, D.C.: Salem Book, 2021); Owen Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness: How the Social Justice Movement is Hijacking the Gospel – and the Way to Stop it* (Washington, DC: Salem Books, 2021); Jared Longshore, ed., *By What Standard? God’s World ... God’s Rules* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2020)

should not discriminate on the basis of one's skin color and thus ethnicity. Many woke advocates see "color-blindness" as a rejection of their innate racial differences, which is a false interpretation of "color-blindness" – a rejection of innate racial differences only in the sense that they should not be used for discriminatory purposes. Color-blindness is a rejection of what racism is – discrimination based on one's skin color and ethnicity, and thus redirects attention to a focus on our common humanity, all humans being equal in the eyes of God.

In my experience interacting with Americans as wokeness enveloped their nation, I was shocked at how people who were previously outwardly friendly, now react so vehemently when their embrace of left-wing racism was called out. Right-wing racism sees non-whites as "inferior races" to be patronized, as "converted heathen" who should be grateful for the "white man" bringing the Gospel of salvation to them. But if you think left-wing racists treat non-whites with respect, you would be sorely mistaken. In fact, it almost seems that left-wing racism allows one to suddenly vent one's repressed racism in a socially acceptable way.

[For the next section, it will be mostly anecdotal evidence, based on my "lived experience" (to use one of those neologisms), especially since I did not take snapshots of the incidents.]

My personal encounters with left-wing racism were certainly eye-opening for me. One such encounter was back in 2018, as the staff at the *White Horse Inn* veered towards promoting "racial justice" issues. On one tweet on the *Modern Reformation* Twitter account back then, I had responded to it with a ping to Michael Horton pleading for him to stop promoting such trash. The response from whoever was behind the *Modern Reformation* Twitter account then was nasty, to say the least. Of course, I unfollowed the account after some attempts at communication.

On another incident on Facebook, I had attempted trying to get a former acquaintance from my seminary to veer away from such nonsense, to no avail. What made it sadder was that of another acquaintance who mocked my comments, making it seem I am just calling wolf "to the left."

That same acquaintance subsequently claimed I am too tightly wound, evidently thinking racism is no big deal and that the correct response was to do "triage" and ignore left-wing racism. He subsequently managed to block me before I could unfriend him, but this episode shows that for many white Americans, even those that call themselves Reformed (or for those who went full steam into the woke movement, "formerly called themselves Reformed"), racism is evidently not a big deal.

### The failure to excise racism and American narcissism

What does this mean for Reformed Confessionalism? On the one hand, nothing. The failure of individual Reformed Christians, even Reformed Confessionalists, is the fault of the persons and not any one doctrine or movement. On the other hand, it matters a



lot, because Reformed Confessionalism in its strict form claim to move Reformed Christians towards being biblical in both faith and life, and to unity in the bond of Christ. For a movement that promised right living, is endemic toleration of various forms of racism acceptable? What is the use of being “Truly Reformed” if one remains a racist? Jesus says that a good tree bears good fruit, and you will know them by their fruits (cf. Matt. 7:17-20).

In R. Scott Clark’s book *Recovering the Reformed Confessions*, he invokes the persons of Charles Hodge, B.B. Warfield, Herman Bavinck, and J. Gresham Machen, whom he claims would be excluded by a boundary marker that makes 6/24 creation necessary for orthodoxy.<sup>17</sup> In his own words, “any boundary marker, however, that includes the Adventist and excludes Hodge, Warfield, Bavinck, and Machen should not commend itself to confessional Reformed folk as a way to mark out Reformed identity.”<sup>18</sup> Well, many Reformed pastors and theologians in the past were racists, like R.L. Dabney, so I guess any boundary marker that includes the liberals and excludes Reformed theologians like Dabney “should not commend itself to confessional Reformed folk as a way to mark out Reformed identity”?<sup>19</sup> Presumably, Reformed Confessionalism according to Dr. Clark can exist side by side with racism, although one can still assert that racism is a sin. But well, so is gluttony, which many Americans are guilty of, so I guess: What is the big deal anyway? As one liberal I used to interact with (in a different context) used to say with regards to the presence of neo-Nazis, “Well, there are neo-Nazis everywhere, so what?”

The failure to excise racism shows the American captivity of the American Reformed churches, from which strict Reformed Confessionalism has emerged. This American narcissism is seen most clearly in my last experience on this topic I am sharing here. I had a friend who is doing church planting in the Chicago area. For whatever reason, he leans into the social justice movement while claiming that he rejects Critical Race Theory. When he had posted a video promoting the TGC AND campaign trying to seek a “middle way” embracing both Christianity and “social justice” concerns, I responded to it in a blog post.<sup>20</sup> I pleaded with him not to promote this kind of racist trash, but

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<sup>17</sup> Clark, *Recovering*, 50

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 50. We would not address whether Clark’s interpretation of their views on creation are correct or not.

<sup>19</sup> The *reductio ad absurdum* argument works as follows: According to R Scott Clark, one major reason why 6/24 creation should not “commend itself as a way to mark our Reformed identity” is because it would exclude Reformed churchmen. But this only means that anything over which Reformed churchmen have had a different opinion on could not be a reason to mark out Reformed identity. If Clark’s argument is true, then Reformed confessionalism can exist alongside racism, since there have been Reformed churchmen who have been racists.

Instead of this terrible idea of marking Reformed identity, we should allow for the fact that Reformed churchmen can hold views that are contrary to the Reformed faith. They were wrong, yet we can still consider them in some sense Reformed. They were Reformed, yet the issues do in some sense mark Reformed identity. This level of nuanced discussion is something Clark seems unable to have.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel H. Chew, “The main lies Justin Gibony of TGC tells us about Racism and Critical Race Theory,” *Daniel’s Place- Reformata et Semper Reformanda* (June 4, 2021). Accessed <https://puritanreformed.blogspot.com/2021/06/the-main-lies-justin-gibony-of-tgc.html> (Oct 23, 2023)

was rebuffed. One of the points I had conveyed was how promoting such racial stuff would cause problems in other countries including my home country of Singapore. In his response, he essentially told me that what such woke stuff does in other countries is not his concern. In other words, *screw the world*, as long as 'Murica has "justice." The fact that Christina Edmonson, wife of OPC pastor Mika Edmonson, was promoting racist trash<sup>21</sup> without repercussion is indeed a serious point of concern, all while they were at one time serving in the Chicago area, a point I also made in response to him, without avail.

Strict Reformed Confessionalism, or basically Reformed Confessionalism in the hands of white American theologians, has proven itself unable to excise racism from her midst. Strict Reformed Confessionalism is also culturally bound to America, despite its claim to be just Reformed, and partakes of all the malaise infecting American society, including her narcissistic view of the world. In other words, strict Reformed Confessionalism is American, and not truly Reformed.

### **The failure of strict confessionalism: Theological lies and the failure to tell the truth**

It is not a secret that the American Reformed churches are extremely divided. After studying Reformed theology, it is my opinion that many divisions are not warranted and driven more by ego and the need to "prove oneself." For example, the whole republication (of the Covenant of Works in the Mosaic Covenant) controversy, while interesting and worth of discussion, is in more opinion not worth the amount of heat and ink it generates. Readers can read the OPC report on this issue themselves and ask if the amount of sophistication is worth actual bickering and fighting over.<sup>22</sup>

Now, it is true that some things are worth fighting over. John Gresham Machen was right to fight liberalism for example. But the amount of stuff American Reformed Christians fight over is shocking given the small proportion they have among professing believers.

This idea of fighting to establish themselves was brought to the fore in 2016, when first Todd Pruitt and then Carl Trueman lobbed theological grenades accusing those who promote a doctrine called "Eternal Functional Subordination" (EFS) or "Eternal Submission of the Son" (ESS) of heresy.<sup>23</sup> This set a firestorm that continues to have its embers even today. Now, charges of heresy are serious charges, and the *first step* of proving any doctrine is heretical is to actually represent it correctly. If one

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<sup>21</sup> See Daniel H. Chew, "Christian Edmonson is a Racist," *Daniel's Place- Reformata et Semper Reformanda* (Nov 20, 2021). Accessed <https://puritanreformed.blogspot.com/2021/11/christina-edmonson-is-racist.html> (Oct 23, 2023)

<sup>22</sup> Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *Report of the Committee to Study Republication* (2016), accessed <https://opc.org/GA/republication.html> (Oct 26 2023)

<sup>23</sup> Alistair Roberts, "The Eternal Subordination of the Son Controversy: The Debate so Far," *Reformation 21* (June 16, 2016). Accessed <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/the-eternal-subordination-of-t.php> (Oct 26 2023)

misrepresents what one is critiquing, then it does not matter how eloquent and how biblical one argues. One is engaging in a straw man and nobody should take what is said seriously.

The 2016 ESS controversy caused me to read up on the topics raised, and the more I read the more disturbed I feel. The initial feelings were one of astonishment and anger that these prominent pastors and theologians are hypocrites when they engage in the sort of slug fest that they deplore and attack in others. Evidently, when pastors and theologians told their congregants not to attack other Christians, or not to fight online, they mean only THEY can engage in attacking other Christians, and fight online. You see, only Reformed pastors and theologians can engage in the type of conduct other Christians should not engage in. For normal Christians to do so is sin I guess, but the clergy have privileges the laity do not!

As I read into the topic, I start to feel disturbed because what the critics are saying is not what the proponents of ESS are saying. Many critics are insisting that ESS necessarily imply this and that, which are heretical. But they do not prove this point, instead taking such implications as a given. This is just for the more honest critics. Then you have militant polemicists who just want to tar ESS any way possible, like Matthew Barrett who attacks ESS as tritheistic, Sabellian and Subordinationist.<sup>24</sup> Barrett's dishonesty is especially seen in his attacking ESS as both tritheistic and Sabellian. Just as something cannot be A and not A at the same time, something cannot be both tritheistic and Sabellian, given tritheism holds to three gods, while Sabellian holds so closely to the unity of the one God the 'persons' are mere "appendages" or "manifestations" of the one unitary God.

Ironically, while it is among the hardcore anti-ESS "Reformed Confessionalists" that truth has gone missing and hatred festers, it is among the egalitarians that charity continues. Glen Butner, while a critic of ESS, is fair in his critique, and makes some points that ESS proponents should address.<sup>25</sup> In my engagement with Butner on social media, I have found him charitable and willing to engage, while my engagement (where there is any) with Reformed Confessionalists has been either absent, or rude and condescending, just shy of hurling anathemas.

Just stand and ask yourself: From a human point of view, who would you be predisposed towards: a rude and condescending Reformed Confessionalist, or a supposed "biblicist"? I have interacted with Bruce Ware as well as Owen Strachan, and they have been extremely courteous. They have also consistently denied the

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2021), 229, 231, 237. See Daniel H. Chew, "Contra Barrett on the issue of EFS: A Critique of Chapter 8 of *Simply Trinity*" (2021), *Reformed Energies*. Accessed <https://puritanreformed.net/theology/ContraBarrettEFS.pdf> (Oct 26, 2023)

<sup>25</sup> D. Glenn Butner Jr., *The Son who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018). See my review of his book, Daniel H. Chew, "Review of 'The Son who Learned Obedience' by D. Glenn Butner Jr" (2020), *Reformed Energies*. Accessed [https://puritanreformed.net/reviews/TheSonLearnObedience\\_review.pdf](https://puritanreformed.net/reviews/TheSonLearnObedience_review.pdf) (Oct 26, 2023)

positions attributed to them. Just on the issue of optics, which side is anyone more predisposed to think is in the right?

Of course, truth is one thing, and conduct another. This is where my reading comes in. In my own personal reading, while I do not think everything said under the banner of EFS is biblical, I find it to be not the monster, the heresy, that strict Reformed Confessionalists accuse it of being. Again, it means a big deal when these polemicists are busy burning straw men. Lying about one's opponents, even after being called out on it, is a sure sign that one is probably in the wrong. The sheer venom that these Reformed men spit against "biblicists" and "Arians," while lying over and over again about their opponents, does not endear me to them. But then, who cares perhaps, since I am a non-white and a non-American, so I am nobody to them?

### **Conclusion: Strict Confessionalism is an elitist American man-made system**

The promise of Reformed Confessionalism is to plot a path between Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism, to not pick fights on minor issues while keeping fidelity to the Christian faith. Evangelicalism has failed in its fiduciary duty to the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Fundamentalism has failed in its duty to love others, especially those of the household of the faith. Sadly, strict Reformed Confessionalism is no different from Fundamentalism, just more scholarly, more organized and institutionalized, and thus more powerful as they weaponize theology against their opponents.

Fundamentalism hurts believers so they become averse to those who claim to have certainty about the Bible. Strict Reformed Confessionalists hurt those seeking truth by weaponizing the truth against believers, using the intellect in a twisted manner to turn people away from God and the God of the Bible. This is increasingly seen in the even more recent attack on "biblicists," a label they used to tar anyone who points to the Bible to support positions contrary to that held by the learned elite. Instead of having a proper discussion about "biblicism," and what the Bible means, modern day *Ressourcement* ("theological retrieval") guys refuse to argue for their positions from Scripture alone, and hurl insults against those who ask for evidence from Scripture only. It does not seem to occur to them that, in their rejection against the error of "biblicism" real and perceived, they might just fall into the error of Traditionalism. This is far from the attitude taken by the great Reformed giant John Gresham Machan, who said,

If we could imagine all the creeds of Christendom as having been suddenly wiped out of men's memories, so that we should have to start all over again in our understanding of the Bible and in our summary setting forth of what the Bible teaches, I believe in time the necessary creeds of the church would again be built up. It might take another nineteen centuries – if it be God's will that the present age shall remain that long; it might take twice that time. But sooner or later it would be done. The Bible is the really essential thing; it is the foundation. The

creeds of the church are the superstructure. Take away the foundation, and all is lost. But take away the superstructure, and the superstructure can be built up again if the foundation remains.<sup>26</sup>

The historic Reformed faith never shies away from Scripture, and using Scripture alone. This is even though Machen himself says earlier,

It would be sad mistake indeed if we should cut ourselves off from the past history of the Christian church in our interpretation of the Word of God.<sup>27</sup>

The issue was never about cutting ourselves from the history of the church, but about how we understand them as subordinate standards, not as interpretive tools standing over Scripture. But how did the American churches get themselves into this mess? I certainly do not have the answers but can point out certain things of note.

Any man-made system is bound to fail, only God remains true forever. “The grass withers and the flowers fade, .... but the word of the LORD stands forever” (Is. 40:8). Any system, no matter how good, how strong, can only continue to work if it abides in God (Jn. 15:6). The corruption of the Reformed Confessionalism of J. Gresham Machan into strict confessionalism is primarily due to its failure to abide in Christ. By their fruits, they may be known, and their fruits are rotten. Strict confessionalism is unable to separate itself from racism, is unable to keep one from lying, and is evidently unable to keep one from remaining in the Protestant faith, if current trends of “ressourcement” persist. This is because it is an elitist man-made system, using truths of Scripture, distorting Scripture and tradition, and then passing off this corrupted facsimile as the real deal.

Pride comes before a fall, and in this case, pride surely plays a part. American exceptionalism in its Manifest Destiny form continues in the white man’s burden, and it infects American Reformed Christianity more than it wishes to admit to itself. It is certainly revealing that, in the book on Reformed identity, it is the Americans (R Scott Clark and D.G. Hart) that are arguing for the strict Confessionalist position, a position so far advocated by only Americans.

Strict Confessionalism is therefore an elitist American man-made system. As the final part of my confessions, I would like to repent of my small part in it. I was taken into it, mesmerized by its intricate intellectualism and the seeming perfection of its parts. There must be a better way, and perhaps my hero John Gresham Machan, while also a flawed man in many ways, among others, can show me one.

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<sup>26</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Things Unseen: A Systematic Introduction to the Christian Faith and Reformed Theology* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2020), 332

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 328