A presidential inauguration offers a wonderful opportunity for an educational institution to look back—to remember trials and triumphs over ground that has been trod—but also to look ahead—to anticipate where in the future it might accomplish maximum good with minimum collateral damage. Since I am a historian, the looking back task comes much more naturally to me. But since I am a Christian historian, I must also be interested in the actual state of Christianity in the world today and in general Christian prospects for the future. The subject I have selected as a way of talking about Calvin College’s past and its future is the Bible. I hope the reasons for selecting this subject will become obvious as we proceed. The first part of the talk explains what I see as Calvin’s distinctive stance with respect to Scripture. The second part describes why I think that distinctive stance has had such a positive influence on Christian higher education in North America. Then the third part turns to look at the Christian world today in order to ask how Calvin’s distinctive stance toward Scripture might equip the college to help, but also to be helped by, the world-wide Christian community as it now actually exists.

And so to the first question: what has been the distinctive historical stance toward Scripture that informs Calvin College’s Reformed past? The college makes no apologies about its forthright allegiance to the Bible. The opening sentences on the web page describing the history of the institution could hardly be clearer: “Calvin College is a college of the Christian Reformed Church, a century-old denomination with a five-century-old heritage. It bases its whole faith and life on the sacred Scriptures, God’s holy, inspired, infallible Word, and thus takes its stand with the churches which have their roots in the Protestant Reformation.” In many respect this affirmation regarding Scripture is very similar to what is affirmed by other evangelical or conservative Protestant colleges.

Yet, notice, Calvin’s position on Scripture is tied self-consciously to a specific denominational tradition within a longer Protestant tradition arising from the Reformation. Defined that way, the stance toward Scripture becomes distinctive. The distinctive is the work that Calvin, the Christian Reformed Church, and this particular strand from the Reformation have done with Scripture as a taken-for-granted starting point. For the most part, Calvin’s tradition has not made its mark in the Christian world by defending the Bible, obsessing over scriptural boundary marking, or striking out combative positions on problems raised by biblical higher criticism. Instead, this tradition has made its mark while defending particular uses of the Bible, obsessing over cultural boundary marking, and striking out combative positions on problems raised by practices of Christian education.

Of course there are a few exceptions to this generalization. Since Grand Rapids at last came to the realization that it too was part of America, it is not surprising that Calvin has occasionally been caught up in arguments over creation and evolution that
directly contest the character of Scripture. From at least the 1920s, it has been difficult to exist within any American college connected in any way with conservative Protestant constituencies and not face such issues. But for Calvin College, specific questions about the nature of early Genesis as sacred scripture have been far less central than at most peer institutions. Calvin, instead, has been much more obviously preoccupied with tasks that involve putting the Bible to use.

Granted, the contrast is not absolute. But for the most part Calvin has been known not for battles about the Bible, but for battles with the Bible in hand as a taken-for-granted resource. The college has been distinguished not for sharpening, protecting, or examining the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, but for intellectual and cultural combat that has tried to take on the whole armor of God.

Calvin has always benefited from a learned and distinguished theology faculty. But the institution is much better known for its Christian philosophers, for its Christian historians, for literary figures shaped by its environment, for its Christian leadership in political thought and action, for its Christian scientists making statements about their fields of inquiry, and for the guidance it has provided for Christian education at all levels.

The key for why Calvin has worked harder at putting biblically based stances to use rather than at refining that biblical stance is the Reformed tradition in which it stands. In turn, that Reformed tradition is anchored by three confessional statements from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that were themselves distinctive in the Reformation era. The Belgic Confession of 1561, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, and the Canons of the Synod of Dordt of 1619 were statements of faith in action. Although I sense that these three Standards of Unity are not nearly as close to the active consciousness of Calvin faculty and students today as they would have been fifty or one hundred years ago, they nonetheless continue to influence the college’s distinctive trajectory.

Like all Protestant confessions of their era, these three are drenched in Scripture. Yet unlike, say, the Westminster Confession that began with a long and carefully nuanced statement on the Bible, these three immediately get down to work, though of course with the Bible in hand. Thus, the deliverances of Dordt grappled with the knotty theological issues raised by Jacob Arminius and his Remonstrant colleagues. The canons offer theology drawn from Scripture, but not a theology of Scripture.

The Heidelberg Catechism also naturally took the Bible as its frame of reference, as testified to by the thick penumbra of proof texts that surround modern editions of the catechism. But the catechism is not about the Bible as such. It is about the existential experience of those who have been drawn to the Bible’s message of God’s providential mercy in his only-begotten Son. I do know from reading memoirs arising in the Dutch-American diaspora that some of you who were force fed this catechism as young people reacted negatively to that force feeding and so now find the catechism itself a painful memory. But for others who simply took their youthful instruction in stride—and for many like myself who came to the catechism as adults and of our own free will—the document’s eighty-five questions and answers remain a noteworthy gospel tocsin.

- What is true faith?
- What do you understand by the providence of God?
- What advantage comes from understanding God’s creation and providence?
- What is your only comfort in life and in death?
• How many thing must you know that you may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort?

Such questions probe the intersection of profound human need and deepest universal truth. The answers offered by the catechism are intensely biblical, but they are not answers that focus on the Bible itself.

It is even partly the same with the Belgic Confession, which from the second part of its second article through its seventh article does provide full treatment of the nature, canon, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture. But even this confession, which is so full on Scripture itself, begins with a confession about God, as “eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and the overflowing source of all good.” Then follows a powerful statement about how God’s “creation, preservation, and government of the universe” opens that universe for humanity as “a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God.” Only then—at affirming a biblical view of God and an equally biblical view of the communicating beauty of the universe that God has made—does the confession take up Scripture directly.

When we fast forward from the Three Standards of Unity to the nineteenth century, we come to Abraham Kuyper and the great impetus he gave to the enterprises that became Calvin College. As Jim Bratt’s splendid and so-to-be released biography shows, Kuyper was like many other larger-than-life figures: their exhilarating rhetoric often ran far beyond the realm of the realistic. And so neither Kuyper’s own Free University of Amsterdam nor the Christian Reformed colleges in the United States, Canada, and South Africa inspired by the Free University have ever come close to capturing every square inch of the cultural landscape for the Lord Jesus Christ. But, comparatively speaking, the sober truth is that such institutions have been more successful than their conservative Protestant peers at taking steps toward that goal. The Kuyperian institutions have never accomplished as much in constructive theology, philosophy, history, science, politics, or education as Kuyper’s soaring vision anticipated. But, again in comparative terms, they have advanced further in those domains that almost all peer institutions.

Kuyper himself wrote a great deal of directly biblical devotional literature, particularly on the Psalms. He was also certainly concerned about critical approaches to Scripture that questioned its character as divine revelation. But his great energy went into putting the biblically informed insights of what he too to be the Calvinist tradition into active practice. The results were substantial—at first most obviously in the Netherlands, but then since the Second World War more obviously in North America.

Which brings us to the second part of this talk and to the question: Why has the distinctively Reformed stance of Calvin College exerted such a positive effect on Christian higher education in America? The answer, from one angle at least, can be phrased in terms of the Bible. From the last decades of the nineteenth century into the era after World War II, higher education sponsored by evangelicals, fundamentalists, and conservative Protestants was tied into knots by a series of controversies focused directly on Scripture. During that same period, Calvin College and associated Christian Reformed enterprises were not. Instead, although almost no one else was paying attention, Calvin people were busy with the tasks of thoughtful Christian scholarship and thoughtful educational practice. Then from the 1950s onwards, when fundamentalist, evangelical, and conservative Protestant Americans began to inch past battles for the Bible in order to engage in biblically normed Christian scholarship, out of
nowhere came the Dutch-Americans to point the way. The result, to oversimplify only a little, is that "we are all Kuyperians now." That quick survey needs to be nuanced, but only a little.

From the time of the American Civil War, the history of Christian higher education under conservative Protestant sponsorship reveals a series of intense struggles that focused energy and attention onto the Scriptures themselves. Did the Bible condemn slavery, as so many abolitionists and almost all African Americans believed, or did it approve slavery, as so many southern whites and a surprisingly large number of northern whites contended? After a military, but not exegetical, resolution of that controversy came immediately the battles over biblical higher criticism that continue to this day. Those truly important debates have involved truly foundational questions of historicity, authorship, reliability, and supernaturalism itself. But they have also had the unfortunate effect of consuming so much energy about the Bible itself that educational explorations under a biblical canopy ground almost to a halt. Or where such explorations did take place, as with the Social Gospel movement, the conservative Protestants were so worried about the questionable biblical basis of the movement that they simply wrote it off.

For their own part, many conservative Protestants turned to dispensational theology where the consuming task was to figure out how the parts of the Bible fit together with each other. The great landmark of this effort was the 1909 reference Bible by C. I. Scofield that was dedicated above all to drawing attention to itself. Institutionally considered, the signal educational initiative of conservative Protestants in this era was the Bible College. These schools were created very specifically to ground students in the knowledge of Scripture and very deliberately to insulate them from the tainted learning of the theologically suspect American academy.

For at least two generations, the liberal arts colleges of conservative Protestants were left trapped between upper and nether millstones. On the one side was the American university world, which seemed bent on explaining the Scriptures away. On the other side were the Bible schools, which were dedicated to separating biblical knowledge from all other forms of knowledge. For broader intellectual and institutional purposes, Christian liberal arts colleges were consumed by the effort simply to hang on.

Meanwhile, back in Grand Rapids, it was different. Early on, a young transplanted Hollander, Geerhardus Vos, was thinking through what it meant for Scripture to narrate a great drama of redemption. Although Vos did not remain long as an instructor at the Christian Reformed Church’s fledgling college, he began there the explorations in biblical theology that have helped later generations to understand more clearly what a powerful theology based on the Bible—instead of just a theology of the Bible—might look like.

It is also noteworthy that Vos’s wife, Catherine, transferred the Bible stories she told her own children and grandchildren into a very effective collection published as The Child’s Story Bible. This book, originally appearing in 1935 and still in print from Wm. B. Eerdmans, reflected in family educational practice the same spirit that inspired Catherine Vos’s husband. Not fretting about the Bible but putting the Bible creatively to use was the task at hand.

In 1920, when other institutions of Christian higher education were worrying about whether Scripture allowed a place for formal philosophy, Calvin College added the philosopher William Henry Jellema to its faculty. He promptly began careful
analysis of classical philosophical texts from within a deeply Reformed vision. The
result, for the students who could keep up with him, was a flourishing of Christian
philosophy that would eventually see four of Jellema’s Calvin College students become
presidents of the American Philosophical Association. What it has meant for Calvin
College to work intellectually under a biblical canopy, instead of working on the canopy
itself, has recently been witnessed by the wider world. The September 27, 2012, issue of
The New York Review of Books contained a surprisingly positive essay on the latest
book by Alvin Plantinga, one of Jellema’s most appreciative students. The review, by
the noted philosopher and self-professed atheist Thomas Nagel, was a surprise because
in that pervasively secular forum it commended Plantinga for a “thorough . . . consistent
. . . [and] valuable” presentation of theism, the possibility of miracles, and the
compatibility of traditional Christianity with evolutionary science. As a lesson for all of
us Americans who insist on quick results from quickly mobilized resources, it is
sobering to think that accounting for this public recognition of biblically normed
philosophy must begin with Calvin’s appointment of a professor determined to do
philosophy from within a biblically normed world view ninety-two years ago.

Not long after Jellema started teaching at Calvin came Henry Zylstra, John
Timmerman, and other professors of English who operated with the same effectiveness
as they nurtured a flowering literary crop grown from enriched Reformed soil. Their
significance, however, is not exactly analogous to what Vos accomplished for theology
or Jellema for philosophy. Zylstra, Timmerman, and their Calvin College colleagues
were not so much the initiators of a mini-renascence of Reformed literature as they were
witnesses to how Christian-inspired literary vision could remain creatively active within
the Reformed faith, while other brilliant writers educated at Calvin, like Peter DeVries
and Frederick Manfred, drifted beyond their Reformed upbringing.

The main point, though, is the same. When from the 1950s in the wider world of
conservative Protestant higher education, a broad array of evangelicals and former
fundamentalists sought guidance or models for what to do with their biblical faith,
assistance from Calvin College and Calvin-related Christian Reformed enterprises was
ready at hand.

To keep this history in perspective, it is naturally necessary to remember other
positive influences that also helped rejuvenate Christian intellectual life in the 1940s and
early 1950s. The list is fairly long, and so a rebuke to those of us in the evangelical world
who thought of ourselves as woe-begotten Eljaha setting out on paths of Christian
scholarship all by ourselves. Thus, it is important to recall the names of many in the
English-speaking world who had not bowed the knee to the Baals of modern secularity:
like the Episcopalian political scientist John Hallowell who was long a mainstay at Duke
University; the all-around inspiration for Mennonites, Harold Bender; Kenneth Scott
Latourette, the historian of China and world-wide Christian expansion who in 1948
delivered his presidential address to the American Historical Association on the subject
“The Christian Understanding of History”; the historian Timothy L. Smith from the
Church of the Nazarene; the Lutheran president of Valparaiso University, O. K.
Kretzmann; Chad Walsh, the Episcopalian litterateur and key early American promoter
of C. S. Lewis; a growing host of Roman Catholics who were bringing revived Thomism
into the public arena; help north of the border from the Canadian philosopher and
historian Charles Norris Cochrane and the cultural provocateur George Grant; and a
phalanx from Britain that besides Lewis included the playwright and translator Dorothy
L. Sayers, the Methodist historian Herbert Butterfield, and the Scottish Presbyterian
theologian Thomas Torrance.
But for communities who had long defined themselves by strict adherence to scripture, Calvin and its denomination were especially important. It was utterly obvious that these Reformed folks maintained very high convictions about the divine inspiration of the Bible. Even if some of them smoked cigarettes and a few allowed alcohol to cross their lips, nonetheless they clearly were Bible believers who could be trusted. We could follow them. And so we evangelicals did—in philosophy, history, the sciences, Christian education, literature, politics, and more.

But now we come to the third part of the talk. In recent decades it has become unmistakably clear that when we speak of “the Christian world,” we really do mean the world. Over the last century, that world has changed more dramatically than at any comparable period since the very first century of Christian history. The deservedly well-known works of Andrew Walls, Dana Robert, Lamin Sanneh, and Philip Jenkins have underscored the reality that Christianity is no longer a Western religion; that the Christian homeland will soon be sub-Saharan Africa, some part of Latin America, perhaps in Asia, even in the People’s Republic of China, or some combination thereof; and that the new normals for contemporary world Christian experience can be radically different from the old normals for Western Christian experience.

A brief review can indicate the situation that these experts have documented extensively. Since we are concentrating on Protestant higher education today, let me restrict myself only to the world-wide situation of Protestants where changes over the last century have been breathtaking. In 1910 almost 90% of the world’s Protestants lived in Europe or the United States. Today, of the world’s approximately 875 million Protestant or Protestant-type adherents, less than 12% live in Europe. Another 15% live in the United States. In former European colonies like South Africa and New Zealand, the numbers of Protestants have burgeoned, but mostly in non-white churches. In short, by the twenty-first century, Protestantism had become a primarily non-Western religion. In 1910, 79% of the world’s Anglicans lived in Britain (with most of the rest in the United States and the British Commonwealth). By contrast, today, 59% of the world’s Anglicans are found in Africa. Also today, more Protestants live in India than in Germany or Britain. About as many live in Brazil as in Germany and Britain combined. Almost as many live in each of Nigeria and China as in all of Europe. Much more than ever before, the Protestant world has become co-extensive with the world itself.

With these new realities in view, what are the particular opportunities and particular challenges facing Calvin College and its Reformed tradition? For addressing this question, the Bible is once again relevant precisely because so much of the dramatic expansion of Christianity in the Majority World has been keyed to the Scriptures. Translation of Scripture into local vernacular languages has always been of highest importance. But so too have hymns, songs, and spiritual songs taken from newly-translated Scripture and set to indigenous local music. Moreover, throughout the newer Christian regions direct imitation of scriptural narratives is nearly universal. Often local Christian communities see themselves as enacting dramas scripted as a continuation of stories from the Bible. This dimension of biblical confidence in what has become the new centers of world Christianity carries most of us Western believers into unfamiliar territory of scriptural intensity, scriptural imitation, and scriptural modeling.

Two examples from distinguished scholars illustrate this strange new world. The late Nigerian historian, Ogbu Kalu, wrote perceptively in one of his last books about the transformation of the great East African Revival, which began in the 1930s as an adaptation of low-church Anglican and pietistic Plymouth Brethren themes in African Great Lakes cultures, into the full-blown neo-pentecostalism of modern Uganda and
surrounding regions. His focus was Simeon Kayiwa who was twenty years old in 1977, the year that Idi Amin ordered the murder of Janani Luwum, the widely respected Anglican bishop and product of the East African Revival. In that fraught period Pastor Kayiwa received a message from God to revive struggling Christians and warn believers against witchcraft; as validation of that message, the Lord also promised miracles as proof. Subsequently, Kayiwa as a latter-day John Wesley recruited a corps of dedicated evangelists, established a hidden sanctuary for believers on the run from Amin, and began along with his band of preachers to perform miraculous deeds. The rest is history that has been reported by the BBC and several reputable journals and newspapers from Britain. Quoting Kalu: “It is claimed that Kayiwa is the father of almost 90 percent of the thirty-five thousand Pentecostal churches in Uganda; that he has raised up to eighteen people from the dead; and that he unites the vast movement that now claims the allegiance of one-fifth of Uganda’s twenty-six million residents.”

The second report is from Philip Jenkins’ illuminating book on how non-Western believers have been reading the Bible entitled The New Faces of Christianity. Jenkins has documented a strikingly large number of settings where the familiar words of Psalm 23 have taken on fresh power. For example, in Korea during the often-brutal Japanese occupation, “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” became reassurance for the many who faced prison, beatings, and family disruption for practicing their faith steadfastly. Among the many other Majority World locations where this psalm resonates powerfully is Ghana where the Pentecostal leader J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu frequently brings healing services to a close by reciting, “Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” During one exorcism of a woman possessed by a river goddess, Asamoah-Gyadu reports that along with hymns and prayer, a recitation of Psalm 23 was the means by which the pagan forces were calmed.

The dynamic place of Scripture in what are rapidly becoming the dominant sites of world Christianity poses challenges and provides opportunities for the Reformed tradition of Scripture that has prevailed at Calvin College. That Majority World deployment of Scripture resembles what the Christian Reformed have done because it concentrates on the use of the Bible. The Pentecostals of Uganda and Ghana—the Koreans who trusted in Psalm 23 to strengthen their hearts in the face of Japanese persecution—are like those who have flourished at Calvin, in that debate over the character of the Bible is not a primary concern. In both instances, the reliable trustworthiness of the Bible is taken for granted. Neither are worrying very much about the precise nature or exact shape of biblical revelation, as so many American evangelicals worried so obsessively for so long. Rather, it is the Bible as a taken-for-granted basis that identifies both much of the new world Christianity and the Reformed traditions of Calvin College.

Yet the differences in how the Bible is put to use are obvious as well. Exorcisms have not featured prominently in Christian Reformed churches. Calvin College and its constituents have been content to focus on one resurrection from the dead. By contrast, patient Christian attention to the classical texts of Western philosophy has not been high on the agenda of Ugandan Pentecostals. They are more concerned about battling demons—understood as the spirits in high places and the enemies of poverty, disease, and internecine warfare—rather than demons understood as the threat of modern secularism.

Propitiously considered, both the older users of Scripture and the newer users of Scripture have much to learn from each other—as, when, and if meaningful
communication takes place within the broadened parameters of actually existing world Christianity. Calvin has long been helping fellow American Christians put the Bible to use for constructive theology, for history, for education, for literature, for philosophy, for politics. It is possible to imagine that through mediating institutions like the International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education, Calvin’s numerous overseas programs, and its extensive array of international connections, that Calvin’s distinctively Reformed use of Scripture may help others in the Majority World to add those uses to the dynamic use of scripture already present in contemporary world Christianity.

Similarly, it is also possible that biblical practices common in the Majority World could be added to the practices so well developed at Calvin. That would mean the Bible for conversion, the Bible for liberation, the Bible for empowerment, the Bible for light in the darkest venues of social dysfunction. It is possible that these Majority World uses might bring fresh vitality to the Calvin community where the Bible for culture has long been its trademark.

But, of course, negative possibilities can also be imagined. Both the Dutch and Dutch-Americans are long practiced in constructing dykes to protect themselves against outside forces. And for some in the Majority World even the most altruistic offers of assistance from the West could be poisoned with the taint of paternalistic imperialism.

Yet for those who are accustomed to put the Bible to use for any purpose in any fashion, it is appropriate for hope to win out over pessimism. It is appropriate to expect that humble attention to the Scriptures will instruct believers at Calvin College and around the world for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. If that takes place, then we may have confidence that the Scriptures will teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness all who attend to them so that they may be complete and equipped for every good work.
\[ \text{1 Ogbu Kalu, African Pentecostalism: An Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2008), 96.} \]

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{ii} Philip Jenkins, The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the bible in the Global South (Oxford University Press, 2008), 147-48.} \]