

Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom at Calvin College

*“The matter of academic freedom, like that of political liberty, is still with us.
From time to time it keeps bobbing up in some form or other....”*
—the opening sentences of an essay by Calvin Professor Jacob B. Vanden Bosch (May 1940)

SUMMARY OF KEY IDEAS

Section 1: Confessional commitments and academic freedom are indispensable and interdependent elements which shape our ecology for Christian teaching and learning at Calvin College.

Section 2: The confessions which bound our academic freedom arise out of and serve the lordship of Jesus Christ. They are subordinate to, and function to support, the authority of scripture. They call us to exercise great care in the interpretation of scripture and the confessions themselves.

Section 3: The confessions offer a set of both orienting convictions and boundaries in which academic freedom is exercised. While not every topic is addressed explicitly in the confessions, we commit to addressing every topic from a perspective grounded in the confessions. Topics that are not addressed explicitly in the confessions may well have positions associated with them that are “consistent with” or “inconsistent with” the confessions.

Section 4: Defining the precise limits of confessional boundaries is an organic and often informal process. When formal action is required, the meaning and implications of the confessions are determined by duly constituted deliberative bodies, rather than individual persons. While CRC synodical decisions are “settled and binding” with respect to pertinent aspects of institutional policy, they do not automatically limit academic freedom unless they are offered as “interpretations of the confessions.” In fact, the CRC encourages ongoing debate and discussion about synodical decisions precisely to ensure that the church is always promoting biblical faithfulness and confessional integrity. This requires an appropriate level of tolerance of a range of ideas and practices under the overall umbrella of confessional subscription. At the same time, the existence of a confessional boundary does not depend on Synod offering an explicit interpretation of the confessions. Such interpretations are only offered when necessary.

Section 5: Confessional commitment and academic freedom are nurtured by high-trust methods of communication and accountability. The most difficult decisions with respect to academic freedom involve the decision about how and when to enforce boundaries. For these decisions to be made well and have perceived legitimacy, they need to be made on the basis of the best possible information, through the due processes established in the faculty and board handbooks.

Section 6: Confessional commitment and academic freedom are of vital importance for our continuing work. Practicing these commitments together in mutually accountable and encouraging ways will help us become at once more firmly grounded and hospitable as we seek to serve together as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

I. The Significance of Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom for Calvin College

As a Christian comprehensive liberal arts college in the Reformed tradition, the purpose of Calvin College is “to engage in vigorous liberal arts education that promotes lifelong Christian service, to produce substantial and challenging art and scholarship, and to perform all our tasks as a caring and diverse educational community.” To pursue these purposes, we are committed to “develop knowledge, understanding, and critical inquiry; encourage insightful and creative participation in society; and foster thoughtful, passionate Christian commitments,” and to “pursue intellectual efforts to explore our world's beauty, speak to its pain, uncover our own faithlessness, and proclaim the healing that God offers in Jesus Christ.”¹ With the support and encouragement of the church, this is an academic mission, carried out in an institution of higher learning, which creates space for the strategic work of teaching, research, and other scholarly activities that are vitally important for faithful Christian discipleship.

Two inter-related themes create the conditions for this mission to flourish. First, our common confessional commitments are a testimony to our common worship of the triune God and our subservience to Christ's lordship in every area of life. These common commitments allow us to move beyond least-common-denominator discussions about the nature of Christian belief and practice, and create the conditions for a culture of learning that delves deeply into the nature of the gospel and its implications for a faithful Christian way of life.

Second, an ethos of freedom allows both the institution and individual faculty members the space to pursue teaching and research that work out the implications of these fundamental Christian commitments for every area of life. This is an exercise in Christian freedom, the unique and unparalleled freedom of those who are bound to Christ (Gal. 5).² In the academic community, this ethos is protected by what is known as academic freedom: the freedom of both an institution and individual faculty members to pursue truth without undue restraint.³ At Calvin College, a confessionally-grounded academic freedom makes possible teaching and learning that challenges settled perspectives, explores formerly unexplored dimensions of God's world and human experience, and allows passionate Christian commitments to develop without coercion. In a fast-paced society, with a complex web of inter-related and competing ideologies, worldviews, political and economic interests, the Christian community needs safe space, under a confessional umbrella, to engage in intellectual, moral and spiritual inquiry, to discern the shape of a faithful Christian way of life.

¹ *Calvin College Mission, Vision, and Purpose Statement.*

² This means that Calvin College does not simply accept a secular definition of academic freedom rooted in modern notions of personal autonomy, any more than Christian believers should accept culturally pervasive definitions of ‘power’ when imagining the nature of God's power. At the same time, we gratefully study discussions and practices of academic freedom in all contexts, including secular ones, for the resources they offer in helping us practice Christian freedom more faithfully.

³ For extended definitions of institutional and individual academic freedom, see Diekema, *Academic Freedom and Christian Scholarship*, 84-86.

Just as the concepts of force and mass have interdependent definitions in Newtonian physics, so too at Calvin College confessional subscription and academic freedom have interdependent definitions. Neither can be defined without reference to the other. Just as interdependence of force and mass in Newtonian physics produces an internally consistent picture of causality in nature, so too, the interdependence of confessional commitments and academic freedom at Calvin aims to produce a generative environment for faithful Christian scholarship and discipleship. As the *Handbook for Teaching Faculty* explains, “At Calvin College, we claim and enjoy an academic freedom that comes from the freedom we have in Jesus Christ as Lord of life and learning. Within our confessional terminology, academic freedom might better be understood as our God-given liberty in the academic profession to which we are called. In our vocation, we have the right and responsibility to explore thoughts and confront theories not always comfortable to ourselves or members of our constituency. But we exercise this freedom with a view toward our largest obligation, ultimately to bring every thought captive in submission to Jesus Christ” (6.14).

Past commitments to both confessional subscription and academic freedom continue to bear rich fruit today. We can be grateful for courageous and patient work by Christians in many fields of study that make possible what many in the church once ardently resisted: clinical psychological counseling, freedom from philosophical foundationalism, engagement with evolutionary theory within a Trinitarian, theistic context, discerning discussions about censorship and particular censored materials, frank discussions of anti-racism, ecumenical Christian engagement, and musical and artistic engagement with a wide spectrum of works by non-Christian artists, playwrights, and composers. The daily life of the Calvin College community as we know it has been made possible because of this freedom in the past. Our classrooms, co-curricular programming, and research agendas are each shaped by these possibilities, to say nothing of the *Festival of Faith and Writing*, *The Festival of Faith and Music*, *The January Series*, *the Worship Symposium*, and a host of other lectures and seminars, which are both the result of and an expression of academic freedom.

Confessional commitments and academic freedom make possible critical engagement with the working commitments of the Christian community across the spectrum of opinion, addressing challenges and opportunities on both the “right” and the “left,” and frequently questioning the false dichotomy implied by this or any number of other interpretative schemes. Confessionally-grounded academic freedom in the last generation has made it possible for Christians to gratefully celebrate the authority of scripture, without being constrained by a modernist or positivist formulation of biblical inerrancy. It has made it possible to profess without reservation that God created the heavens and the earth, without being bound by a certain type of creationism or an approach to evolution that entails philosophical naturalism. Without confessionally-grounded academic freedom, it is almost inevitable that institutions become beholden to particular political parties or social agendas, usually tied to economic interests (and it is important to note that academic freedom is only one, but not the only safeguard necessary to protect against this). These economic pressures may come from opposite or competing points of view: professional organizations, grant making entities, donors, and potential students. It is important to be aware of all of these implications, but not to allow any of them to erode institutional mission and identity.

Given these values, it is no surprise that Calvin College has produced a procession of defenses of confessionally-grounded academic freedom, including works by Henry Stob,

W. Harry Jellema, Anthony Diekema, Ed Ericson, George Monsma, Lee Hardy, David Hoekema and Joel Carpenter (see the attached bibliography). These writings feature a firm defense of academic freedom in the context of confessional subscription, aware of threats to academic freedom from multiple sources. Over against the secular academy, these voices have defended the legitimacy of a bounded academic freedom at Christian colleges. Over against those who would want to further limit academic freedom, these voices have defended the importance of academic freedom from ad hoc attacks, informal silencing procedures, or other threats to well-intentioned, conscientiously-developed, confessionally-grounded teaching and scholarship. In other words, these writings simultaneously affirm both the freedom of the institution to establish a particular academic freedom policy and the freedom of individual faculty members to fulfill their calling as teachers and scholars.⁴

As a result, Calvin College is a Christian community of learning that stands in contrast, on the one hand, to institutions with an atmosphere that is both authoritarian and compromised by populist suspicion of intellectual pursuits, and on the other, to institutions with the kind of theological or religious pluralism that often leads to a lowest-common-denominator discourse. In theory, and often in practice, Calvin College has created an environment where professors and students can be free from both the often unquestioned ‘orthodoxies’ of the secular academy and from the unquestioned extra-confessional ‘orthodoxies’ of Christian communities. This is a fragile balance that requires ongoing attention.

II. Scriptural Authority, the Reformed Confessions, and the Call to Faithful Interpretation

The faculty handbook at Calvin states that “Calvin College faculty members are required to sign a synodically approved Form of Subscription in which they affirm the three forms of unity—the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and the *Canons of Dort*—and pledge to teach, speak, and write in harmony with the confessions” (3.6.1.1). Later, in discussing academic freedom, the handbook states “the faculty member shall be judged only by the confessional standards of Calvin College, and by the professional standards appropriate to his or her role and discipline.” (3.6.4). When challenges to academic freedom arise at Calvin, they often relate to the precise interpretation and function of these confessional standards.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ and the Authority of God’s Word

The purpose of confessional subscription is to strengthen our witness to the lordship of Jesus, and our life together as fellow disciples of Jesus. The confessions are a form of testimony and doxology, a means by which we testify together to our common faith in the triune God and our freedom both from the tyranny of personal autonomy and secular humanism, and from the effects of inadequate accounts of the Christian faith. They are a

⁴ The interplay of these two freedoms is discussed in James Gordon, “Individual and Institutional Academic Freedom at Religious Colleges and Universities,” *Journal of College and University Law* 30.1 (2003): 1-28, and David M. Rabban, “A Functional Analysis of ‘Individual’ and ‘Institutional’ Academic Freedom under the First Amendment,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 53.3 (1990): 227-301.

means by which we declare that we are professors of the Christian faith, announcing that our world belongs to God and that our only comfort is found in God's hold on us through Jesus Christ.

Confessional subscription is a means by which to uphold rather than displace scriptural authority. By signing the *Form of Subscription*, Calvin faculty confess that they submit to the authority of all of scripture, and therefore that they accept the subordination of the confessions to the primary normativity of scripture. The Bible and the confessions should not be viewed as two independent entities which may vie for relative authority over against each other. The Bible is the ultimate authority. The confessions offer a summary of biblical teaching for the purpose of forming disciples, clarifying biblical teaching on a given point of doctrine, and helping the Christian community avoid misleading interpretations of biblical texts. Like the "rule of faith" in the early church, the confessions both emerge from the Bible and in turn guide the interpretation of the Bible.⁵ They are a tool to help believers practice the hermeneutical rule that "scripture interprets scripture." For this reason, many writings about the confessions refuse to speak about the "scripture and the confessions" as two sources of authority, but instead speak of "the Bible as interpreted by the confessions."⁶ Importantly, the normativity of scripture for us and our common work pertains to all scriptural teaching, not only to matters which the confessions state explicitly.

The authority of scripture, in turn, is grounded in the work of the triune God. Both the inspiration and interpretation of the Bible are an exercise of the authority of Jesus Christ, made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. As the Belgic Confession explains: "We believe without a doubt all things contained in them—not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God" (Belgic Confession 5). This means that "discerning the spirits" is one of the most significant ongoing tasks for disciples of Jesus in all walks of life. Scriptural authority is also not an end in itself. It is grounded in and points to the authority of Jesus Christ.

Interpreting the Bible and the Confessions

This vision calls us to exercise great care in our interpretation of the Bible, a challenging task given the diversity of biblical materials, the varying social and historical conditions in which the biblical texts were first written, the different assumptions and capacities that we each bring as interpreters, and the challenges of the interpretative task in a post-modern age.

Faithful interpretation arises out of communities of disciples. The Bible is authoritative for the body of Christ constituted by every member's submission to the lordship of Christ. The Bible instructs us in the pathways of true liberty and freedom from the power of sin. As

⁵ As Todd Billings describes it, "the rule of faith emerges from Scripture" and "provides extrabiblical guidance about the center and periphery of God's story of salvation accessed through Scripture" (xiv), see also p. 22.

⁶ For this reason, the confessions have not been considered a "Tradition" that stands next to or over against scripture, but rather are understood as an articulation of scriptural authority. See Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, for a description of two approaches to the role of tradition in the reception of scriptural teaching. See also Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, ed. John Bolt (Baker, 2003), 489-494, and especially Jaroslav Pelikan, "Confessional Rules of Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Credo* (Yale U. Press, 2003). 142-157.

redeemed sinners, submitted to the lordship of Christ, we anticipate that God's Word to us will typically challenge, subvert and condemn many of the human assumptions and preunderstandings that characterize our comfort zones, convicting us as well as comforting us. Hearing and obeying God's Word entails the lifelong, cultivation of certain moral, intellectual and volitional capacities that are essential to a healthy Christian life. In sum, as confessional Christians, we interpret the Bible "in the context of the triune activity of God, the God who uses scripture to reshape the church into Christ's image by the Spirit's power."⁷

While the confessions do not themselves include an extended discussion of biblical hermeneutics, they do commit us to interpret the Bible within the bounds of certain convictions. For example, the confessions commit us to a view of the inspiration of scripture in which the agency of both the Holy Spirit and human writers is significant (Belgic Confession, article 3), and a view that the entire scripture is authoritative (Belgic Confession, article 5). The confessions also commit us to understand the creation as God's revelation (Belgic Confession, article 2), giving us the challenge and privilege of drawing upon our knowledge of the Bible as we study creation and drawing upon our knowledge of creation as we interpret the Bible. The confessions also reflect a particular way of reading the Bible, offering an example of the fruit of a hermeneutic which is guided by these claims.

This vision also calls us to take great care as we interpret the confessions. The confessions are historical documents with emphases and vocabulary that reflect local circumstances. But this does not mean that we treat these documents as inaccessible to us or as mere historical artifacts. Indeed, we are communally committed—through the *Form of Subscription*—to affirm them as living documents, offering themes that we agree to teach diligently and at times presenting us with dilemmas that require careful and honest discussion.⁸ In this way, the confessions are as important for Calvin College as the *Constitution or Bill of Rights* is for jurisprudence in the United States. As Joel Carpenter explains, "Commitment to a particular way of thinking and seeing theologically does not foreclose fresh inquiry, but places it within a coherent and living theological and intellectual heritage. In that sense, it is much more like American constitutionalism than like a rigid doctrinal fundamentalism."⁹

This analogy does not solve every problem of confessional interpretation. Indeed, just as American jurisprudence is complicated by a multiplicity of judicial philosophies held by various judges and politicians, so too there are a range of approaches to the interpretation of the confessions. Some of the same questions that arise in judicial philosophy also arise in confessional interpretation: How does the intent of the writer shape interpretation? Are we bound not only to the claims of the text, but to the assumptions made by the text?

⁷ J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God* (Eerdmans, 2010), xiii.

⁸ As, for example, when the CRC moved to alter the presentation of materials in the confessions regarding the Anabaptists and the Catholic mass.

⁹ Joel Carpenter, "Holding with Confessions," *Perspectives* (Oct. 1999): 18. For comparisons between constitutional interpretation and scriptural and confessional interpretations, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Interpreting the Bible and the Constitution* (Yale U. Press, 2004), and Ronald R. Garet, "Comparative Normative Hermeneutics: Scripture, Literature, Constitution," *Southern California Law Review* 58 (1985): 37-127.

The complexities of these questions can certainly create points of ambiguity and disagreement. This is one reason it is so important to interpret the Bible and the confessions together as part of the body of Christ. When ambiguity and disagreement do arise, then we rely upon a set of deliberative bodies and duly approved procedures that are consistent with a polity that is grounded in the confessions—a polity that allows for the exercise of authority and mutual accountability by duly constituted deliberative bodies.

We engage in such interpretive deliberations with great care, eager to avoid two extremes: a community that is so rootless that any interpretation is deemed acceptable, and one that is so authoritarian that interpretations are too firmly drawn.

Even if confessional subscription is regarded as an imperfect system, it is what we have (and, as many have noted, it may well be one of the least problematic options available to Christian colleges and universities).

III. The Function of the Confessions as Orienting Center and Boundary Marker

The confessions have two primary functions with respect to academic freedom: a centering and a boundary function.¹⁰ These two functions are succinctly noted by a recent observer of Calvin College, Robert Benne, who comments that the *Form of Subscription* “not only sets dogmatic boundaries, but also delineates a particular way of thinking and seeing.”¹¹ These functions are related, but distinct from the function of the documents during the time in which they were written. That is, while confessions may have been written in particular historical circumstances to combat particular heresies and testify to particular aspects of the gospel, they perform a different function once they are adopted by a denomination or a college as an ongoing doctrinal standard.

A. The Confessions as an Orienting Center or Common Point-of-View

The *Form of Subscription* which all Calvin faculty sign includes the following: “We promise therefore to teach these doctrines diligently, to defend them faithfully, and not to contradict them, publicly or privately, directly or indirectly, in our preaching, teaching, or writing.” Over the course of Calvin’s history, one of the primary ways this has been worked out is through an integrative approach to teaching and learning. Confessional subscription entails a commitment to approach all topics from a perspective or point-of-view articulated in the confessions. The convictions articulated in the confessions offer a robust biblical perspective which has implications for every area of human endeavor.

¹⁰ There is a moderately large literature on the nature of the confessions and what it means to be a confessing church (e.g., *Calvin Seminary Forum*, Spring 2008). There are a few sources on the nature of confessional subscription (e.g., H. De Moor, *Equipping the Saints* [Kampen, 1986], 57-77, 309-313; Jaroslav Pelikan, “Confessional Subscription as Legal Compliance,” in *Credo* [Yale University Press, 2003], 264-273). There is far less literature on the relationship between confessional subscription and academic freedom, in part because very few Christian colleges link confessional subscription and academic freedom (e.g., Joel Carpenter, “Holding with Confessions,” *Perspectives* [Oct. 1999]: 17-18).

¹¹ Robert Benne, *Quality with Soul: How Six Premiere Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Eerdmans, 2001), 102-103.

The adverbs in the statement (“diligently,” “faithfully”) are important. Signing entails an eagerness to pursue this perspectival learning. Signing the *Form of Subscription* as a grudging concession is a denial of the *Form of Subscription’s* tone and language. So Calvin faculty, for example, honor Christ's lordship in all matters, honor the authority of scripture, and promote human acts that “arise out of true faith, conform to God's law, and are done for God's glory” (HC). We might speak of this perspectival function using optical metaphors (e.g., “our vision needs to be sharpened,” “astigmatisms need to be corrected”) or through other images (e.g., “the confessions are a nourishing center of our communal life”).¹² Typically, the language here implies an outward orientation: we operate *from* or *through* a perspective or point-of-view grounded in the confessions as we turn our attention *toward* topics drawn from the full range of human learning. In exploring the full range of human experience, faculty will certainly acquaint students with many perspectives that are inconsistent with the confessions, but will do so from a perspective of adherence to the confessions.

When we speak of the confessions in this way, it is not helpful to speak in categorical terms of a given topic as being confessional or not. Rather, it is better to ask how a point of view grounded in the confessions shapes our approach to any given topic. On some topics, the confessions will rather explicitly shape the conclusions we draw. On others, the connection will be much more indirect (e.g., on which arguments help us decide on the value of a given economic or philosophical theory).¹³ On many technical questions, a confessional perspective may make no noticeable difference (e.g., on the functions of a dominant chord in music) though it may shape how we would describe the significance of those questions and their relationship to other fields of knowledge. Indeed, the confessions do not dictate a specific outcome to many of the questions which faculty explore in their research and teaching. The confessions do not address every topic, but at Calvin, we address every topic from a scriptural Christ-centered point-of-view, which is articulated in the confessions.

For this reason, many faculty members develop a confessionally-grounded perspective without frequent explicit reference to confessions, choosing instead to draw on the same Biblical texts and themes that inspired the confessions in the first place, as well as on the contributions of theorists, artists, theologians, and others who work in ways that are consistent with the confessions. Many of these resources will, in fact, come from beyond the Reformed tradition. In this way, the confessions function as a kind of “fundamental” articulation of core commitments rather than a comprehensive statement of Christian responses to all topics. At the same time, given the particular status of the confessions in the *Form of Subscription*, it is important for Calvin faculty to be aware of which specific confessional claims are especially pertinent to their own work. In many cases, they may well offer faculty access to a rich vein of theological resources.

¹² Kevin van Hoozer proposes an image from the world of theater, speaking of confessions as “dramaturgical traditions that preserve precious insights into the canonical script” (*The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* [Westminster John Knox Press, 2005], 253).

¹³ Indeed, on some questions, people taking opposite sides on a given debate may each make arguments that are based on scripture and are consistent with the confessions. The Bible and the confessions do not provide a definitive approach to several contested economic and political claims in the Christian community.

There is also a danger that confessional subscription can foster an unhealthy Reformed triumphalism. This is why it is important to remember that many confessional claims are not unique to the Reformed tradition, including a substantial number of the claims that most directly inform ongoing teaching and research. At the same time, there are instances where Reformed angularities can factor quite prominently in how we approach an issue. For example, the Reformed tradition's high view of the ascension has been a resource in recent faculty publications. Indeed, the Reformed tradition provides an especially strong context in which to pursue academic callings, and that strength is carried, in part, through confessional subscription.

This confessional form of perspectival teaching and research does not emerge without care. It needs to be practiced.¹⁴ This is, in part, why the college instituted the Kuiper Seminar, requires faith-and-learning statements, and funds perspectival scholarship through CCCS. The confessions are, of course, only one resource to help us hone this perspectival vision. We also have the *Contemporary Testimony*, commentaries on the confessions, publications in nearly all disciplines that arise out of Reformed confessional commitments, and statements and confessional documents from a variety of other Reformed bodies around the world.

It is important to stress that this process is an academic undertaking. It is a process driven by questions, pursuing topics that are often filled with ambiguity. The undertaking involves give-and-take, frank disagreement, and occasionally dramatic shifts in frameworks of understanding. In this process, some of us use technical argumentation, some write satire, others create poetry or novels or sculptures, still others write devotionally. We engage works that are both pious and blasphemous, deeply orthodox and subtly heterodox. Controversial topics may sometimes cause us to suspend judgment or speak prophetically, to empathize with opponents and be self-critical of friends. All of this work is spiritually dangerous, though no less dangerous than avoiding this kind of activity.

Calvin faculty members spend most days working at this task: pursuing teaching and learning in a way that exercises academic freedom from a Reformed point-of-view. We do so within an ethos of freedom: we freely choose to sign the *Form of Subscription*, and we freely work to address the world from a confessional perspective. We also do so as members of Reformed congregations, participating in communities who strive, however imperfectly, to live out these confessional commitments. All of this already happens, never perfectly, but often with great vigor. This positive, constructive mode of engagement with the living tradition should continue to be nurtured and strengthened.¹⁵

¹⁴ Charles Taylor offers a fruitful set of categories to develop this, as he describes the interplay of "rules" and "practices." See "To Follow a Rule," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Harvard U. Press, 1995), 178-180. As Taylor's essay probes the significance of unformulated background understanding, communal acts of interpretation, and formulated rules, it offers a particularly interesting framework in which to think about how confessional subscription, church membership requirements, the Christian schooling requirement, and faculty development programs promise to sustain the mission and ethos at Calvin College.

¹⁵See Joel Carpenter, "The Perils of Prosperity: Neo-Calvinism and the Future of Religious Colleges," in Paul J. Dovre, ed., *The Future of Religious Colleges* (Eerdmans, 2002).

B. The Confessions as Boundaries or Standards

When necessary, confessional commitments function *as a boundary* to limit academic freedom.¹⁶ Apart from issuing a formal gravamen which expresses disagreement with the confessions, Calvin faculty are not free to argue, for example, that the resurrection of Jesus did not happen, or that God did not create the earth.¹⁷ We often speak about this boundary function using metaphors of legal infringement: the boundaries need to be “enforced.” We might also speak of these boundaries in covenantal terms: to have made a covenantal commitment to one community means living within the boundaries established by that community.

When we speak of the confessions as boundaries, it is possible to speak of a given argument or position as being “consistent with the confessions” or “not consistent with the confessions” (a commonly used phrase in CRC synodical deliberations). For example, to assert that the resurrection of Jesus did not happen would be beyond the bounds of the confessions; it would be “not consistent with the confessions.” From this perspective, it would be better to speak of a *position* on an issue rather than an *issue or topic* itself as being confessional. Some topics are directly addressed by the confessions (e.g., the resurrection of Jesus). Others, though not explicitly addressed in the confessions, can still be approached from a confessional point of view (e.g., abortion, warfare, economic justice). Some positions on *each* of these topics may be judged to be “consistent with the confessions;” others may be judged to be “inconsistent with the confessions.” This is similar to the language of the faculty handbook which speaks of Calvin faculty members teaching, speaking, and writing “in harmony with the confessions” (3.6.1.1).

It is true that there are many topics that are not associated with an explicit confessional boundary, and others that are. But given that we are committed to approach every topic from a confessionally-grounded point-of-view and that many topics which are not explicitly named in the confessions nevertheless give rise to positions that may or not be consistent with the confessions, it is advisable to minimize, if not eliminate, the categorical use of the term “confessional.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Lee Hardy, “The Value of Limitations,” *Academe Online* (Jan.-Feb., 2006).

¹⁷ A “gravamen” is a kind of ecclesiastical communication regarding problems with confessional subscription. Even when they hold a position that appears to be clearly outside the boundaries, Calvin faculty members are free to state their position, but in a formal gravamen (see the Form of Subscription and the Supplement to Church Order article 5). There are two types of gravamina: “a *confessional-difficulty gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession but does not call for a revision of the confessions, and a *confessional-revision gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber makes a specific recommendation for revision of the confessions.” A brief history of gravamina in the CRC includes those of D. H. Kromminga (1945) on premillennialism, Clarence Boersma (1952) on the Belgic Confession, Harry Boer (1977, resolved in 1980, 1981) on reprobation. For Harry Boer’s account, see *The Doctrine of Reprobation in the Christian Reformed Church* (Eerdmans, 1983).

¹⁸ The categorical use of the term “confessional” is reinforced by the use of the term “*status confessionis*” to describe significant confessional moments. See, for example, Eugene Teselle, “How Do We Recognize a *Status Confessionis*?” *Theology Today* 45.1 (1988): 71-78; Joachim Guhrt, “*Status Confessionis*: The Witness of a Confessing Church,” *Reformed World* 37 (December 1983), pp. 301-8; D. J. Smit, “What Does *Status Confessionis* Mean?” *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church*, ed. G. D. Cloete and D. J. Smit (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 7-32; Milan Opocënsky, “Processus Confessionis,” in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, ed. Wallace M. Alston and Michael Welker (Eerdmans, 2003), 385-397. Many of these articles discuss the complications of this categorical use of the term. In the context of this document, the term “*status confessionis*” could be understood to mean that “a topic of great weight or

In this view, it is problematic to assert that that a topic like homosexuality is either confessional or not. This statement is understandable in that the topic is not explicitly addressed in the confessions. Yet some positions regarding homosexual relationships clearly fall outside the confessional boundaries (they are “inconsistent with the confessions”), some fall within the boundaries (they are “consistent with the confessions”), and some may be disputed. For example, some Christian proponents of gay marriage themselves point out that some Christian defenses of gay marriage violate scriptural teaching. Further, some proponents of gay marriage would repudiate the confessions, and build their case on very different doctrinal positions. To avoid the confusion caused by the categorical use of the term “confessional,” it would be best to avoid the categorical phrases “confessional” and “not confessional,” and ask instead “in what way do the confessions bear on a given topic?” and “what positions may be consistent with or inconsistent with the confessions?”

There are several reasons why boundaries are important.¹⁹ First, the confessions make claims about topics that are of central importance to the Christian faith. Several claims made by some Christians today (including some people who might identify with the broad Reformed tradition) either contradict or are inconsistent with the confessions and should be simply out-of-bounds at Calvin College: the claim that God is not sovereign, the claim that the Trinity is a fourth-century invention that offers a fundamentally distorted view of divine life, the idea that resurrection of Jesus was not an historical fact in any sense. This does not mean that these ideas should not be studied; but it does mean that faculty members are not free to advance them apart from issuing a gravamen.

Second, stating boundaries explicitly serves the community by warning of possible danger, much like an ordinance which prevents people from swimming in riptides. Such a rule is not necessary if everyone always exercises good judgment and is an expert swimmer. Still, because our capacities vary and judgment is often clouded, articulating the rule is well-advised. It alerts swimmers that to persist in swimming entails risk of danger. So a confessional boundary regarding the significance of the resurrection, for example, functions to alert members of the community to pay special attention when discussing views that minimize its importance. The language about chastity (*Heidelberg Catechism* QA 108-109) functions at minimum to make us very aware of any position we might take about sexual expression that erodes the link between sexuality and holiness.

Third, naming specific boundaries is necessary for the same reason that due process requirements are necessary: they are institutional processes for effectively responding to problems that inevitably arise. The reason we ultimately need them is because of our own imperfections, and the ways that individual judgments can go awry. They are, in part, an institutional response to the effects of the fall. To deny that we need boundaries is to deny

significance promises to undermine confessional integrity, requiring institutional action to define confessional boundaries.”

¹⁹The history of Christianity attests to wise use of boundary language: a) the famous Chalcedonian statement of Christology—that Jesus’ two natures are unified “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation”—is an instructive example of how theological language can protect against heresy while not claiming to define inexhaustible mystery; and b) the term “Canons” of Dort means, literally, a “measuring stick.”

the limitations in knowledge and perspective that we all share. To choose a dramatic example, the declaration that the theological defense of apartheid was a heresy was a boundary-setting act that was necessary because of a profound error in judgment.

Fourth, care for boundaries can, under the right circumstances, establish and nurture trust. The confessions are a sign of unity and identity for a broader community. Confessional boundaries need care—whether we specify them, reinforce them, add to them, or adjust them—for the simple reason that church unity needs to be actively tended. When we think about any specific topic, our concern should be with addressing a constituency of 5,000 faculty, staff, and students on campus, 60,000 alumni, 260,000 people in the CRC, and several hundred thousand others around the world with whom we enjoy some kind of relationship. No one person, and no group of a hundred people, has the capacity to keep up with every contested issue. We trust each other to each be stewards of certain concerns and areas of discourse. We trust each other to work in an area, to test boundaries when necessary, and to call attention to boundaries that need to be re-examined. Tending boundaries transparently and forthrightly builds trust.

Fifth, boundaries function to protect faculty from restrictions on academic freedom that are imposed from points-of-view that fall outside the confessions. As Lee Hardy summarizes, boundaries “guarantee that positions formally consistent with those boundaries, and taken in good scholarly conscience, are not marginalized by political means. . . The creeds may function as a tether, but they must also serve as barricade.”²⁰ Charges of confessional unorthodoxy are only allowable on the basis of the confessions, and not on the basis of extra-confessional convictions or attitudes.

This concern for boundaries fits well with theological discussions of freedom, particularly in the Augustinian and Reformed tradition. This view contends that to be free is *not* to be unfettered and able to do or say whatever we want. Indeed, Augustine describes that scenario as the very essence of sinful brokenness. In contrast, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards, among others, articulate what is sometimes described as a “positive” account of freedom. On this account, we are free when we are enabled and empowered to do the good—that is, when we are “fettered” to true claims which orient us toward the good and when we are formed to be people disposed to that good.²¹

In sum, the confessions articulate both the center and the boundaries of our common work as disciples of Jesus. Sometimes the two functions of the confessions (the perspectival and the boundary functions) are overlaid with other metaphors associated with the ethos or communication style of a given community. The first is associated with a “truth seeking understanding” mode, the second with a “faith-defending” mode. While this is an apt

²⁰ Hardy, 8.

²¹ See Henry Stob, *The Christian Concept of Freedom* (Eerdmans, 1957): “human freedom can never be described simply as exemption from restraint, but only adjectivally as exemption from ‘undue’ restraint. . . The liberal notion of freedom is negative; it is freedom from. For the Calvinist it is positive; it is freedom for. For the secularist, freedom is an end. For the Calvinist it is a means. . . We know, therefore, that the question of freedom is never rightly put until one asks, What Lord do you acknowledge? To what do you tie yourself?” (31-32). See also Henry Stob, “Academic Freedom at a Christian College,” in *Theological Reflections* (Eerdmans, 1981), 240-243, and William Cavanaugh, “Sailing Under True Colors: Academic Freedom and the Ecclesially Based University,” in *Conflicting Allegiances: The Church-Based University in a Liberal Democratic Society*, Michael J. Budde and John Wright, eds., (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004): 31-52.

sociological and historical description of two broad types of denominations and colleges in the recent past, it can quickly become a false dichotomy. It would be unfortunate if this sociology and history became determinative for us. A confessional perspective leads naturally to both kinds of discourse. Indeed, both modes are called for and modeled by biblical texts. The challenge is to create a culture in which there is a healthy mix of both modes of discourse.

IV. The Organic Nature of Confessional Boundaries

One of the largest challenges in creating such a culture concerns the definition of the boundaries. The exact nature of these boundaries is sometimes ambiguous, and sometimes contested.²² Sometimes this is because the confessions are not as precise as are current discussions of a given topic. Sometimes this is because the church community—wisely or unwisely, intentionally or unwittingly—tolerates or welcomes a certain range of opinion about a given topic. This is as it should be: the documents are “living documents,” much like the U.S. Constitution.²³ Ultimately, the operative confessional boundaries are those particular boundaries which a community chooses to enforce. Because they are the documents of the church, the church has the authority and responsibility to see that the documents are functioning in a healthy way and to make final judgments about boundaries when necessary. The *CRC Church Order Supplement* acknowledges this:

2. The subscriber does not by subscription to the confessions declare that these doctrines are all stated in the best possible manner, or that the standards of our church cover all that the Scriptures teach on the matters confessed. Nor does the subscriber declare that every teaching of the Scriptures is set forth in our confessions, or that every heresy is rejected and refuted by them. 3. A subscriber is only bound by subscription to those doctrines which are confessed, and is not bound to the references, allusions, and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines nor to the theological deductions which some may draw from the doctrines set forth in the confessions. However, no one is free to decide for one’s self or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in.²⁴

²² At times this point is made by the phrase “messy boundaries.” Yet this can convey to some the sense that that the boundaries are unimportant, or that our confessional commitments are spineless. While there certainly are almost inevitable inconsistencies in a large community, it is important to remember that we are dealing with an organic body of diverse individuals. At other times we may speak of “gray areas.”

²³ The metaphor “organic” and the phrase “living document” convey a) that the claims made by the confessions are understood to be true assertions today just as they were when the document was written, b) that the resonances of particular claims inevitably change in light of a changing cultural context, c) that this confessional tradition is amendable, through a range of possible synodical actions. These terms also resist two opposite errors: a) the notion that we are today bound by every assumption of the original writers of the confessional documents (e.g, their views of science, race and ethnicity, gender), and b) a view which suggests that the historical distance between when the document were written and today makes their meaning inaccessible or passé.

²⁴ *CRC Church Order Supplement*, article 5. For similar caveats among conservative Presbyterians, see Charles Hodge, “What is Meant by Adopting the Westminster Confession?” in A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (1869, reprinted, Banner of Truth, 1992), 420-422. For further explanation, see Report 38, *1976 Agenda for Synod*, 408-449.

This paragraph confirms this organic understanding, affirming both an ongoing discussion about which references, allusions and remarks are incidental to a given doctrine as well as the importance of submission to the assemblies of the church. This paragraph is a strong clue about the operative philosophy of confessional subscription in the CRC. There have been intense debates about the nature of confessional subscription in almost every generation since the Reformation.²⁵ The CRC was, in fact, founded in the context of a dispute about the nature of confessional subscription.²⁶

On the spectrum of views about confessional subscription, the CRC has avoided two extremes: a) the view that subscription binds us to the exact wording and inherent philosophical assumptions of each confessional article, and b) the view that the confessions are merely “points of departure” or “reference points” for discussion. This approach assumes that confessional subscription entails a commitment to a set of convictions and to practices which are consistent with them, but also that signers are not bound by every assumption or implicit philosophical conviction of the sixteenth century, nor to incidental details or the exact wording of every article. So those who promote making the Belgic Confession a matter of subscription in the CRC do so out of the conviction that confessions matter, and this is the reason why they urge the church today to place its rejection of racism on a confessional footing. But the same people would not insist that confessional subscription binds us, for example to the assertion that Paul wrote Hebrews (*Belgic Confession*, article 4).²⁷

This conversation about approaches to confessional subscription can be sustained at a level of detail that would rival typologies of theories about contemporary constitutional interpretation, literary criticism, or biblical hermeneutics. The subject has generated a surprisingly large bibliography in both Reformed and Lutheran circles, including a wide variety of terms to describe various positions. These terms can be charted on a spectrum that ranges from strict to lenient views of subscription.²⁸

²⁵ See, for example, David W. Hall, ed., *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, second ed. (Covenant Foundation 2001).

²⁶ See, for example, R. C. Janssen, *By This Our Subscription: Confessional Subscription in the Dutch Reformed Tradition Since 1816* (Kampen 2009), Donald Sinnema, “The Origin of the Form of Subscription in the Dutch Reformed Tradition,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 42 (2007): 256-282; John Van Engen, “The Problem of Tradition in the Christian Reformed Church,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 20 (1985): 69-89, 1976.

²⁷ Other matters that have been judged not to be weighty include the 1) judgment of Judas and Simon the Sorcerer described in Belgic Confession article 35, 2) the specific division of the law in Heidelberg Catechism QA 93, 3) the use of Gen. 1:26-26 as a proof text for the Trinity in Belgic Confession article 9, and 4) the selective use of certain biblical manuscripts or translations of I John 5:7 as a Trinitarian proof text in Belgic Confession article 9, and 5) whether the relationship of body and soul in a human person is an apt analogy for the relationship of Jesus’ divine and human nature (Athanasian Creed). See discussion in Janssen, 378, 380.

²⁸ This chart includes a wide variety of terms used in Presbyterian and Lutheran circles in several countries. The strongest debates emerge between proponents of various terms within a given column. For more, see Janssen, *By This Our Subscription*, Hall, *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, and Erik T. R. Samuelson, “Roadmaps to Grace: Five Types of Lutheran Confessional Subscription,” *Dialog* 45.2 (Summer 2006): 157-172.

This middle way also acknowledges that an implicit hierarchy of boundaries emerges over time. Some matters are “weightier” than others (cf Matt 23:23). The strongest boundaries are those concerning fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, articulated in the ecumenical creeds. Other boundaries remain around uniquely Reformed doctrines or approaches. Still, the *Form of Subscription* binds us not only to the ecumenical creeds, but also to the Reformed confessions. Healthy boundaries with respect to Reformed doctrines need to be maintained with integrity and transparency, but also with humility and an abiding commitment to the catholicity of the church—which is, indeed, a primary Reformed confession. The middle way also means that there is an ongoing process of communal discernment around which boundaries to enforce and in what way—a process that is both necessary and complex.

This process of communal discernment is inevitably messy. It involves many people making judgments, often on the basis of different motives, assumptions, and goals. It involves the work of successive deliberative bodies (e.g., synods, boards of trustees) comprised of people with a range of sensibilities, institutional memory, ecumenical experience, and capacity for biblical exegesis.

The process can also be instructive and even sanctifying. By working together to discern the meaning and implications of the scripture for our life together, we practice what it means to be bound together as part of the body of Christ.

Nevertheless, some despair that this process of communal enforcement and boundary determination will ultimately be arbitrary and political. Yet it would not be fair to dismiss this communal interpretation as entirely unworkable. When faced with prior discussion about the role of government, a posture toward Anabaptists, and a Reformed assessment of Roman Catholic eucharistic theology, the CRC has altered the presentation of the text of the confessions, placing certain passages in the footnotes. When given an opportunity to add a confession related to an especially crucial topic (e.g., *the Belhar Confession*), the CRC has moved to actively consider that possibility. On other issues, such as the exact formulation of the doctrine of divine election or divine simplicity, the church welcomes or tolerates a range of opinion. On still other issues, the whole church can unwittingly move beyond the confessions, and the confessions can be invoked as a way of bringing the church back to a common understanding or set of practices.³⁵ Any individual, congregation, classis, or agency that believes that the boundaries are too unclear or that they have been too narrowly or laxly enforced can ask for a clarification. Thus, even though they have not always been perfectly utilized, we do have processes in place to address challenges that may arise.

Sometimes boundary setting is associated with unhealthy and destructive fear: fear of change, or fear of the unknown. Indeed, some boundaries have been defined or enforced because of unhealthy fear. Yet boundary making or enforcing is not *necessarily* the result of unhealthy fear. Some fear may be healthy. It is healthy to fear losing something good, right, and true when there is a real danger that such loss may occur. Further, some boundary setting is driven not by fear, but by moral courage. It was an act of moral

³⁵ Several theologians, for example, have argued that the church over time set aside a confessional sacramental theology for a form of Zwinglian memorialism. In some cases, the confessions have been helpful in pulling the church back toward a confessional theology.

courage when some South African denominations declared that the theological defense of apartheid crossed a confessional boundary. Often, an act of boundary-making or enforcement is the result of mixed motives, and often our attribution of motives is governed by our prior point of view. What seems like courage to some seems like fear to others, and vice versa.

Boundary Setting and Appropriate Degrees of Tolerance

At times there may be wisdom in tolerating a certain level of ambiguity or disagreement, times in which drawing a very clear boundary would be counter-productive. Engineers who design bridges, for example, specify dimensions for materials along with tolerances, indicating the amount of variation that is acceptable without compromising the design. At some point, the amount of variation will compromise the design (e.g., the truss is too long and will not fit in the bridge or the truss is too thin and will not support the weight it was designed for). The topic of divorce is one example where the church has, in practice, chosen to live with some measure of ambiguity. Some discussions of creation and science have been strengthened by holding off a rush to judgment about the exact nature of a boundary. John Calvin himself called for tolerance for a certain range of views about the exact way Christians speak about what happens to the soul at the time of death.³⁶

An appropriate level of tolerance strengthens the common good. Lee Hardy explains “by tolerating that which we disagree with, we seek to protect an end against inappropriate means for attaining it.” Further, some level of tolerance is absolutely necessary given the finite capacity of human beings, including the writers of the confessions, all faculty members, and any ecclesiastical or administrative unit. As Hardy explains, “If it is the duty of professors at a Reformed university to root out error in the Reformed tradition, then it is also the duty of the Reformed university to grant them the permission to do so. To suppress all critical discussion of the creeds at the institutional level would be to adopt means that work against the end of having true belief on matters religious. A church-related institution of higher learning should encourage reflection within certain religious boundaries and reflection upon those religious boundaries.”³⁷ What is needed is what Presbyterian theologian Benjamin Warfield once described as “all reasonable liberty with all reasonable strictness.”³⁸

The urge to invoke a confessional boundary as a means of forcing a community to conform is tempting on both the left and right. How do we avoid the twin temptations: to fail to enforce boundaries on the one hand and to set them too quickly on the other? We work together, over time, with the best available resources, according to duly established processes. Discerning when to articulate and defend a boundary is difficult at best. When a boundary question does arise, it is answered through duly established processes over

³⁶ *Institutes* IV.1.10.

³⁷ Hardy, 5-6.

³⁸ *Presbyterian Review*, 10.40 (Oct. 1889), 656-657, in a discussion of confessional subscription. The 1986 statement “The Confessional Nature of the Church,” by the Presbyterian Church USA, concludes with these words: “Difficult as it is to find the way between church authority without personal freedom or personal freedom without church authority, a distinctive mark of the Reformed tradition is the belief that it is only by seeking this difficult way that the church can be a united community of Christians who are both ‘reformed and always being reformed’” (Section 29.154-155).

time—a process that inevitably involves discussion, disagreement, and dialogue, and that must be transparent and widespread enough to generate significant buy-in over time.

Specific Boundaries at Calvin College and in the CRC

There are many examples of how more-or-less clear boundaries operate in the CRC at large, and also often at Calvin in particular, even on very divisive and challenging topics. For example,

- defending the idea that texts in the Bible are similar to other ancient documents does not cross a line, advocating that that Bible is not uniquely inspired would cross a line;
- defending the idea that Jesus' resurrection was different from a medical resuscitation would be common, but advocating that Jesus did not rise physically from the dead would cross a line;
- arguing that euthanasia on demand is morally acceptable would cross a (generally accepted) line, while calling for the withholding of life-preserving treatment in some circumstances does not, nor would wrestling with the way Christian moral claims should factor into civil policy in a pluralistic society;
- defending evolutionary theory in biology does not cross a line, while promoting philosophical naturalism or denying that God created the world crosses a line;
- defending pacifism does not cross a line, despite the CRC's stated position endorsing a version of the just war theory;
- defending or opposing affirmative action may not cross a line, but defending arbitrary racial profiling practices would cross a line in light of the Bible's clear teaching about how human persons are created in God's image;
- arguing that abortion on demand is morally acceptable would cross a line, while wrestling with how to best think about the beginning of life does not, nor would wrestling with the way Christian moral claims should factor into civil policy in a pluralistic society;
- arguing that a "social Darwinist" position regarding the poor and vulnerable is consistent with Christian moral claims would cross a line, but arguing for changes in welfare policy on the grounds that churches should do more for the poor voluntarily does not, nor would wrestling with the complexity of providing charity or defining justice in a secular society.

In each of these cases, it is not problematic for faculty to describe each of the positions, and to engage students in vigorous debates about them. But in each of these cases, it would be problematic if faculty advocated a position that is not consistent with the confessions and their high view of scriptural authority. To be sure, this distinction can become complicated, especially because what is said in the classroom is not always what is heard. At times, the description of a position can be heard as advocacy of that position. This is an inevitable challenge of life together, and we must rigorously protect space for accurate presentations of various points-of-view, even as we work together for confessional integrity.

Further, each of these issues has a different history with respect to confessional subscription. Some have been very controversial, some not. Some have been handled in ways that build trust, others not. Some of these issues have been discussed broadly, but

without any discussion of whether certain positions cross a confessional boundary (e.g., euthanasia). In some cases, the community appears to be working with broad consensus without any need for articulating a precise definition. Some of these issues have been discussed very specifically in terms of a confessional boundary (e.g., creation and science).³⁹ While the CRC Synods have not often rendered specific judgments about confessional boundaries, there are instances in which Synod has specifically stated that some positions cross a confessional boundary,⁴⁰ and others in which Synod has declared that competing positions on a contested issue are each consistent with the confessions and thus do not cross a confessional boundary (e.g., women's ordination).⁴¹ Taken together, these examples show that some positions on some issues can be contrary to the confessions even if Synod has not specifically declared them to be contrary, some are known to be contrary without the need for synodical action; some boundaries remain constant across cultures and historical periods, others may shift because of changing contexts. At times, a particular boundary has been very clearly and painstakingly articulated (e.g., the Board of Trustees' 1991 report on Howard Van Til's work on faith and science). More often, some ambiguity is tolerated. That ambiguity should not be viewed as the absence of a boundary, only the absence of an articulated boundary. The boundary may be unarticulated because it has never been questioned, or because it cannot be determined with confidence. Here we must be very careful to extend grace and hospitality particularly to new members of the community who may inadvertently step on these boundaries. This also points to a tension around the explicit naming of boundaries. On the one hand, it is unwise to state boundaries prematurely; on the other, unstated assumptions can so easily lead to inhospitality.

Finally, it is important to note that there are implicit boundaries at stake with respect to a range of controversial topics, and that these boundaries affect both the "right" and "left" of the political or ideological spectrum. This is why it is in everyone's best interest not to settle for either a general neglect of boundaries or for a culture of overly zealous boundary enforcement.

CRC Synodical Statements on Ethical and Doctrinal Issues

Over the past several decades, the CRC has issued several statements and reports on significant doctrinal and ethical issues (<http://www.crcna.org/pages/positions.cfm>). These statements do not automatically serve as boundary markers for academic freedom unless they are approved as an official interpretation of a confessional document.⁴² Yet these

³⁹ In 1991, Synod ruled that some formulations of the origins of the cosmos are inconsistent with the confessions, affirmed the need for continuing research, and offered pastoral guidelines for how that work could best be discussed (*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 762-768, 773-777). The *Acts of Synod* can be found in the Calvin library at BX6820.A3. An index of past synodical decisions can be found at BX6820.A32 2001. Electronic editions of all synodical materials since 1999, including the Rules for Synodical Procedure and the CRC Church Order can be found at <http://www.crcna.org/pages/synodical.cfm>.

⁴⁰ The CRC Synod in 1974 declared that "Anyone who holds the second-blessing teaching is thereby disqualified for the office." The reference here is to those who hold the teaching that baptism in or with the Holy Spirit is a second blessing distinct from and usually received after conversion" (*Acts of Synod 1974*, p. 31).

⁴¹ *Acts of Synod 1988, 1989.*

⁴² *Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44. The Synod of 1926 did specifically say that certain statements about the Lord's Day "are to be regarded as an interpretation of our confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1926, 191-192*).

statements are useful for the college in several ways. First, these reports are a resource for learning. They offer an interpretation of scripture on the topic at hand, establishing a kind of benchmark for work on a given topic. Those who disagree with a given document, especially one which explains “the clear teaching of scripture,” need to demonstrate that an alternative position is based on an equally tenable interpretation of scripture consistent with the confessions. Second, they are useful for helping faculty understand the constituency of the college. Third, they are case studies in approaching complex issues from a confessionally informed point-of-view. Calvin College’s own expanded mission statement describes the role that these documents play as follows:

Over the years the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church has enacted many such decisions that guide the teaching, scholarship, and daily living at the college. For example, Synod investigated and established a position on life issues well before the landmark *Roe v. Wade* case of 1973. Synod established decisive moral views on how we are to consider people of other cultures and racial backgrounds, and thereby has identified and condemned the racism prevalent in our culture. Synod adopted a resolution on pornography and sexuality that addresses a major moral concern in society. These positions grant a common reference point for the frequently more pluralistic views found at the college. Thereby Synod has established a structure for the college within which further debate may occur (*Expanded Mission Statement*, I.C.).

Third, these documents may help the college in determining institutional policy. This brings us to a complex decision issued by Synod in 1975 about the status of synodical actions. This decision includes both of these assertions:

“Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters are subordinate to the confessions, and they ‘shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order’ [*Church Order*, art. 29]. All office-bearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances.”

“The confessions and synodical pronouncements have nuances of differences. They differ in the extent of their jurisdiction, in the nature of their authority, in the distinction of their purposes, in the measure of agreement expected, and in their use and function. The use and function of synodical decisions are explicitly or implicitly indicated by the wording of the particular decision itself:

- 1) When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confession, this is its use and function,
- 2) when a synodical decision involves pronouncements that are related to the confessions or go beyond the confessions, the use and function of such decisions is to further express the faith of the church without such statements thereby becoming additions to the confessions,
- 3) when a synodical decision involves adjudication of a certain issue, this is its particular use and function although the decision may have doctrinal and ethical implications for the future,
- 4) when a synodical decision is expressed in the form of a testimony or letter, this is its use and function,

- 5) when a synodical decision is expressed as a guideline for further study or action, this is its use and function,
- 6) when a synodical decision is set forth as pastoral advice to churches or individuals, this is its use and function.”

At the same time, while it is important to realize that synodical statements do not automatically become boundaries for academic freedom, it is also important to realize that the topics which they address may well have boundaries associated with them. Many of these are often unarticulated or untested, usually because there has been no need for them to become explicit. For example, the CRC statement on abortion does not explicitly state a boundary. Yet there would almost certainly be widespread consensus that defending the claim that abortion on demand is morally acceptable would cross a line. In other words, there is an operative, if unstated boundary.⁴³

Ecclesiastical Freedom in the CRC

Throughout the history of the CRC, there has been a strong tradition of what might be called “ecclesiastical freedom”—the freedom to disagree with positions of the CRC, and the freedom to challenge interpretations of the confessions, and even to challenge the confessions themselves. Such freedom was exercised by people, including Calvin faculty, who argued for the alteration of how the confessional materials on the Roman Catholic Mass, the Anabaptist tradition, and the role of church and state are presented in CRC publications (the CRC has moved some of the historic texts to footnotes, and provided explanatory notes with other materials).⁴⁴

Synod itself has noted this freedom by commenting, in response to an academic freedom case at Calvin College, that Article 29 of the CRC Church Order “does not preclude faculty discussion, debate, or disagreement with the substance of a synodical decision or position taken.”⁴⁵ In practice, there is tension between this tradition of ecclesiastical freedom, even with respect to the confessions, and the *Form of Subscription* which says:

We declare, moreover, that we not only reject all errors that militate against this doctrine, and particularly those which were condemned by the above-mentioned Synod, but that we are disposed to refute and contradict these and to exert ourselves in keeping the Church free from such errors. And, if, hereafter, any difficulties or different sentiments respecting the aforesaid doctrines should arise in our minds, *we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach, or defend the same, either by teaching or writing, until we have first revealed such*

⁴³ So while the CRC has not explicitly indicated that its position on homosexuality is “an interpretation of the confessions,” some positions on homosexual relationships are almost certainly “inconsistent with the confessions,” including some positions that various advocates for homosexual relationships themselves argue are not appropriate positions for Christians to hold.

⁴⁴ Indeed, this freedom for pastors has sometimes been invoked—by parties as disparate as Arminius and Herman Hoeksema—as *libertas prophetandi* (“the freedom of/for prophesying”). See, for example, Peter White, *Predestination, Policy and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 24; and Christoph Lüthy and Leen Spruit, “The Doctrine, Life, and Roman Trial of the Frisian Philosopher Henricus de Venro (1574?-1613),” *Renaissance Quarterly* 56 (Winter 2003): 1112–1151.

⁴⁵ *Acts of Synod 1996*, p. 528.

sentiments to the Curatorium [the Board of Trustees], under the penalty, in case of refusal, of being by that very fact suspended from our office.

Some Calvin faculty have expressed their “difficulties or different sentiments” when signing the *Form of Subscription*. But it is not a widely known practice for Calvin faculty to engage in this type of communication following their appointment. It may be constructive to imagine what kind of future practices would best ensure confessional integrity and make possible significant learning opportunities for our students and constituents.

At minimum, the *Form of Subscription* points us to an appropriate tone and strategy for expressions of ecclesiastical freedom. It suggests a strategy that begins by consulting with those in authority, and a tone of bold humility that cares enough about the confessions to raise difficult issues and, at the same time, is willing to submit to the judgment of the church.

V. Strengthening Confessional Commitments and Academic Freedom

Note: The material that follows describes the processes in HCL 2. It includes some sentences from the preface to HCL 2, which the community will not have access to (many of the HCL 2 recommendations will go into the faculty handbook, but the front material in HCL 2 will not).

A healthy culture of confessional subscription and academic freedom is dependent upon a climate of trust, transparency, mutual encouragement and accountability. In our work together, our standard mode of operation should be with high-trust communication patterns that presume good motives and confessional integrity on the part of all parties: faculty, administrators, and the Board of Trustees.⁴⁶ We need to honor each other by following due process scrupulously. We need to have sufficient processes in place not only for the large scale issues, but also for dealing with what seem like minor disagreements. Calvin constituents should be assured that Calvin faculty members are teaching and writing in ways that are consistent with the confessions. Calvin faculty should be able to trust that those who may assess their work will be doing so on the basis of discerning biblical reasoning, using established processes, deeply aware of Calvin’s policies on academic freedom.

⁴⁶ See Adrianna Kezar, “What is More Important to Effective Governance: Relationship, Trust, and Leadership, or Structures and Formal Processes,” and Myron L. Pope, “A Conceptual Framework of Faculty Trust and Participation in Governance,” in William G. Tierney and Vicente M. Lechuga, eds., *Restructuring Shared Governance in Higher Education* (Jossey Bass, 2004); D. Gambetta, *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1988); R. C. Mayer, J. H. Davis, and F. D. Schoorman, “An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust,” *Academy of Management Review* 20 (1995): 709-734; A. K. Misra, “Organizational Response to Crisis: The Centrality of Trust,” in R. Kramer and T. Tyler, eds., *Trust in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 1996); D. Rousseau, S. B. Sitkin, R. Burt, and C. Camerer, “Not So Different After All: A Cross-Discipline View of Trust,” *Academy of Management Review* 23.2 (1998): 393-404; R. B. Shaw, *Trust in the Balance: Building Successful Organizations on Results, Integrity, and Concerns* (Jossey Bass, 1997); and W. G. Tierney, “Organizational Culture in Higher Education,” *Journal of Higher Education* 59.1 (1988) 2-21; V. Braithwaite and M. Levi, eds., *Trust and Governance* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988).

This culture is, in turn, dependent upon both informal and formal practices which strengthen vibrant confessionally-grounded teaching and scholarship and which approach difficult issues at the boundaries with collegiality, wisdom, and discernment. As Nicholas Wolterstorff has suggested, “almost always it is in the procedure, not in the qualifications [of academic freedom] as such, that the injustice lies [when there is an infringement of academic freedom].”⁴⁷ Great care must be taken to avoid both over and under responding to specific situations.

First, the college needs to promote awareness and understanding of these policies. It does so through a clear description of these policies in the *Handbook for Teaching Faculty* and *Board of Trustees Handbook*, through sessions in faculty orientation, Board of Trustees orientation, the Kuiper Seminar, the faculty-staff conference, and through regularly scheduled board –faculty discussion sessions on academic freedom, planned by the Academic Freedom Subcommittee of PSC.

Second, the college promotes a confessionally-grounded perspectival approach to Christian teaching and learning through faculty faith and learning statements, the Kuiper seminar, faculty development opportunities, and through the initiatives of Calvin’s Centers and Institutes. In addition, some of the most generative work in encouraging vital confessionally-grounded scholarship happens in departmental colloquia, peer learning groups, book study groups, and many informal discussions among colleagues. Faculty members ask colleagues to read scholarly work prior to publication. They present public seminars to faculty and students, conduct adult education classes, and submit work for publication in peer-reviewed journals. Further, when students ask faculty members how their views square with scripture, when faculty members discuss their work with colleagues or review peer review comments, or when faculty hear from parents or constituents about their work, the process of accountability is in motion. The same process happens when a faculty member questions a commonly held opinion on a given subject. These encounters can be very challenging. But at their best, they can be invigorating and instructive.⁴⁸

Third, the college also strengthens this centering function in its response to any difficult, controversial, or misunderstood topic. When controversial topics arise, the college encourages collegial work on a series of common questions (see the *Handbook for Teaching Faculty*), including several questions related to biblical and theological faithfulness. The college welcomes those with questions or concerns about the implications of Calvin’s policies of confessional subscription and academic freedom for any specific topic or position to discuss the matter with their colleagues, department chair, and academic dean. When a topic warrants special consideration because of its prominence in cultural or church discussions, the frequency or quality of constituent complaints related to the topic,

⁴⁷ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Academic Freedom in Religiously Based Colleges and Universities,” 253.

⁴⁸ As Lee Hardy explains: “The real danger to academic freedom comes from the informal cultures of intolerance that can easily grow and embed themselves in any academic institution. They are sometimes subtle, and come in many forms: from a Board of Trustees that sees itself as an ideological agent of certain elements in the college’s constituency; to a President with a pronounced authoritarian streak; to a donor with lots of money and a political agenda; to a department dominated by a rigid party line; to faculty members quick to impute ignoble motives to those who disagree with them; to well-intentioned administrators eager to enforce the latest social orthodoxy. The real constraints on the freedom of inquiry are for the most part unofficial and informal, not institutional” (6).

or substantive differences of approach to the topic in the Christian community, the college can initiate a process for proactive reflection and common learning through its regular governance channels.

Fourth, these commitments are strengthened by Calvin's approach to constituent complaints. Calvin has a long history of responding to constituent complaints in ways that both honor the legitimacy of such communication from supporters of the college and protect academic freedom. While some complaints are based on misinformation which can be easily corrected and others are based on ill will, many are well-meant expressions of genuine concern for the college, often about a topic that is of current and vital interest for the Christian community. Calvin faculty, staff, and administrators have long realized that a complaint is often a fertile opportunity for teaching and learning: an opportunity for the college to learn from constituent responses and questions, to communicate the nature of work at the college, and to hone understanding about challenging topics. There is a fairly strong, if unwritten, set of best practices around these communications, developed over time by deans, provosts, department chairs, and others. These best practices include responding to complaints only from identified, not anonymous sources, consulting with those involved, and with experts on the topic of concern on a scale that is appropriate to the concern, looking for opportunities to explain the mission of the college, initiating, when possible, face-to-face conversations, which are often best for strengthening mutual understanding. As a result, college faculty members enjoy greater support than many colleagues at other institutions, secular or Christian.

Fifth, when difficult decisions do need to be made, particularly about the definition of confessional boundaries, the college is committed to a transparent set of procedures deeply grounded in both the best practices of institutional governance and Reformed polity. While individual persons are encouraged to engage with the confessions and discern how best to work in ways that are consistent with them, only duly constituted deliberative bodies may render authoritative judgments about the meaning of the confessions (*Church Order Supplements*, article 5). The confessions are documents that belong to the church. For the ongoing life and work of the CRC and its agencies and educational institutions, the authority to make binding judgments about the meaning and implications of the confessions is assigned to Synod. Under the authority of Synod, the church delegates authority with respect to the functioning of the confessions for the life of the college to the Board of Trustees (as is made clear in the particular version of the Form of Subscription which faculty members sign). The Board of Trustees, in turn, delegates authority to the college's governance system, in which decisions about personnel and confessional interpretation are assigned to PSC and in which Faculty Senate discusses, receives for information, endorses, or approves matters of college-wide significance depending on the nature of a specific action. Decisions of Synod, the Board of Trustees, and PSC are healthiest and have the strongest possibility for reception when they are generated through highly consultative, deliberative processes based on the most accurate information.

Sixth, healthy practices around academic freedom take into account the varying roles and functions of a faculty member beyond teaching and research. Many current discussions of academic freedom speak eloquently about protecting and enhancing rigorous, fair, balanced academic discourse. Yet many of the most challenging questions about faculty freedom relate to freedom for other kinds of activities. There may be very good arguments to protect freedoms for these other activities, but they often go unarticulated. There are several questions that warrant further attention. How does academic freedom apply to

advising and informal relationships? What are the implications of academic freedom for the work of professional colleagues on campus, many of whom have faculty status, who do not teach or conduct research? What about political advocacy in areas beyond a faculty member's primary area of competence? How does academic freedom relate to family and church life? How should confessional commitments shape creative work in the visual, musical, and literary arts? This question is addressed in the faculty handbook this way:

The Calvin College teacher is a citizen, a member of a learned profession, and a representative of Calvin College. When speaking as a citizen, the teacher should be free from institutional censorship or discipline unless his or her Christian character is compromised or Christian witness impaired. However, a special position in the church and in the community imposes special obligations. The Calvin College staff member should remember that the public will tend to judge the profession and the institution by his or her utterances. Therefore, he or she should be accurate at all times, exercise proper restraint, and respect the rights of others to express their opinions. The faculty member shall not attempt to politicize the institution in purely partisan matters, and shall dissociate the college from political activities. (3.6.4)

This paragraph signals the responsibility that faculty members have in exercising leadership in the Christian community.

Finally, in all matters related to confessional subscription and academic freedom, the college is committed to promoting practices of mutual encouragement and accountability, and honoring the unique insights and gifts of each member of the community. While difficult and controversial issues have the potential to become deeply personal, and painful, the college is committed to create the conditions in which disagreement—even about vitally important beliefs—does not generate personal animosity. The *Heidelberg Catechism* clearly and beautifully articulates this vision: “God's will is that I never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor join in condemning anyone without a hearing or without a just cause. Rather, in court and everywhere else, I should avoid lying and deceit of every kind; these are devices the devil himself uses, and they would call down on me God's intense anger. I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it. And I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor's good name” (HC 112).

Nurturing these practices over the years ahead will require forums for talking together about challenging issues, in which relationships can be developed, and through which our own discipleship can be sharpened. Indeed, one of the most important opportunities we have in the current situation is to imagine better, more transparent forms of high trust communication—communication that is not clouded by worries over the motives of others.⁴⁹ If we do not do this, the college becomes vulnerable to manipulation by the

⁴⁹ Ed Ericson, Jr. offers an interesting comparison regarding this point: “In my observation, those institutions which show the greatest difficulty in handling issues of academic freedom are the ones which grow out of churches with a Congregationalist, as opposed to a Presbyterian, form of church government. (Or, if these terms are not to one's taste, try ‘doctrinalist-statement’ college versus college in a confessional tradition). Though both lodge final authority in a Board of Trustees, in the ‘congregationalist’ institutions there is the established analogy that a church board can dismiss a pastor by its own internal decision. The ‘presbyterian’ institutions are more likely to seek communal decision-making and thus attend to the collective wisdom of the faculty” (187).

culture at large, as well as by internal groups and constituencies, and their rhetorical patterns, political ploys and power plays.

VI. Continuing Significance of Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom for Our Common Mission

Cultivating healthy practices around confessional commitment and academic freedom is a vitally important task for us, integrally related with Calvin's Reformed identity. This work is especially crucial because of our goal to become a more multi-ethnic, multi-cultural community unified in our pursuit of Christian teaching and learning. Our commitment to become a multi-cultural community is a firm resolution to not let ethnicity be our source of unity. Rather, we are resolved to be a multi-ethnic community which joins together for a common mission, held together by shared practices of teaching and learning guided by common confessional commitments. This case is made clearly in *From Every Nation*:

What is the core of our institutional identity? . . . An answer . . . can be found in the Expanded Statement of Mission, which declares that our "identity as a Reformed Christian educational institution. . . means that our approach to education is set within a tradition of biblical interpretation, worship, and Christian practice expressed in the creeds of the Reformed-Presbyterian churches having their roots in the Protestant Reformation" (p. 14). Many college documents, including the Expanded Statement of Mission, describe the contours of the robust confessional vision that draws sustenance from this tradition—the familiar redemptive-historical pattern of creation, fall, redemption, and fulfillment that frames the Reformed community's self-understanding and its terms of engagement with society and culture. . .

What must be emphasized, in any case, is that the call to "ungrasp" an inherited institutional identity is by no means a call to compromise, let alone abandon, the Reformed character of Calvin College. Nor is it a call to create some undifferentiated, common-denominator identity unconnected to the lived experience of community members. Rather, it is a call to grapple honestly with the risks that may be entailed in attempting to distinguish between negotiable cultural expressions and the non-negotiable core identity in Christ testified to in the historic confessions—in the willingness, as the *Expanded Statement of Mission* puts it, to "live as the visible embodiment of [God's] covenant promises. . . [manifesting] the universal scope of divine love" (p. 17). It is a call to discernment and a posture of imitation, a posture that grows out of a spirit of humility rather than of cultural superiority, whatever its source. The confessions themselves can point us toward such discernment and reexamination. As the *Expanded Statement of Mission* notes: "At their best, confessions provide a community of faith with a prophetic voice that the world can hear. Used appropriately, they are guides in a continuing common effort of reexamining the scriptures to hear God's call. . . The confessing community forms the principal witness to the awakening reign of God, and provides a vision of spiritual liberation that also requires liberation from injustice and bondage" (pp. 15, 18).⁵⁰

⁵⁰ *From Every Nation*, 13-14.

This reference to the appropriate use of the confessions in the heart of the expanded statement of mission and *From Every Nation* calls for thoughtful consideration of how the confessions serve the mission of the college and in the expression of academic freedom.

Finally, it is important to state that all of this is designed to protect the college as an academic institution: a place for teaching and learning, peer-reviewed research and student apprenticeships. We do this work in close partnership with the institutional church. We do this work as a non-profit organization in a competitive economic climate. But we do our work best when we function as an academic organization, making decisions through academically rigorous processes, in relationships of mutual accountability with the church and constituency we serve.

The challenge of academic freedom “even more than the problem of rising costs, is the dilemma of the church-related school. It is real and serious. In this situation the question remains: what *are* the rights and prerogatives of the supporting church community? Has it the right to impose any restrictions? . . . What is at stake is ultimately the role and survival of the church-related school. That question persists, no matter what the relation of school to church is. It persists as long as confidence, moral and financial support, and participation by the supporting community are essential to the church’s operation. Improvement of regulations, integrity on the part of faculties, administrators and governing boards, and clearly formulated conditions for hiring and maintaining a staff all help toward a stable situation. But ultimately the resolution of the problem depends upon faith in the triumph of truth if freedom of inquiry is permitted. The development and exercise of such faith is a long and painful process. Until the day when, if ever, such faith matures, church-related academic institutions will continue to maintain a precarious existence.”

— John H. Kromminga, *Calvin Theological Journal* 5 (1970): 215.

APPENDICES: BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS/BIBLIOGRAPHY

FACULTY HANDBOOK ON SIGNING THE FORM OF SUBSCRIPTION

3.6.1.1 Signing the Form of Subscription

Calvin College faculty members are required to sign a synodically approved *Form of Subscription* in which they affirm the three forms of unity—the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and the *Canons of Dort*—and pledge to teach, speak, and write in harmony with the confessions.

[The material that follows will be added pending approval of HCL 2 by the Board of Trustees]

The current form of subscription⁵¹ reads as follows:

We, the undersigned, faculty of Calvin College, an institution of the Christian Reformed Church of North America, by means of our signatures declare truthfully and in good conscience before the Lord that we sincerely believe that all the articles and points of doctrine set forth in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort fully agree with the Word of God.

We promise therefore to teach these doctrines diligently, to defend them faithfully, and not to contradict them, publicly or privately, in our preaching, teaching, or writing.

We pledge moreover not only to reject all errors that conflict with these doctrines, but also to refute them, and to do everything we can to keep the church free from them.

We promise further that if in the future we come to have any difficulty with these doctrines or reach views differing from them, we will not propose, defend, preach, or teach such views, either publicly or privately, until we have first disclosed them to the Board of Trustees for examination. We are prepared moreover to submit to the judgment of the Board of Trustees, realizing that the consequence of refusal to do so is suspension from office.

We promise in addition that if, to maintain unity and purity in doctrine, the Board of Trustees considers it proper at any time—on sufficient grounds of concern—to require a fuller explanation of our views concerning any article in the three confessions mentioned above, we are always willing and ready to comply with such a request, realizing here also that the consequence of refusal to do so is suspension from office.

Should we consider ourselves wronged, however, by the judgment of the Board of Trustees, we reserve for ourselves the right of appeal; but until a decision is made on such an appeal, we will acquiesce in the determination and judgment already made.”

This Form of Subscription is based on the form used for church office-bearers, but clearly spells out that the college’s Board of Trustees, rather than a faculty member’s church council, is the body charged with confessional oversight for teaching, scholarly activities, and other college-related work.

Faculty members who are also church office-bearers sign a slightly different form with respect to their work as office-bearers which names the church council as the oversight body. In this situation, the faculty member works under the authority of two complementary oversight bodies: the college’s Board of Trustees provides oversight for the teaching, scholarly activities and other college-related work of the faculty member; the congregation’s council provides oversight for work

⁵¹ To be signed by professors, ministers, evangelists, elders, and deacons when ordained and/or installed in office. The original *Form of Subscription* was adopted by the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619. The translation appearing here was approved by the Synod of 1912 and modified by the Synod of 1988.

related to the life of the local congregation. At the same time, the college recognizes that while these functions may be distinguished, they are also difficult to separate. For this reason, the Board of Trustees requests that when a faculty member who is also an office-bearer has “a difficulty with these doctrines or reaches views differing from them,” that this concern be disclosed both to the church council and to the Board of Trustees. The board commits to work with the church council to maintain the authority that is appropriate to each body.

For the work of the college, the meaning of subscription shall be determined according to the church order of the Christian Reformed Church (e.g., Church Order, Article 5, and its supplements), which currently reads:⁵²

The person signing the Form of Subscription subscribes without reservation to all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church, as being doctrines which are taught in the Word of God. The subscriber does not by subscription to the confessions declare that these doctrines are all stated in the best possible manner, or that the standards of our church cover all that the Scriptures teach on the matters confessed. Nor does the subscriber declare that every teaching of the Scriptures is set forth in our confessions, or that every heresy is rejected and refuted by them. A subscriber is only bound by subscription to those doctrines which are confessed, and is not bound to the references, allusions, and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines nor to the theological deductions which some may draw from the doctrines set forth in the confessions. However, no one is free to decide for one’s self or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in.

The confessions are documents that belong to the church. For the ongoing life and work of the CRC and its agencies and educational institutions, the authority to make binding judgments about the meaning and implications of the confessions is assigned to Synod. Under the authority of Synod, the church assigns authority for the life of the college to the Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees, in turn, assigns authority within the college’s governance system, in which decisions about personnel and confessional interpretation are assigned to the Professional Status Committee (PSC).

When the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church has issued a formal interpretation of the confessions, that interpretation shall be binding for Calvin College. When a disagreement about confessional interpretation arises, PSC may, after reviewing prior synodical action on the topic and in consultation with experts in confessional interpretation, theology and church polity, recommend to the Board of Trustees (a) that the board issue a provisional judgment about the meaning and implications of the confessions for the work of the college on the topic in question, and (b) what that provisional judgment should be. PSC shall seek to make a recommendation that is consistent with the Christian Reformed Church’s approach to confessional subscription in general and to the issue at hand. Any provisional judgment of the Board of Trustees is in turn subject to the judgment of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church.

FACULTY HANDBOOK ACADEMIC FREEDOM POLICY

3.6.4 Academic Freedom

Every faculty member, whether tenured or untenured, shall be entitled to the right of academic freedom in the performance of his or her duties. The faculty member shall be judged only by the confessional standards of Calvin College, and by the professional standards appropriate to his or her role and discipline. A faculty member shall not be expected or required to retract or modify his or her utterances merely because a complaint against them has been received. Only complaints

⁵² From the majority report of the study committee reporting to the 1976 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church, edited for gender inclusiveness.

which allege a violation of confessional or professional standards shall be considered, and then only when the evidence supporting the allegation is more substantial than rumor or hearsay. By making this commitment to its entire faculty, Calvin College seeks to implement the Christian principles of justice and charity in its own community.

A staff member is entitled to academic freedom as defined above. It extends to the discipline in the classroom, to research, writings, and other public utterances in the field of professional competence. It does not extend to the expression in the classroom of opinions on controversial and partisan issues which have no relationship to his or her discipline or teaching subject. The classroom may not serve the teacher as a platform for causes unrelated to his or her profession as a Christian teacher of a discipline.

The Calvin College teacher is a citizen, a member of a learned profession, and a representative of Calvin College. When speaking as a citizen, the teacher should be free from institutional censorship or discipline unless his or her Christian character is compromised or Christian witness impaired. However, a special position in the church and in the community imposes special obligations. The Calvin College staff member should remember that the public will tend to judge the profession and the institution by his or her utterances. Therefore, he or she should be accurate at all times, exercise proper restraint, and respect the rights of others to express their opinions. The faculty member shall not attempt to politicize the institution in purely partisan matters, and shall dissociate the college from political activities.

Staff members are permitted and, normally, even encouraged to run for political office or hold memberships on civic commissions. Should staff members be elected or appointed to such positions which necessitate either partial reduction in or complete separation from service to Calvin College, they may retain their position on the staff, but then under the terms of the leave of absence policy.

2004 Calvin College Self-Study Report

Academic Freedom at Calvin

The protection of academic freedom is vital to the survival of the Christian community of learning of which the college faculty is the center. Calvin College believes that religious communities should be free to work from a distinctively religious perspective, to work from a starting point of commonly held religious presuppositions. Hence, according to the *Expanded Statement of the Mission of Calvin College (ESM)* and the *Handbook for Teaching Faculty*, academic freedom at Calvin is framed by commitments that flow from each faculty person's membership in the Calvin community. These prior commitments are essentially three: the confessional standards of the college, the professional standards of the scholarly discipline, and the public standards of keeping the classroom free from partisan political propaganda unrelated to a scholar's discipline or teaching subject.⁹ Faculty members at Calvin submit to the limitations on academic freedom implied by their acceptance of the confessional standards of the college because their commitment to these standards forms the foundation and motivation for their scholarship and teaching. Their shared religious convictions are also common intellectual convictions about what is true. Their consensus becomes a positive asset for the Calvin faculty; it forms a community of scholars and teachers engaged with each other and with students in the pursuit of truth.¹⁰

This is a more generous notion of academic freedom than exists at many private, church-related colleges. At the same time, the practice of academic freedom at Calvin is not without occasional strains. These strains typically occur when academic investigation and comment bear on controversial issues under discussion in the broader communities serving and served by the college—the church, parents, alumni, and other constituencies. At the time of Calvin's 1994 self-study, these issues included the role of women in the church (specifically, their suitability for holding church office), the place of scientific theorizing in church life, and the meaning for readers

of the Scriptures of the evidence for a very old earth and the theory of evolution. Topics of concern in 2004 include these, as well as homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, capitalism, and the outlook and methods associated with postmodernism. Structures of due process protect faculty members from alleged violations of confessional or professional standards and ensure that in the event of challenges to this right, the college is committed to the implementation of Christian principles of justice and charity in its community.¹¹

At Calvin commitment to academic freedom for Christian scholars is rooted in Abraham Kuyper's insistence that the academy and the church constitute different spheres of human endeavor. Calvin College is the college of the CRC, but the college is not a church. As Anthony Diekema, president emeritus, put it, the college and the church "keep faith with each other by sharing a belief system and maintaining trust." The "church and its worldview deserve a distinctive place in the intellectual conversation of the campus."¹² The college, in its mission statements, affirms its close relationship with the church; the church, in its synodical documents, supports the academic and intellectual mission of the college. Faculty members at Calvin take seriously the right and the responsibility to assess and critique the views of the church. There is very wide appreciation, moreover, for the enrichment of community and church life that results from careful protection of the principles of free inquiry at the college.¹³ Ambiguity arises, however, with regard to the extent to which specific church statements, such as acts of the denominational Synod, are binding on faculty members at the college.

It is very likely that there will be social, ethical, and religious issues that challenge the college in the next decade. It is important to recall that in well-publicized cases in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the structures of due process at the college were found adequate, and the academic freedom of Calvin faculty members was vindicated.¹⁴

9. ESM, pp. 44-45; *Handbook for Teaching Faculty*, section 3.6.4, http://www.calvin.edu/admin/provost/fac_hb/chap_3/3_6.htm.
10. Lee Hardy, "The Value of Limitations," a paper given at a conference on academic freedom at religiously affiliated institutions, sponsored by the American Association of University Professors and the University of San Diego, San Diego, California, March 15, 2003.
11. See, for example, "Procedures for Handling Allegations of Confessional Orthodoxy," *Handbook for Teaching Faculty*, section 6.3; and "Exploring God's Creation," *Handbook for Teaching Faculty*, section 6.14, http://www.calvin.edu/admin/provost/fac_hb/chap_6/6_1.htm.
12. Anthony J. Diekema, *Academic Freedom and Christian Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 115.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-122.
14. Diekema discusses these cases at length in *Academic Freedom and Christian Scholarship*, chapter three, "Threats to Academic Freedom," pp. 11-43.

Excerpt from Calvin College Expanded Mission Statement (p. 37-38)

This time of growth and transition, during which Calvin College scholars have increasingly reached out to a larger audience, has also necessitated attention to issues of academic freedom. In its respect for scholarly and creative work, Calvin College follows a more generous definition of academic freedom than do many Christian colleges (see faculty handbook, section 3.6.4). Essentially faculty members are free to exercise their talents with only three restraints: the confessional standards of the college, the professional standards of the discipline, and the prohibition of propagandizing in the classroom for causes unrelated to their profession as Christian teachers of a discipline. These restraints are not without risk and may be enforced only via due process and by communally accepted standards. Still, they are and should continue to be required in order to maintain the confessional, professional, and educational integrity of Calvin as a college in the Reformed Christian tradition.

At the same time, this very integrity demands a positive, supportive, expansive vision of academic freedom. The integrity of any educational institution resides in a process of free postulation, inquiry, interpretation, and conclusion. While the task of scholars at any college is to keep alive, develop, and pass along the root ideas of a culture, and while the task of scholars at a Christian college is to engage those ideas, to examine them, and to challenge or affirm them as consequential for the Christian faith, the Reformed Christian academic especially feels obligated to

engage alternative points of view in order to learn from them, to be challenged by them, and to bring a Reformed and Christian witness to bear upon them.

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