

# Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom

*Principles and Practices  
at Calvin College*



2017 California College Board SM SEM Oaxaca Road, MI 49546

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*“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. . . .”*

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 been addressed implicitly. We are committed to being consistent with the confessions.

## Section 4

The process of decision-making is both formal and often informal. When formal action is required, the meaning and implications of the confessions are determined by duly constituted deliberative bodies, rather than individual persons. While the confessions inform many aspects of institutional policy, they do not automatically limit the church's response to new circumstances. The confessions are always consistent with the church's mission and the Great Commission. 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 together nurtured by high-trust methods of communication and accountability. 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 to serve together as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.



# CONFESSONAL COMMITMENT

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

in Newtonian physics, so too at Calvin College confessional subscription 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 *Hand-*

sions 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 cut across by the dichotomy implied by this or any number of other interpretative schemes. Confessionally-grounded academic freedom in past generations has made it possible for Christians to gratefully celebrate the authority of scripture, without being constrained by a view of inerrancy that involves a hermeneutic of simplistic literalism. 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 Carpen-

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 gla i HbYci gmiUZfa Vch hYZYXca cZhY ]bgh i hcb hc YgLV]g U particular academic freedom policy and the freedom of individual faculty a Ya VYfglc Z U` h Yf W` ]b[ Ug hUWYfg UbXgWc Ufg<sup>4</sup>

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 cZm i bei YghcbYXdfh cXcl ]YgñcZh YgYW Uf UWXa miUbXZca h Yi bei YghcbYXdfh UfUWbZggcbU dfh cXcl ]YgñcZ7\ f]ghUb Wa a i b]hYg"H]g' is a fragile balance that requires ongoing attention.

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

H YZW hm\ UbXVcc\_ Uh7Uj ]b g hUyg h Uh17Uj ]b 7c`Y[ YZW hma Ya - bers on regular appointments are required to sign a synodically approved *Covenant for Faculty Members*<sup>5</sup> ]b k \ ]W h YmiUZfa h Y h fYY Zfa g cZ unity—the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and the *Canons of Dort*

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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. 5g'h Y6Y[ ]W7cbZgg]cb 'Yl d'U]bg ÍK YVY ]Yj Yk ]h'ci h'UX'ci VhU' 'h' ]b[ g' contained in them—not so much because the church receives and approves h'Ya 'Ug'g' W'Vi h'UVcj YU' 'VVMi g'Yh Y< c`mGd]f]h'hgh]ÚYg' ]b'ci f` \`YUfhg' that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from ; cXí fBY[ ]W7cbZgg]cb ) E'H' ]g'a YUbg'h UhÍX]g'Wfb]b[ 'h'Ygd]f]hgí' ]g'cbY cZh'Ya cgh]g[ ]b]ÚVbh]cb[ ]c]b[ 'H'g' g'Zf' X]g'M' Yg' cZ>Yg' g' ]b' U' k U\_ g' cZ 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 so- VU' UbX' \ ]grf[ ]W' WbX]h]cbg' ]b' k \ ]W'h' YV]V] ]W' hM' hg'k YFYÚf'ghk' f] ]HbZ' 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 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 life-long cultivation of certain moral, intellectual and volitional capacities that are essential to a healthy Christian life. In sum, as confessional Chris- h]Ubg'žk Y ]b]hfdfYih' Y6 ]VYÍ ]b' h' YWb]hM' hcZh' Yhf]i ]bYUM] ]hmcZ; cXž' the God who uses scripture to reshape the church into Christ's image by the Spirit's power."<sup>8</sup>

While the confessions do not themselves include an extended discussion

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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 fBU\_Yfž &S' Ež (, - Ì (- (ž UbX YgdYU' `mi>Ufcg'Uj 'DY]\_ UbžÍ7cbZgg]cbU' Fi `Yg' cZ Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Credo* (Yale U. Press, 2003). 142–157.

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

Celestial Celestial Academic Feed

interpretation? Are we bound not only to the claims of the text, but to the assumptions made by the text?

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 interpreta-

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.<sup>11</sup> These two functions were succinctly noted by an observer of Calvin College, Robert Benne, who commented that the *Form of Subscription* (now named the *Covenant for Faculty Members*) is a particular way of thinking and seeing.<sup>12</sup> 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 par-

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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.

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

The *Covenant for Faculty Members* which all Calvin faculty sign includes the following statement: "We heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them."

Over the course of e -

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).<sup>14</sup> 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 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 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 "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 *Covenant for Faculty Members*, claims are especially pertinent to their own work. In many cases, they may well offer faculty access to a rich vein of theological resources.

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 faculty publications. Indeed, the Reformed tradition provides an especially strong context in which to pursue

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14 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 contested economic and political claims in the Christian community.

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.<sup>15</sup> This is, in part, why the college instituted the Kuiper Seminar, requires faith-and-learning statements, and funds perspectival scholarship through the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship (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 ambiguous. 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 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 *Covenant for Faculty Members*, 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,

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15 Charles Taylor offers a fruitful set of categories to develop this, as he describes the "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."

constructive mode of engagement with the living tradition should continue to be nurtured and strengthened.<sup>16</sup>

*The Confessions as Boundaries or Standards*

When necessary, confessional commitments function *as a boundary* to limit academic freedom.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> We often speak about this boundary function using metaphors of legal infringement: the boundaries need to be  
ÎYbZfWXĪ K Ya ][ \hUgc gdYU\_ cZh YgYVci bXUF]Yg]b Wj YbUbH\_ hfa g  
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  
cZU[ ]j Yb Uf[ i a Ybhc f d c g] h] cb Ug VY] b[ ÎWbglgh] bhk ]h \h YWbZgg] cbgĭ  
cf Îbch Wbglgh] bhk ]h \h WbZgg] cbgĭ° Wcccb` d f gY

YgYg`  
kci ` .

bchi Ud Yb`  
B

WbZgg



It may be consistent with or inconsistent with the confessions?"

There are several reasons why boundaries are important.<sup>20</sup> 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 the resurrection of Jesus was not an historical fact in any sense. This does not mean that these

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

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

20 The history of Christianity attests to wise use of boundary language: a) the fa- a ci g'7\UWXcb)Ub'gUha Ybh'hi fQ f

of apartheid was a heresy was a boundary-setting act that was necessary

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 can find a simple reason that church unity needs to be actively tended. When we think of the constituency of 5,000 faculty, staff, and students on campus, 55,000 alumni, 240,000 people in the CRC, and several hundred thousand others around

In sum, the confessions articulate both the center and the boundaries of our common work as disciples of Jesus. Sometimes the two functions





cidental 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.<sup>26</sup> The CRC was, in fact, founded in the context of a dispute about the nature of confessional subscription.<sup>27</sup>

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 arti-  
WzUbXVh Yj Jk h Uh YWbZgg|cbg UFYa YfYm|dc|blg'cZXdufhi fY'cf' IfYZfYbWdc|blg| Zcf X|gWgg|cb" H |g'Uddf cUW Ugg a Yg'h UhWbZgg|cbU' 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 ee exac05600uc suband i



<b>Biblicist Anti-Confes- sionalism</b>	<b>Strict Subscription</b>	<b>Subscription that is binding and plenary, but not repristinating<sup>i</sup></b>
<p>The view that confessions are unnecessary distractions from the clear message of scripture and undermine its authority</p>	<p>verbatim subscription</p> <p>Repristination Juridical confessionalism</p> <p>Strict constructionist</p> <p><i>“ipsissima verba”</i></p> <p>Closed confessionalism</p> <p>The view that subscribers are bound to the exact words of the confession, as they were understood when they were written.</p>	<p>ÎGi VgHbWcf`Gi VgHbU` Gi VgWdh]cbI<sup>ii</sup></p> <p>Î8 ZfYbh]U]b[ `7ca d`YH` Gi VgWdh]cbI<sup>iii</sup></p> <p>Î7cbgfi Wj YWbZgg]cbU]ga İ<sup>iv</sup></p> <p>Îquia</p>

Subscription that is “appropriating” but not “loose” or indeterminate	Lenient Subscription	Liberal Non-Confessionalism
<p>Î9ggYbH]U`HYbYİ` subscription<sup>vi</sup></p> <p>Î5ddfcdF]U]b[` confessionalism” (as cddcgYX]r: ÎV]bX]b[` confessionalism”)</p>	<p>Î5H]li X]bU` =bH]dfYU]cbİ`/ Î<i>Quatenus</i>” (insofar as) confessionalism (see note v VYckL/</p>	<p>Opposition to subscription to confessions on the grounds of religious and intellectual freedom</p>
<p>The view that subscribers are bound only to the essential tenets of a given confession, rather than to the entirety of the documents, and that subscribers only agree to <del>ÎddfcdF]U]b]h`Y]h`Y]a`Y]g`</del> of the confessions, rather than to be bound to them and to promote them actively.</p>	<p>Î: `cU]b[İ`cf ÎcdYbİ` WbZ]gg]cbU]ga` / Î@ccgYİ`cf`U]h]li X]bU]F]U]b` g] VgW]dh]cb]g]g`/ 7cbZ]gg]cbg`UgÎdc]bh]g`cZ fY]fY]bWİ`cf Î[i]X]dc]g]g]</p>	
	<p>The view that the confessions are only V]bX]b[ Î]bgZ]f`Ugİ`h`Y]m] agree with scripture, and that they primarily offer an instructive example of how to speak of God and the world, rather than offering any binding content.</p>	

matters, and greater tolerance around less weighty matters. The term is used to describe the confessional views of Groen van Prinsterer, one of Abraham Kuyper’s mentors. See R. Janssen, 383–386.

iv A term coined by Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten.  
v *Quia* g] VgW]dh]cb`fY]f]g]r`h`Y]W]U]a`h`U]h`WbZ]gg]cbg`fY]V]bX]b[`ÎVW]g]Y]h`Y]m] agree with scripture.” *Quatenus* subscription refers to the claim that the confes-g]cbg`fY]V]bX]b[ Î]bgZ]f`Ugİ`h`Y]m]U]fY]k]h`g]W]dh]fY]İ`H`g]X]g]h]b]W]cb`Ug`VY]b` prominent in both Reformed and Lutheran discussions of subscription.  
vi The current practice of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

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.<sup>30</sup> Any individual, congregation, classis, or agency that believes that the boundaries are too unclear or that they have been too narrowly or laxly enforced, 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 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 courage when some South African denominations declared that the theological defense of apartheid

fy 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 [g]hrc`cb[ `UbXk ]` `bchU`h]b`h`h`YVf]X] Ycf`h`Yhfi gg]g`hrc`h`]b`UbXk ]` `bch 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 Vm\`c`X]b[ `cZZUfi g` `hrc` `i` X]a` YbhUVci`h`h`Y`Y] U`W`b`U`i` f`Y`c`Z`U`V`ci` b`X`U`f`n`i` 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.<sup>31</sup>

An appropriate level of tolerance strengthens the common good. Lee < UFXmYl d`U]bgz`Î6mhc`YFU]b[ `h`Uh`k` \]W`k`Y`X]gU] fYY`k`]h`z`k`Y`gY`\_`hrc` protect an end against inappropriate means for attaining it.” Further, gca`Y`Y`Y`c`Zrc`Y`Ub`W`]g`U`Vgc`i`h`Y`mb`Y`W`g`U`f`m[ ]`j`Y`b`h`Y`U`b`]h`Y`W`d`U`M`h`c`Z` human beings, including the writers of the confessions, all faculty mem- Vfgz`Ub`X`Ub`m`Y`W`W`g`]`U`g`]`W` `cf` `U`Xa` ]b`]g`f`U`h`j`Y`i`b`]h` `5`g`<`U`F`X`m`Y`l`d`U`]`b`g`z`Î`=`Z` 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 ]bg]h`h`]cb`c`Z` \] [ `Y`f` `Y`U`f`b`]b[ `g` `ci` `X` `Y`b`W`i` f`U`] `Y` f`Y`U`Y`M`]cb` `k` ]h` ]b` `W`F`H`U`]b` `f`Y`] [ ]ci` g`Vci` b`X`U`f`]Y`g` `Ub`X`f`Y`U`Y`M`]cb` `i` dcb` `h`cg`Y`f`Y`] [ ]ci` g`Vci` b`X`U`f`]Y`g`<sup>32</sup> We b`Y`X`k` \ `U`h`D`f`Y`g`V`m`f`]`U`b` `h` `Y`c`c`] ]`U`b` `6`Y`b` `Ua` ]b` `K` `U`F`U`Y`X`cb`W`X`Y`g`W`]V`X`U`g` Î`U` `f`Y`U`g`cb`U`V`Y` `]`V`f`h`m`k` ]h` `U` `f`Y`U`g`cb`U`V`Y`g`f`]`W`b`Y`g`g`<sup>33</sup>

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

31 *Institutes* IV.1.10.

32 Hardy, 5–6.

33 *Presbyterian Review*, 10.40 (Oct. 1889), 656–657, in a discussion of confessional g`V`g`W`d`h`cb`"H`Y`%, \*`g`h`U`h`a`Y`bh`Î`H`Y`7`cb`Z`g`g`cb`U` `B`U`i` f`Y`c`Z`h`Y`7` \i` f`W`z` `V`n`h`Y` D`f`Y`g`V`m`f`]`U`b` `7` \i` f`W` `I` G`5`z` `W`b`W`X`Y`g` `k` ]h` `h` `Y`g`Y`k`cf`X`g` `Î`8`]`Z`U`W` `h`U`g` `]h`]g` `hrc` `U`b`X` the way between church authority without personal freedom or personal freedom without church authority, a distinctive mark of the Reformed tradition is the belief h`Uh`]h`]g`cb`m`V`m`g`Y`Y`\_`]b[ `h`]g`X`]Z`U`W` `h`k`U`n`h`U`h`Y`W`i`f`W` `W`b` `V`Y`U`i`b`]h`X`W`a` - a`i`b`]m`c`Z`7` \]g`]`U`b`g`k` \c`U`F`Y`V`ch` `D`Y`Z`fa`Y`X`U`b`X`U`k`U`ng`V`]b[ `f`Y`Z`fa`Y`X`U`f`G`W`]cb` 29.154–155).

set them too quickly on the other? We work together, over time, with the best available resources, according to duly established processes. Discern-  
 ]b[ 'k \ Yb 'lc 'UfhW`UH`UbX`XYZbX`U`Vci bXUfm]g`X]Z`W`hUhVYgh`K \ Yb `U`  
 boundary question does arise, it is answered through duly established pro-  
 cesses over time—a process that inevitably involves discussion, disagree-  
 ment, and dialogue, and that must be transparent and widespread enough  
 lc`[ YbYfUH`g][ b]ÚWbhVi m]b`cj Yf`h]a Y`

*Specific Boundaries at Calvin College and in the CRC*

There are many examples of how more-or-less clear boundaries operate in





are each consistent with the confessions and thus do not cross a confession-  
 al boundary (e.g., women’s ordination).<sup>36</sup> Taken together, these examples  
 show that some positions on some issues can be contrary to the confessions  
 Yj Yb ]ZGnbcX` Ug`bchgdYUW`mXYWUFYXh` Ya` ]rc` VY`WbhfUfnz`gca YUFY  
 \_bck b` ]rc` VY`WbhfUfnk ]h` ci` h`h` YbYXZcf` gnbXQW` U`M]cb/gca YVci bX  
 aries 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 Trust-  
 ees’ 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,  
 cf` V`WU` gY` ]h`W`bchVY`XHYfa` ]bYXk` ]h` `Wb`U`X`b`W` <` YfYk` Ya` i` gh`VY`j` Yfm  
 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  
 \`UbXZ` ]h` ]g`i` bk` ]gY`rc` g`H`Y`V`ci` bXU` ]Yg`df`Ya` U`i` f`Y`n`cb` h` Y`ch` Yf`zi` bg`H`Y`X`  
 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  
 UZ`W`V`ch` h` Y`f` ] [ ` H` UbX`I` Y`H` `c`Z`h` Y`dc` ]h`W` cf` ]X`Y`c` [ ]W` g`d`Y`M`fi` a` "H` ]g`  
 is why it is in everyone’s best interest not to settle for either a general ne-  
 glect 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  
 fYdcf ]g`cb` g` ] [ b` ]U`W`b`h`X`c`W` ]b`U` Ub`X`Y`h` ]W` ]gg`i` Yg`f`H` Yg`Y`g`H`Y`a` Yb`lg`W`b` VY`  
 found in summary form at <http://www.crcna.org/pages/positions.cfm> with  
 references to the full statements and reports). These statements do not au-  
 tomatically serve as boundary markers for academic freedom unless they  
 UFY`U`dd`f`c`j` YX`U`g`Ub` `c`Z`U`U` ]b`h`f`d`f`Y`H` ]cb` `c`Z`U`W`b`Z`g`g` ]cb`U` `X`c`W`a` Yb`h`<sup>37</sup> Yet  
 these statements are useful for the college in several ways. First, these re-  
 ports 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 ex-

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36 *Acts of Synod* 1988, 1989.  
 37 *Acts of Synod 1975*zd" ("H` Y`GnbcX`c`Z`% &` X` ]X`g`d`Y`M`U`W` mg`U`n`h` U`h`W`H`U` ]b` g`H`Y`  
 a` Yb`lg`U`ci` h`h` Y`@cf`X`g`8`U`n`f`U`Y`rc` VY`f`Y` ]U`Y`X`U`g`Ub` ]b`h`f`d`f`Y`H` ]cb` `c`Z`ci` f` `W`b`Z`g`  
 sions" (*Acts of Synod* 1926, 191–192).

derivative 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 prevalent in our culture. Synod adopted a resolution on pornography. 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:

"The confessional documents of the Christian Reformed Church are the Word of God or the Church Order' [*Church Order*, art. 29]. All of our decisions are based on the Word of God and the Church Order."

"The confessional documents of the Christian Reformed Church are the Word of God or the Church Order' [*Church Order*, art. 29]. All of our decisions are based on the Word of God and the Church Order."

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,desithad0.7 sene(confessi33.867[(af th.35 T1.385 Td-33.867]) when

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).<sup>39</sup>

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 Constitution “states that the substance of a synodical decision or position taken.”<sup>40</sup> In practice, there is tension between this tradition of ecclesiastical freedom, even with respect to the confessions, and the *Covenant for Faculty Members*, which says:

K Y Ugc' dfca |gY' hc' dfYgYbhc' f'fYW|j Y WbZgg|cbU` X|ZUW` h'Yg' |b` a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel. Should we come to believe that a teaching in the confessional documents is not the teaching of God's Word, we will communicate our views to the Board of Trustees, according to the procedures prescribed by the Handbook for Teaching Faculty. If the board asks, we will give a full explanation of our views. Further, we promise to submit to h\YVcUFXg' i X| a YbhUbXU' h'cf|]mā

Gca Y7Uj |b` ZUW` hm\Uj Ym' dfYggYXh' Yf' iX|ZUW` h'Yg' |k` \Yb' g| |b|b| h'Y *Covenant for Faculty Members*. 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 practice Yg'k ci` X'VYgh'Ybg' f'YWbZgg|cbU` |bhM|f|]mUbX'a U` Y' dcgg|VYg| |b|UWbh learning opportunities for our students and constituents.

At minimum, the *Covenant for Faculty Members* 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

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39 Indeed, this freedom for pastors has sometimes been invoked—by parties as disparate as Arminius and Herman Hoeksema—as *libertas prophetandi* (freedom for prophesying”). See, for example, Peter White, *Predestination, Policy and Polem-*

*War*: f7Ua V|X| YI b|j Yfg|miDfYggz' &SS&Ez' d'' &( /UbX 7\ f|g'rd\ `@` h'mUbX` @Yb` Gdfi |]z' iH` Y8' cWf|bYz` @|Zz' UbXFca Ub' Hf|U` cZh' Y: f|g|Ub` D\|` cgd\ Yf` < Ybf|Wg' de Veno (1574?-1613),” *Renaissance Quarterly* 56 (Winter 2003): 1112–1151.

40 *Acts of Synod* 1996, p. 528.

a tone of bold humility that cares enough about the confessions to raise the church.

### V. Strengthening Confessional Commitments and Academic Freedom

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.<sup>41</sup> We need to honor each other by following 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.

This culture is, in turn, dependent upon both informal and formal practices that strengthen vibrant confessionally-grounded teaching and collegiality, wisdom, and discernment. As Nicholas Wolterstorff has sug-

41. GY5XF|UbbU? YnUfZIK \Uh|g'A cfY=a dcfhUbhlc'9ZWMj Y; cj YfbUbW. FYU|cb-ship, 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* f|cgym6Uggz'8S(L/8"; Ua VMHŁ Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations'f7Ua Vf|X| Y. 6Ug| 6'UWk Y'z% , , L/F"7"A UnYfz >"< "8Uj |gzUbx: "8"GWccfa UbzI5b -bH| fU|j YA cXY'cZCf| U|nU|cbU Hfi gh' Academy of Management Review'8S'f% -) L'+S-İ+' (/5"? "A |gFUZİCf| U|nU|cb- al Response to Crisis: The Centrality of Trust," in R. Kramer and T. Tyler, eds., *Trust in Organizations* fH\ci gUbXCU\_ğ75. GU| Y% - \*L/8"Fci ggYu žG"6"G|h| bž F"6i flžUbx7"7Ua YfYfZİB chGc'8|ZfYbh5Zmf'5` .5'7fcg|8|gMd|bYJ |Yk'cZ Trust," *Academy of Management Review*'&'f% - , L' - ' İ (S /F"6"G Uk žTrust in the Balance: Building Successful Organizations on Results, Integrity, and Concerns f|cgym6Uggz% - +L/UbXK "; "H|YbYnZİCf| U|nU|cbU '7i 'hi fY|b <| [\ Y'9X| W- tion," *Journal of Higher Education*) - %f% , , L:đ 8%J "6fU|h k U|H'YbXA "'@Yj ž eds., *Trust and Governance* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988).

[YghYXZÎUa cghUk Ung`h]g`b`h`YdfcWXi fYzbch]b`h`Yei U]UWh]cbg`OZ UWXYa ]WfYXca QUg`g`Wz`h`Uh`h`Y`b`i`gh]W``Yg`Q`\\Yb`h`YfY`lg`Ub`]b-fringement of academic freedom].<sup>42</sup> Great care must be taken to avoid both c]Yf`UbX`i`bXf`fYg`dcbX]b[ `r`g`dYU`U`g`h`i`U`h`cbg`"

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 "ci fbUg": i fh Yfz`k`\\Yb`gh`XYb]g`Ug`ZUW`h`m`i`a`Y`a`V`f`g`\\`c`k`h`Y`f`j`]Y`k`g` 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 W`a`a`c`b`m`\\`Y`X`c`d`]b`]c`b`c`b`U`[`]`j`Y`b`g`i`V`Y`W`H`Y`g`Y`Y`b`W`i`b`h`f`g`W`b`V`Y`j`Y`f`m` challenging. But at their best, they can be invigorating and instructive.<sup>43</sup>

42. B ]Wc`U`g`K`c`h`f`g`r`f`Z`Z`Î`5`W`X`Y`a` ]W`f`Y`X`c`a` `]b`F`Y`][`]c`i`g`m`i`6`U`g`Y`X`7`c``Y`]`Y`g`U`b`X`I`b`]-versities," 253.

43. 5g`@Y`<`U`F`X`m`Y`d`U`]b`g`Î`H`Y`f`Y`U`X`U`b`[`Y`f`r`c`U`W`X`Y`a` ]W`f`Y`X`c`a` W`a`Y`g`Z`c`a`h`Y`]b-formal 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 W`Y`Y`g`W`b`g`h`i`Y`b`W`r`c`U`D`f`Y`g`X`Y`b`h`k`]h`U`d`f`c`b`c`i`b`W`X`U`h`c`f`]h`f`]U`b`g`f`Y`U`/r`c`U`X`c`b`f`k`]h`c`h`g`c`Z`a`c`b`Y`m`U`b`X`U`d`c`]h`W`U`Y`b`X`U`/r`c`U`X`Y`d`U`f`h`a`Y`b`h`X`c`a`]b`U`h`X`V`m`i`U`f`][`X`d`U`f`m`i`]b`Y`/r`c`Z`U`W`h`m`i`a`Y`a`V`f`g`e`i`]W`r`c`]a`d`i`h`Y`][`b`c`V`Y`a`c`h`j`Y`g`r`c`h`c`g`Y`k`\\`c`X`]g`U`f`Y`Y`k`]h`h`Y`a`/r`c`k`Y`!`]b`h`b`h`c`b`Y`X`U`X`a`]b`]g`f`U`c`f`g`Y`U`Y`f`r`c`Y`b`z`f`W`h`Y`U`h`g`h` social orthodoxy. The real constraints on the freedom of inquiry are for the most d`U`h`i`b`c`Z`U`U`U`b`X`]b`z`f`a`U`z`b`c`h`]b`g`h`i`h`c`b`U`i`f`f`E`

Third, the college also strengthens this centering function in its response



encouraged to engage with the confessions and discern how best to work in ways that are consistent with them, only duly constituted deliberative bodies of the church (such as the Synod) are authorized to make binding decisions regarding 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 decisions regarding 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 *Covenant for Faculty Members* which faculty members sign). The Board of Trustees, in turn, delegates authority to the college's governance



nerable to manipulation by the 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

College. Nor is it a call to create some undifferentiated, common-de-

*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*



# APPENDICES: BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

## Faculty Handbook on Signing the Covenant for Faculty Members

### 3.6.1.1 *Signing the Covenant for Faculty Members*

Calvin College faculty members are required to sign a synodically approved *Covenant for Faculty Members*—a statement 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 current *Covenant for Faculty Members*<sup>46</sup> reads as follows:

We, [the undersigned], believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God, which proclaims the good news of God's creation and redemption through Jesus Christ. Acknowledging the authority of God's Word, we submit to it in all matters of life and faith.

We confess our faith in the *Apostles' Creed*, the *Nicene Creed*, and the *Athanasian Creed*—as ecumenical expressions of the Christian faith. In doing so, we confess our faith in unity with followers of Jesus Christ throughout all ages and among all nations.

We confess our faith in the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and the *Canons of Dort*—as historic Reformed

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46 The *Covenant for Faculty Members* (<https://www.calvin.edu/admin/provost>)

expressions of the Christian faith, whose doctrines fully agree with  
 understand Scripture, direct the way we live in response to the  
 gospel, and locate us within the larger body of Christ.

Grateful for these expressions of faith, we promise to be formed



congregation. At the same time, the college recognizes that while these



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 refrain from any action which would bring the college into disrepute or dishonor 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

also common intellectual convictions about what is true. Their consensus  
 scholars and teachers engaged with each other and with students in the  
 pursuit of truth.<sup>49</sup>

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

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 pro-

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, the 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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