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Tradition, Faith, and Doctrine

Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely, doth openly break the Traditions and Ceremonies of the Church, which be not repugnant to the Word of God, and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, (that others may fear to do the like,) as he that offendeth against the common order of the Church, and hurteth the authority of the Magistrate, and woundeth the consciences of the weak brethren.

— Article 34 of Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion

It may seem strange to begin a book like this one that is primarily concerned about broadening Reformed theological accounts of the scope of salvation with a chapter on tradition, faith, and doctrine. Isn't this a little far afield? Yet it seems to me that the two things are related. What is said about the scope of salvation is surely connected in more than a passing way to the sources of authority and testimony to which theologians give heed. A Reformed view of these things sheds light on how formal judgments about Scripture, tradition, and doctrine play out in the material concerns about particular issues in tackling the scope of salvation (as well as other doctrines, of course). Consequently, some remarks about how a thinker in the Reformed tradition might approach these matters seem called for. Because it appears to me that Reformed views on this matter overlap with and

have been developed in dialogue (and conflict) with several other constituencies and their concerns, we will need to navigate a course that includes discussion of a wider range of such “interest groups” than other, similar accounts might provide. I trust that this will be regarded as a strength rather than a liability of the chapter.

Along with many historic members of my own theological tradition (though fewer contemporary representatives), I think of myself as a Reformed Catholic. That is, my own views on matters theological are part of the tradition of western catholic Christianity that divided from the Roman branch at the Reformation. As the patristic scholar D. H. Williams has recently put it, “There is no question that the early Reformers believed they were seeking to restore the faith of the early church. The basic thrust of their mission was not to point to themselves as the begetters of a new ‘protestantism’ but to the establishment of a proper Catholicism.”¹ The fact that branches of the Christian Church remain at odds with one another over doctrine and practice—even if their differences are expressed in more collegial ways these days—is regrettable. Like Williams, I think the Reformation was a time of great rediscovery and religious reform. But I also think it was a time of theological violence (committed in different ways by each of the parties to the conflict) that was misguided and harmful. If the Western church had taken upon itself the task of reform earlier and with more seriousness, then perhaps the Reformation would have been an intra-ecclesial debate, not the cause of disruption. But counterfactual history is not the focus of this chapter, or this book; I register this point merely to indicate my own sensibilities with respect to the relationship between the Roman and Reformed branches of Christianity. Similar things could be said about different branches of Protestantism as well. We

1. D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influences of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 85.

are siblings, not enemies, related to one parent, namely, Western catholic Christendom. It is a fundamental mistake to conceive of the relationship between Roman and Reformed Christianity otherwise—as if we were two distinct religious entities or, even worse, two distinct religious traditions. We are two branches of one rich and complex religious tradition.²

Scripture and Tradition

To complicate matters further, Reformed Christianity is a branch of the Christian tradition that has a number of different shoots. These include churches of both presbyterian and episcopal polities. Anglicanism, despite what you may have read or experienced (pace John Henry Newman), is a historically Reformed church. Its formularies are the product of the Reformation as much as the documents and liturgies of other churches in this tradition. In fact, for some time after the Reformation, the Anglican Church was viewed by the Reformed on the continent of Europe as a sister church, not as something apart, as some contemporary Anglicans would have

2. It might be asked whether this characterization of the relationship between Reformed and Roman Catholicism is really to the point. For instance, article 22 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England, a Reformed confessional document to which we shall return presently, says that the “Romish” doctrine of “Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as Relics, and also Invocation of Saints,” is “a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.” Similarly, article 19 of the same document says that “the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, have erred, so also the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of Ceremonies, but also in matters of faith.” This raises two serious concerns: Can a given ecclesial body be a church if it defends errors in doctrine and practice? And if (some) Reformed communions have these statements as a confessional basis, can they be described as *siblings* of Roman Catholicism? As to the former question, much depends on the nature of the error concerned. I suppose creedally orthodox Roman Catholics are not in error about matters touching central dogmatic affirmations about the faith. That said, they may still be in doctrinal error or may practice their faith in a mistaken fashion, e.g., through some of their Mariological doctrines. As to the latter query, I suppose siblings can have periods in which their relationship is strained and difficult. The children of one set of parents may well be closely related in a biological sense even if they have not been able to get along with each other personally and are deeply divided over matters both think important. Something like that seems to be true of the separated branches of global Christianity.

us believe.³ It is often said that Anglicanism is rooted in Scripture, tradition, and reason. But if this is taken to mean that tradition and reason stand alongside Scripture as equal partners in the theological enterprise, then this is a mistaken report of the theological roots of Anglicanism. Consider article 6 of the Thirty-Nine Articles:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.

Compare this with article 34, part of which is the epigraph to this chapter:

It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word. Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely, doth openly break the Traditions and Ceremonies of the Church, which be not repugnant to the Word of God, and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, (that others may fear to do the like), as he that offendeth against the common order of the Church, and hurteth the authority of the Magistrate, and woundeth the consciences of the weak brethren.

3. This point is brought out rather nicely in Jonathan D. Moore's study *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and The Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). For two very helpful introductions to Anglican thought by someone sympathetic to this line of reasoning, see Mark Chapman, *Anglican Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), esp. chap. 1; and Mark Chapman, *Anglicanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

And this:

Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, Ceremonies or Rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying.

The message is pretty clear: Scripture is the *norma normans non normata*—that is, the norming norm that is not normed by anything else. Tradition, here understood to be a collection of divers human practices of an ecclesial nature, may differ according to locality, custom, and time, provided they are in accordance with the word of God. But tradition is implicitly subordinate to Scripture in this regard. One might compare article 21 on this matter, “Of the Authority of General [Church] Councils”:

General Councils may not be gathered together without the commandment and will of Princes. And when they be gathered together, (forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and Word of God,) they may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of holy Scripture.

This is an important amplification of the previous point. The article makes explicit the fact that ecclesiastical councils can be in error, the implication being that such error occurs when these bodies go beyond their scriptural warrant to propound doctrines that, ex hypothesi, cannot be binding upon the consciences of Christians.

It might be helpful to compare the sort of authority envisaged for councils in the Thirty-Nine Articles with the authority of case law in societies such as those in Great Britain and the United States. In such legal systems, law can be made by precedent, and the law is binding upon all citizens of the societies concerned. But the law is

not necessarily inerrant: new laws can be enacted that repeal previous legislation, replacing them with regulations that are more just, or more appropriate to the times in which we live. This is not to denigrate the character or normative nature of the law as such; it is to understand that particular aspects of the body of legislature at any given time may be mistaken or need amending.

Let us take an example. We would not think a law that prevented citizens from normally being able to bear arms where once they were able to carry arms an unjust law, provided the new law was enacted according to due legal process, which made provision for the repeal of the previous law under certain circumstances. The fact that such process can be exceedingly complex is not to the point here. Our concern is with the normative nature of such legislation. Just as certain laws can be overturned that once were binding upon a people, so also conciliar statements may be in error, provided it can be shown that they do not correspond to the word of God. And just as there is nothing remiss in acknowledging that law can be mistaken and need repealing while at the same time acquiescing to the normative status of such law while it is in force, and of the law per se (as a system of legislation), so also there is nothing remiss in claiming that conciliar statements can be mistaken and need redressing by subsequent ecclesial bodies, which may have a better or more complete theological perspective. We might very well think a given law unjust, but this does not necessarily mean we think the law as a body of legislation, governing the way a given society is governed, is unjust. Just so, we may think a given ecclesiastical council mistaken in something it affirms. This does not necessarily call into question all conciliar authority. The point is that conciliar authority, though normative under certain conditions, is nevertheless limited in its purview by the word of God, under which it stands and by means of which it can be corrected. It has a normative status, but

one the warrant for which is derived from a higher norm to which all conciliar canons are subordinate, namely, Holy Scripture. One of the important claims made by theologians of the Magisterial Reformation was that ecclesiastical authority is not without error when it comes to matters of doctrine. In this respect, ecclesiastical councils differ from Scripture.

This point is amplified and expanded upon by the fathers of that great English assembly that produced the Westminster Confession. It is one of the singular ironies of ecclesiastical history that the confessional basis of the Church of Scotland and many other presbyterian bodies is the document drawn up by a group of largely English divines, called together, at least initially, in order to revise the Thirty-Nine Articles.⁴ This may be the English church's greatest gift to presbyterianism. In the first chapter of the Westminster Confession, entitled "Of the Holy Scripture," we read that

[t]he authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God. (1.4)

And this:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. (1.6)⁵

4. For a recent account of this see Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2009).

5. However, note that later in this same article (1.6), the authors write that "there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed." This is rather different from the tone of the Thirty-Nine Articles.

Although the Westminster divines allowed that not every part of Scripture is as clear as one might like (1.7), they speak with one voice about how Scripture is the norming norm of all theological judgments, in this manner:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. (1.9)

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. (1.10)

Tradition certainly plays an important role in both the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Westminster Confession, but it is an ancillary one. It is a norm not alongside Scripture but subordinate to it.⁶ This represents an important difference of theological judgment between confessional Protestants and their Roman brethren. We might put it like this: for the Reformation churches, Scripture is recognized by the church as being divinely inspired via the susurrations of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that moved the fathers of the ecumenical councils of the church to pronounce particular books canonical. They themselves were not competent to make this judgment apart from the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is a bit like recognizing the queen as she goes on a walkabout among a crowd of people. Our recognition of her does not confer on her a regal status. Rather, we acknowledge her regal status as we recognize that this person is our sovereign. Just so, the fathers of

6. Compare later in the Westminster Confession, which (at this juncture) echoes the language of the Thirty-Nine Articles: "All synods or councils, since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both" (31.4).

Nicaea, Chalcedon, and the rest recognized the qualities of certain documents as bearing the marks of apostolicity and divine revelation, and canonized them. This was an ecclesial act in one respect, but it was an act undertaken by a body subordinate to the work of the Holy Spirit, who authorized these texts. The fathers of the ecumenical councils did not make Scripture; they understood certain books as being authorized by God. It is the difference between *deciding* one afternoon that a particular letter one has discovered in the attic was written by one's infamous ancestor the Bristol pirate Edward Teach (a.k.a. Blackbeard), and *recognizing* by certain telltale signs that the letter one has found in the attic was the work of the infamous Teach. In the former case, some act of imprimatur has gone on whereby I make a judgment about the artifact in question that confers upon it a certain status. In the latter case, the judgment concerned is more a question of seeing qualities latent within the letter as being the sort of qualities to be found in the extant work of Teach. I say that the fathers of the ecumenical councils were engaged in an activity much more like this latter case of discovery than like the former one. And I think this sort of view is not an atypical one in the Reformed tradition.

But when the matter is put like this, it may seem that there is less separating the Reformed Catholic from the Roman Catholic position (which is all to the good, as far as I am concerned). At the very least, it is important to note that representatives of these different communions greatly value the role of tradition in the life of the church and that there is a place of eminence, though not preeminence, given to tradition in the doctrinal formularies of two of the shoots of the Reformed tradition, namely, Anglicanism and Presbyterianism.

The Role of Faith

But if the churches of the Reformation have retained an important though subordinate place for tradition in the formation of Christian doctrine, then what of the role of faith? Here, consideration of the contribution of evangelical theology, including Reformed evangelical theology, is pertinent.⁷

Evangelical theology has traditionally had a somewhat ambivalent relationship to the notion of “experience,” understood here as some event lived through of which one is consciously aware. Our focus shall be upon the role *religious* experience plays in the formation, sustenance, and development of Christian doctrine. But, given the foregoing, we will also consider the relationship between religious experience as a putative source of encounter with the divine, and other sources of testimony appealed to in order to ground theological authority, such as Scripture and tradition. We will see that in Reformed and evangelical thought there are different, sometimes conflicting, accounts of the relation that experience bears to doctrine or to norms of theological authority.

But faith itself is an act that implies religious experience. So, in addition to the question of the relation between faith and religious experience of the sort just mentioned, there is a logically prior question about how faith itself is to be understood qua experience in evangelical theology. The concept of faith admits of numerous different interpretations.⁸ But for most evangelicals, faith is an act that involves two components. The first is propositional content, that is, believing that such and such is the case. This we shall call the “doxastic” component of faith. The second part is trust—what we might call the “fiducial” component to faith. Some people think faith

7. Reformed theology is not synonymous with evangelical theology, as shall become clear in what follows.

8. See William Lad Sessions, *The Concept of Faith* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

is essentially nonpropositional or numinous and cannot be expressed in language. I shall have nothing to say about such notions of faith in what follows—not because they are unimportant but because they do not seem to be typical of mainstream Reformed and evangelical theology.

It seems clear that faith is something that is normally acquired. For some, faith acquisition comes about through a process of discovery, reflection, careful weighing of evidence, and so on. For others, it seems to be a sudden intrusion into their lives, as it was for the apostle Paul. God’s presence is somehow impressed upon that person in such an immediate way that he or she cannot deny it; it is overwhelming. Whether faith is acquired through reflection or through dramatic change, it looks like one important feature of such faith is doxastic, in that one comes to hold certain beliefs in virtue of having faith. It also seems fairly clear that such faith in God also includes a fiducial component. From this, it should be clear that reflection on the very concept of faith and the role it plays in evangelical theologies must also include consideration of how faith relates to experience, because to have faith is to undergo some sort of experience.⁹

Though the subject of disagreement between competing parties of evangelicals, the *concept* of faith in evangelical theology has historically had fairly well-defined boundaries, which is attributable in large measure to the legacy of the Reformation. The Reformers bequeathed to their theological progeny an understanding of the nature of faith and its central and defining place in Protestant thought, which evangelicals have traditionally taken very seriously. But the issue of what faith consists in—what it is, exactly—should be distinguished from the matter of what function it has in theology, what role it plays. I suggest that these two issues, the conceptual

9. Note that here and in what follows, “experience” is not equivalent to “feelings.”

and the functional aspects of faith, correspond to two levels of disagreement among evangelical theologians on the role of faith. It is tempting to think that this question of the role of faith in the life of the believer has been what has most often divided evangelicals. But in fact, such differences are the outcome of deeper commitments about the conceptual component of faith.

This was true even when evangelical theology was in its infancy, if the story told in the recent literature by David Bebbington and those who have followed his lead is correct.¹⁰ Assume, for the sake of argument, that Bebbington is right and evangelicalism as a movement began in the 1730s with the revivalism of John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards, at the onset of what has become known as the Great Awakening. If this is true, then it would appear that at the beginning of evangelicalism there was a difference of opinion on the nature of faith, on its role in theology, and on how it is related to religious experience, a divergence that continues to the present.¹¹

10. See David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989). Bebbington argues that there are four distinctive features of theologies that are evangelical: biblicism (a high view of Scripture in all matters touching Christian faith and practice), cruciocentrism (the centrality of the atonement), conversionism (that fallen human beings need to hear and respond to the gospel), and activism (the imperative to evangelize). This characterization of evangelicalism has become known as the Bebbington Quadrilateral.
11. Garry Williams has recently argued that the elements of the Bebbington Quadrilateral were already present in Reformation and Puritan theology. If that is right, then evangelicalism was aboriginally Augustinian in its understanding of faith and experience, and only subsequently fissured along “Calvinistic” and “Arminian” lines. This would mean there was originally much more convergence on the concept of faith and on how to understand religious experience in light of faith among evangelicals than Bebbington’s thesis would allow for. But even if Williams is right (and I think there is much to be said for his argument), it is still the case that there are those in the evangelical constituency who align themselves with an evangelical Arminianism, as well as those who stand within Augustinianism broadly construed. That is all I am presuming here. See Garry J. Williams, “Enlightenment Epistemology and Evangelical Doctrines of Assurance,” in *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2008), 345–74.

To see this, let us turn to consider some of the main points of convergence and divergence over the matter of faith that existed between traditional evangelical Wesleyan Arminianism and evangelical Reformed theology of the sort embraced by stalwarts of evangelical history such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards.¹² We begin with the conceptual level, concerning the nature of faith. Wesleyan evangelicals have traditionally agreed with their Reformed counterparts that it is faith alone that justifies a person before God; that faith is a gift of God; that faith brings about moral and spiritual reorientation; and that (as a consequence of this) faith itself must be experiential. In other words, faith is inherently *affective*. It cannot be a merely notional or intellectual assent to a given statement or proposition, though it normally includes such assent.¹³

Following Jonathan Edwards, we might think of the *affection* as that faculty of the soul which inclines or disinclines a person to do a thing under consideration, and includes the will, the mind, and the heart in such inclination. In this view, religious affections do not admit of a bifurcation between “heart” and “mind.” They are more like “reasons of the heart.” This means they are not reducible to emotion, passion, or intellectual preference but involve the interplay of mind, will, and heart, as Edwards suggests.¹⁴ That this affective

12. I choose these two strains of evangelical theology because they have clear historical precedent in the literature and entail distinct theological positions. But one could just as easily speak, in denomination-specific terms, of evangelical Baptists, some of whom have historically been Reformed (such as Andrew Fuller, Charles Spurgeon, and John Piper) and some of whom have been more Arminian in their theology (such as the late Stanley Grenz and Roger Olsen). Or one could speak of evangelical Anglicans who are Arminian or Reformed, or free Evangelicals, Disciples of Christ, charismatics, Pentecostals, and so on. The relevant issues here can be transposed, without much change, to these particular denominational contexts.
13. Does this mean one must have a consciously “affective” experience in order for a given experience to count as genuinely “religious”? Not necessarily. One can profit from reading Scripture without being conscious of simultaneously enjoying a particular “experience” of God beyond the reading. The Holy Spirit may be at work in the believer without that believer’s being conscious of it, and so on. But from an evangelical perspective, the affective component to faith is vital.

understanding of faith crosses the Arminian–Calvinist divide in historic evangelical theology can be illustrated from the experience of both John Wesley and Edwards, both of whom give paradigmatic accounts of “affective” faith acquisition. Wesley’s famous report of his “conversion” runs thus:

In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine* and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹⁵

Edwards’ account has striking similarities:

The first that I remember that ever I found anything of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things, that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words, I Tim. 1:17. “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever, Amen.” As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before. Never any words of scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was; and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be wrapped up to God in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him.¹⁶

14. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 96–97. Edwards admits that “it must be confessed, that language here is somewhat imperfect” in defining religious affections (97).

15. From *John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler, Library of Protestant Thought (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 66.

16. From Jonathan Edwards, “Personal Narrative,” in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 283–84. The fact that the precise date and morphology of the conversions of Wesley and Edwards have been disputed need not detain us here.

But there are also important areas of conceptual disagreement between the two evangelical parties on the question of faith acquisition. The Wesleyans could not agree with the Reformed about the *manner* in which salvation is said to be only by divine grace through faith. Broadly speaking, Arminian theology as a genus, of which evangelical Wesleyans are a species, is often accused of being committed to a doctrine of synergism according to which there is both a human and a divine contribution to be made to the process by which faith is acquired.¹⁷ We might say that for the synergist, humans have the freedom to embrace or reject prevenient divine grace by, or with, faith. By contrast, most Reformed theologians (though perhaps not all) are said to affirm monergism.¹⁸ This, very roughly, is the doctrine according to which no human contribution can be made to the process by which faith is acquired. That is, for the monergist, humans are *utterly incapable* of responding to God's suasions with faith. The work of salvation is entirely a work of grace; the human decision in regeneration follows in the wake of a prior (and absolutely singular) divine act.¹⁹ Such a distinction does serve

17. There are important doctrinal differences between the Arminianism espoused by Jacob Arminius and his immediate disciples, such as Episcopius, and later Wesleyan Arminianism. Arminian theology is a rich and variegated genus, just as Reformed theology (its theological parent) is. Both Arminianism and Reformed Christianity belong to what, to borrow another zoological term, we might call the family of evangelical theology. Recent work in historical theology has helped clarify some of the differences between species of Arminian theology. See, e.g., Richard Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Theology of Jacob Arminius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991). Cf. Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2006).

18. Reformed theologians are typically theological determinists, but some have advocated theological libertarianism, like the Arminians. This is a matter to which we shall return in chapter 3. An excellent discussion of Calvinistic libertarianism can be found in William Cunningham's essay "Calvinism and the Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity" (1862), in *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989), 471–599.

19. The reason for such human incapacity is moot. Many Reformed theologians argue that the noetic effects of sin are such that human beings are incapable of turning to God without divine grace. But the Amyradians and, later, followers of Jonathan Edwards in New England argued that there is no natural impediment to fallen human beings trusting in God by faith, but there is a moral inability to do so. See, e.g. Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey,

a purpose, but it is not clear to me that it is a useful distinction when applied to different branches of evangelical theology. For it is not clear to me that Arminian theologians are synergists. Careful Arminian theologians deny that fallen human beings may turn to God without the interposition of divine grace, just as Reformed theologians do. Although there is a real disagreement about how much the will of a fallen individual awakened or invigorated by the secret working of the Holy Spirit may be said to be active in the process of salvation, this is not the same thing as claiming that the will of a fallen individual contributes in any substantive way to salvation. It is not even clear what it would mean for “the will” to contribute to salvation, other than as a euphemism for the agent contributing to her or his salvation. And no evangelical theologian, Arminian or Reformed, would countenance that.²⁰

This leads us to note, more briefly, the second level of disagreement between Wesleyan and Reformed evangelicals on the matter of the role faith plays in their respective theologies. We have seen that evangelicals have tended to converge on the centrality of faith for the Christian life and on the importance of the idea that one is saved only through faith, despite wranglings over what salvation *sola fide* entails. But they have disagreed among themselves about the practical consequences of this commitment in the *ordo salutis* and the life of faith. Here the different theological characters of the two evangelical traditions come into play more obviously. Consider, for example, how faith is deployed in, say, the doctrine of regeneration or perseverance. Arminian evangelicals have traditionally thought that in both regeneration and perseverance, the human subject

vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 156–62, 362–63.

20. For one interesting recent account of salvation that is consistent with Arminian theology and is not synergistic, see Kevin Timpe, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), chap. 4.

contributes to the process involved, which the Reformed have denied. This is one important reason for the different accounts of the order of salvation and of perseverance that one finds in these two traditions.

However, it is also true to say that in the past century (and for a variety of reasons), the conceptual boundaries thought to circumscribe what is doctrinally permissible in discussion of the nature of faith in the evangelical constituency have broadened out. This means that there is now a greater range of options on the nature of faith *and* its function in evangelical thought than was true at the close of the nineteenth century. For instance, there are evangelical biblical scholars for whom Pauline faith is as much a matter of belonging to the covenant community as it is a question of having some alien righteousness imputed to the believer by God (see the work of scholars like N. T. Wright and those taking a “New Perspective” on Paul).

Thus far, we have seen that the relationship between faith and experience is an intimate one. For evangelical theologians, faith depends on experience; it is affective. It is practically impossible to have faith without such experience, even if, as a matter of fact, for some people faith in God begins at the same moment that experience of God occurs.²¹ But a lively, affective faith is not enough. One can have the sort of evangelical understanding of faith just outlined and yet live a wicked life (see Rom. 6:1). Such antinomianism is a real problem for evangelicals who take seriously the experiential dimension to faith, as expounded by evangelical leaders of the past like Wesley and Edwards.²² In the recent literature, Richard

21. Experience of God need not generate faith. James 2:19 tells us, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.” But clearly the demons believe that there is a God without trusting in God. They have known God, have had experience of God, but have no faith in God. The same is true of many human beings—which is why it is possible to commit the unforgivable sin by rejecting the susurrations of the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29).

Swinburne has taken the view that the best way to avoid antinomianism is to adopt a pragmatic model of faith. Whereas a number of theologians in the Western tradition, such as Thomas Aquinas or Martin Luther, have emphasized both the doxastic and fiducial elements of faith, Swinburne wants to make a case for acting as if certain things were the case. The fiducial pragmatist (as we shall call him) need not believe that there is a God, but he must act as if there is a God, living a life consistent with that belief, informed by certain moral commitments and actions. Swinburne comments: “On the Pragmatist view, a man S has faith if he acts on the assumptions that there is a God who has the properties which Christians ascribe to him and has provided for me the means of salvation and the prospect of glory, and that he will do for S what he knows that S needs or wants—so long also as S has good purposes.”²³ What is potentially lacking in the Lutheran account of faith, where one believes that there is a God and trusts that through Christ’s work he or she will be saved, is *good purpose*. It is this that leaves the door open to antinomianism. In short, the Lutheran view (as Swinburne characterizes it) cannot exclude the scoundrel from being a person of faith. This is precisely why Swinburne thinks the pragmatic account of faith is superior to the Lutheran. The fiducial pragmatist must have a good purpose in view, which the Lutheran view cannot guarantee.

But Swinburne clearly has a rather different conception of faith than that of evangelicals attracted to the affective account of theologians like Edwards. Swinburne thinks belief is not praiseworthy because it is not voluntary: one cannot simply bring oneself to believe a particular proposition. The mind believes a given proposition on the basis of the evidence. But trust occurs where there is an evidential gap. It is what stands “in” that gap. Thus, I trust

22. We shall return to the question of antinomianism in chapter 2.

23. Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 116.

God despite the lack of overwhelming evidence for God's existence. However, as Paul Helm has pointed out, this means there is a paradox at the heart of Swinburne's account of pragmatic faith. For, according to Swinburne,

[T]o the extent that the existence of God is evidentially established it is more reasonable to believe that he exists than not, but for that very reason there is less opportunity for faith in him, for trust. Merit comes only from trust, but trust can only occur when there is evidential deficiency. . . . [T]o the extent that you have good grounds for a belief about God you at the same time reduce opportunities for trusting God, for acting on an assumption while having a good purpose, and so you reduce the opportunities for faith in God, and so lessen your chances of gaining merit by exercising such faith.²⁴

The upshot of this is that for the Swinburnian fiducial pragmatist, ignorance about intellectual arguments concerning God is better for one's faith. Needless to say, this is a rather peculiar conclusion for a philosophical theologian to reach.

But, assuming that the evangelical does have a conception of faith like the Lutheran, how can she exclude the possibility of antinomianism? An affective faith might still issue in a lack of good purpose. In fact, it looks like one cannot prevent antinomianism, even if it is part and parcel of faith to be experiential, as it is in the Wesleyan and Edwardsian accounts. However, something is surely awry with the person who thinks that faith is affective and yet that such faith need not issue in good purpose. Similarly, one cannot exclude the possibility that one's spouse does not reciprocate conjugal love but simulates it from purely selfish motives. But this does not in and of itself nullify conjugal love, or the trust one places in one's spouse. The misuse of a thing does not invalidate its right use.

24. Paul Helm, *Faith with Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 146.

Experience and Doctrine

From consideration of Scripture and tradition, as well as faith as experience, we turn to wider concerns about faith, experience, and doctrine. Recall the initial distinction made at the beginning of the preceding section of this chapter concerning the role religious experience plays in the formation, sustenance, and development of Christian doctrine, as well as in the relationship between religious experience as a putative source of encounter with the divine and other sources of testimony appealed to in order to ground theological authority. We shall consider each of these issues in turn.

Indisputably, religious experience plays an important role in the genesis of doctrine, as well as in its sustenance and development. This holds true irrespective of one's particular theological proclivities. But it is not clear that a Reformed and evangelical account of the genesis of doctrine requires that in every instance the human authors of Scripture underwent some supernatural experience of which they were conscious, as a necessary condition for the genesis of biblical doctrine. For instance, reading Luke–Acts, one gets the impression that the author did not write because he believed he had a specific experience to communicate, nor because he believed he was “under the influence” of the Holy Spirit, but because he thought it important to leave a record of the events described. The same is not true of, say, Paul or Jeremiah, for whom particular religious experience was a fundamental motivation for his writing.

This is consistent with the claim that Luke–Acts was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, because divine ministrations need not be something of which we are conscious. (I am not conscious of God upholding me at every moment of my existence. Yet the doctrine of providence suggests this is just what God does.) This has the strange consequence that a specific revelatory *experience* of

God, understood as an event lived through of which the subject is conscious, is not a necessary condition for the formation of Scripture. Yet I think this must be embraced, given that some of the human authors of Scripture appear not to have been aware of the fact that their writings were divine revelation (or, perhaps, the vehicle for divine revelation).²⁵ But then, what role does experience play in the formation of doctrine? One way of getting clearer on this question involves distinguishing different levels of experience in relation to the formation of Scripture. At the *mundane* level, there are those experiences which are necessary for the author to be in a position to write the sort of material he does. So, the author of Luke–Acts has the experience of growing up in a literate community, being shaped by that community, becoming a physician, meeting Paul, deciding to write Luke–Acts (or being the author substantially responsible for this document), and so on. Without these particular mundane experiences, Luke–Acts would not exist as we have it. And it is surely plausible to think that God ensures that the author of Luke–Acts has these experiences in order to bring about the writing of the portion of Scripture he writes.

But then there is another level, that of *supernatural* experience, where authors live through an event of which they are conscious and which they report in terms of a divine encounter of some kind. This is also an important feature of Scripture and happens at key moments in the biblical narrative, for example, to Moses on Sinai, to Isaiah in the temple, to Ezekiel in his vision of the valley of dry bones, on

25. Experience of God is not a sufficient condition for the formation of the canon, because other conditions are also necessary, such as the process of inscripturation, which in the case of many biblical books included a period of oral transmission of the purported experience, being written down, preserved, and redacted by a given ecclesial community and being accepted by the church as of divine origin. None of these things necessarily undermines the status of Scripture as divine revelation, any more than the recording of an interview with the prime minister and its being written down and edited at some later date for publication and dissemination necessarily undermines the status of the words on the page of the published form of the interview as being those uttered by the prime minister.

the Mount of Transfiguration, and at Paul's conversion. But it is not clear that all biblical authors are consciously aware of having had such experiences—or even that every author reports having had, or having heard about, such experiences (consider, for example, the books of Ruth, Esther, and Proverbs).

So it seems that experience is very important in the formation of Scripture and that the right concatenation of mundane experience is used by God to bring about the writing of Scripture. But in some cases, this does not appear to include the notion of a consciously apprehended religious experience informing the output, in addition to such mundane experience. In such cases, I presume God works secretly by the Holy Spirit, providentially ensuring that the mundane experience that informs the writing of a particular author of Scripture enables that author, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to write the word of God. But importantly, such divine workings may be hidden from the person writing, who may not be conscious of this secret divine work.²⁶

Note that this understanding of divine revelation and the process of its being encoded in Scripture need not be flat-footed about how the particular canonical form of the text came about. What is important is the claim that through these different sorts of literature, in diverse ways, using the texture and voice of particular authors, in texts brought together and edited over time, we find God speaking. These are not merely the words of human beings who, through reflection upon the divine, came to hold particular views and transmitted them,

26. Compare the Puritan theologian William Ames, who writes, "Divine inspiration was present among these writers in different ways. Some things were utterly unknown to the writer in advance, as appears in the history of creation or in the foretelling of things to come. But some things were previously known to the writers. . . . Some things were known by a natural knowledge and some by a supernatural. In those things that were hidden and unknown, divine inspiration was at work." William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John D. Eusden (Boston: Pilgrim, 1968), 186. See also Kenneth J. Stewart, "The Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture, 1650–1850: A Re-Examination of David Bebbington's Theory," in Haykin and Stewart, *Advent of Evangelicalism*, 398–413.

or came to have particular experiences and wrote them down for posterity. These are the very words of God communicated through the feeble, fragile, fallible medium of human beings. God so fashions and shapes these humans that all the idiosyncrasies and traits a particular author has are used by the divine author to convey exactly what that divine author intends to say. For the evangelical theologian, there can be nothing implausible in thinking that God accommodates God's self in such a complex manner as to ensure, through this process of experience, writing, and transmission, that what results is what God intended to convey to God's people. As the Old Princeton theologian Benjamin Warfield memorably put it, the different biblical authors are like the colored panes in a stained-glass window. The same light shines through them all, but it is refracted in many different and beautiful ways corresponding to the color, shape, and transparency of the glass through which it passes.²⁷

But more important than this, the Christian theologian has a theological reason for thinking that it is characteristic of God to accommodate God's self in such complex ways to God's creatures. This can be seen preeminently in the incarnation, the supreme instance of divine accommodation. Christology cannot be an afterthought in an evangelical account of divine revelation and its relation to faith and experience. It must be foundational. For Christ, as the word of God incarnate, is divine revelation incarnate. We know God has revealed God's self to the extent that we know Christ is God—not because revelation includes only those places in Scripture where Christ is reported as speaking but because the Second Person of the Trinity is the word of God. He is, as it were, the speech of God, who brings forth creation and who inspires the prophets and apostles by God's Spirit. So, divine revelation is, in a way, guaranteed

27. Benjamin B. Warfield, "Inspiration," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Severance, 1915), 3:1473–83.

by the role played by Christ as God incarnate, as well as by the work performed by Christ qua word of God who by the Spirit communicates to the prophets before Christ and the apostles after his ascension. The upshot of this is that, as one aspect of the *opus dei*, revelation is a triune work. Although it terminates upon the word of God in a particular manner, it also involves the Father in its instigation and the Spirit in its communication.

This also gives some indication of how an evangelical account of the relation between experience and the formation of biblical doctrine may differ from that of classical liberal theology and its modern counterparts. Liberal theologians thought that Scripture is the codification of religious experiences. Thus, for example, Friedrich Schleiermacher's famous thesis that "Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech."²⁸ But they denied that these religious experiences constitute an immutable divine revelation. They conceived of religious experience as what generates doctrine, including the doctrine in Scripture, but they thought doctrine was inherently revisable on the basis of new experiences of God. There is, in this way, a constant process of experiencing God, checking this with Scripture and the tradition, and using such experience to correct or adjust the testimony of the Christian faith in line with the "God consciousness" or "sense of absolute dependence" the theologian perceives in and through the person and work of Christ. Hence, according to liberal theologians, experience is normative in Christian theology in a way that Scripture is not. This picture of the relation between faith and experience is beguiling, because it captures an important truth about how doctrine is often generated through religious experience. The problem with liberal theology lies not in its placing experience of God center stage

28. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (1830; repr., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), §15.

but rather in its decoupling such experience from a robust concept of divine revelation along with an insistence upon a particular conception of religious experience as fundamental to the formation of doctrine. It is this move that enabled the liberal theologians to invert the traditional Reformation idea of Scripture as the final norm in matters of doctrine, replacing it with contemporary religious experience.

So much for the role of experience in the genesis of doctrine; what of the role it plays in its sustenance and development? Like many Reformed thinkers, I take it that doctrine is propositional or can be expressed in propositional form.²⁹ Scripture contains propositions. It also contains lots of other sorts of things, like commands, imprecations, and tropes, which are not propositions. But this is not to deny that we find doctrine in Scripture. Similarly, we find doctrine in the catholic creeds and in the confessional symbols of particular ecclesial communities (the Westminster Confession, the Augsburg Confession, the Baptist Confession of 1689, and so on). Here, there is a way in which experience plays a role in bearing witness to Scripture in the doctrine confessed by the church. As the contemporary Anglican evangelical theologian John Webster puts it, “[A] creed or confessional formula is a public and binding indication of the gospel set before us in the scriptural witness, through which the church affirms its allegiance to God, repudiates the falsehood by which the church is threatened, and assembles around the judgement and consolation of the gospel.”³⁰

29. Karl Barth offers a different account of dogmatics as a critical science that concerns itself with the proclamation of the church. He seems to think that this task is principally concerned not with propositions but with witness. Suppose that he is right. Such an account is surely consistent with thinking that doctrine can be expressed in propositional form, which is what I am supposing here. See Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: SCM, 1949), chap. 1.

30. John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2005), 73–74.

I suggest that this is a right understanding of the role of the creeds and confessions of Christendom. The ecumenical symbols of the church were authorized by councils that were moved by the Holy Spirit (whether or not they were conscious of this and “experienced” the work of the Holy Ghost) and that witnessed to Scripture in the canons forged thereby. To the extent that these canons are extrapolations of Scripture’s explicit and implicit message, they are to be upheld—but only so far. Scripture is normative in a way that not even the catholic creeds are. The same goes for particular confessions that are also witnesses—in the first instance, to Scripture, but also as echoes of those ideas found in previous creedal documents that the framers of such confessions recognized as other, more ancient witnesses to the same truth.

This, or something very like it, has been the traditional understanding of most Reformed evangelicals with respect to the creeds and confessions of the church, in common with many other orthodox Christians. The extent to which a given creed or confession effectively witnesses to Scripture is, of course, an important theological consideration, but here is not the place to explore that. It is sufficient for present purposes to understand that the authority of the creeds and confessions is derivative. The experience of those framing these documents is not normative for Christian faith, as the experience of the apostles and prophets as authors of Scripture was. The Fathers who worked on the great symbols of the church were certainly guided by the same Holy Spirit that inspired the authors of Holy Writ. But the sort of guidance needed was more by way of recognizing what to say about Scripture, what to leave out, and how to express it in language that would preserve the church and communicate to the generation to which they addressed themselves, in thought-forms and ideas inevitably somewhat removed from those of the Bible. Such guidance is very different from divine revelation.

It is like the difference between writing *Jane Eyre* and writing a study guide to *Jane Eyre*. *Jane Eyre* would exist without the study guide, but the study guide would never have been conceived without *Jane Eyre*. Just so with respect to the two sorts of literature that make up Scripture and the creeds and confessions, respectively, and the different sorts of experience each required.

This is not to deny that there is doctrinal development of a sort: the more Christians have reflected on Scripture and listened to theologians from the past, the clearer certain issues have become (although this is not always the case and this does not imply a sort of Hegelian unfolding of the true nature of doctrine through history). But an evangelical account of faith and experience cannot countenance the prospect that something might be added to Scripture or stand alongside Scripture as an equivalent source of authority. In this way, evangelicals are heirs to the Reformation *sola scriptura*. Scripture has a final authority that no other source of creaturely testimony does (bar Christ). It is alone in that sense. But, of course, Scripture is never alone in another sense. It is always read and understood within the community of faith in a tradition stretching back to the apostles, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

It does not seem likely that there will be a convergence of differing evangelical conceptions of the relation between faith and experience anytime soon. Some writers worry that the doctrinal plurality currently tolerated on a number of doctrinal loci, including issues that are part of the Bebbington Quadrilateral, is a cause for grave concern about the integrity of evangelicalism and its future as a coherent theological movement. Increasingly, theologians who are evangelicals identify themselves with one or another subgroup by

adding a particular preliminary to the noun *evangelical*, such as “postconservative evangelical,” “progressive evangelical,” “Catholic evangelical,” “liberal evangelical,” and so on. It may be that in due course, the doctrinal nuances that pick out these differing subgroups will lead them in such different directions that the term *evangelical* becomes more like its German equivalent, *evangelische* (roughly, “Protestant”), than the name for a coherent theological movement or homogeneous group of beliefs held by particular theological communities. This is a real concern. But I have argued that the two main evangelical genera that emerged from the Great Awakening, namely, Wesleyan Arminianism and the evangelical Reformed thought of theologians like Jonathan Edwards, share enough in common concerning the notion of faith, especially of faith as affective experience, for them to be considered part of one family of Christian theology that has its roots in the Reformation. I have also outlined one account of the role experience plays in the formation of doctrine in Scripture, which (I submit) is consistent with an evangelical way of thinking.³¹ Finally, I have given some indication of how this differs from the way in which subsequent generations have reflected on Scripture, which has been codified in the bodies of doctrine comprising the creeds and confessions, which is where we began this chapter. There is more to be said about how evangelicals view their own private religious experiences with respect to faith, and about the relationship between faith and what is often called Christian practice. But enough has been said here to indicate how discussion of such matters might begin.

31. It would be anachronistic to claim that the church fathers who recognized the canon of Scripture were evangelicals in the Bebbington sense of that term. The account set forth here may be thought of as a Reformed perspective on the relationship between religious experience and the formation of doctrine consistent with evangelicalism—a sort of Reformed evangelical gloss on how the Fathers came to canonize the creeds.