

Hübner on the Types of Contemporary Reformed Theology

Review of “The Diversity of Contemporary Reformed Theology: A New Encyclopedic Introduction with a Case Study”, by Jamin Andreas Hübner

https://www.academia.edu/41278303/The_Diversity_of_Contemporary_Reformed_Theology_A_New_Encyclopedic_Introduction_with_a_Case_Study

Hübner’s introduction makes clear that he takes his effort to encompass types of Reformed theology broadly, In particular he is not restricted by the denominational paradigms that so often govern the thought of academics who are tied to some institution with its own institutional outlooks. He refers ‘to countless labels, such as “new Calvinism,” “Neocalvinism,” “Continental Calvinism,” “the Young, Restless, and Reformed” (YRR), “Four-Point Calvinists,” “Reformed Baptists,” “Confessionally Reformed,” “1689ers,” “Reformational,” “presuppositionalists,” etc.’¹ Putting it another way, Hübner says: “This project is not a historical genealogy.”² He identifies five types that he will use in his categorization:

1. Confessional Reformed
2. Calvinist Baptist
3. Neocalvinist
4. Progressive Reformed
5. The Theology of the Reformers

He adds the fifth category as a control type. He notes that one seldom finds anyone who actually holds to the theology of the Reformers, but that it does provide an objective reference point from which to compare the other views. This seems unobjectionable until one considers a couple of additional factors.

First, 5 “means primarily the thought of Martin Luther and John Calvin”. This may be fine for the Lutherans, but when a Reformed person wishes to go *ad fontes*, there is a panoply of Reformers to consider. Not only was there diversity from the beginning, as in Zurich vs Geneva, but the rapid international spread of Reformed theology soon produced marked international differences, especially in the view of how the churches were to be constituted. Just by way of example, there is a later controversy at the Westminster assembly over baptism. The Scots wanted the baptistry at the front of the building, below the pulpit, to symbolize the subordination of the sacraments to the preaching of the word, while the English wanted it in the back by the church door to emphasize that baptism was the entry into the church. This may seem to be an anachronism, but it is an example of differences that go all the way back to the Marion exile congregations on the continent,

¹Jamin Andreas Hübner, “The Diversity of Contemporary Reformed Theology: A New Encyclopedic Introduction with a Case Study.” *Canadian-American Theological Review*, 2019, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 44-102.

²Hübner, p. 44.

who sought to have their own assemblies so that they could have a church “with an English face”. Hübner eventually (p. 73) expands the list of Reformers to Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Melancthon, Hus and Wyclif.

Secondly, part of the differences between the other four types have to do with their claims about what the theology of the Reformers was. The Neocalvinists premise their identity of being Reformed on a notion of a radical break between Calvin’s own theology and the sort of scholastic ideas the neocalvinism rejects. Baptists take a reductionist view of what the real theology of Calvin was, implicitly making the central ideas to be the ones that Baptists can go along with, etc. Thus Hübner 5th point really means entering into such controversies himself, to posit what the real Calvin believed.³

One must also recognize that to carry through his classification, Hübner must set aside the way the people under study use the labels within his types. For example, the Baptists tend to divide themselves with terms such as Reformed Baptist, Calvinistic Baptist, Sovereign Grace Baptist, etc. which they see as real differences. But Reformed Baptist seems to be itself a wide category that spans Confessional Baptist over to any sort of five-pointer and beyond. Besides this there are stylistic differences based on the provenance of the leaders.⁴

But immediately after this he introduces another and far more disparate element, namely the “post-modern and linguistic turn” where differences are not over truth but are “competing discourses” and theology is not about propositions but “spirit-directed performance” “rather like sailing”.⁵ After citing various utterances along this line he concludes that ‘All of the above theologians come from some version of “reformed theology” and yet disagree on what “theology” is or is about.’⁶ He recognized that all this is in stark contrast to those who hold that Reformed theology is “the system of doctrine thought in the Holy Scriptures” and is “ultimately a web (or list) of true propositions extracted from the inerrant text of God’s Word” and that “to seriously question the doctrinal standards is to (*functionally*) question the entire system and, eventually, to question God.” But he immediately attempts to raise suspicion about this position by invoking the principle of *Semper Reformanda*, which he interprets as “always reforming”, (a gloss I have heard from the enemies of Reformed theology, as distinct from the Reformed rendering of “always to be Reformed”).⁷

Throughout all this Hübner, invokes ecumenical motives for why his project is justified and worthwhile and implies the desirability of a certain unifying outcome. But clearly, this can only be achieved at a price, that of setting aside the fundamental self-understanding of much of the Reformed types he will be reviewing, and doing so in favor of the philosophies

³Hübner acknowledges these distinctions to an extent, but expresses them in a weird way. ‘Together, these divergences (combined with differences in geography and demographics) formed a considerable gap between the “Lutherans” and the “Calvinists,” and between “the Presbyterians” (following Calvin) and “the Reformed”(following Zwingli). p. 46.

⁴In my only foray into a Reformed Baptist church I discovered a style of worship, a method of preaching, and a body of religious cant that exactly corresponded to what was done in the GARB dispensational Baptist church that I attended in high school. As an example of religious cant, the is the use of “journeying mercies” in a prayer, when “safe travel” is meant.

⁵Hübner, pp. 47, 48.

⁶Hübner, p. 49.

⁷Hübner, p. 51.

of the liberals. It is also evident that Hübner realizes this and that he will have to make a choice about whose values he will back if he is going to carry through his projects under the terms that he is indicating.

Despite the above, he begins the section on Contemporary Reformed theology with a list of contemporary figures (and here it is hard to see how any like could be representative, or satisfy anyone's idea of who are the significant figures), and a list of denominations. The first of these is the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which he laughably describes as requiring candidates for ordination to "substantially adhere to the Westminster Standards but may have minor exceptions approved by the Presbytery."⁸ It is laughable because many PCA presbyteries are full of people who reject the system of theology of the Standards, preferring either a monocovenantal or tricovenantal theology. His list of their theological works includes *Christian Faith* by Hendrikus Berkhof, so the category is broad enough to embrace the Dutch Middle Orthodoxy.

Arriving at Calvinist Baptist Reformed Theology, Hübner allows that its adherents "exhibit a number of different frameworks such as dispensationalism, progressive dispensationalism, new covenant theology, and progressive covenantalism."⁹ One wonders if any content remains to the label other than Baptist practice. This grouping is probably offensive to most of the people lumped together in it. What he does get, and points out, is a large media presence and a large following, when they are added up. Heading up their list of institutions he has Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, the denomination of the Evangelical Free Church (which he does not mention). When I was a student there, the Evangelical Free Church had no doctrine of the mode of baptism. Also the faculty was split between "Calvinists" and Arminians, with the Free Church itself seeing a focus on such doctrines as divisive and detrimental to the denomination. Walter Kaiser was formulating his Promise Theology as an alternative to Reformed theology. On the other hand, the school claimed to be the true heir of old Princeton, viewing Westminster Seminary as the home of the extremists.

Next comes Neocalvinism. Here his description is rather interesting.

Neocalvinist reformed theology (or "Neocalvinism") enters the scene with the rise of modernity and work of several thinkers, pastors, and theologians from the 1800s, most notably Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854–1921).[70] Generally speaking, Neocalvinism is (a) Dutch Reformed theology tempered by modernism, and (b) the more direct theological and intellectual descendant of John Calvin, having sidestepped both the entrenched scholasticism of Turretin and the fundamentalism of American evangelicalism. Given this orientation and the particular intellectual influences of the sixteenth and seventeenth century before Neocalvinism, Confessional Reformed theology and Baptist Calvinism may be considered deviations from the "theology of the reformers" (see the fifth category below) while Neocalvinism is an *revised extension* of the "theology of the reformers."

His footnote 70 adds: "Following in their footsteps are a number of notable philosophers such as Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977), Evan Runner (1916–2002), and Roy Clouser. Note also that Neocalvinism is also regularly called "Kuyperianism," though some would distinguish the latter as a subset of the former."

⁸Hübner, p. 54.

⁹Hübner, p. 58.

The claim that this is the more direct descendant of Calvinism is disputed by recent advocates of natural law and students of Reformed scholasticism, who point to a categorical falsification of Calvin's views by the Neocalvinists.¹⁰ He cites four points of Neocalvinism:

1. Neocalvinism insists on a comprehensive and integrated understanding of creation, fall and redemption.
2. Neocalvinism emphasizes God's good and dynamic order for creation.
3. Neocalvinism affirms the historical development or differentiation of creation.
4. Neocalvinism recognizes an ultimate religious conflict: the antithesis, in all of life.¹¹

We must briefly consider each of these. One can say that Reformed covenantal theology insists on a comprehensive and integrated understanding of creation, fall and redemption. These are explained in terms of the Covenant of Works, encompassing God's purpose in creation, and the Covenant of Grace, whereby God directs history toward the restoration of the purpose. Neocalvinism breaks this up by adding the Common Covenant and creating a tricovenantal system. History then runs on two side-by-side tracks. Point 1 is then categorically wrong in its depiction of Neocalvinism. Point 2 is quite correct on Neocalvinism's emphasis on God's good and dynamic order for creation. But this is on the basis of theosophy, which rejects the Greek and scholastic (and Calvinist) static concept of God, for one that sees God as constantly changing through an ongoing process of self-creation.¹² Point 3 is also correct, provided that one notes that Reformed theology already had an historical development or differentiation of the covenants. Here one could ask whether Neocalvinism gave additional impetus to the development of this concept in Biblical theology, even in the work of such dissenters from Kuyperianism as Klass Schilder. Point 4 is half right. Neocalvinism posits the antitheses. This is partly because the concept was already at hand in the source theologies, such as the work of von Baader, but also as it was the necessary dialectical counterpart of Common Grace, an ultimate unifying principle, which in turn was necessitated by Common Covenant.

¹⁰ See Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann, 2006) pp. 2, 4, 5, 175. The point is also argued by J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classical Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019) pp. 149-154. As for the Reformed character of the philosophers Hübner invokes, Dooyeweerd's theosophy (for this see J. Glenn Friesen, *Neo-Calvinism and Christian Theosophy: Franz von Baader, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd* (Calgary: Aevum Books, 2015, 2016, 2021), or my own *Theosophy, Van Til and Bahnsen: How Neocalvinism Deformed Apologetics* (Rapid City: Via Moderna Books, 2023) and Clouser's own article where he denies the eternal trinity, Roy Clouser, "Religious Language: A New Look at an Old Problem", *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Hendrick Hart, Johan Van der Hoeven, and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Universtiy Press in America, 1983), p. 401.

¹¹ Hübner, pp. 63, 64.

¹² Again see J. Glenn Friesen, *Neo-Calvinism and Christian Theosophy*.

Hübner lists as the Neocalvinist denominations the Christian Reformed Church, and the Reformed Church in America, which have drifted so far from their Reformed origins that arguably, any Neocalvinism in their circles has largely morphed into some sort of liberalism detached from his covenantal skeleton. What he leaves out is that Cornelius Van Til (whom he does list as one of two founders of Westminster Seminary¹³) was a Neocalvinist, and injected a strong current of Neocalvinism in American Presbyterianism, first the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and then passing into the PCA. Also, other contemporary movements, such as Radical Two Kingdom theology, are based on the Kuyperian tricovenantal paradigm. Finally, monocovenantal theologies such as the Federal Vision, were founded by people who were originally Kuyperian, but came to see covenantal theology as so fractured (by Neocalvinist tricovenantalism?) that a new monocovenantal unity could and should be sought. Interestingly, in the bibliography section Hübner lists Herman Hoeksema with the Kuyperians, though footnoting it as not “entirely representative”. Hoeksema is another case of the tricovenantal Kuyperian tradition crashing into monocovenantalism, because of the antinomies generated by tricovenantalism.

But as an extension of this, the Baptists have taken to adapting concepts from Neocalvinism to shore up their theology. For example, when John MacArthur and his Grace Church decided to defy the state government and stay open during the COVID shutdown, they cited Kuyperian sphere sovereignty as the theological basis of their decision. Basically, as Baptist covenant theology ties the covenants to the church as an institution of professing believers, Baptists who want to say something authoritative about society add the supposedly covenantal institutions of sphere sovereignty onto their theological system. See the review of Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism* on this site for a further discussion of this phenomenon.¹⁴

Finally, Hübner reaches the Progressive Reformed category, which he calls ‘in many ways the “liberal” opposite of the Confessional Reformed.’¹⁵ He might as well have said this of the Neocalvinists, after lopping off as he does the whole side of them that he leaves in the Confessional camp.

Reaching his control group of Reformers, he lists, as the third point that they have in common ‘a deep suspicion about the state-church’s monopoly on doctrine and on the “means of grace”’.¹⁶ Why then in their confessions and practice did they unite the action of church and state on just these matters in order to create a Christian society? This is not something Hübner wishes to contemplate. He does footnote a list of books that showcase the usual liberal posturing to deplore all this lack of religious liberty. What the liberals themselves do, once they have the power, is seen in the current cancel culture, where dissenters from liberalism are silenced, lose their jobs, and sometimes even are denied access to economic instruments such as banking. For a discussion of how the theology of the Reformers differs from today’s “Calvinism” see the review on this site of Pascal Denault,

¹³The other founder he calls “John Machen” which may result in many readers not recognizing the name, in place of the familiar J. Gresham Machen.

¹⁴Further afield, but related to the concepts of state authority involved is the review of this site of *Authority in the Christian Life*, by Jean-Marc Berthoud.

¹⁵Hübner, p. 67.

¹⁶Hübner, p. 73.

The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism.

The doctrine that Hübner chooses for a “case study” to compare all these traditions is the doctrine of Scripture. This would seem to be a bad choice, in that it should come down to the liberals vs. everyone else, and not through light on the distinction of the categories, except number 4. Something else is going on here, however. In a footnote [103] Hübner makes a “point of correction”. Before B. B. Warfield the common doctrine was that of divine dictation, which he says was “the precise doctrine which Warfield rejected.” Here he instances Turretin.¹⁷ But was it? Was that the doctrine that Turretin and others meant in their Latin text? Here is an example of another view on the topic:

The term “dictation” in modern parlance bears a wooden, narrow meaning not applicable to inspiration during the Reformation. Indeed, if ever a word suffered the ignominies of modern theological reconstruction, it is the word “dictation.” The word was in general use among the Reformers as common terminology describing the penmen’s role in writing under immediate inspiration. Reformation era writers used the word “dictation” as a safeguard against the erosion of the active, creative instrumentality of the Holy Spirit in inspiration. Dictation and infallibility were linked in Reformation theological formulation. To replace infallibility, certainty and the impossibility to err, with degrees of inerrancy, to be without error, the Reformed Orthodox use of dictation would also be replaced and thus the demonization and inaccurate teaching on the 16th and 17th c. theological definition of dictation.¹⁸

What is evident upon an exploration of the topic, (which the reader can easily do through internet searches), is that Hübner has decided to base his investigation on a liberal canard. He takes up as his targets R. C. Sproul, Robert Reymond, and next John Frame. “John Frame’s bibliology is more sophisticated but essentially the same. The scriptures are self-authenticating”. But what does Frame mean here about the scriptures being self-authenticating? Frame is a follower of Van Til, and in much of Van Til’s theology, he settled on the self-authenticating Scripture as his “presupposition.” In this Van Til and Frame are implementing their version of the Kuyperian and Neocalvinist starting point.¹⁹ They are here being most self-consciously Neocalvinist. So why is this Hübner’s example of group 1 not group 3?

In his next section, he admits that the “bibliology of the Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists is virtually indistinguishable.”²⁰ But following that is his discussion of the Neocalvinists, whose views were indeed different. The question becomes, does Hübner get at the root of the difference? He says that they have an “organic”, “graphic”, or “incarnational” view. He begins to expound Kuyper’s discussion with its dynamic and organic language, as opposing “the modern, dualistic perspective of creation.”²¹ Not explained is the theosophical source of this emphasis in Kuyper. Further Kuyper viewed his opposition to dualism in a related way. For Kuyper dualism was a problematic concept. The

¹⁷ Hübner, p. 75.

¹⁸ Peter Van Kleeck, in <https://standardsacredtext.com/2022/02/01/dictation-and-inspiration/>

¹⁹ For an extended discussion see my *Theosophy, Van Til and Bahnsen*.

²⁰ Hübner, p. 77.

²¹ Hübner, p. 81.

main enemy that Kuyper saw was modernism, which he interpreted as a materialist monism. On the other side was theosophical anti-materialism which typically denounced dualism. This theosophy was very appealing to Kuyper, and he feared the material side of dualism as a potential concession to materialist modernism. Yet he could not see how Christianity could be divorced from some kind of dualism. Thus Kuyper wanted to preserve dualism, but avoid expressions of dualism that would lead to errors. Hübner goes on to discuss Kuyper's desire for an illuminated reading of Scripture, which is very much a part of Kuyper's theosophical mysticism.

Hübner does not discuss Dooyeweerd's views. For Dooyeweerd revelation takes place in the supratemporal, from which discursive reasoning is excluded. Therefore Scripture cannot be understood propositionally.²² In fact, this necessitated that theology be subordinated to philosophy, for only in philosophy, which begins with reflection on the experience which emerges from the supratemporal to the temporal, can discursive knowledge begin. Here is the real source of the big split in Neocalvinism between the type represented by Van Til and his numerous followers and the type considered by Hübner.

He then takes up the Progressive Reformed, with their usual enmity to real Christianity. For example Douglas Hall says that "American biblicism" has "only slightly camouflaged fascistic political overtones".²³ Hübner gives these writers a lengthy exposure, before going on to his control case of the Reformer's thought. Here he tries, as one would expect by now, to muddy the waters. For example:

Whether or not Donald McKim and Jack Rogers overstated their case in arguing their contrary, there is no question that Luther and Calvin believed in something closely approximating "verbal-plenary inspiration" and some sense of "infallibility"; had reservations about a canon larger than the current Protestant consensus: held to a "self-authenticating" bibliology and yet they were not card-carrying, twentieth-century conservative Presbyterians.²⁴

So why bring up McKim and Roger's bullshit book? It was thoroughly debunked and an embarrassed Roger's blamed McKim, claiming that McKim was responsible for the historical errors. All Hübner really says is that besides McKim and Roger being wrong, it remains a fact that not only did the Reformers not live in the twentieth century, and were not Presbyterians, they did not even carry cards saying that they did and were! Anyway, why should the Reformers accept the apocryphal books, that even many of the church fathers knew to be bogus? What does it prove against the Bible that they did not? Hübner then points out that a modern scholar, John McNeill, agrees with Warfield that Calvin did not believe in the dictation theory of inspiration, but Hübner says this is a confusing way to try to suggest that what McNeill says is contrary to Warfield.²⁵

²² See J. Glenn Friesen's book or my *Theosophy, Van Til and Bahnsen* pp. 31-36. Late in his career, in the 1970s, Cornelius Van Til finally broke with Dooyeweerd over this matter. See chapter two, "Van Til's Synthesis" in the above book.

²³ Hübner, p. 89.

²⁴ Hübner, p. 94.

²⁵ See also, Ralph Connington, "Did Turretin Depart from Calvin's View on the Concept of Error in the Scriptures?" *Foundations* 61.2 (2011) https://www.academia.edu/1157576/Did_Turretin_depart_from_Calvins_view_on_the_concept_of_error_in_the_Scriptures

We also read that “Presumably because of the canonical uncertainty in the first two centuries of the church (or just because he did not value these books as highly as others), Calvin wrote commentaries on all the biblical books except 2-3 John, and Revelation.” As for Revelation, if you don’t understand it, it is best not to teach it, and Calvin’s reticence sounds like wisdom. Hübner mentions that Calvin made use of Baruch, but the Belgic Confession, after listing the apocryphal books, says “All of which the Church may read and take instruction from, so far as they agree with the canonical books.” This is something that the Confessional Reformed, other than the Presbyterian side, are still confessionally committed to.

Hübner’s summary section is the sort of Kumbaya boilerplate that we can pass over, about how each perspective contributes its bit to the whole, even the ones he doesn’t like. He never gets around to explaining the sort of labels he mentions in the first paragraph, even though he calls his article an “Encyclopedic Introduction”. I can’t see that he justifies the four categories that he uses for the Reformed, or that their definition is particularly correct. He shows no interest in most of the theological issues that matter to and divide the people behind these labels.

Still, I think many people would appreciate a paper that really does explain these labels. There may not be anyone who knows enough to write such a paper.