

Calvin and Canadian Protestantism: The Witness of W.W. Bryden

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2009 marks not only the 500th anniversary of the birth of the Protestant Reformer John Calvin (1509-1564) but also the 100th anniversary of the ordination of arguably one of Canada's leading Calvinist theologians - Walter W. Bryden (1883-1952). As Donald Wade remembered it, T.F. Torrance once lauded Bryden as a truly remarkable theologian. "I can't help but think," Torrance remarked to Wade, that Walter Bryden "is more like John Calvin than anyone I've ever known."¹ This paper seeks to test Torrance's impression by examining Bryden's legacy as a Calvinist and the significance of Bryden's interpretation of Calvin and the Calvinist tradition for Canadian Protestantism. I intend to proceed along three lines of inquiry. First, I will briefly explore the kind of Calvinism in which Bryden was raised, educated, and called to work as a member and minister of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Second, I will sketch Bryden's interpretation of Calvin and the Calvinist tradition by looking at Bryden's most important writings on the Reformed tradition. Third, on that basis, we'll then come back to Torrance's first impression. Was Walter Bryden some sort of Calvin revivendus in the Canadian context? Or is there some other way to account for his theological contribution to Canadian Protestantism?

The basic facts of Walter Bryden's life are widely known. Born on a farm on the banks of the Blair River near Galt, Ontario on September 18, 1883, the elder son of a

¹ See Donald Wade, "The Theological Achievement of Walter Bryden." A paper presented to the Karl Barth Society of North America, Toronto, March 1974. See John Vissers, *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W.W. Bryden* (Pickwick Press, 2006) 249.

Scottish immigrant family, Bryden came by his Calvinism honestly, some might say inescapably - even providentially. His mother came from the north of Scotland, from a family in Cromarty which had taken a very active part in the Disruption on the side of the Free Church. "...She was," Bryden noted, "a fervent Free Church woman" and "she really created my interest in the Church." Bryden's father's family came from the south, from Dumfries, from the "auld kirk." But, as Bryden noted, his father was a canny Scot who had learned that discretion was the better part of valour – "accordingly," he said, "I went to the Free Church."² He was raised at Knox's Church, Galt where Calvinism had flourished since at least the early nineteenth century through the settlement of Scottish Presbyterians. Late in his life Bryden recalled that as a teenager in high school he had read all kinds of old national Scottish history, as well as the history of the Kirk. "Indeed," he said, "there was a time when I verily believed Scotland was God's throne and the rest of the world His footstool."³ Whatever Bryden knew of Calvin and Calvinism initially he knew from Scotland, not France or Geneva.

The Calvinism of Bryden's youth was characterized by a rigorous form of Presbyterian polity (with its dissenting Free Church heritage), a strong dose of Calvinist orthodoxy (with its emphasis on the sovereignty of God, total depravity, predestination, and the penal substitutionary atonement as set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith), and a lively evangelical piety. It was also Calvinism in the process of change. By the nineteenth century the older Post-Reformation scholastic Calvinism of the seventeenth century had been reshaped in response to emerging Enlightenment (modern)

² W.W. Bryden, "An Address delivered by Dr. Walter W. Bryden, Principal, Knox College, Toronto, to the Pre-Assembly Congress, on the evening of Monday, June 5, 1950," 9.

³ W.W. Bryden, "Address Delivered to the Presbyterian Congress" (June 5, 1950). See John Vissers, *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W.W. Bryden* (Pickwick Press, 2006).

thought, especially in Scotland. It was a Calvinism which appealed to the Common Sense philosophies of Thomas Reid (1710-1796) and William Hamilton (1788-1856) in order to shore up the first and fundamental truths of orthodoxy. Relying upon a faculty psychology, it argued that the basic truths of the Christian faith were accessible to “common sense” and demonstrable as the data of human consciousness. Common Sense therefore provided the philosophical constructs to support a natural theology which could in turn be used to support Calvinist orthodoxy and piety. It made Calvinism appear intellectually rigorous, philosophically sophisticated, and scientifically justified.⁴ The Calvinist context of Bryden’s youth provided a powerfully comprehensive worldview in which Christian faith and human experience appeared consonant, although by the 1880s and 1890s (i.e. the years of Bryden’s childhood and youth) cracks began to appear in this intellectual hegemony.

But there was more. Knox’s Church, Galt was not only strongly Calvinistic, it was also evangelical in its theology and ministry. It had been founded as a congregation of the Free Church in 1844 under the leadership of the Rev. John Bayne. By the 1860s it was touched by the evangelical revival movements that swept up from the American states. In fact, the congregational history records a “significant revival” which took place among the people of Knox’s, Galt in 1869. In 1888 the Rev. Alexander Jackson of Pittsburgh was inducted as the minister and he continued the tradition of Calvinist theology and evangelical preaching that had become characteristic of the congregation. During Bryden’s formative years the congregation flourished. In 1889, the Sabbath school enrolled a record number of 679 students, with 52 teachers and officers, and in 1895 five

⁴ See John Vissers, *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W.W. Bryden*, 35-36. See also A.B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Mind: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (McGill-Queens’, 1979) 26-30; S.A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Oxford, 1960), 3.

students from the congregation were studying at Knox College in Toronto.⁵ Historian David Bebbington's four common and essential marks of evangelicalism in modern Britain are useful here: conversionism (the belief that lives need to be changed and that personal transformation is possible), biblicism (a particular regard for the authority of the Bible), activism (the expression of the gospel in effort), and crucicentrism (a stress on the sacrifice of the cross). The evangelical awakenings emphasized salvation by faith alone, accompanied by the personal experience of new birth (regeneration), and were intensely missionary (i.e. evangelistic).⁶ This was the kind of evangelical Calvinism frequently found among congregations of the Free Church tradition in Upper Canada.

That said, the evangelical Calvinism of Walter Bryden's youth was also under attack from within and without. In 1902 the nineteen year old Bryden enrolled at the University of Toronto to study philosophy. He graduated in 1906 and the following year earned the M.A. in philosophy and psychology, with honours standing, for a thesis called "A Verification of the Law of Weber, By the Method of Mean Gradations, With Reference to Great Differences in Light Intensities." It's a brief account and verification of experimental method in psychology and was likely a piece of work that Bryden dashed off to fulfill the requirements for the degree. More importantly, Bryden was introduced to ideas that called into question the Calvinist worldview of his youth. There was the idealist philosophy represented by John Watson at Queen's and in Toronto by the erstwhile Presbyterian minister George Paxton Young. There was Darwinism which

⁵ John Vissers, *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W.W. Bryden*, 32-33. See "History of Knox's Church, Galt," The Archives of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

⁶ John Vissers, *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W.W. Bryden*, 39. See David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1-20; and Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 2: *A.D. 1500-A.D. 1975* (Harper and Row, 1975) 1019.

challenged supernatural accounts of the origin and development of human beings. And there was the rise of Canadian social criticism.

How did Bryden handle this at the time? We can't be sure but we do know that he went to study theology in preparation for ordination, two years at Knox College in Toronto and one year at the United Free Church College in Glasgow. Both faculties represented a variety of approaches to Reformed theology as Calvinism was coming to terms with the modern era. Bryden was directed to theological developments in Scotland and away from the conservative defense of Calvinist orthodoxy at Princeton Seminary. Through the influence of T.M. Lindsay and James Denney at Glasgow, and later P.T. Forsyth, he was introduced to a mediating form of Calvinism which sought to reformulate basic orthodox insights and evangelical faith with historical criticism of the Bible and the modern worldview. As he began ordained ministry in Lethbridge, Alberta in 1909 Walter Bryden had experienced at least three different trajectories of Calvinism in the Canadian context: (1) an enduring Upper Canada post-Reformation scholastic Calvinism influenced by Scottish Common Sense and the evangelical revivals; (2) an emerging liberal (or progressive/Social gospel) Protestant Calvinism shaped in response to Hegelian idealism, evolutionary thought (Darwinism), and Canadian social criticism and (3) a mediating liberal evangelical Calvinism which appealed primarily to theological developments in Scotland. Bryden served in Lethbridge from 1909 until 1912 when he was called to the Presbyterian Church in Woodville, Ontario where he served until 1921. For three years he was the minister in Melfort, Saskatchewan and then returned to Ontario where he began teaching at Knox College in 1925. He taught for twenty-seven years, and served as Principal from 1945 until his death in 1952.

By the 1930s, Calvin and Calvinism looked very different to Walter Bryden. Canadian Protestant theology was rife with a mood of crisis. Theological liberalism looked like it was on the verge of failure. Idealism, which had provided the major philosophical paradigm for Protestant theology since about 1870 was floundering. Two-party Protestantism, divided by the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, bedeviled the mainline churches, and for all its ecumenical promise, as David Marshall has noted, the church union movement had not fulfilled the hope for church renewal in Canada.⁷ Economic uncertainty during the Great Depression accompanied by the threat of another cataclysmic war in Europe only heightened the anxiety. It was precisely at this moment that Bryden raised a voice of protest against Canadian Protestant Christendom by appealing to the theology and ministry of John Calvin. And he did it with the help of Karl Barth.⁸

It is worth noting, as we move to Bryden's published writings and lectures, that his first book, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul*, published in 1925, contains no reference to John Calvin. In fairness, the book is a pastoral and theological reflection on Paul's Corinthian correspondence and one might not expect to find Calvin there. But then again, Calvin was a pastor and wrote commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians which Bryden might have consulted. I can't be sure, of course, but I think that John Calvin did not factor significantly in Bryden's thought during this early period. I say this because John Calvin does not even appear in a place where one might expect to find him: in a little pamphlet Bryden wrote in 1927 for the continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada called *The Christian Ministry*. The pamphlet was intended to aid in the recruitment of new ministers

⁷ See David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (University of Toronto Press, 1992) 184ff.

⁸ See John Vissers, *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W.W. Bryden*, 2-3.

in the aftermath of church union. It also provided a theological rationale for ordained ministry at a time when the relationship between clergy and laity in the continuing church was strained. But despite extensive reference to the meaning of ministry in the New Testament, the Protestant Reformation, and the Church of Scotland, one looks in vain for any mention of Calvin.

Bryden's first public and subsequently published reference to the 16th century Reformer took place in an address delivered at the 1929 Spring Convocation of The Presbyterian College, Montreal, called "The Triumph of Reality." And what a debut it was! Calvin made clear, once for all, Bryden noted, that the great truths of the Christian faith are not at our command. They cannot be ordered up and believed at will. Calvinism is not a matter of believing certain things in order to be right with God. It is an acknowledgement that faith issues from God in whose glorious and sovereign presence we confess our absolute dependence. Now what makes this reference really interesting is that it follows a reference to Karl Barth, whom Bryden refers to as "the stern, new prophet of Europe." It was Barth who reminded the Protestant churches that true belief is wrought by God, whose will is not a corrected continuation of our own, and who approaches us as wholly other. This was, Bryden argued, not only strong doctrine; it was "real Calvinism in a modern dress." When he discovered Karl Barth, Walter Bryden encountered a theologian with whom he immediately felt a common interest. Here was someone, as James Smart noted, "who was asking the same questions and struggling to find the way forward to a Church that would recover its roots in the Scriptures and in the

Reformation.”⁹ In short, for Bryden, meeting Barth meant meeting Calvin again for the first time.

By the time Bryden published *Why I Am A Presbyterian* in 1934 his re-engagement with Calvin, orchestrated by Barth, appeared complete. The unity of the church, Bryden argued, is not co-extensive with the unity of a particular ecclesiastical institution. The unity of the church is a theological and spiritual reality which John Calvin rightly understood. “No one has put greater significance on the unique *reality* and divine *significance* of the Church than has John Calvin,” wrote Bryden.¹⁰ Calvin was the true “High-Churchman” in contrast with the high-ecclesiastic, Bryden noted, and Presbyterians are not yet true Presbyterians if they “do not profoundly understand what Calvin was striving for, and insisting upon, in this regard.”¹¹ In the course of the book Bryden responded to John T. McNeill, a former professor at Knox College who, following church union, became Auburn Professor of Church History at Union Theological Seminary, New York. This is the same John T. McNeill who edited what became the standard reference edition of Calvin’s 1559 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1960) – the so-called McNeill-Battles edition. In two books, namely *The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1875-1925* and *Unitive Protestantism*, McNeill made the case for ecumenicity and church union rather forcibly by appealing to Calvin. It is true, Bryden conceded, that Calvin worked tirelessly for the unity of the Protestant movement, but not at any price. The unity of the church for Calvin was “a possibility only on conditions which presupposed an uncompromising theological understanding of

⁹ James D. Smart, “The Evangelist as Theologian,” in W.W. Bryden, *Separated Unto The Gospel*, x.

¹⁰ Walter W. Bryden, *Why I Am A Presbyterian*, 142.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

the true Gospel.”¹² What was the basis of that theological understanding? Here Bryden was clear: it is a right apprehension of God.

If, however, men (and women) can learn again what John Calvin meant by *God*, (that is, in his truly religious apprehension of God, before that apprehension is depleted by definitive thought. For Calvin, God was no mere name, nor mere subjective experience, or a necessary postulate of thought) more especially, if they can grasp what he meant by the *Word of God*, and above all, if they can reach those depths of self-understanding again in which the Protestant *justification by faith alone* becomes to them the veritable *Gospel* that it is, Protestant peoples will have secured for themselves a substantial basis for a higher and more fruitful Christian unity than has been. But to recognize such things, - to “desperately recognize” them, as has been said – will involve men (and women) in exacting, yea, in terrific theological implications.¹³

It is no accident that this sounds a lot like Karl Barth, and indeed, this paragraph in the text is followed by a lengthy quote from Barth in which he points out that those who appeal to the active, organizing, unionizing world-embracing spirit of Calvin overlook the fact that Calvin first wrote the *Institutes*. Calvin first worked out the substance of the faith and built his understanding of the church upon it. He had a theme and developed its variations, first he knew what he wanted, and then he wanted what he knew.¹⁴ Bryden , Barth, and Calvin – the voices seem to converge as one.

Bryden’s thinking about the significance of Calvin continued to develop in a 1935 essay called “The Presbyterian Conception of the Word of God.” By “Presbyterian” Bryden meant “Reformed,” and by “Reformed” Bryden mostly meant Calvin. It was Calvin’s recognition of the need for a completely fresh and living apprehension of the Word of God which constituted the primal inspiration of the Reformation.¹⁵ But Bryden

¹² *Ibid.*, 150.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 152

¹⁴ Karl Barth quoted by W.W. Bryden, *Why I Am A Presbyterian* 153.

¹⁵ W.W. Bryden, *Separated Unto The Gospel*, 178.

was careful and outlined how Calvin ought to be critically appropriated rather than imitated, emulated, or idolized:

It is quite impossible for us, in any literal sense, to go back to Calvin, as some seem to suggest we should. We dare not accept all his theological positions, certainly not some of the implications of his thought; nor would it be advisable to try to emulate his life. Indeed, nothing would have so horrified Calvin himself as the thought of future generations might attempt to imitate him, or do no more than merely accept his view of God, man and the world. It was against such idolatry that Calvin struggled all his life; and he found reason to condemn it as it existed in the preceding Roman Church, even to the bitter end. What he primarily meant by the “Sovereignty of God” is to be found in a true understanding of his attitude in this regard, namely that no Father of the church, however, revered, no Church, no priesthood, no saint, no good man, nor the good lives, the pieties, and true thoughts of the same, dare ever come between the soul of man and the living Word of God. At the same time, if we are still to possess anything that makes Presbyterianism distinctive – I had almost said, if we are to possess any convictions worthy of a truly Christian faith – we must get back to something of that understanding of the Word of God which created both Calvin and the reformed faith.¹⁶

Bryden then proceeded to sketch a reading of Calvin’s theology that attempted to reach back behind the post-Reformation scholasticism which had shaped subsequent Calvinism – what Bryden referred to as “Rational Orthodoxy.” Here Bryden distinguished between Calvin’s view of the Word of God and one in which the Word of God is identified simply with the written Holy Scripture, in its fullness, verbally inerrant and plenary inspired. This view, Bryden argued, ignores Calvin’s emphasis on the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit and tends to objectify the Bible. Calvin distinguished between the Word of God and the written text of the Bible, Bryden argued, although Bryden admitted that in his exegesis, commentaries, and polemical writings Calvin seemed to make no such distinction. At the same time, the appeal to the Holy Spirit should not be mistaken in Calvin as an appeal to faith as purely a matter of private judgment.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

Bryden set this reading of Calvin over against religious thought since Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel. "The Liberal or Modern View," as Bryden called it, identified the Word of God with "supreme moral and religious values which find unique expression...in Jesus' life and personality."¹⁷ Both conservative Calvinism and modern Calvinism sought to ground the certainty of faith in something other than God, God's revelation, and God's actions. Conservative Calvinism, Bryden argued, did so by appealing to a written text; modern Protestantism by appealing to religious experience, historical investigation, or philosophical ideals. Neither was true to Calvin, Bryden concluded. The heart of Calvin's theology, as Bryden understood it, was that we may know God because God shares God's self-knowledge with us, God and God alone can authenticate God's Word to us - God makes God known, and makes it possible for us to participate in that knowing of God which only God in God's freedom creates. Apart from understanding this central point in Calvin's theology "any interpretation of Calvin's faith or of his theology must be entirely superficial."¹⁸

The problem with the modern church, as Bryden saw it, was that it had domesticated divine transcendence and thereby trivialized God. It was true that God was personal, and that God shared divine self-knowledge with us in revelation, but Calvin believed when God spoke to human beings he did so over against them, and a moment was created in which a person must come to a decision, not as a reviewer, weigher, or chooser between respective ideas about God, but as a person under constraint and in crisis.¹⁹ It is in this encounter with God, in fact, that a person becomes a person for the

¹⁷ W. W. Bryden, "The Presbyterian Conception of the Word of God," *Separated Unto the Gospel*, 188.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

first time. The same argument appears, in abbreviated form, in Bryden's 1940 book *The Christian's Knowledge of God*.²⁰

If Bryden's lecture notes are any indication, he worked through the main themes of Calvin's theology with his students annually from the late 1920s until his death in 1952. In a set of lectures called "John Calvin and the Reformed Faith: The Primacy of God in All Things" the same interpretation of Calvin as that found in the published writings emerges. Calvin grounded the reality of faith in the reality of God, Bryden argued, and not in the security of an inerrant Scripture or an infallible church. The Reformation, he argued, was not a natural phenomenon. It was rooted in the conviction that the God who had spoken in times past (*Deus dixit*) was now speaking again. Bryden pointed out that Calvin acknowledged his own limitations and ascribed the sovereign place to God in all aspects of the Reformation movement. Calvin's genius, Bryden argued, was that he purposefully and deliberately pointed beyond himself to the Word of God, i.e. God's Word in Christ which was "always a living thing, contemporaneous, personal, and immediate."²¹ This was the source of Calvin's humility, confidence, and assurance. In another set of lectures, Bryden discusses the theological differences between Calvin and Luther. In both sets of lectures the appendices and footnotes are filled with Barth.

Bryden's final, and perhaps simplest and most straightforward, interpretation of Calvin is to be found in his December 1949 *Presbyterian Record* article "John Calvin: Apostle of God's Sovereign Power." Assuming the significance of Calvin not only for changing the church but also for altering the "religious complexion of an entire

²⁰ W.W. Bryden, *The Christian's Knowledge of God* (Thorn Press, 1940) 72-73.

²¹ W.W. Bryden, "John Calvin and the Reformed Faith," 7.

civilization,” Bryden asked “What was the secret of this man’s power and of an influence which was of epochal dimensions?” It was not, as many supposed, Calvin’s simple appeal to the Bible, or his rediscovery of the true doctrines of God, or his form of church government that made Calvin’s influence so significant. It was, rather, “the discovery of the fact that God Who had unmistakably spoken to prophets and apostles...in times past, just as unmistakably speaks through them to the hearts of men (and women) *now*” (with the emphasis on “now”). Calvin knew, Bryden asserted, that as a *living* God, God could only be *livingly* apprehended and known. This was, for Bryden, Calvin’s theological genius: God could not be mediated to human beings, except as God mediated Godself, through Jesus Christ, who is present to his church by the Holy Spirit. The mediation of God by God in Word and Spirit was the pivot around which the Reformed faith revolved. Nothing else of itself could mediate God – not church, tradition, the magisterium, history, not the Bible, not even John Calvin, could make God known to people. The mistake of the medieval church was that it believed that God’s word and God’s grace could be stored up in Holy Scripture and the sacraments, and possessed and distributed at will – the will of the church, that is. Christian faith for Calvin, as Bryden understood it, was personal trust in what Christ had done and *was doing*. This is what gave the Reformed church its dynamic, i.e. it was essentially to be a reforming Church, ever passing judgment upon itself, not by means discoverable within itself or by claims made it upon it from without, “but as being held subject always to God’s holy, living, searching, and dynamic Word.”

We note by way of observation that for Walter Bryden what made Calvin the Reformer that he was is that as a theologian of Word and Spirit Calvin espoused what

became known as the Protestant Principle. Expressed negatively, the Protestant Principle, as defined by Paul Tillich, is the protest against any absolute claim for a finite reality, whether it is a church, a book, a symbol, a person, or an event. Expressed positively, it was the affirmation that God is free and that God's grace is not bound to any finite form. As Bryden saw it, Calvin taught and lived by the rule that the finite possesses no capacity for the infinite.²²

But Bryden didn't stop there. There was "cash value" to this insight – a theological payoff to be picked up, in two ways. First, the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, contrary to all caricatures, does not set out God as the Source of all things, the sole Governor of the universe, as an all-powerful, all-determining power monger. If God is omnipotent and almighty, God's power must be read through the lens of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, God's crucified Messiah, the suffering servant. The analogy for God's power, Bryden argued, is not human power writ large, it is not despotic, it is revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. Providence and predestination, whatever they might mean, need to be understood in this light; to use Paul's language, "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Secondly, the Protestant Principle was, by definition, a principle of protest. "No Reformer," Bryden argued, "has given so sure a lead in the matters pertaining to Church and State, and class and class." Bryden often railed against the domestication of the gospel in middle-class Canadian Protestantism, and he believed Calvin supported him in this. Calvin, Bryden said, was respectful of civil authority, but he was never satisfied with the status quo. Calvin believed that God was at work in history. He did not believe that the so-called orders of a static society were divinely constituted and therefore not subject

²² See John Vissers, *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W.W. Bryden*, 267.

to change. Social orders, political structures, and economic systems are at best approximations of God's will for the world. The gospel reveals a radical and revolutionary power of God which stands in judgment over and against all that militates against God's reign of justice and love in the world. As Bryden saw it, Calvin's insights into the living God transformed our understanding of personal faith, ecclesial life, and social order. That's why Calvinism changed the complexion of an entire civilization.

Let's return now to the impression Walter Bryden made upon T.F. Torrance. There was a specific historical context to this remark. Bryden had been invited to introduce Torrance as the keynote speaker at the Pre-Assembly Congress of the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1950. The primary purpose of the congress was to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the union of 1875. The introduction runs to six single-spaced typed pages because Bryden enlarged the scope of his address to make a link between the history of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and the history of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition about which Torrance was to speak. Bryden spoke about the survival of continuing Presbyterianism after church union in 1925 and what he saw as the renewal of Reformed faith and theology following World War II. He traced the roots of Presbyterianism in Canada to the Huguenots, to Irish and Scottish Presbyterians, and to the influence of the American church, especially in Ontario. What really put the theological fiber in this tradition, however, was not this cultural history, or a common appeal to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, but rather the theology of the 16th century Reformers, especially John Calvin. This is what justified, in Bryden's mind, the separate existence of a continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada. Throughout the rest of the introduction Bryden sounded

the notes that were familiar to his students and those who had read his books. Calvin brought the church a completely new consciousness of God which resulted in an entirely new relationship to God. Calvin was – for Bryden (to borrow a phrase from John Leith) a “God-intoxicated” preacher and theologian. He was absorbed in what God had done and in what God promises to do for God’s people today. Calvin was joyfully obedient to the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ and he promoted ecumenicity. It has to be said that there’s more than a note of defensiveness when Bryden speaks about Canadian Presbyterianism here, but the appeal to Calvin is strong and clear. The introduction concludes with a generous welcome and commendation for Dr. T.F. Torrance. I suppose one might imagine any number of thoughts going through Torrance’s head as he got up to speak after such an introduction. But we don’t have to imagine; Torrance told Wade what he thought: “I can’t help but think that Walter Bryden is more like John Calvin than anyone I’ve ever known.”

What did Torrance see? Walter Bryden was a small man, owlish in appearance, with eyes that pierced in eager encounter, solemn and wise, an arm slightly paralyzed and withered. But when he preached and lectured he exploded with passion and insight. And he never tired of speaking about the significance of Calvin’s contribution to the Protestant faith. So what should we make of this on the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth and the 100th anniversary of Bryden’s ordination? What kind of Calvinist was Walter Bryden? And what did it mean for Canadian Protestantism?

From the perspective of historical scholarship today Bryden’s account of Calvin’s epochal significance seems somewhat limited, perhaps naïve, even wrong-headed. The emergence and extent of Calvin’s influence has to be measured, for example, as Bruce

Gordon nicely demonstrates in his new biography of Calvin, against the background of the entire Swiss Reformation. When we ask why, during the sixteenth century Reformation, certain theological ideas came to function and flourish while others faded away we can't simply answer in terms of John Calvin. Despite the fact that he taught church history, Walter Bryden was not a rigorous scholar of Calvin and the Reformation. There's a lot about Calvin – good and bad, which Bryden simply ignored. Similarly, if by Calvinist we mean a slavish interpreter of the theology of John Calvin, one who admits few other insights besides those of the master, Bryden doesn't exactly qualify. Nor was he an uncritical apologist for the tradition spawned by Calvin's name, especially the period of Protestant scholasticism and Reformed orthodoxy which followed the sixteenth century. Here he drew sharp distinctions. Yet, Bryden's brand of Calvinism mattered. To a generation of Protestant ministers looking for identity in the midst of a crisis in theology and church, Walter Bryden championed the essential insights of Calvin and seemed to embody the ethos of the Reformer in ways that were compelling. He pointed them back beyond Scotland to the continental Reformed theology of Calvin's Geneva.²³ Bryden's interpretation of Calvin may not have been comprehensive but it was consistent. Simply put: he reminded Canadian Protestants that God matters. It was precisely that insight from Calvin that prevented Bryden from turning Calvin into an idol or fixating on the 16th century alone. Bryden was concerned about what God was saying and doing here and now. It's true that Bryden's interpretation of Calvin and the Calvinist tradition was deeply indebted to Karl Barth. But he leveraged this interpretation of Calvin to marshal a critique of early 20th century Canadian Protestantism with its penchant for idealism and its tendency toward secularization. The renewal of the church, Bryden

²³ J.C. Hay, "Allan Farris," in "The Tide of Time." Edited by John Moir (Toronto: Knox College, 1978) 16.

believed, always takes place in accordance with its own faith and life. And his appeal to Calvin stands as a constant witness to Canadian Protestantism that the Christian movement is always in danger of co-opting the reality of God to justify the church's existence and advance its own agenda. Bryden saw Calvin as a prophet and true Calvinism as a prophetic movement – even revolutionary. Those who stood in Calvin's tradition had to be prepared to stand against any and all powers and authorities (social, political, economic, cultural, and ecclesiastical) that distorted the truth, oppressed the poor, and usurped the place of God alone. For that reason, I conclude with this friendly provocation: if judged from this perspective, Walter Bryden may well have been the only true "Calvinist" that the Canadian church has ever known.