

## Introduction: The Theological Contribution of W.W. Bryden

*Walter Bryden is a truly remarkable theologian. I can't help but think that he is more like John Calvin than anyone I've ever known.*<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Torrance

*It is impossible to understand Dr. Bryden's theology except as the fulfillment in a special sphere of this task of evangelist. His concern even in the most involved intellectual consideration was that the Gospel might be heard and believed.*<sup>2</sup> James D. Smart

*I stand firmly by the Reformed faith, subject to Scripture which I believe cradles God's living Word for those who have ears to hear it. That about sums me up, whatever lies before.*<sup>3</sup> Walter W. Bryden

*The Christian's Knowledge of God* was a book written by Walter Williamson Bryden (1883-1952), a Canadian Presbyterian minister and professor whose theological teaching and writing shaped and challenged a generation of ministers during a critical period in twentieth century Protestantism. Through his five books, numerous articles and book reviews, correspondence, sermons, and lectures, Bryden became a dominant force at Knox

1. A comment made by T.F. Torrance to Donald V. Wade in 1950 and cited in Wade's unpublished paper "The Theological Achievement of Walter Bryden," 1974.
2. James D. Smart, "The Theologian as Evangelist," *Separated Unto the Gospel*. Edited by D.V. Wade. (Toronto: Burns & MacEachern, 1956) viii.
3. Walter W. Bryden, in a letter to Alan Farris, 1945.

College, Toronto and in the Canadian church. His writing and teaching set forth an approach to Christian theology that was to reposition Presbyterianism within the ecclesial landscape of Canada. Bryden's theological contribution is essentially twofold. First, from the late 1920s he was influenced by the theology of Karl Barth and became one of the earliest and most influential interpreters and exponents of neo-orthodoxy in North America. Secondly, he was one of the ablest and most articulate critics of church union in Canada after 1925 and was a leader in the theological renewal of the Presbyterian Church thereafter.<sup>4</sup> In short, Bryden represented the emergence of a theologian born and bred on Canadian soil. The influence on Bryden's thought of Britain's John Knox and James Denney, and Europe's John Calvin and Karl Barth, is marked, to be sure. But before Bryden's generation most theological teachers in Canada were younger scholars from Britain who came to the colony to cut their intellectual and pedagogical eye-teeth before returning home to more prestigious academic and ecclesial positions in the heart of the empire. Bryden was one of Canada's first theologians to work out the meaning of the Reformed faith in the Canadian context. As an interpreter of Barth he was neither slavish nor uncritical and "indeed was fully sensitive to the fact that Canada was not Europe, and transplants, theological or other-wise, were not wholly appropriate. He was therefore a rather rare person, an original Canadian theologian who sought to address the peculiarities of the Canadian scene in the light of the insights of Biblical theology."<sup>5</sup>

Born near Galt, Ontario Bryden's family had deep roots in Scottish Calvinism. 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 family on his father's side

4. John Vissers, *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W.W. Bryden* (Pickwick Press, 2006), 8. See also Robert Benedetto and Donald McKim, "W.W. Bryden" in *Historical Dictionary of the Reformed Churches*, Second Edition (Scarecrow Press, 2010) 63-64.

5. J. Charles Hay, "Allan Farris," *The Tide of Time*. Edited by John Moir. (Toronto: Knox College, 1978) 16.

had immigrated to Canada from Dumfries in southern Scotland, and were “auld kirk” people. But, as Bryden noted, his father was a canny Scot who had learned that discretion was the better part of valour and accordingly the family went to the Free Church. Late in his life Bryden recalled that as a teenager in high school he had read all kinds of 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.”<sup>6</sup> Knox’s Church, Galt, where the Bryden family worshiped, was a congregation of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Created in the union of 1875, the amalgamated denomination brought together four different streams of Scottish Presbyterianism in Lower and Upper Canada. Knox’s Church had been a Free Church before 1875 and continued to be characterized by a robust Presbyterian polity, a strong dose of Calvinist orthodoxy, and a lively evangelical piety. It was colonial Free Church Scottish Calvinism in full bloom, a post-Reformation scholastic orthodoxy modulated by the evangelical awakenings of the mid-nineteenth century and a strong dissenting heritage.

In 1902 Bryden began studies in philosophy and psychology at the University of Toronto and was introduced to the modern thought which had begun to reshape Calvinism in late nineteenth century Canada. From about 1870 philosophical idealism had begun to replace Common Sense philosophy as the paradigm for theology. Theologians and church leaders were grappling with the challenges of Darwinian evolution, Hegelian idealism, Marxist social criticism, and Freudian psychology, as well as the historical critical study of the Bible. After graduation in 1906 Bryden entered Knox College, Toronto to study for the Christian ministry and concurrently completed a master’s degree in psychology in 1907. During his theological education he spent one year in Scotland at the United Free Church College in Glasgow where he studied with T.M. Lindsay, George Adam Smith, James Orr, and James Denney. Bryden was especially

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6. 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.

influenced by Denney and later described him as “the prince of Scottish theologians whose terse observations, as the years go by, seem to become ever more pregnant with meaning.”<sup>7</sup> At both Knox College and the United Free Church College Bryden was introduced to a variety of approaches to Reformed theology as Calvinism was coming to terms with modernity. At Knox Bryden was directed to theological developments in Scotland and away from the defense of Calvinist orthodoxy at Princeton Seminary. Through the influence of Lindsay and Denney at Glasgow, and later P.T. Forsyth, Bryden 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. Bryden returned to Canada, graduated from Knox College in 1909, studied briefly in Strasbourg, France, was ordained, and became the minister of churches in Lethbridge (Alberta), Melfort (Saskatchewan), and Woodville (Ontario). In 1927, following church union in 1925, he was appointed by the General Assembly of the “continuing” Presbyterian Church as professor of church history and the history and philosophy of religion at Knox College. Upon the retirement of Thomas Eakin in 1945, Bryden was appointed as principal and served until his death in 1952.

Bryden's first book, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul*, was written while Bryden was a congregational minister and published by James Clarke and Co in London, England in 1925. The book is a psychological study of Paul's religious experience based upon the Corinthian correspondence; it provides an incisive critique of modern church life rooted in deep pastoral reflection accompanied by a critical engagement with contemporary New Testament scholarship. As James D. Smart noted in 1956 “this book shows a mind moving abreast of the most vital developments in Christian theology and already grappling with the questions which have increasingly engaged the attention of the Church's leading theologians in the past quarter century. When one reads this book, written before much had been heard of Barth or Brunner, one realizes

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7. Bryden, *The Significance of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1943) 27.

why Dr. Bryden immediately felt a community of interest with them. They were asking the same questions as he had been and were struggling to find the way forward to a Church that would recover its roots in the Scriptures and in the Reformation.”<sup>8</sup>

Bryden's second book, *Why I Am A Presbyterian* (1934), is based on a series of lectures he gave at Knox College and the University of Toronto in which he explained his personal decision to remain within the Presbyterian Church rather than join the United Church of Canada the name for the church union of Methodists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians in 1925. From Bryden's perspective the impetus for church union had come primarily from a desire to establish a larger, more efficient and better organized Christendom church in Canada. Concern for external organization did not, in his judgment, constitute a sufficient basis for the unity of the church. The debate had been dominated, he argued, by considerations that were practical and bureaucratic rather than theological, spiritual, and missional. In opposing church union, however, Bryden also distanced himself from the major arguments proposed against it. Neither a sentimental desire to maintain Scottish Presbyterianism in Canada nor a wish to maintain a strict post-Reformation scholastic orthodoxy justified the continuing existence of a Presbyterian Church. As Bryden saw it, there was a place for a Reformed church with a confessional commitment and an ecumenical heart that sought to engage the realities of the Canadian context critically.

In 1943 a smaller book on the Westminster Confession of Faith was published. It was an expanded version of a lecture delivered before the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada in Hamilton, Ontario on the occasion of the three hundredth anniversary of the Westminster Assembly. James D. Smart heard the original lecture and described it this way: “For an hour and twenty-five minutes Dr. Bryden poured forth his unique blend of incisive learning and passionate faith in a quiet voice that kept every ear strained lest it should miss

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8. James D. Smart, “The Evangelist as Theologian,” Introduction, W.W. Bryden, *Separated Unto the Gospel* (Toronto: Burns and MacEachern, 1956) x.

a word.”<sup>9</sup> On the one hand Bryden extolled the virtues of the Westminster Confession of Faith arguing that it represented the enduring witness of a generation to its faith in Jesus Christ. At the same time he pointed to its limitations as a confessional standard grounded in a particular historical context, and he resisted any and all attempts to adopt it as a statement of faith which set out eternal truths once for all time. He thus commanded respect for the faith which was set out in the Westminster Confession of Faith while also destroying every pretext of a foundation for literalism in the Presbyterian Church. Most importantly, he reminded his listeners that Presbyterians in Canada in the twentieth century were under the same obligation to confess their faith.

Bryden's other books included an unpublished manuscript (*After Modernism, What?* 1934) which contained a lengthy engagement with Barth's theology and English Barth scholarship in the 1930s. In 1956 a posthumous volume of sermons, lectures, and essays appeared, edited by one of Bryden's students and his successor in the chair of the history and philosophy of religion, Donald V. Wade, under the title *Separated Unto the Gospel*. Ten volumes of unpublished lecture notes circulated for many years among his students. These notes, along with his correspondence, book reviews, articles, and sermons are now housed in the Caven Library at Knox College and the Archives of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Bryden's most important book, however, was undoubtedly *The Christian's Knowledge of God*. Originally published in 1940 in Toronto by The Thorn Press to a limited circulation, it was republished in London by James Clarke and Company in 1960, apparently on the recommendation of Thomas F. Torrance who recognized its importance as a statement on the meaning of revelation. As a treatment of theological epistemology it stands among a number of other works in the Reformed tradition on the same theme published in English from the 1930s through the 1950s, for example, John Baillie's *Our Knowledge of God* (1939), Karl Barth's *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (1928) and *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God* (1938), Emil Brunner's *The Divine-Human Encounter* (1944)

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9. James D. Smart, op.cit. xi.

and *Revelation and Reason* (1946), H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), T.H.L. Parker's *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (1952), and E.A. Dowey's *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (1952). Behind many of these books one finds the sharp exchange between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth on the question of revelation as found in *Natural Theology* which contained Brunner's essay "Nature and Grace" and Barth's "Nein" (published in English in 1946).

Bryden saw his book as a friendly provocation which highlighted "the uncertainty and ambiguity characteristic of so much modern Protestant preaching" and the Liberal Idealism upon which the church's theology in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had been built.<sup>10</sup> Following Karl Barth's lead, Bryden criticized natural theology and emphasized a christocentric conception of divine revelation as the starting point for the church's theology. Step by step he sought to deconstruct what he considered to be the facades of both "modernism" and "rational orthodoxy" and cast a theological vision focused on the "Judging-Saving Word of God." That vision of the living Word, as he saw it, had created the original Reformation of the 16th century, especially Calvin. The whole book, as readers will discover, abounds in provocative *obiter dicta* characteristic of the theology of crisis written during the 1920s and 1930s.

It should also be noted that the book was written and originally appeared at a particularly difficult period in Canadian Protestant church life. Protestant theology in Canada during the 1930s was rife with the mood of crisis. It was a time, in the words of one church leader, "of the seeming failure of liberal theology, a time of theological perplexity, of the lost radiance of Christianity, of the dominance of secularism, of optimism about man and the world though this has faded in the face of the world crisis [and] of the decay of worship."<sup>11</sup> Idealism, which had provided the major philosophical paradigm for Protestant theology in Canada since about 1870, as noted earlier, had floundered. Two-party Protestantism, divided by the fundamentalist/modernist

10. From the inside cover of the 1960 edition of *The Christian's Knowledge of God* published by James Clarke and Co, London.

11. J. G. Berry, Review of W.W. Bryden's *The Christian's Knowledge of God* in *Presbyterian Record* 66.2 (1941) 45.

controversy, bedeviled the mainline churches and, for all its ecumenical promise, the church union movement did not fulfill its hope of renewing the church to confront the forces of secularism. To the extent that the crisis being felt in the churches belonged to the wider mood of disillusionment in Canadian society, it was fed by the economic uncertainty of the Great Depression and the threat of a second cataclysmic war in Europe.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the mood of crisis, or perhaps precisely because of it, a revived Protestantism in the spirit of Luther and Calvin appeared during this period to challenge the dominant Canadian theological ethos and ecclesiastical establishment, and Walter Bryden's *The Christian's Knowledge of God* was its *cri de coeur*. The uncertainty and ambiguity which many felt had characterized the preaching in Protestant churches during the first quarter of the twentieth century generated a protest by a new generation of clergy who believed that the Christian faith had something significant to say in the midst of troubling times. J.G. Berry, writing a review of Bryden's book for the *Presbyterian Record* in 1941, noted that this new Protestantism took its stand firmly on the Word of God, which it affirmed as the revelation of the living God. It drew sharp distinctions between time and eternity and it emphasized "the infinite qualitative difference" (Kierkegaard) between God and humanity. It railed against the teachings of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism and yet it refused to retreat behind what it saw as the Biblicism of conservative orthodoxy. It pointed again and again to the Divine Word which it believed had been spoken decisively in God's crucified Messiah. The mood of crisis, it argued, had to be understood in terms of God's judgment. Among the voices raised in this protest none was stronger or more significant in Canada than that of Professor Bryden and his book *The Christian's Knowledge of God*.<sup>13</sup>

The argument of *The Christian's Knowledge of God* is straightforward. Bryden begins by seeking to demonstrate that the concept of revelation in modern theology has been compromised by historicism and philosophical idealism.

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12. John Vissers, *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W.W. Bryden* (Pickwick Press, 2006, and James Clarke, 2011) 2.

13. Ibid. 3.

After clearing away what he considers to be problematic understandings of God and revelation he turns to re-appropriate the conception of revelation which he believes is found in the Bible and in the tradition of the ancient catholic church. This was the conception of revelation, Bryden believed, which was rediscovered in the 16th century Protestant Reformation, especially by Luther and Calvin, and it was the understanding of God's revelation to which the theology of Karl Barth pointed. As he makes his case Bryden demonstrates more than a passing familiarity with the history of western thought, modern Christian theology, and other religious traditions. In fact, he was interested in what other religions had to say about revelation, god, and miracles long before it was fashionable.

As might be expected, not everyone appreciated Bryden's approach. The most trenchant critique was mounted by F.H. Anderson of the University of Toronto's philosophy department who described Bryden's theology as "irrational enthusiasm."<sup>14</sup> S. Vernon McCasland of the University of Virginia wondered whether Bryden's emphasis on the "absoluteness" of divine revelation in contrast with the relativity of all other kinds of knowledge could actually be supported from biblical revelation itself. And how is it, he argued, that finite human minds could receive and comprehend an absolute revelation.<sup>15</sup> From within his own church Bryden was attacked by Frank Beare, at the time a lecturer at The Presbyterian College, Montreal, who saw Bryden's neo-orthodoxy as irrational and sectarian.<sup>16</sup> Since Bryden's book addressed Liberal Protestantism and philosophical idealism head on it was to be expected that he would be criticized from those quarters. At the same time, others like W. Stanford Reid, a Westminster Seminary graduate, while expressing appreciation for Bryden's theology, did not think that his views on the inspiration of the Bible, the doctrine of predestination, and subscription to the Westminster

14. F.H. Anderson, "On A Certain Revival of Enthusiasm," *The University of Toronto Quarterly* 10.2 (1941) 194.

15. S. Vernon McCasland, Review of *The Christian's Knowledge of God* in *The Journal of Bible and Religion* (August 1941) 179-80.

16. Frank Beare, "Against the Barthian Theology," *The Presbyterian Student* (March 1937) 9-10.

Confession of Faith were orthodox enough. From friendlier quarters, Daniel Day Williams of Union Theological Seminary urged his students to read *The Christian's Knowledge of God* as a classical example of neo-orthodoxy.

Whether one agrees with Bryden or not, it has to be admitted that he lived an authentically theological existence during a critical period in Canadian Protestantism, as *The Christian's Knowledge of God* demonstrates. As a neo-orthodox theologian Bryden's work has to be assessed in terms of the rise and fall of the neo-orthodox theological movement in North America from the 1930s through to the 1960s. But it also had its own character. Bryden's forte, as Joseph C. McLelland has noted, was "theological epistemology – a theory of knowledge which accepts as primary datum the novelty of a Word from God."<sup>17</sup> He believed that the renewal of the church takes place in accordance with its own faith and life, a theology of Word and Spirit. The way forward, Bryden argued, is to recover the church's roots in the Scriptures and in the Reformation. "If, however," wrote Bryden, Protestant Christians in Canada can "learn to discern again what John Calvin meant by God" and "if they can grasp what he meant by the Word of God" they will "have secured for themselves a substantial basis for a higher and more fruitful Christian unity than has been."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Bryden argued that "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."<sup>19</sup> "It is not too much to hold," he argued, that it was "a completely fresh and living apprehension of the Word of God which constituted the primal inspiration of the Reformation movement as a whole," and for Calvin in particular.<sup>20</sup>

Yet Bryden was neither a restorationist nor an obscurantist. For all his blistering attacks against modernism, he remained

17. Joseph C. McLelland, "Walter Bryden: 'By Circumstance and God,'" in *Called to Witness: Profiles of Canada Presbyterians*, edited by W. Stanford Reid (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1980), 2:123.

18. W.W. Bryden, *Why I Am A Presbyterian*, 165.

19. W.W. Bryden, "The Presbyterian Conception of the Word of God," in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, 178.

20. *Ibid.*, 179.

importantly rooted in the tradition of nineteenth-century liberal theology. His was a decidedly neo-Reformation and modern option in theology. But he sought to use the modern insights illuminated by liberal Protestantism in order to overturn rather than advance idealism and rationalism in theology. The great essentials of the Reformed faith, Bryden believed, could be re-appropriated without violating modern ethical and religious sensibilities.<sup>21</sup> Rightly or wrongly, Bryden believed that Barth's theology led the way in this task. By the time he wrote *The Christian's Knowledge of God* Bryden had been reading Barth for over ten years. He referred to Barth as "the stern new prophet of Europe" and "the modern scion of the Reformation spirit," whose theology was "real Calvinism in a modern dress."<sup>22</sup> In short, Bryden believed that Barth's theology provided an example of how to re-appropriate the Reformation after the Enlightenment without retreating into what he called "rational orthodoxy" or accommodating to "modernism." Importantly Bryden's theology was also marked by a prophetic critique of both church and society. His work stands as a constant reminder that the Christian community is always in danger of co-opting the revelation of God to justify its own existence and advance its own agenda. Following Barth, Bryden refused to divorce ethics from dogmatics, and politically he was a social democrat.

As a theologian Bryden knew that the stakes were very high and that's how *The Christian's Knowledge of God* ends. Bryden had a deep appreciation for those who were trying to make the Christian faith meaningful for their time. But he refused to step out from under the fact that the Christian gospel was a scandal to the modern mind. If Christianity is reformulated so that it is but one contributing factor to the religious and philosophical culture of the world, then Christians may have to face with courage the fact that they have been the victims of a great illusion. But if God is God, God may yet speak a truly saving and utterly cleansing Word. And then these concluding words: *Tempora mutantur, nos*

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21. Bryden, Review of *The Organism of Christian Truth* by John Dickie in *Canadian Journal of Religious Thought* 9.1 (1932) 81.

22. Bryden, "The Triumph of Reality," in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, 134; see also "The Presbyterian Conception of Revelation," unpublished manuscript, 49.

*et mutantur in illis*. "Times change, and we change with them."<sup>23</sup>

With this in mind, in our context, and in our time, it may be that the church still has something vital to learn from a theologian like Walter W. Bryden and from his book *The Christian's Knowledge of God*. For both its historical and theological significance the book is now being republished, some seventy years since its original publication, and some fifty years since its first publication by James Clarke and Company, alongside my own monograph on Bryden's thought, *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W.W. Bryden* which seeks to set forth a fuller account of this important theologian's work. Walter Bryden once remarked that "Scholars, when they cease to be prophetic, and thus fail to be theologians, possess a significance little more than that of scribes." *The Christian's Knowledge of God* amply demonstrates that Walter Williamson Bryden was no mere scribe.

John Vissers  
Montreal, 2011

### For Further Reading:

#### Primary

Bryden, W.W. *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul: A Study of the Soul of St. Paul Based Upon the Corinthian Correspondence*. London: James Clarke, 1925.

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#### Secondary

McLelland, J.C. "Walter Bryden: 'By Circumstance and God,'" *Called to Witness: Profiles of Canadian Presbyterians*. Edited by W.S. Reid, 2:119-26. Toronto: Committee on History, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1980.

Vissers, John A. *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W. W. Bryden*. Pickwick Press, 2006. Republished by James Clarke and Company, 2011.

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23. Bryden, *The Christian's Knowledge of God*, 264.