

Introduction

The Word of God and the Words of Walter W. Bryden

We must take the best and most irrefragable of human doctrines, and embark on that, as if it were a raft, and risk the voyage of life, unless it were possible to find a stronger vessel, some Divine Word on which we might journey more surely and securely.¹

The Gospel is therefore not an event, not an experience, nor an emotion—however delicate! Rather, it is the clear and objective perception of what eye hath not seen nor ear heard. Moreover, what it demands of [us] is more than notice, or understanding, or sympathy. It demands participation, comprehension, co-operation; for it is a communication which presumes faith in the living God, and which creates that which it presumes.²

DR. Stuart C. Parker, the influential liberal minister of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (Simcoe Street) in Toronto, was beside himself with rage, and had to be physically restrained. Walter Bryden, Knox College's professor of church history and the history and philosophy of religion, had just delivered a one hour and fifty minute address on the significance of the Westminster Confession of Faith to the General Assembly meeting in Hamilton, Ontario. The year was 1943, and Parker assumed that by now most Canadian Presbyterians, especially those teaching in the church's colleges, considered the seventeenth-century statement of Reformed theology as having not much more than historical significance. Yet here was Bryden, one of the church's leading theological professors, extolling the virtues of the

¹ This quote from Plato's *Phaedo* was cited by Bryden in the opening lines of his unpublished manuscript "After Modernism, What?" (1934). Bryden noted that he was indebted to Richard Birch Hoyle, *The Teaching of Karl Barth: An Exposition* (London: SCM, 1930) 267 for the quote.

² Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by E. C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) 28.

Westminster Confession for the continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada. To be sure, he pointed out its limitations as a confessional standard, and he resisted any and all attempts to adopt it as a statement of faith which set out eternal truths once for all time. But when it came to making his main point, Bryden was unapologetic: the Westminster Confession of Faith represented the enduring witness of a generation to its faith and life in Jesus Christ, and continuing Presbyterians in Canada were under the same obligation of the gospel to confess their faith in God's Judging-Saving Word. Fortunately, Parker was intercepted as he made his way down the aisle of St. Paul's Church to speak to the slight and soft-spoken Walter Bryden. Nevertheless, Parker's response represented the increasing impatience on the part of some Canadian Protestant church leaders with the emergence of a new and distinct theological witness in the second quarter of the twentieth century. What kind of theologian and what kind of theology could possibly provoke such a strong reaction, especially in Canadian Protestantism? These are the questions to be explored in this book.

Canadian Protestant theology during the 1930s was rife with the mood of crisis. It was a time, in the words of one Canadian 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."³ Idealism, which had provided the major philosophical paradigm for Protestant theology in Canada since about 1870, had floundered. Two-party Protestantism, divided by the fundamentalist/modernist 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. Indeed, as David Marshall has argued, the emergence of such movements as the Oxford Group and the Fellowship of Reconciliation were band-aid measures.⁴ 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 another cataclysmic war in Europe.

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. The uncertainty and ambiguity which characterized much of the preaching in Protestant churches in the first quarter of the twentieth

³ J. G. Berry, Review of W.W. Bryden's *The Christian's Knowledge of God* in *Presbyterian Record* 66.2 (1941) 45.

⁴ David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850–1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 184ff.

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 in 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.⁵ 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 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 in Canada than that of Professor Walter Williamson Bryden. During the 1920s Bryden had already been tenaciously burrowing to the foundations of modern theology in order to find a different basis for Protestant faith and life than the idealist version of Christianity to which he had been introduced as a student. By the early 1930s, when the mood of crisis set in, he was in a position to offer an incisive critique of Canadian church life and the theology which supported it to a new generation of theological students who believed that liberalism had been tried and found wanting. The importance of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth for this movement soon became apparent, and Walter Bryden was one of the first Canadian theologians to understand the radical challenge Barth’s protest posed for the modern church.

Karl Barth was a young Reformed pastor in Safenwil, Switzerland when, in 1919, he startled the European theological world with the publication of his commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans. Dominated by the language of paradox, crisis, and dialectics, Karl Barth’s book was an astonishingly brash challenge to the hegemony of nineteenth-century liberal theology and *Külturprotestantismus* (Cultural Protestantism). Unsatisfied with the first edition, Barth rewrote the book leaving, as he said, no stone unturned. The second edition, published in 1922, erupted with even more volcanic power as Barth pointed to the centrality of the Word of God which touched time and history in Jesus Christ, and which continues to touch humanity again and again as the original Word is heard, “leaping across the distances of time which are no barrier or hindrance to the running of the communication from eternity.”⁶ Barth spoke passionately about a word of judgment which contradicted and condemned human pride and its manifestation in ethics, politics, and religion. Religion, Barth argued, far from being the point of closest con-

⁵ J. G. Berry, *Presbyterian Record* (1941) 45.

⁶ Alasdair I. C. Heron, *A Century of Protestant Theology* (London: Lutterworth, 1980) 77.

tact with God, is the house human beings build in order to hide themselves from God, to convince themselves that God is within their grasp and under their control. "The hurricane of the Word tears away the flimsy structures of our pretensions, the altars of our false gods, the artificial securities to which we love to cling, all that Paul describes as the 'righteousness of the Law.'"⁷ The cross of Jesus Christ is God's final and decisive 'No!' to all that: it leaves us literally nothing of our own on which we can rely. But God's 'No!' is spoken to create faith so that human beings may trust solely in God and hear behind and beyond this 'No!' the even deeper, more profound, and final promise of God's 'Yes!' The affirmation is the real purpose of the negation as God's Word of judgment makes real and radical faith possible, inviting humanity into the saving purposes of God.

At about the same time that Karl Barth was ringing a bell that sounded throughout Christendom,⁸ a youngish Walter Bryden, an ocean away in "a quiet little village in the heart of Old Ontario,"⁹ was working his way through Paul's Corinthian correspondence with many of the same theological questions. Like Barth, Bryden knew what it was to mount the pulpit steps each week to speak to his congregation in "the infinite contradiction of their life, but also to speak the no less infinite message of the Bible."¹⁰ Passing largely unnoticed at the time, the book that resulted from Walter Bryden's study did not contain the sharp language that characterized Barth's work. But *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul* showed, as James D. Smart noted, "a mind moving abreast of the most vital developments in Christian theology" at the beginning of the twentieth century and "already grappling with the questions which dominated the attention of the church's leading theologians in the second quarter of the twentieth century." More importantly, "when one reads this book, written before much had been heard of Barth or Brunner, one realizes 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."¹¹

Even though he was uneasy about the ecclesiastical and theological climate within which he found himself, Walter Bryden assumed the starting-

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, quoted by Heron, *A Century*, 77.

⁸ Later in his life Barth compared the experience of writing his commentary on Romans to a man who, tripping in the darkness of the church tower, had accidentally caught hold of the bell-rope to steady himself and alarmed the whole countryside. See Heron, *A Century*, 78.

⁹ Bryden, "The Triumph of Reality," in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, edited by D. V. Wade (Toronto: Burns and McEachern 1956) 131.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Boston: Pilgrim, 1928) 100.

¹¹ James D. Smart, "The Evangelist as Theologian," in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, x.

point of modern theology at the end of the nineteenth century: Divine Spirit. He made the claim that the essential thing in religion “is a real *apprehension of God* which is neither a purely intellectual or moral, nor yet an emotional experience of life.”¹² Such a real apprehension of God, he argued, cannot be experienced but through the Spirit of God as the most important and most present factor in this realistic world. The Spirit is “an unobtrusive Presence, easily grieved away and sometimes quenched, but it waits at the door of every soul and is quick to enter at the behest of the slightest need.”¹³ The problem of the church in his day, he contended, was that “the fact of the Spirit had been so modified in so-called Christian circles (if not altogether dismissed from the category of real things), as to make it practically identical with the natural evolution of the laws of moral progress.”¹⁴ The Spirit of God, as Bryden understood it, had been separated from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and attached to the rational ideals of the modern world. This was precisely the antithesis of the New Testament gospel, a message which emphasized that there was a need for revelation in history and a need for revelation in every individual soul, “if that soul is to know truth—God. Revelation in the individual’s life is that light which breaks upon personal labor and patience, and courageous and obstinate adventure in the sphere of the Spirit, and which reveals itself in a knowledge ear-marked of God.”¹⁵

Walter Bryden was reacting to the idealism and rationalism that dominated Protestant thought and life in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Canada’s leading idealist philosopher of the time, John Watson of Queen’s University, Kingston, for example, appealed to Paul’s Athenian address in order to shore up a Hegelian and Darwinian worldview: “In God ‘we live and move and have our being,’” Watson told a Kingston meeting of the Y.M.C.A. in 1901. “We are spirits capable of communion with the Spirit of all things; the meanest as well as the highest object within our reach witnesses of this universal spirit; and living in it, we may become worthy members of the family, the community, the state, the race. To realize this spirit in all its forms is our true life work.”¹⁶ The spirit about which idealism spoke gathered up all humanity as one in the progressive unfolding of history. Watson’s conception of the spirit, however, was too domesticated for Bryden. In the hands of politicians and ecclesiastical bureaucrats it had been used to prop up the status quo and to justify a society and a church that appeared to have little

¹² Bryden, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul* (London: James Clarke, 1925) 237.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁶ John Watson as quoted by A. B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1979) 207.

in common with the faith of the New Testament. The Spirit of Jesus, Bryden argued, created longings, passions, paradoxes, and even uncertainties in the midst of real life. The Holy Spirit, it seemed to him, raised questions about God, human beings, and the world, before it created a knowledge of God. The Spirit, when it stirred in the human soul, caused people to labor under the burden of their sins and long to hear a divine word.

Bryden sensed that there was something profoundly wrong with the idealist bent of Canadian Christianity, yet he also knew that he could not simply embrace the old orthodoxies. Already between a rock and a hard place, Bryden's dilemma was exacerbated by the church union movement where appeals to the principles of idealism and rationalism were rampant. Though sympathetic to the need for church unity, he remained aloof to the debate in the years leading up to church union "because he was alarmed by the indifference to theology displayed by both sides."¹⁷ When required to make the decision, however, Bryden opted for the continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada because the case for union had left him unconvinced. But it would take Karl Barth's radical and clarion call to reorient Walter Bryden to the theology of Word and Spirit at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. In the wake of Barth's influence, and within a few short years of writing *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul*, Bryden talked paradoxically and prophetically about God's Judging-Saving Word, and launched his own protest against the worldview of the dominant ecclesiastical establishment. Along the way, he became one of the most important and articulate post-union voices in the continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Four years after Walter Bryden's death in 1952, James D. Smart, then a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and one of Bryden's former students in the 1920s, gave the following assessment of Bryden's theological significance:

A future historian who attempts to understand and evaluate the development of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in the half century following 1925 will find himself very clearly confronted with the fact of Walter W. Bryden. He will not find the name appearing often in the minutes of the General Assembly nor among those serving on important committees which are supposed to wield great power in the shaping of the church's life. But as he examines the convictions which have moved men to action and asks why the ministry of this Church has moved in certain directions and not in others, he will come upon innumerable trails all leading back to the classroom of this one man.

¹⁷ Robert Wright, "The Canadian Protestant Tradition 1914–1945," in *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760–1990*, edited by George A. Rawlyk (Burlington, Ont.: Welch, 1990) 152.

It can be said that he has moved the Church at the level of its faith and its deepest thinking as has no other man in its history.¹⁸

An exalted estimate, to be sure, but it is safe to say that outside Canadian Presbyterian circles Bryden's name has never been widely known, let alone acclaimed. Over the years a few United Church theologians have commented on Bryden's legacy in passing. W.O. Fennell, for example, noted in his anniversary retrospect of the Canadian Theological Society that there were forerunners to the present association of Canadian theological scholars, among them Walter W. Bryden and the Trinitarian Society which met at Knox College during the 1930s and 1940s: "the Trinitarian Society, founded by ministers graduated from Knox College, much under the influence of the Barthian scholar, Principal Bryden, and including a few non-Presbyterians in its membership, met regularly to discuss classical theological themes with vigour and scholarly acumen."¹⁹ Some of Bryden's books were published and reviewed outside Canada but for the most part his influence was exercised within the Presbyterian Church in Canada in the two decades following church union. These were the years he mounted a rigorous defense of the Reformed faith for a church that had gone through a major crisis. He did so by appealing to the increasingly influential dialectical theology of Karl Barth and his colleagues. As a result, Bryden became the conduit through which many Canadian Presbyterians were introduced to neo-orthodox theology.

Born on September 12, 1883 on a farm near Galt, Ontario, to a family of Scottish immigrants, Walter Bryden studied philosophy, psychology, and modern languages at the University of Toronto before proceeding to theological studies at Knox College, Toronto in preparation for the ordained ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. During the course of studies in divinity, Bryden spent a year abroad at the United Free Church College in Glasgow where he was exposed to theological teachers who were to have a decisive influence on his thinking. Following graduation in 1909 he served successively as the minister of Presbyterian congregations in Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan before being called in 1927 to a professorship at Knox College, where he taught church history and the history and philosophy of religion. In 1945 he was appointed by the General Assembly as principal of the college, a position he held until his death on March 23, 1952.²⁰

¹⁸ James D. Smart, "The Evangelist as Theologian," in Bryden, *Separated Unto the Gospel*, vii.

¹⁹ W. O. Fennell, "The Canadian Theological Society: An Anniversary Retrospect," *Studies in Religion* 14 (1985) 409. See also the more recent article by Gordon Harland, "God's Judging Saving Word: The Legacy of Walter W. Bryden," *Touchstone* 13.3 (1995) 43–51.

²⁰ "Death of Principal of Knox College," *The Presbyterian Record* (May 1952) 9.

In five books, numerous articles and book reviews, correspondence, sermons, and more than ten volumes of unpublished lecture notes and manuscripts, Bryden almost single-handedly set forth an approach to Christian theology that was to reposition Presbyterianism within Canadian Protestantism after church union.²¹ Bryden's contribution as a Presbyterian minister, theological professor, and college principal is essentially twofold: first, he was one of the earliest and most influential interpreters of Barth and Barthianism on the Canadian scene; and second, he was one of the ablest and most articulate critics of church union in Canada in the post-union era. The main purpose of this book is to examine both dimensions of Bryden's theological contribution and their interdependence. On the one hand, Bryden marshaled the new Reformation theology of Barth and Brunner to launch a broadside against Canadian Protestantism in general and the church union movement in particular. At the same time, his increasing disillusionment with the idealism of modern Protestant theology and church life, especially as it was expressed in church union, had already prepared him to embrace wholeheartedly the witness of the neo-orthodox theologians.

The Neo-Orthodox Protest and Canadian Protestantism

The story of the reception of Karl Barth's theology in Canada and neo-orthodoxy's subsequent influence in Canadian Protestantism, as historians have long recognized, is bound up with the life and thought of Walter W. Bryden. In his *A History of the Church in the United States and Canada*, R. T. Handy identified "Professor (later Principal) Walter Williamson Bryden of Knox College, a Presbyterian seminary" as one of Karl Barth's chief interpreters in North America. Bryden, in fact, was the only Canadian interpreter of Barth mentioned.²² Similarly Mark Noll's *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* isolated but a single figure, "W. W. Brydon (sic) of Knox College, Toronto" as a significant neo-orthodox thinker in Canada.²³ Canadian church historian John Webster Grant noted that the works of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth "had first been drawn to the attention of

²¹ Bryden's books and articles are introduced throughout this book. His six main books, in the order of writing and publication, are: *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul* (1925), *Why I Am A Presbyterian* (1934), *After Modernism, What?* (unpublished, 1934), *The Christian's Knowledge of God* (1940; republished in 1960), *The Significance of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (1943), and *Separated Unto the Gospel* (published posthumously, 1956).

²² R. T. Handy, *A History of the Church in the United States and Canada* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) 409.

²³ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 522.

Canadians through the enthusiastic sponsorship of W.W. Bryden of Knox College.”²⁴

Beyond initial and isolated acknowledgement, however, no one has really examined the nature and substance of Bryden’s thought and influence as a neo-orthodox theological professor in the Canadian context. In fact, Canadian historians and theologians have generally ignored the neo-orthodox movement in twentieth-century Canadian Protestantism. The studies that do exist have gotten the movement quite wrong, either because they fail to examine the thought of Canadian theologians in detail or because they force neo-orthodoxy to fit a preconceived argument concerning the development of religious thought in Canada. For example, Robert Choquette summarizes neo-orthodox theology in Canada by describing Barth’s influence during the 1930s as providing “conservative evangelical Christians with a refreshing alternative to the overly simplistic and literal reading of the Bible that all too frequently prevailed in fundamentalist circles.”²⁵ One looks in vain, however, for any mention of a Canadian theologian or thinker who actually appropriated Barth in this manner. In an otherwise illuminating study of Canadian religious history, Michael Gauvreau dismisses “Barthian neo-orthodox theologians” as modernists, relativists, and existentialists who, “rather than returning to the sources of evangelical tradition, broke decisively with its theology of history.”²⁶ The distinctive tenets of the emerging “theology of crisis” were characterized by what Gauvreau describes as a “sense of absolute contradiction between the uncertain, constantly changing record of human civilization, and the eternal, unchanging, incomprehensible revelation of God.”²⁷ Though his instincts may well be correct, Gauvreau says all this without examining the thought of even a single Canadian neo-orthodox thinker. Similarly, in his argument for secularization, David B. Marshall contends that neo-orthodoxy was a brief and unsuccessful detour on the road that led inevitably from Victorian Christianity to secular modernity.²⁸ To his credit, Marshall takes a few pages to examine the reception of Karl Barth’s theology and the emergence of neo-orthodox themes in John Line, D. L. Ritchie, Walter Bryden, and E. H. Oliver. But the overall impression remains the same: neo-orthodoxy had little currency in Canadian Protestantism during the 1920s and 1930s.

²⁴ John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (Burlington, Ont.: Welch, 1988) 152.

²⁵ Robert Choquette, *Canada’s Religions* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2004) 320.

²⁶ Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal: McGill Queen’s University Press, 1991) 268.

²⁷ Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, 268.

²⁸ David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850–1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 4, 181–204.

Most interpreters have also failed to distinguish between the theology of Karl Barth and the influence of so-called Barthianism that was transmitted to Canada via other representatives of the dialectical school of theology, especially Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr. One notable exception is Robert A. Wright who has pointed to the crucial role played by Reinhold Niebuhr of Union Seminary in New York in transmitting Barth's influence to Canadian Protestantism during the depression. But again, aside from passing references to Walter Bryden, J. King Gordon of the Canadian Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, and John Line of Emmanuel College, there is no serious attempt to understand Canadian expressions of neo-orthodox themes, nor precisely how it was that Niebuhr became so influential in the reception of neo-orthodoxy in Canada.²⁹

A careful examination of Walter Bryden's thought and influence, as I intend to show, raises serious questions about the assumptions concerning neo-orthodoxy with which Canadian historians and theologians have worked. For example, Walter Bryden's early reception of Karl Barth's early theology indicates that neo-orthodoxy began to emerge in Canadian Protestantism by the late 1920s. There is also evidence to suggest that the interpretation of Barth embraced by Canadian theologians owed as much, if not more, to Brunner and a number of English interpreters in Britain and the United States, as it did to their reading of Barth himself. Furthermore, Walter Bryden was not interested in adopting the themes of Barth's theology wholesale and transplanting them to Canadian soil. Rather than parroting Barth or borrowing idly (as many of Barth's followers were known to do), Bryden tried to work out the implications of Barthian insights for the Canadian churches in the second quarter of the twentieth century. And perhaps most important of all, although Walter Bryden was one of the first on the continent to see the significance of Barth, he came through to his basic theological position on his own. He developed his own thought, primarily in reaction to the idealism which dominated Canadian Protestant thought in the first part of the twentieth century, and largely through the influence of the moderating Calvinism espoused by theologians like James Denney and P. T. Forsyth. The reception of Barth by Bryden was also prepared by the influence of Albert Schweitzer's deconstruction of the search for the historical Jesus, and accompanied by the *Formgeschichtliche Schule*, of which Rudolf Bultmann's book *Jesus* was representative. Bryden's version of neo-orthodoxy, then, had roots that went deep in Canadian and British intellectual soil as well as those that reached out to continental European theology.

It is in this context, then, that Barth's decisive influence on Bryden is to be understood. By the late 1920s Bryden was sounding the themes that were

²⁹ Wright, "The Canadian Protestant Tradition 1914–1945," 179–80.

to signal his lifelong engagement with Barth whom he referred to as “the stern new prophet of Europe” and “the modern scion of the Reformation spirit,” and whose theology he described as “real Calvinism in a modern dress.”³⁰ Bryden’s formative teachers had introduced him to a mediating and moderate form of Calvinism which combined critical scholarship with evangelical piety, but it was Barth who provided the categories with which Bryden framed his protest against both confessional Calvinism and progressive Protestantism.

The term ‘neo-orthodoxy’ demands particular explanation since it figures so prominently in this account of Bryden’s thought and influence. Despite the fact that it is, as Douglas John Hall notes, a highly ambiguous term that defies categorization, and always has been, the term ‘neo-orthodoxy’ has been used to describe the development of twentieth-century theology for so long now that it seems unimaginable to tell the story without it.³¹ Neo-orthodoxy has usually been identified with the theology of the schools of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, and sometimes Reinhold Niebuhr, which reasserted the principles of Reformation theology in a protest against the continuing influence of late nineteenth-century culture on Protestantism. In fact, the story of how Barth rebelled against his eminent liberal teachers and became the leader of a revolt against a liberal Protestant theological establishment is, as Gary Dorrien has noted, “the founding narrative of twentieth-century theology.”³² In the 1920s Barth and his chief theological collaborators were known as “theologians of crisis” or “dialectical theologians.” Initially Barth’s allies included Eduard Thurneysen, Friedrich Gogarten, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich. By the 1930s these thinkers and others, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, Regin Preter, Gustav Aulen, Helmut Thielicke, and Suzanne de Dietrich, were working out their own forms of theology beyond liberalism while emphasizing their differences from Barth and each other.

Nevertheless, their initial protest against liberalism was marked by a number of common themes including the transcendence and holiness of a wholly other God, human sinfulness, the doctrine of grace, the centrality of Christ, the strange new world within the Bible, and justification by faith alone. They objected to liberal Protestantism’s emphasis on the immanence of God, the optimism which characterized liberalism’s view of humanity and the progress of history, the authority of religious experience, the identifica-

³⁰ Bryden, “The Triumph of Reality,” in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, 134; see also “The Presbyterian Conception of the Word of God,” unpublished manuscript, 49.

³¹ Douglas John Hall, *Remembered Voices: Reclaiming the Legacy of “Neo-Orthodoxy”* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 5.

³² Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 3.

tion of revelation with rational and ethical ideals, and the gradual coming of the Kingdom of God on earth through social means. As modern thinkers, however, they accepted biblical criticism and were concerned to work out a social ethic in the industrial order that took social criticism of religion seriously. Initially launched as a protest against liberalism, the so-called neo-orthodox theologians soon trained their sights on the older forms of orthodoxy as well—confessional Protestantism, scholasticism, and fundamentalism—rejecting what they perceived as the reduction of Reformation insights to static scholastic principles and the identification of revelation with the words of a verbally inspired and infallible Scripture. They also pressed their critique to include Roman Catholic theology prior to Vatican II because it allowed, they believed, that human beings could gain a knowledge of God prior to and apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The movement in which these theologians found themselves as allies of a sort earned such tags as neo-supernaturalism, theology of encounter, existential theology, kerygmatic theology, theology of paradox, theology of the Word of God, Christian realism, dialectical theology, crisis theology, neo-Reformation theology, and Barthianism. Although ambiguous and problematic, the most prominent and persistent title given to the theological protest represented by this web of theological trajectories was neo-orthodoxy.

The giant figures, as Gary Dorrien notes, “compel later generations to explain them. To the extent that they have any say in the matter, they also usually resist the labels assigned to them.”³³ The fact that Karl Barth offers a striking example on both counts is an important point for understanding the shape of neo-orthodoxy in Canada. The movement that grew up around Barth’s initial theological protest soon took on a life of its own. Increasingly, Barth felt the need to distance himself from the others and sharply denied that he was a neo-orthodox theologian. He wanted no part of a movement to create a new or modernized orthodoxy. Furthermore, he rejected almost every other label used to describe the theological work with which he and his colleagues had been engaged, partly because he insisted that he did not want any school of followers, and partly because major rifts began to appear between them in the late 1920s. By the time the periodical *Zwischen den Zeiten* ceased operations in 1932, Barth and Bultmann had parted company over hermeneutics, and a dispute over natural theology was heating up between Barth and Brunner that led to their acrimonious split in 1934. Aware of this, and writing much later, James Smart lamented the confusion surrounding the term neo-orthodoxy:

³³ Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology*, 1.

Who and what does it signify? Is this the theology of either of the Niebuhrs, or of Paul Tillich, or of Karl Barth, or of Emil Brunner? It cannot be the theology of all of them since they differ from each other not in superficial but in basic aspects of their theologies. Lumping them together as proponents of a “Neo-Orthodox Theology” misrepresents every one of them. Yet a surprising number of authors use this term, undefined, chiefly as a way of putting behind them a number of significant theologies of the immediate past.³⁴

The theology of Barth and his colleagues which reached Canadian shores in the late 1920s, therefore, was already a theology in transition. Whatever consensus had existed among the crisis theologians was in the process of breaking up. And the differences between them were real theological differences. What frequently went by the name of Barthianism represented positions Barth had already repudiated. The reception of Barth and Barthianism in the English-speaking world, including Canada, facilitated by secondary interpreters, often exacerbated the confusion. Perceptively, Walter Bryden was one of the first Canadian interpreters of Barth and Barthianism to see the distinctions, although he was not always consistent in applying the insights. For this reason, Bryden sharply denied on more than one occasion that he was a Barthian. Like Barth, Bryden saw himself as a church theologian in the ongoing tradition of Calvin and Luther who sought to express the faith of the Reformation in ways that were adequate to the twentieth century. Like Barth, he wanted to be categorized under no other marker than church theologian of God’s free and sovereign Judging-Saving Word.³⁵

Regrettably, then, the term neo-orthodoxy has often been used to paper over the differences between any and all post-liberal options without examining the distinctive theological character of each and the unique theological contributions of those who espoused them. Even more disconcerting, this has been done in and under the name of Karl Barth. It is one of the purposes of this book, therefore, to examine a specific example of neo-orthodox theology in Canadian Protestantism, in order to correct this gross generalization of Canadian religious history. Theological neo-orthodoxy was a diverse and contentious movement, and the term itself was disowned by Barth and most of his theological collaborators. It is time for scholars to recognize neo-orthodoxy for what it was: a series of theological trajectories which emerged from a common theological protest. Rather than using the term neo-orthodoxy to describe a monolithic position, it is better to speak about “neo-orthodoxies.”

³⁴ James D. Smart, *The Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 24–25.

³⁵ Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology*, 1.

Walter Bryden, in this sense, represented one of those trajectories in North American theology.

It might be argued, of course, that the continuing use of the term neo-orthodoxy is no longer justified if it fails to illumine the theological thought of those it is intended to represent. If the term is meant to describe a new form of orthodox confessionalism or scholasticism, then neither Karl Barth nor Walter Bryden deserve the label, and the term should be mothballed. But few, if any, interpreters use the term neo-orthodoxy in this way any longer. The neo-orthodox impulse, as I intend to argue, was a complex and creative blend of Reformation theology with modern thought, reformulated to overthrow liberal Protestant Christendom; not retreating behind the modern world or seeking to go around it, but going through it. As such, it was a thoroughly modern option in twentieth-century theology. Furthermore, the continuing use of the term acknowledges a basic historical reality: a theological trajectory emerged in the first half of the twentieth century that was perceived, rightly or wrongly, to provide a third option beyond two party Protestantism in North American Christianity and, for better or worse, the name by which it became known was “neo-orthodoxy.”

The Nature of Bryden's Neo-Orthodoxy

Walter Bryden's role in this movement in Canada compels an explanation. He provided leadership to a particular post-liberal, anti-modernist protest against idealism and rationalism in the second quarter of the twentieth century and one of the main tasks of this book is to explain the nature and function of that protest in Canadian Protestantism. The explanation is guided by the following thesis concerning the character and function of his neo-orthodox theological contribution: Walter Bryden pointed Canadian Presbyterians to a neo-Reformation theology of Word and Spirit at a critical moment in their history. Three distinctive features of this neo-orthodox theological witness are to be noted: (1) it was a theology of revelation, (2) it was a critical retrieval of Reformation theology and (3) it was a self-consciously post-Enlightenment theology.

First, it was a theology of revelation, or more particularly a neo-Reformation *theology of Word and Spirit*. Bryden's forte, as Joseph C. McLelland has noted, was “theological epistemology—a theory of knowledge which accepts as a primary datum the novelty of a Word from God.”³⁶ Bryden focused on the question of revelation and the knowledge of God because

³⁶ Joseph C. McLelland, “Walter Bryden: ‘By Circumstance and God,’” in *Called to Witness: Profiles of Canadian Presbyterians*, edited by W. Stanford Reid (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1980) 2:123.

these constituted, for him, the central issues of the Christian faith. Already in his first book, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul*, published in 1925, Bryden identified this question as one of fundamental importance: “What do you mean by Knowledge of God,” is probably the most difficult question that may be asked of a religious man; but the fact of its attainability is the most fundamental and universal, if least definable, of religious convictions.”³⁷ Similarly, Bryden’s most important book, *The Christian’s Knowledge of God* (1940), was an attempt to explore the meaning of Christian revelation by challenging the modern focus on rational, historical, ethical, and philosophical ideals, and positing in their place what he argued was a realistic conception of revelation centered in the self-disclosure of the God who shares self-knowledge with human creatures. The result, for Bryden, was a Trinitarian theology of the Word and a dialectical, christocentric reconstruction of the doctrine of revelation, which he described as the Judging-Saving Word of God.

Walter Bryden shared this concern for revelation with other Protestant theologians in the first half of the twentieth century. As Wilhelm Pauck has noted, they stood over against the strategy of theological liberalism, from Schleiermacher-forward, to base theology on human religious consciousness. Defiantly in the place of theological liberalism, theologians like Barth and Brunner interpreted the Christian faith on the basis of God’s revelatory Word in Jesus Christ. As a theological strategy, “instead of asking: ‘What has modern man to say about the gospel?’ the theologians now concerned themselves with the question: ‘What does the gospel say to modern man?’”³⁸ Accompanying this focus on revelation was a new emphasis on the Bible. Pauck argued that, in contrast to the modernist view of the Bible, Barth and Brunner’s view differed from “that which can be obtained by the use of the historical method for the interpretation of historical texts and documents,” because it took “the books of the Bible as bearers of kerygma, a message of salvation that must be believed.”³⁹ On the other hand, Pauck insisted, their view had “nothing in common with the view of the fundamentalists,” who stressed “the literal inerrancy of the Bible as if this were the foremost article of the Christian faith.”⁴⁰ The Christian message, the kerygma, the gospel of Christ, in the view of the dialectical theologians, represents “a scandal and a provocation” to the contemporary world because the revelation of God, revealing as it does the radical message of the cross, calls into question all human efforts at self-salvation. It offers human beings “renewal through the forgiveness of

³⁷ Bryden, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul*, 152.

³⁸ Wilhelm Pauck, in Kegley and Bretall, *Theology of Emil Brunner*, 35. See also Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 126.

³⁹ Pauck, 35.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

their sins.” This was the conception of revelation and faith that Bryden shared with the theologians who came to be described as neo-orthodox.⁴¹

In his use of the concept of revelation, Bryden was particularly driven, as we shall argue, by the concern to isolate and identify the nature of the Christian’s encounter with God. “What was the nature of faith?” and “What constituted the Christian’s knowledge of God?” were questions of paramount importance to him. Barth’s startling comments in the Second Edition of the *Epistle to the Romans* were mirrored in Bryden’s own theological anxiety. What was the participation, comprehension, and cooperation which the revelation of the gospel demanded? In what sense did the revelation of the gospel presume faith in the living God, and create the faith which it presumed? Long before he heard anything about the theology of Karl Barth, Walter Bryden had already been wrestling with questions about the life of God in the souls of men and women. But with the assistance of Barth and the neo-orthodox theologians he began to develop a dialectical conception in which there was a relation of correspondence between an act of God and an act of the human subject, the act of divine self-revelation and the human act of faith in which the revelation of God is apprehended. This was the existential position he pursued over against conservative and liberal forms of Protestant theology.

Second, Bryden pointed to a *Reformation* conception of Word and Spirit. In all his theological work Bryden sought to recover, re-appropriate, and reassert the Reformation insights of Calvin and Luther. When one reads Bryden’s lectures, books, and sermons, it is difficult to disagree with John Godsey who argued that the term ‘neo-Reformation’ might be a more apt descriptor for the theological movement known as neo-orthodoxy.⁴² The Barthian revolt in modern theology, as Gary Dorrien has described it, effected a stunning reorientation of the field of Christian theology by insisting that modern Protestantism could recover its authentically Christian basis only by returning to the Reformation’s conceptions of revelation and faith. This conventional definition of neo-orthodoxy suffices as long as one bears in mind that a neo-orthodox theologian like Walter Bryden took modern forms for granted and took his “orthodox” elements from Luther and Calvin, not from later Protestant orthodoxy. Assuming that a recovery of authentic Reformation teaching was both possible and desirable, Bryden believed that the church of his day had to reach back beyond post-Enlightenment modernism and scholastic Calvinism to the theological renewal which had taken place with Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli.

⁴¹ Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 126.

⁴² John Godsey, s.v. “Neo-orthodoxy,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1986) 10:360ff.

Calvin's theology in particular played a decisive role in shaping Bryden's thought. As a Reformed theologian Bryden pointed to Calvin's theology of Word and Spirit as the source of renewal for Canadian Protestants. "If, however," Bryden wrote, Protestant Christians 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."⁴³ Along the same lines, 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."⁴⁴ "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.⁴⁵ When Reformed Christians today speak about revelation and the Word of God, they must mean by it what Calvin meant.⁴⁶

Not only did Bryden explicitly and self-consciously seek to re-appropriate Calvin's conception of the Christian message, he also stood within Luther's tradition of a theology of the cross, sounding a great "No!" against all theologies of glory. The term *theologia crucis* was used by Martin Luther to describe the early period of his Reformation theology. The term referred not simply to the Christian doctrine of the atonement, but to an entire theological method in which the cross is seen as the focal point of God's revelation and the organizing principle of all theology. In Luther's words, "the cross is the criterion of all things" (*Crux probat omnia*), and "the cross alone is our theology." In the Heidelberg Theses (1518) Luther contrasted the *theologia crucis* with the theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*). The theology of glory summed up Luther's objections to late medieval scholastic theology and its approach to the knowledge of God. Like Luther, Bryden rejected a theology of glory (*theologia gloria*) as he saw it manifested in the modernism and fundamentalism of his day. Modern idealists and rationalists, he believed, perceived the glory of God—God's power, wisdom, and goodness, manifest in the works of creation. Instead, Bryden turned to a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) in which the church places its faith in the God hidden in the suffering and humiliation of the cross. Like Luther, Bryden believed that the natural knowledge of God to be gained from the created order, when left in the hands of sinners, even sinners redeemed by grace and called to be the

⁴³ Bryden, *Why I Am A Presbyterian* (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, 1934) 165.

⁴⁴ Bryden, "The Presbyterian Conception of the Word of God," in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, 178.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

church, resulted in attempts at self-justification by moral, intellectual, cultural, social, political and economic achievement. A theology of glory, Bryden believed, creates a church that domesticates the Word and the Spirit of God. In Luther's terms, a church that looks at the invisible things of God as they are seen in the visible things does not deserve to be called a church. But the church that looks on the visible rearward parts of God as seen in suffering and the cross does deserve to be called a church. A theology of the cross creates a church in which all human preconceptions of deity and human perceptions about how God may be known and how God may act in the world are shattered. For Walter Bryden, "the Word of God is Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, with nothing to be added or subtracted from simply that."⁴⁷ In the cross of God's crucified Messiah, God's judgment and salvation are revealed, not in the power and glory which human beings usually associate with the Absolute, but in poverty, suffering, and death.

Walter Bryden was not a lone voice in bearing witness to the enduring value of Reformation insights for his day. He lived and taught at a time when a "Luther-and-Calvin Renaissance," to quote Wilhelm Pauck, was taking place. The new work on Luther and Calvin allowed the great Protestant Reformers, it was believed, "to speak in their own name as they have not been able to do in any previous period of Protestant history."⁴⁸ It would be a mistake, to be sure, to describe Walter Bryden as a Calvinist as if he were concerned to defend some ecclesiastical or denominational distinctive. Nevertheless, Bryden's theological witness is incomprehensible apart from the tradition of Calvin and Luther.

Third, Bryden's theological protest, for all of its blistering attacks against modernism, remained importantly rooted in the tradition of nineteenth-century theological liberalism. It was a decidedly *neo*-Reformation and modern option in theology. But it 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.⁴⁹ Many of Bryden's critics argued that his neo-orthodoxy deviated too much from the orthodoxy of the Reformation theologians and the classical Protestant confessions to be a thoroughly Reformed theology, while others argued that it was too narrowly conservative and orthodox to sustain Christian faith in the modern context. Both failed to recognize that neo-

⁴⁷ Bryden, *The Christian's Knowledge of God*, 173.

⁴⁸ Pauck in Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 127.

⁴⁹ Bryden, Review of *The Organism of Christian Truth* by John Dickie in *Canadian Journal of Religious Thought* 9.1 (1932) 81.

orthodoxy, for all its problems, was a sophisticated synthesis of Reformation theology with modern thought.

The neo-orthodox theologians, as Wilhelm Pauck and David Tracy have argued, shared the liberal and not the orthodox understanding of the task of theology. Despite its critique of liberalism and modernism, neo-orthodoxy was indebted to many of the practices established by liberal Protestant theologians, including the use of historical criticism, the acceptance of the social criticism of religion, the conception of revelation as the self-revelation of God, and the importance of cultural analysis in theology. David Tracy draws a parallel between the 'neo-orthodox' theologians and Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, in their affirmation and negation of liberal modernity, and their rejection of both orthodoxy and liberalism as adequate for contemporary needs. The neo-orthodox theologians were compelled to challenge their liberal forbears not out of lack of regard for the theological relevance of cultural analysis, but out of a different postmodern analysis. This analysis found its roots in disillusionment with the optimism of the evolutionary theory. In their critique of the liberal enterprise, neo-orthodox theologians emphasized the radical nature of sin and evil, and rejected liberalism's Christological formulations. They argued that only the unique gift of the Word of God and faith could provide an adequate foundation for a truly Christian theology. Tracy notes that on this point the neo-orthodox joined the orthodox theologian in "insisting upon the theologian's own faith as an existential condition of the possibility of theology."⁵⁰ The difference, however, existed in the fact that the neo-orthodox theologian's faith, unlike that of the orthodox, was radically experiential and claimed to illumine all human existence since "the subject-referent of the neo-orthodox theologian is not really the "believer" as for the orthodox, but the more radical model of the human being of authentic Christian faith."⁵¹

At the same time, Walter Bryden stood within a tradition of Canadian Presbyterian orthodoxy of sorts. In his recent history of Knox College, Brian J. Fraser has argued that the faculty there has always taught a basic, if somewhat varied, orthodoxy. The argument is that they were committed to what Fraser describes as "the great evangelical truths" which "included the doctrines of creation, fall, redemption, atonement in Christ, justification by faith, sanctification through the work of the Holy Spirit, and eternal life."⁵² Fraser argues that "the ways in which these affirmations were expounded and interpreted

⁵⁰ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage For Order* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 27. See also Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 193ff.

⁵¹ Tracy, *Blessed Rage For Order*, 28.

⁵² Brian J. Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy: A History of Theological Education at Knox College, Toronto, 1844–1994* (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 1995) 14.

by different generations of faculty changed four times between 1844 and 1994. The changes from conservative orthodoxy, to progressive orthodoxy, to neo-orthodoxy, to divergent views of orthodoxy, reflected the different ways of interpreting the central truths of the gospel to the culture in which the church found itself.”⁵³ As one of the new faculty members appointed to Knox following church union in 1925, Fraser notes, Walter Bryden set out an approach to the theological heritage of Presbyterianism in the form of neo-orthodoxy:

Influenced by Scottish theologians James Denney, P. T. Forsyth and German theologian Karl Barth, both confessional orthodoxy and progressive orthodoxy failed to understand the true nature of the gospel and the church. Confessional orthodoxy reduced the gospel to a system of thought and progressive orthodoxy reduced it to a system of morals. The church needed to recover the full heritage of the Protestant Reformation and recognize the transcendent, unique and mysterious nature of Christ’s encounter with humanity at the centre of the church’s life and witness. Knowledge of God grew out of this transforming encounter with the person of Christ, in whom God’s self-revelation was complete and by whom God redeemed the world.⁵⁴

In short, Bryden employed a modern theological method to protest against both modernism and fundamentalism and to reassert the great evangelical truths of the Reformed faith. Neo-orthodoxy, as we intend to demonstrate, was a theologically complex movement. Its expression in the Canadian context, as Bryden’s theology reveals, was highly ambiguous. It betrays quite appropriately, as Douglas John Hall has described it, a certain Kierkegaardian contrariety which defies categorization.⁵⁵

Bryden and the Identity of Post-Union Presbyterianism

Bryden’s neo-Reformation theological witness emerged and functioned within a particular ecclesial context. In the aftermath of 1925, approximately one-third of the membership and one-quarter of the clergy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada decided not to enter church union, and to continue as Presbyterians. Walter Bryden emerged as a theological leader among this group and marshaled a neo-Reformation theology of Word and Spirit in the service of continuing Presbyterianism. As N. Keith Clifford has noted in his

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 15–16.

⁵⁵ Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 6.

book *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada 1904–1939*, those who opposed church union and constituted the continuing Presbyterian Church “did not bind their church to any theory of biblical inerrancy, premillennialism, or dispensationalism, and they did not insist that their church adopt an anti-ecumenical stance. Consequently, after 1925 the Presbyterian Church in Canada was completely free to follow Walter Bryden, their new young theologian at Knox College, beyond modernism and fundamentalism to neo-orthodoxy.”⁵⁶ Through his influence as a theological teacher Bryden exercised more power than might at first be recognized from an analysis of the formal constituency of his thought. The theology of the majority of a generation of Presbyterian ministers was forged by listening to Bryden’s voice in the classroom and the pulpit. The theological themes enunciated by Bryden became, in the hands of his students, a post-union apologetic for the continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada. As Joseph C. McLelland has argued, in this context Bryden’s influence was considerable:

The quarter century and more during which Bryden taught the theologues of Knox was the most critical in the history of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Behind lay mixed motives and traditions, ahead an uncertain future, no clear theological position emerging, but rather a struggle over the Church’s relationship to its subordinate standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith. This was Bryden’s hour. Occupying one of the highest and most influential positions in the Church, he brought his considerable gifts to bear on the practical issue of theological education—the teaching of those ‘teaching elders’ who must minister to a Church undergoing a crisis of identity.⁵⁷

In an essay on The Presbyterian Church in Canada after 1925, Neil Gregor Smith agreed: “The long association of Dr. W. W. Bryden with Knox College, first as Professor of Church History and History and Philosophy of Religion, and later as Principal, contributed a great deal to a theological awakening in the church.”⁵⁸ In the official history of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, John Moir notes that in the years after 1925 “Within Knox College and Presbyterian College the majority of faculty members were older men who showed little interest in theological trends and seemed to repeat well-worn lectures,” the notable exception being W. W. Bryden, who

⁵⁶ N. Keith Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada 1904–1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985) 4.

⁵⁷ J. C. McLelland, “Walter Bryden: ‘By Circumstance and God,’” in *Called to Witness*, edited by W. Stanford Reid (The Presbyterian Church in Canada: Committee on History, 1980) 2:120. For Bryden’s influence see also John Moir, *Enduring Witness* (Hamilton, Ont.: The Presbyterian Church in Canada: Bryant, 1975) 235.

⁵⁸ Neil Gregor Smith, “1925 and After,” in *A Short History of The Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, 1966) 97.

“through his classes and writing did much to shape and challenge a generation of younger ministers.”⁵⁹ As Walter Bryden introduced his students to the new European trends in Protestant theology in the early 1930s, a generation of younger Presbyterians began to see their church’s destiny “as that of being the instrument through which in Canada Protestantism might be recalled to its heritage as a church reformed and ever anew reforming according to the Word of God in Scripture.”⁶⁰

The question arises as to why Bryden’s voice was so influential in such circumstances? This was a period of crisis, to be sure, and Bryden passed on to his students what many considered to be a compelling new form of theology. But in such circumstances why was Bryden’s influence so decisive while others were overshadowed? The competing factions in the post-union church included those who advocated Machen’s Princeton orthodoxy, others who emphasized John Watson’s progressive ideals of liberal Protestantism, and still others who expressed a sentimentalism for the Scottish identity of Canadian Presbyterianism. At the same time, the theological direction of the new United Church seemed somewhat unclear as it dealt with the convergence of Wesleyan, Holiness, and Reformed theologies accompanied by liberal ideals and a passion for the Social Gospel. In this context, the Word-centered Reformed tradition of Canadian Presbyterianism was naturally more hospitable to the neo-orthodox vision embraced and espoused by a man like Bryden. The content and context of Bryden’s message, therefore, were very significant factors, to say the least. Bryden was in the right place at the right time and he had something important to say.

But Walter Bryden’s influence is also explicable in terms of who he was and how he comported himself. Bryden offered his students not simply a theology but also a credible model of the minister as confessing, prophetic theologian, one who strove to put faith into words and actions and who sought to embody the message he proclaimed. The profound personal effect that Bryden had upon students is clear in their testimony: “In that company and in those circumstances Dr. Bryden shone with a brilliance to that of the star of Bethlehem directing the footsteps of the shepherds unerringly to the Christ-child. It would be impossible to exaggerate the debt students of that era owe to Walter Bryden.”⁶¹ Hagiographic to be sure, but it reflects the high esteem in which Walter Bryden was held by those who were profoundly shaped by his teaching. In Bryden’s case, the prophet himself was decisive in the reception of the message. In short, Bryden was a passionate and ar-

⁵⁹ John Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 235.

⁶⁰ James D. Smart, “Canadian Presbyterianism Since 1925,” *Presbyterian Record* 79.2 (Feb. 1954) 19.

⁶¹ Charles Cochrane, “Personal Memoir,” unpublished, 17.

ticulate theological professor who cared deeply about those he was educating for the ministry of the continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada. They, in turn, received the Christian message in terms of Bryden's neo-Reformation conception of God's Judging-Saving Word, and delivered it to a church trying to find its ecclesial and theological bearings in the second quarter of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

The theological contribution of Walter W. Bryden will be examined by arguing that his dialectical christocentric conception of revelation as the Judging-Saving Word of God is the center of his theological thought; that this conception of revelation was an attempt to recover Calvin's doctrine of the Word of God, reaching back behind both modernism and Protestant scholasticism; that it was initially shaped by the liberal evangelical Scottish Calvinist theology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also by Schweitzer and Bultmann, and then decisively by the theology of the early Karl Barth and the neo-orthodox movement; that it was driven by the theological critique to be found in Luther's theology of the cross; and that it functioned to provide a post-union theological vision for Canadian Presbyterian theological students and clergy, largely through the profound personal influence of Walter Bryden himself.

This examination of Walter Bryden's theological contribution, therefore, is primarily a study in historical theology. As such, my concern is to set forth a thorough exposition of the main themes of Bryden's texts, published and unpublished, within the context of the prevailing theological, ecclesiastical, and religious issues of his day, in order to document what Bryden believed about revelation, why he believed it, and how he understood its significance for Canadian Protestantism. My purpose, therefore, is not to provide a detailed biography of Bryden's life, intellectual or otherwise, although a good deal of historical and biographical material is included in order to understand the origin and genetic development of Bryden's thought and influence. By genetic I mean an understanding of Bryden's development taken from a standpoint within Canadian Protestantism rather than from the endpoint of Barth's decisive influence.⁶² The neo-orthodox theology of revelation, if it is to be understood properly in the Canadian context, requires more than the general appeal to Barth's thought and influence which has characterized the studies to date.

⁶² I am indebted to Bruce McCormack of Princeton Theological Seminary for this concept. See his seminal study of the origins and genetic development of Karl Barth's theology, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

It must also be stressed that I do not intend to give a purely theoretical account of certain Christian doctrines as espoused by Walter Bryden. Rather, I propose that a study of Walter Bryden's theological contribution opens a window on the entire Reformed Protestant tradition in Canada in the first half of the twentieth century, enabling us to examine how and why certain theological trends prevailed, while others receded. In particular, this study reveals that Walter Bryden was an able and vigorous participant in a period of dramatic theological challenge and change; that neo-orthodox theology had real currency in Canadian Protestantism by the early 1930s; and that Bryden's form of neo-orthodoxy played an increasingly important role in the continuing Presbyterian Church. This book is the story of the development of a particular doctrine as espoused by a particular theologian in a particular context. It differs, on one hand, from the works of Canadian historians who examine religious history with reference to institutions and intellectual movements, but pay little attention to the details and nuances of doctrinal development. On the other hand, it differs from the works of Canadian theologians who examine Christian doctrine with little or no reference to the Canadian intellectual tradition within which it is embedded. There is, I have discovered, a lively Canadian theological tradition to be documented, explored, and appropriated, and the thought of Walter Bryden is a case in point.

In this study I am chiefly concerned, then, with the modest task of describing the various positions taken by Walter Bryden, in a manner that is both fair to him and clear to readers. My hope, therefore, in writing this book is threefold. First, I hope that my readers will discover the thought of a relatively unknown Canadian theologian, and will be inspired to read his books for themselves. Readers of this book are often introduced to Bryden's theology in his own words. The systematized manner in which Bryden's theological contribution is presented, however, is not a substitute for a direct reading of Bryden himself. Second, I hope that my readers will come to understand how Bryden's thought represented the early reception of Karl Barth's early theology and the neo-orthodox movement in Canada, and how these ideas came to function, flourish and fade at a particular moment in Canadian Protestantism. Third, I hope that my readers will come to appreciate the significance of a Christian tradition which emphasizes a theology of Word and Spirit. Walter Bryden believed that in revelation God shares divine self-knowledge with human beings in the person of Jesus Christ through the witness of the Holy Spirit. The Christian's knowledge of God, therefore, is rooted in a past act and a present reality: the decisive self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ and the ongoing action of a personal, relational God who creates the faith by which the God revealed in Jesus Christ is encountered. As a theologian of Word and Spirit, Bryden did not force a choice between a the-

ology of the Word and a theology of experience. One may be permitted the observation that, given the fragmentation of much contemporary theology, a tradition that holds Word and Spirit together is surely worth preserving, not only because it illumines the past, but also because it offers lessons for the future. A theology of Word and Spirit, framed within a theology of the cross, offers words of judgment and salvation that are vital for the ongoing renewal of the Christian movement.

The argument proceeds as follows. The first chapter examines the origins and development of Bryden's theological mind as a Reformed theologian, and sketches the ecclesiastical, intellectual and theological ethos within which he was raised and educated as a Canadian Presbyterian (1883–1909). The second chapter examines the development, emergence and dominance of Bryden's neo-orthodox voice within the context of his work as a Presbyterian minister, theological professor, and college principal (1909–52). Chapters one and two set the stage for the exposition of Bryden's theology of revelation in chapters three through five. Chapter three sets out the central themes of Bryden's theology of the Word, including his critique of modern idealism and rational orthodoxy, and his constructive proposal for a dialectical christocentric re-conception of revelation, identified as the "Judging-Saving Word of God." This chapter explores Bryden's theological contribution against the background of Calvin, Schleiermacher, and Barth. In the fourth chapter I examine Bryden's doctrine of the knowledge of God in terms of Bryden's theology of the Holy Spirit and his understanding of faith. We see how his thought converges with Luther's theology of the cross. Here we move from doctrine to experience, from theological affirmations and negations to existential realities in Bryden's thought. The fifth chapter sets out Bryden's ecclesiology on the basis of the doctrine of revelation and knowledge of God in the previous two chapters, noting the emphasis Bryden placed on the church as a confessing community. The church, he argued, is created, built up and sent out into the world by Word and Spirit. In the conclusion, I assess Bryden's theological legacy in relation to the succeeding generation which followed him into neo-orthodoxy, the subsequent decline and fall of neo-orthodoxy in the twentieth century, and the ongoing significance of Bryden's theological witness.

Karl Barth once advised a younger theologian that truly profitable research in theological history is motivated by something more than dispassionate interest. Throughout this book I have tried to heed his advice:

For me it would be the canon of all research in theological history, and perhaps in all history, that one should try to present what has engaged another person, whether in a good way or a less good, as something living, as something that moved him and that can and indeed does move oneself too; to unfold it in such a way that even if one finally

takes some other route, the path of this other has an enticing, or, if you like, tempting attraction for oneself. Disregard of this canon can only avenge itself by rendering the attempted historical research unprofitable and tedious.⁶³

Since the theology of Karl Barth plays such a significant role in this study of Bryden's theological contribution to Canadian Protestantism, heeding Barth's advice appears to be the better part of wisdom. Hence, this book seeks to present what engaged Bryden as something living, as something that moved him, and as something which, as it moved him, moved others through him. James D. Smart said that it was impossible to understand Walter Bryden's theological contribution except as the fulfillment, in a special sphere, of the task of an evangelist. Bryden's concern, in even the most involved intellectual consideration, was that the Gospel might be heard and believed. We would do well to remember, Smart concludes, "that the response the evangelist covets is not an elaborate eulogy but that his gospel should be heard and believed and that the decisions with which it confronts the Church should be faced without evasion."⁶⁴

⁶³ Karl Barth, *Letters, 1961–1968*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) Letter 239; cited in John Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 5.

⁶⁴ James D. Smart, "The Evangelist as Theologian," in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, x, xi.