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A divided world is seen more and more to call for a united Church if the hurt of that world is to be healed.

EDWIN LEWIS

*U*nto the true unity of the Church it is sufficient to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments: nor is it necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by men should be alike everywhere.

PHILIP MELANCHTHON

*T*he desire to come together as brothers must not lead to a watering-down or subtracting from the truth. Our dialogue must not weaken our attachment to our faith.

POPE PAUL VI

I am not too enamored of church unity discussions if in the end they mean uniformity.

RAYMOND BROWN (BRITISH BAPTIST)

Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics: Reformed Theology and the Postmodern Turn



John R. Franke

*A*t the beginning of the twenty-first century the intellectual milieu of Western thought and culture is in a state of transition precipitated by the perceived failure of the philosophical assumptions of the modern world spawned by the Enlightenment. This transition has been marked by the emergence of postmodern theory and its thoroughgoing critique of the modern quest for certain, objective, and universal knowledge along with its attempt to engage in new forms of conversation in the aftermath of modernity. One observer notes that when we survey "the panorama of contemporary thought it is evident in field after field, in discipline after discipline, that a significant critique of modernity has arisen along with a discussion of a paradigm change. The upshot is that the kind of change under discussion is not incremental or piecemeal, but structural and thoroughgoing."¹

While this intellectual and cultural transition has produced significant questions and concerns for the discipline of theology, it is certainly not unprecedented. The expression of Christian thought has taken shape and has been revised in the context of numerous cultural transitions: from an initially Hebraic setting to the Hellenistic world; from the thought-forms of Greco-Roman culture to those of Franco-Germanic; from the world of Medieval feudalism to the Renaissance;

from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment; from the developed world to the third world; and currently, from a modern to a postmodern context. Throughout this history Christian theology has shown itself to be remarkably adaptable in its task of assisting the Church in extending and establishing the message of the gospel in a wide variety of contexts. At the same time, theological history also provides numerous examples of the inappropriate accommodation of Christian faith to various ideologies and cultural norms. This checkered past confirms the vitality of Christian theology while warning of the dangers of too closely associating it with any particular form of cultural expression. If we are to faithfully and appropriately address the opportunities and challenges presented by our shifting circumstances, we must understand the nature of the cultural transition that is occurring as well as its significance for the theological discipline. In short, we must come to terms with the challenge of doing theology in a postmodern context.

One common response among Christian thinkers to the emergence of postmodern thought has been to view it primarily as a threat to Christian faith. Catholic theologian Richard John Neuhaus sums up the reaction of many to postmodernity by connecting it with relativism and subjectivism and calling it the enemy of basic thinking about moral truth. This sort of response has been characteristic of thinkers across the theological spectrum. At the heart of this critique is the consistent identification of postmodern thought with relativism and nihilism. In this conception postmodernism is viewed as fundamentally antithetical to Christian faith. Merold Westphal comments that at "varying degrees along a spectrum that runs from mildly allergic to wildly apoplectic"² many Christian thinkers "are inclined to see postmodernism as nothing but warmed-over Nietzschean atheism, frequently on the short list of the most dangerous anti-Christian currents of thought as an epistemological relativism that leads ineluctably to moral nihilism. Anything goes."³ This view has been especially common among evangelicals who have tended to think that postmodern thought is opposed to the notion of truth in general, and to

the truth claims of the Christian faith in particular.

In contrast, this article, the first in a series of four, will focus on the promise of postmodern thought for the task of Christian dogmatics from the perspective of the Reformed tradition. This article will consider the basic character of Reformed theology and the nature of the postmodern turn. Three subsequent installments will explore the shape of postmodern Reformed dogmatics through an examination of the nature of revelation (article #2), and the place of Scripture in the task of dogmatics through a consideration of its relationship to culture (article #3) and the Reformed confessional tradition (article #4). The intent of these essays is to suggest a program for Reformed dogmatics that is inherently reforming in accordance with the character of the Reformed tradition and that responds constructively to the intellectual opportunities and challenges of the emerging postmodern ethos.

THE CHARACTER OF REFORMED THEOLOGY

Reformed theology is reforming theology. This assertion arises from the Reformed concern for the ongoing reformation of the faith and practice of the Church according to the Word of God in the context of ever-changing circumstances and situations: *ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda*. This insistence on the continual reformation of the Church suggests a corresponding principle with respect to a Reformed conception of theology. Reformed theology is always reforming according to the Word of God in order to bear witness to the eternal truth of the gospel in the context of an ever-changing world characterized by a variety of cultural settings: *theologia reformata et semper reformanda*. Among the most central intellectual commitments that inform this approach to reformation and theology are the primacy and freedom of God in the governance and guidance of the Church and the world along with the contextual and corrupted nature of human knowledge. Accordingly, the process of reformation from the Reformed perspective is not, and never can be, something completed once and for all and appealed to in perpetuity as the "truly Reformed" position. Rather, an approach to refor-

mation that acknowledges the primacy and freedom of God in all creaturely relations along with the limited and distorted conceptions of human knowledge will be an ongoing process that is "always reforming."

However, while this "reforming" principle preserves the primacy of the Word of God in the Church and properly acknowledges the contextual nature of all human confession, Michael Welker observes that it has also brought Reformed theology into a "profound crisis" at the beginning of the new millennium. He notes that the speed, diversity, and complexity of social and cultural change in Western industrialized settings have particularly taxed Reformed theology with its particular openness to contemporary cultural developments. Hence, the *theologia reformata et semper reformanda* can sometimes appear "to be at the mercy of the shifting Zeitgeist" in which it falls "victim to the cultural stress of innovation." Welker concludes that when Reformed theology has "entered that stress, it seemed to lose its profile" and that when it has "opposed that stress, it seemed to betray its typical mentality and spiritual attitude."⁴

These observations point to two distortions to which theology in the Reformed tradition has been susceptible and which must be avoided if the vitality and faithfulness of its distinctive witness to the gospel are to be maintained. One is the conservative distortion of so closely equating Reformed theology with the events, creeds, and confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as to virtually eliminate, in practice if not in theory, the reforming principle of the tradition, thus betraying a central commitment of its formal character. The other is the progressive distortion of becoming so taken with the opportunities and possibilities for innovation that the tradition loses its profile, thus betraying its material concerns.

It is my conviction that it is necessary to rethink and reform the assumptions that have guided the practice of contemporary Reformed theology in order to develop an approach that affirms and embraces the reforming principle of the tradition without sacrificing its material profile. At the

turn of the century the state of Reformed dogmatics, at least in its more conservative iterations, can be best described as stagnant. The majority of its practitioners, both scholars and pastors, seem to be content with the restatement and defense of past theological conclusions rather than in the appropriation of the tradition for the purpose of providing fresh constructions that might more adequately address the contemporary situation. Gordon Spykman observes that the history of Reformed dogmatics in the twentieth century, with a few notable exceptions, "leaves us with a rather meager record."⁵ In the field of systematic theology, the work of Louis Berkof, first published in 1938, continues to be used as a standard textbook at conservative Reformed seminaries and holds an "almost uncontested place" in the field of Reformed dogmatics.⁶

One of the most recent efforts in Reformed theology, that of Knox Seminary professor Robert Reymond, may be viewed as an attempt to "update" Berkof in order to provide a more current textbook.⁷ However, the work displays little evidence of familiarity with recent developments in the discipline of theology and largely ignores current cultural issues and concerns.⁸ For the most part, Reymond restricts his discussions to exegetical matters and engagement with other Reformed writers leading Robert Letham to conclude that the work is "biblicistic and sectarian in its thrust."⁹ Such an approach to theology, rooted in particular understandings of the role of Scripture in the theological enterprise and the nature of confessional theology, has become all too common in the more conservative circles of the Reformed theological community. I believe that it is necessary to rethink and revision the Reformed dogmatic enterprise as it is practiced in the context of the contemporary situation. Before examining the post-modern setting however, it may be helpful to comment briefly on the nature of dogmatics.

Dogmatics refers to the attempt to clarify the distinctive content of the Christian faith for the Church in order to enable the Christian community to be clear about what it believes in its witness to the world. It is also an investigation of the content of Christian theology for the practical purpose

of considering how that content is to be most properly and effectively conveyed and communicated in each new social, linguistic, and cultural setting. In this sense, as Karl Barth remarks, "dogmatics as such does not ask what the apostles and prophets said but what we must say on the basis of the apostles and prophets."¹⁰ It is also important to remember that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as Reformed, Lutheran, or Roman Catholic dogmatics, but only Christian dogmatics pursued from the perspective of a particular ecclesial tradition. It is not the goal of dogmatics to promote a sectarian spirit in the Church. Rather, the various traditions within the Christian Church, united by consensual ecumenical orthodoxy, offer their distinctive witness to the whole Christian faith through the act of dogmatics as a contribution to the common task of the whole Church, in its various confessional and ecclesial expressions, to clarify the teaching of the one faith.

Likewise, there is technically no such thing as premodern, modern, or postmodern dogmatics, but only Christian dogmatics pursued in the context of particular social and intellectual situations. In these local settings, contemporary challenges and concerns are addressed and critical theological use is made of the conceptual tools and concepts of a specific time and place for the purpose of clarifying, explaining, and illuminating the universal truth of the Christian faith in the midst of numerous historical and cultural locations. Hence, the adjectives "postmodern" and "Reformed" employed in the title of these essays should be understood as providing explicit identification of the particular ecclesial and confessional tradition from which this proposal for Christian dogmatics arises and the cultural context in which it is situated, pursued, and developed. Given this general conception of dogmatics, we now turn our attention to the postmodern situation and two particularly significant aspects of postmodern thought for the task of dogmatics.

THE POSTMODERN SITUATION

The current cultural context in North America, as well as in much of the world, can be generally and felicitously

labeled and described as "postmodern." This, of course, raises the question as to the proper conception of the postmodern situation. It is important to realize that a precise understanding of postmodernity is notoriously difficult to pin down. Yet in spite of the fact that there is no consensus concerning the meaning of the term, it has still become almost commonplace to refer to the contemporary cultural situation as "postmodern." The lack of clarity about the term has been magnified by the vast array of interpreters who have attempted to comprehend and appropriate postmodern thought. Paul Lakeland observes that there are "probably a thousand different self-appointed commentators on the postmodern phenomenon and bewildering discrepancies between the ways many of these authors understand the term *postmodern* and its cognates."¹¹ In the context of this lack of clarity about the postmodern phenomenon, the term has come to signify widely divergent hopes and concerns among those who are attempting to address the emerging cultural and intellectual shift it implies.

This situation presses the question as to whether any similarity can be found within the diversity of postmodern thought so as to make sense of the movement. To address this circumstance it will be helpful to see postmodernism as a label that identifies an ongoing paradigm shift in contemporary culture. Almost without exception, those who are engaged in the pursuit of this paradigm shift use the term postmodern. This engagement generally involves the vigorous critique of the modern paradigm and some general and tentative suggestions concerning the shape of an alternative. This observation enables us to suggest a basic, minimalist understanding of postmodernism as referring primarily to the rejection of the central features of modernity, such as its quest for certain, objective and universal knowledge, along with its dualism and its assumption of the inherent goodness of knowledge. It is this critical agenda, rather than any proposed constructive paradigm to replace the modern vision, that unites postmodern thinkers. Nancey Murphy employs the term postmodern to describe emerging patterns of thought

and to "indicate their radical break from the thought patterns of Enlightened modernity."¹² As Diogenes Allen puts it, postmodern thought is simply discourse in the aftermath of modernity.¹³ At this level we find a remarkable congruence among those who adopt the label postmodern as a description of their work, a congruence that extends from Derrida to postliberals to postconservative evangelicals. Broadly speaking, the term postmodern implies the rejection of certain central features of the modern project.

The Protestant reformation provides an example of a similar situation. The sixteenth-century Protestants were in agreement that the medieval Roman Catholic tradition had corrupted the Christian faith and so made the Reformation of the Church necessary. Although they were united in what they were against, when it came to the task of setting forth a positive agenda they were fragmented. Consequently, they struggled without success to achieve a unified movement. In a similar manner, postmodern thinkers are united, not by agreement about a particular constructive agenda, but by their shared belief that the modern project is inadequate and their shared commitment to the task of developing new paradigms for intellectual pursuit.

This construal of postmodern thought as a critique and rejection of modernity leads to one central dimension of postmodern theory that is especially important. At the heart of the postmodern ethos is the attempt to rethink the nature of rationality in the wake of the modern project. This rethinking has resulted not in irrationality, as is often claimed by some opponents of postmodern thought, but rather in numerous redescriptions and proposals concerning appropriate construals of rationality and knowledge after modernity. In spite of their variety, these attempts can be broadly classified as producing a chastened, situated, and contextual rationality that is more inherently self-critical than the constructions of rationality common in the thought-forms of modernity.¹⁴ Two features that serve to distinguish this postmodern rationality from the modernist conceptions it seeks to replace are of particular importance, the linguistic turn and

the nonfoundationalist turn. Let us briefly examine each of these.

POSTMODERN THOUGHT: THE LINGUISTIC TURN

Postmodern thought is characterized by a linguistic turn and the transition from a realist to a constructionist view of the world.¹⁵ Postmodern thinkers maintain that humans do not view the world from an objective vantage point, but structure their world through the concepts they bring to it, particularly language. Human languages function as social conventions that describe the world in a variety of ways depending on the context of the speaker. No simple, one-to-one relationship exists between language and the world and thus no single linguistic description can serve to provide an objective conception of the "real" world. Language structures our perceptions of reality and constitutes the world in which we live.

Hence, postmodern anthropologists have discarded the older assumption that culture is a preexisting social-ordering force that is transmitted externally to members of a cultural group who in turn passively internalize it. They maintain that this view is mistaken in that it isolates culture from the ongoing social processes that produce and continually alter it.¹⁶ Culture is not an entity standing above or beyond human products and learned mental structures. In short, culture is not a "thing."¹⁷ The modern understanding tended to focus on the idea of culture as that which integrates the various institutional expressions of social life and binds the individual to society. This focus on the integrative role of culture is now facing serious challenges. According to Anthony Cohen, it has become one of the casualties of the demise of "modernistic grand theories and the advent of 'the interpretive turn' in its various guises."¹⁸ Rather than exercising determinative power over people, culture is conceived as the outcome and product of social interaction. Consequently, rather than being viewed as passive receivers, human beings are seen as the active creators of culture.¹⁹

Clifford Geertz provided the impetus for this direction through his description of cultures as comprising "webs of

significance" that people spin and in which they are then suspended.²⁰ Geertz defines culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."²¹ According to Cohen, Geertz was responsible for "shifting the anthropological view of culture from its supposedly objective manifestations in social structures, towards its subjective realisation by members who compose those structures."²² Culture resides in a set of meaningful forms and symbols that, from the point of view of any particular individual, appear as largely given.²³ Yet these forms are only meaningful because human minds have the ability to interpret them.²⁴ This has led anthropologists to look at the interplay of cultural artifacts and human interpretation in the formation of meaning. They suggest that, contrary to the belief that meaning lies in signs or in the relations between them, meanings are bestowed by the users of signs.²⁵ However, this does not mean that individuals simply discover or make up cultural meanings on their own. Even the mental structures by which they interpret the world are developed through explicit teaching and implicit observation of others. Consequently, cultural meanings are both psychological states and social constructions.²⁶

The thrust of contemporary cultural anthropology leads to the conclusion that its primary concern lies in understanding the creation of cultural meaning as connected to world construction and identity formation. This approach leads to an understanding of culture as socially constructed. The thesis of social constructionists such as Peter Berger is that, rather than inhabiting a prefabricated, given world, we live in a linguistically construed social-cultural world of our own creation.²⁷ At the heart of the process whereby we construct our world is the imposition of some semblance of a meaningful order upon our variegated experiences. For the interpretive framework we employ in this task, we are dependent on the society in which we participate.²⁸ In this manner, society mediates to us the cultural tools necessary for constructing our world.

Although this constructed world gives the semblance of being a given, universal, and objective reality, it is actually, in the words of David Morgan, "an unstable edifice that generations constantly labor to build, raze, rebuild, and redesign."²⁹ We inhabit linguistically and socially constructed worlds to which our personal identities are intricately bound. The construction of these worlds, as well as the formation of personal identity, is an ongoing, dynamic and fluid process, in which the forming and reforming of shared cultural meanings play a crucial role. Culture includes the symbols that provide the shared meanings by which we understand ourselves, pinpoint our deepest aspirations and longings, and construct the worlds we inhabit. And through our language and the symbols of our culture we express and communicate these central aspects of life to each other, while struggling together to determine the meaning of the very symbols we employ in this process. To be human is to be embedded in culture and to participate in the process of interpretation and the creation of meaning as we reflect on and internalize the cultural symbols that we share with others in numerous conversations that shape our ever-shifting contexts.

POSTMODERN THOUGHT: THE NONFOUNDATIONALIST TURN

Postmodern thought is also characterized by a nonfoundationalist turn. The chastened rationality of postmodernity entails the rejection of epistemological foundationalism and the adoption of a nonfoundationalist and contextual conception of epistemology. In the modern era, the pursuit of knowledge was deeply influenced by Enlightenment foundationalism. In its broadest sense, foundationalism is merely the acknowledgment that not all beliefs are of equal significance in the structure of knowledge. Some beliefs are more "basic" or "foundational" and serve to give support to other beliefs that are derived from them. Understood in this way, nearly every thinker is in some sense a foundationalist, rendering such a description unhelpful in grasping the range of opinion in epistemological theory found among contemporary

thinkers. However, in philosophical circles foundationalism refers to a much stronger epistemological stance than is entailed in this general observation about how beliefs intersect. At the heart of the foundationalist agenda is the desire to overcome the uncertainty generated by the tendency of fallible human beings to error and the inevitable disagreements and controversies that follow. Foundationalists are convinced that the only way to solve this problem is to find some universal and indubitable means of grounding the entire edifice of human knowledge.

The modern quest for epistemological certitude, often termed "strong" or "classical" foundationalism, has its philosophical beginnings in the thought of the philosopher René Descartes. Descartes sought to reconstruct the nature of knowledge by rejecting traditional medieval or "premodern" notions of authority and replacing them with the modern conception of indubitable beliefs that are accessible to all individuals. The goal to be attained through the identification of indubitable foundations is a universal knowledge that transcends time and context. In keeping with this pursuit, the ideals of human knowledge since Descartes have tended to focus on the universal, the general, and the theoretical rather than on the local, the particular, and the practical. This conception of knowledge became the dominant assumption of intellectual pursuit in the modern era.

In the postmodern context, however, foundationalism is in dramatic retreat, as its assertions about the objectivity, certainty, and universality of knowledge have come under fierce criticism.³⁰ Merold Westphal observes: "That it is philosophically indefensible is so widely agreed that its demise is the closest thing to a philosophical consensus in decades."³¹ J. Wentzel van Huyssteen agrees: "Whatever notion of postmodernity we eventually opt for, all postmodern thinkers see the modernist quest for certainty, and the accompanying program of laying foundations for our knowledge, as a dream for the impossible, a contemporary version of the quest for the Holy Grail."³² And Nicholas Wolterstorff offers this stark conclusion: "On all fronts foundationalism is in bad shape. It

seems to me there is nothing to do but give it up for mortally ill and learn to live in its absence."³³ The heart of the postmodern quest for a situated and contextual rationality lies in the rejection of the foundationalist approach to knowledge along with its intellectual tendencies.

Postmodern thought raises two related but distinct questions to the modern foundationalist enterprise. First, is such an approach to knowledge *possible*? And second, is it *desirable*? These questions are connected with what may be viewed as the two major branches of postmodern hermeneutical philosophy: the hermeneutics of finitude and the hermeneutics of suspicion. However, the challenges to foundationalism are not only philosophical, but also emerge from the material content of Christian theology. Merold Westphal suggests that postmodern theory, with respect to hermeneutical philosophy, may be properly appropriated for the task of explicitly Christian thought on theological grounds: "The hermeneutics of finitude is a meditation on the meaning of human createdness, and the hermeneutics of suspicion is a meditation on the meaning of human fallenness."³⁴ In other words, many of the concerns of postmodern theory can be appropriated and fruitfully developed in the context of the Christian doctrines of creation and sin.

Viewed from this perspective, the questions that are raised by postmodern thought concerning the possibility and desirability of foundationalism are also questions that emerge from the material content of Christian theology. They both lead to similar conclusions. First, modern foundationalism, with its emphasis on the objectivity, universality, and certainty of knowledge, is an impossible dream for finite human beings whose outlooks are always limited and shaped by the particular circumstances in which they emerge. Second, the modern foundationalist emphasis on the inherent goodness of knowledge is shattered by the fallen and sinful nature of human beings who desire to seize control of the epistemic process in order to empower themselves and further their own ends, often at the expense of others. The limitations of finitude and the flawed condition of human nature mean that

epistemic foundationalism is neither possible nor desirable for created and sinful persons. This double critique of foundationalism, emerging as it does from the perspectives of both postmodern philosophy and Christian theology, suggests the appropriateness and suitability, given the current intellectual situation, of the language of nonfoundationalism as descriptive of an approach to the task of theology that is both postmodern and faithful to the Christian tradition.

One of the issues arising from the linguistic and nonfoundationalist turns in postmodern thought with respect to Christian faith and the work of dogmatics concerns the nature of revelation. If all thought is situated and contextual, what does this mean for the Christian belief in the ultimate authority of divine self-revelation? How should these concerns be accounted for in our understanding and articulation of revelation? These important questions will provide the focal point for the next article in this series.

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Notes

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