

**Reforming Theology:
Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics¹**

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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 concern for 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. In the words of Jürgen Moltmann, reformation is not “a one time act to which a confessionalist could appeal and upon whose events a traditionalist could rest.”² Rather, an approach to reformation 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.”³

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 the conviction of this essay 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 creative appropriation of the tradition in order to provide 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.”⁴ 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.⁵ The most recent effort 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.⁶ However, the work displays little evidence of familiarity with recent developments in the discipline of theology and largely ignores current cultural issues and concerns.⁷ 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.”⁸

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. This essay will suggest a program for reforming theology that seeks to promote a conception of theology that is inherently reforming in orientation in accordance with the formal character of the tradition. The purpose of this reforming venture is to redeem the promise contained in the subtitle by pointing the way toward a renewal of the Reformed dogmatic enterprise as it is practiced in the context of the contemporary situation. However, before launching into these matters, 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.”⁹ 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 subtitle of this essay 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 it will be helpful and appropriate to provide a brief sketch of the cultural and intellectual setting from which this particular proposal for dogmatics emerges.

The Postmodern Situation

The current cultural setting in North America, as well as in much of the Western industrialized 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 a 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.”¹⁰ 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.

One common response to the emergence of postmodern thought has been of the negative variety. Many Christian theologians and thinkers have come to view postmodernity primarily as a threat to Christian faith. Catholic theologian Richard John Neuhaus summed up the reaction of many to postmodern thought by connecting it with relativism and subjectivism and calling it the enemy of basic thinking about moral truth.¹¹ 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” 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.”¹² This view has been particularly characteristic among evangelicals who, according to Mark McLeod, “tend to think that postmodernism opposes the truth, and in particular, the absolute truth of the gospel.”¹³

However, the wholesale identification of postmodern thought as nothing other than a radical brand of relativism is simply too narrow to do justice to the actual breadth of the phenomenon and fails to account for the many postmodern thinkers who distance themselves from the more radical implications of poststructural and deconstructive thought. For instance, Nancey Murphy draws a sharp distinction between Continental forms of postmodernism and those of Anglo-American postmodern thinkers. She employs the term postmodern to describe emerging patterns of thought in the Anglo-American context and to “indicate their radical break from the thought patterns of Enlightened modernity.”¹⁴ The Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff offers a vigorous defense and affirmation of truth as well as a telling critique of modernity.¹⁵ Moreover, post-analytical philosophers such as Cornel West,¹⁶ Jeffrey Stout,¹⁷ and Hilary Putnam¹⁸ provide extensive critiques of modernity and move in postmodern directions. In ethics, the constructive communitarian approach of Alasdair MacIntyre may be called postmodern.¹⁹ Thomas Kuhn²⁰ and Stephen Toulmin²¹ have sought to develop contextual, postmodern approaches to the philosophy of science. In theology, the postliberalism associated with Hans Frei²² and George Lindbeck²³ is indebted to postmodern theory and the later work of Wittgenstein.²⁴ Given the variety of intellectual endeavor that may be described as postmodern we must conclude that postmodern thought cannot be narrowly associated with only a few select interpreters.

The breadth of postmodern thought suggested by the few examples offered here raises the question as to what, if anything, gives unity and cohesion to postmodern thought. Dan Stiver points out that we should not expect postmodernism to be characterized by a tight conformity to particular categories and patterns of thought. He

reminds us that we “use terms like analytic philosophy, existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism, process philosophy, and pragmatism with meaning but also with awareness that it is notoriously difficult to come up with demarcation criteria that will tell us in any and every case who is and is not in the pertinent group. Postmodernism is that kind of term.”²⁵ 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, while moving beyond the narrow understanding that only sees it as a synonym for deconstructive relativism. To address this circumstance it will be helpful to see postmodernism as a label that identifies an ongoing paradigm shift in Western culture. Stiver observes 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.”²⁶ Almost without exception, those who are engaged in the pursuit of this paradigm shift use the term postmodern. Stiver suggests that this engagement generally involves three dimensions: first, the stringent criticism of modernity; second, the belief that “radical surgery” is required to address the ailments of modernity and that “a massive reconfiguration” or major paradigm shift is unavoidable; and third, the presentation of some basic sketch as to the possible shape of an alternative paradigm.²⁷ From this description it is clear that the unity of the movement lies not in any tentative sketch of the details of a new paradigm but rather in the rejection of the program of modernity.

This insight leads us to suggest a basic, minimalist understanding of postmodernism. The term is best understood as referring primarily to the rejection of the

central features of modernity. As Diogenes Allen puts it, postmodern thought is discourse in the aftermath of modernity.²⁸ 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, 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. This postmodern quest for new paradigms has significantly shaped the discipline of theology in the past twenty years as theologians from various contexts and traditions have sought to “fill the void” left by the rejection of modernity. Terrence Tilley cites ten alternative postmodern theologies that he divides into four categories: constructive postmodernisms, postmodern dissolutions, postliberal theology, and theologies of communal praxis.²⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer identifies eight types of postmodern theology: radical orthodoxy, postliberal theology, postconservative theology, deconstructive a/theology, reconstructive theology, postmetaphysical theology, feminist theology, and Anglo-American postmodernity: a theology of communal praxis.³⁰ Each of these typologies indicates the presence today of a number of constructive postmodern theological programs.

Clearly, postmodernism cannot be dismissed as nothing more than a deconstructive agenda that stands in stark opposition to Christian faith and thought. In fact, there is much evidence that suggests that the postmodern context has actually been responsible for the renewal of theology as an intellectual discipline after a period of

stagnation under the weight of modernist demands concerning the acquisition of knowledge. Freed from the constraints of modernity, postmodern concerns have spawned numerous new theological programs. This broad construal of postmodern thought as a critique and rejection of modernity leads to one central dimension of postmodern theory that is especially important for theology and theological method. 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 less informed opponents of postmodern thought, but rather in numerous redescrptions 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 rationality that is more inherently self-critical than the constructions of rationality common in the thought-forms of modernity.³¹

Several common features serve to distinguish this chastened rationality from the modernist conceptions it seeks to replace. Chastened rationality is marked by the transition from a realist to a constructionist view of truth and the world.³² 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, such as 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. Chastened rationality is also manifest in the “loss of the metanarrative” and the advent of “local” stories. Postmodern thinkers assert that the all-encompassing narratives of scientific progress that shaped and

legitimated modern society have lost their credibility and power. Further, they maintain that the very idea of the metanarrative is no longer credible.³³ This is not to suggest that narratives no longer function in the postmodern context. Rather, the narratives that give shape to the postmodern ethos are local rather than universal. Postmodernity embraces the narratives of particular peoples and celebrates the diversity and plurality of the world without attempting to discover a “grand scheme” into which all of these particular stories must fit. Above all, however, the chastened rationality of postmodernity entails the rejection of epistemological foundationalism and the adoption of a nonfoundationalist and contextual conception of epistemology. The centrality of this commitment to the concerns of postmodern theory gives rise to the assertion that postmodern theology is nonfoundationalist theology. This in turn raises the question of the possibility and legitimacy of nonfoundationalist theology from the perspective of ecumenically orthodox Christian faith. It is the contention of this essay that such an approach to theology comports well with orthodox Christian faith, particularly as it has been expressed in the Reformed tradition with its emphasis on contextuality and the reforming principle. Hence, we will now turn our attention to the case for a nonfoundationalist approach to theology.

The Case for a Nonfoundationalist Theology

In the modern era, the pursuit of knowledge was deeply influenced by Enlightenment foundationalism. The goal of the foundationalist agenda is the discovery of an approach to knowledge that will provide rational human beings with absolute, incontestable certainty regarding the truthfulness of their beliefs. According to

foundationalists, the acquisition of knowledge ought to proceed in a manner somewhat similar to the construction of a building. Knowledge must be built upon a sure foundation. The Enlightenment epistemological foundation consists of a set of incontestable beliefs or of unassailable first principles on the basis of which the pursuit of knowledge can proceed. These basic beliefs or first principles must be universal, objective, and discernable to any rational person apart from the particulars of varied situations, experiences, and contexts.³⁴

This foundationalist conception of knowledge came to dominate the discipline of theology as theologians reshaped their construals of the Christian faith in accordance with its dictates. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the foundationalist impulse produced a theological division in the Anglo-American context between the “left” and the “right.” Liberals constructed theology upon the foundation of an unassailable religious experience, whereas conservatives looked to the Bible as the incontrovertible foundation of their theology.³⁵ What is particularly significant, and often overlooked, is the similarity between these two groups concerning the basic structure of theology. For all the differences between “liberals” and “conservatives” on the proper foundations for theology and, as a consequence, their (often) mutually exclusive conceptions of theological issues, both groups were drawing from commonly held foundationalist conceptions of knowledge. In other words, liberal and conservative theologians can often be viewed as working out the theological details of the two sides of the same modernist, foundationalist coin.

In the postmodern context, however, foundationalism is in dramatic retreat, as its assertions about the objectivity, certainty and universality of knowledge have come under

withering critique.³⁶ 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.”³⁷ 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.”³⁸ 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.”³⁹ The heart of the postmodern quest for a chastened rationality lies in the rejection of the foundationalist approach to knowledge.

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. 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.”⁴⁰ 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 absolute 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.

According to William Stacy Johnson, nonfoundationalist approaches to theology “share a common goal of putting aside all appeals to presumed self-evident, non-inferential, or incorrigible grounds for their intellectual claims.”⁴¹ They reject the notion that among the many beliefs that make up a particular theology there must be a single irrefutable foundation that is immune to criticism and provides the certain basis upon which all other assertions are founded. In nonfoundationalist theology all beliefs are open to criticism and reconstruction. This does not mean, as is sometimes alleged, that nonfoundationalists cannot make assertions or maintain strong convictions that may be

vigorously defended. As Francis Schüssler Fiorenza says, to engage in nonfoundationalist theology is to accept that it is a “self-correcting enterprise” that examines all claims and relevant background theories without demanding that these be completely abandoned all at once.⁴² Nonfoundationalist theology does not eschew convictions, it simply maintains that such convictions, even the most longstanding and dear, are subject to critical scrutiny and therefore potentially to revision, reconstruction, or even rejection.

The adoption of a nonfoundationalist approach to theological method has raised concerns for many in the conservative theological community who see the abandonment of foundationalism as little more than a potential (or actual) slide down the proverbial “slippery slope” into nihilistic relativism.⁴³ Does not such an approach really amount to a theological relativism that allows for anything? We might first respond that no theological method can secure truth and that all are subject to distortion in the hands of finite and fallen human beings. A nonfoundationalist approach to theology seeks to respond positively and appropriately to the situatedness of all human thought and therefore to embrace a principled theological pluralism. It also attempts to affirm that the ultimate authority in the church is not a particular source, be it Scripture, tradition, or culture but only the living God. Therefore, if we must speak of “foundations” for the Christian faith and its theological enterprise, then we must speak only of the triune God who is disclosed in polyphonic fashion through Scripture, the church, and even the world, albeit always in accordance with the normative witness to divine self-disclosure contained in Scripture. Put another way, nonfoundationalist theology means the end of foundationalism but not “foundations.” However, these “foundations” are not “given” to human beings. As Bruce McCormack notes, they “always elude the grasp of the human

attempt to know and to establish them from the human side” and they cannot be demonstrated or secured “philosophically or in any other way.”⁴⁴ Hence, human beings are always in a position of dependence and in need of grace with respect to epistemic relations with God. Attempts on the part of humans to seize control of these relations are all too common throughout the history of the church and, no matter how well intentioned, inevitably lead to forms of oppression and conceptual idolatry. Nonfoundationalist theology seeks to oppose such seizure through the promotion of a form of theology and a theological ethos that humbly acknowledges the human condition of finitude and fallenness and that, by grace if at all, does not belie the subject of theology to which it seeks to bear faithful witness.

While the concern of relativism will remain one of the major challenges for nonfoundationalist theology, let us here note one of its potentially significant benefits for the Reformed theological tradition. It promotes a theology with an inherent commitment to the reforming principle and maintains without reservation that no single human perspective, be it that of an individual or a particular community or theological tradition, is adequate to do full justice to the truth of God’s revelation in Christ. Richard Mouw points to this issue as one of his own motivations for reflecting seriously about postmodern themes: “As many Christians from other parts of the world challenge our ‘North Atlantic’ theologies, they too ask us to think critically about our own cultural location, as well as about how we have sometimes blurred the boundaries between what is essential to the Christian message and the doctrine and frameworks we have borrowed from various Western philosophical traditions.”⁴⁵ The adoption of a nonfoundationalist approach to theology accents an awareness of the contextual nature of human knowledge

and mandates a critical awareness of the role of culture and social location in the process of theological interpretation and construction.

A nonfoundationalist conception envisions theology as an ongoing conversation between Scripture, tradition, and culture in which all three are vehicles of the one Spirit through which the Spirit speaks in order to create a distinctively Christian “world” centered on Jesus Christ in a variety of local settings. In this way theology is both one, in that all truly Christian theology seeks to hear and respond to the speaking of the one Spirit, and many, in that all theology emerges from particular social and historical situations. Such a theology is the product of the reflection of the Christian community in its local expressions. Despite its local character, such a theology is still in a certain sense global in that it seeks to explicate the Christian faith in accordance with the ecumenical tradition of the church throughout its history and on behalf of the church throughout the world.

Further, despite its particularity as specifically Christian theology, such a theology is also public and carries an implicit claim to be articulating a set of beliefs and practices that are “universal” in the only way that any claim to universality can be made, as the faith of a particular believing community. In this way, such a theology calls for a response beyond the confines of the particular community from which it emerges, and is set forth as a contribution to the wider public conversation about the nature of ultimate reality, meaning, and truth. As Kathryn Tanner explains, there is no reason to think that a specifically Christian context rules out theological claims that are universal in scope or that a Christian context means that theologians are discussing matters that only concern Christians. Instead, theologians seek to “proclaim truths with profound ramifications for

the whole of human existence; that they do so from within a Christian cultural context simply means that the claims they make are shaped by that context and are put forward from a Christian point of view. Indeed, if, as an anthropologist would insist, assertions always show the influence of some cultural context or other, following a procedure like that is the only way that universal claims are ever made.”⁴⁶

From the perspective of Christian dogmatics, this approach seeks to nurture an open and flexible theology that is in keeping with the local and contextual character of human knowledge while remaining thoroughly and distinctly Christian. From the perspective of the Reformed tradition, it provides a conceptual framework for the maintenance of the reforming principle. We will now turn our attention to the articulation of this postmodern, nonfoundationalist approach to theology as it might be situated in the context of Reformed concerns. This will be facilitated through the examination of three formal characteristics of theology in the Reformed tradition that enter into constructive conversation in the task of dogmatics: Reformed theology is canonical theology; Reformed theology is contextual theology; and Reformed theology is confessional theology. The role of each of these will be formulated in keeping with a commitment to a nonfoundationalist and contextual approach to theology in keeping with the reforming principle of the tradition.⁴⁷

Reformed Theology is Canonical Theology

The Reformed tradition has always been concerned to do theology that is faithful to the witness of canonical Scripture and shares this ecumenical commitment with the whole church. While this commitment is shared, much debate has been engendered in the

church as to the proper construal of Scripture as a source for theology. It is to this question that we now turn our attention. The Christian tradition has been characterized by its commitment to the authority of the Bible. Christian communal identity is bound up with a set of literary texts that together form canonical Scripture. According to David Kelsey, acknowledging the Bible as Scripture lies at the heart of participating in the community of Christ and the decision to adopt the texts of Christian Scripture as “canon” is not “a separate decision over and above a decision to become a Christian.”⁴⁸ To be Christian is to participate in a community that acknowledges the authority of Scripture for life and thought. The question that arises is how this authority ought to be construed. This question leads us to consider how the Bible ought to function in theology by pursuing the traditional assertion that Scripture is theology’s “norming norm.” The point of departure for this affirmation of Scripture as the norming norm for theology lies in the Protestant principle of authority articulated in confessions such as *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, which states: “The Supreme Judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of counsels, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other than the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”⁴⁹ This statement reflects the concern of the Reformed tradition to bind Word and Spirit together as a means of providing the conceptual framework for authority in the Christian faith and brings into focus the sense in which the Bible is conceived of as the norming norm for theology.

The assertion that our final authority is the Spirit speaking through Scripture means that Christian belief and practice cannot be determined merely by appeal to either

the exegesis of Scripture carried out apart from the life of the believer and the believing community or to any “word from the Spirit” that stands in contradiction to biblical exegesis. The reading and interpretation of the text is for the purpose of listening to the voice of the Spirit who speaks in and through Scripture to the church in the present. This implies that the Bible is authoritative in that it is the vehicle through which the Spirit speaks. In other words, the authority of the Bible, as the instrument through which the Spirit speaks, is ultimately bound up with the authority of the Spirit. Christians acknowledge the Bible as Scripture because the Spirit has spoken, now speaks, and will continue to speak with authority through the canonical texts of Scripture. The Christian community came to confess the authority of Scripture because it experienced the power and truth of the Spirit of God through writings that were, according to their testimony and confession, “animated with the Spirit of Christ.”⁵⁰ Following the testimony of the church of all ages, we too look to the biblical texts to hear the Spirit’s voice.

In declaring the biblical canon to be closed at the end of the fourth century the church implicitly asserted that the work of the Spirit in inspiration had ceased. However, this did not mark the end of the Spirit’s activity in connection with Scripture. On the contrary, the Spirit continues to speak to succeeding generations of Christians through the text in the ongoing work of illumination. On the basis of biblical texts that speak of the continuing guidance of the Spirit to the earliest believers, subsequent generations of Christians have anticipated that the Spirit would guide them as well. The Puritan pastor John Robinson proclaimed his famous and frequently quoted belief that God had yet more truth and light to break forth from his holy word. This Puritan notion of further light has been expressed in the language of literary theory by Northrop Frye who notes that, to

an extent unparalleled in any other literature, the biblical texts seem to invite readers to bring their own experiences into a conversation with them resulting in an ongoing interpretation of each in the light of the other.⁵¹ For this reason, Frye suggests that readers properly approach the text with an attitude of expectation, anticipating that there is always more to be received from the Bible.⁵² Through Scripture, the Spirit continually instructs the church as the historically extended community of Christ's followers in the midst of the opportunities and challenges of life in the contemporary world.

The Bible is the instrumentality of the Spirit in that the Spirit appropriates the biblical text for the purpose of speaking to us today. This act of appropriation does not come independently of what traditional interpretation has called "the original meaning of the text." Careful exegesis is required in an effort to understand the "original" intention of the authors by determining what they said. However, the speaking of the Spirit is not bound up solely with the supposed "original intention" of the author. Contemporary proponents of "textual intentionality" such as Paul Ricoeur explain that although an author creates a literary text, once it has been written, it takes on a life of its own.⁵³ While the ways in which the text is structured shape the "meanings" the reader discerns in the text, the author's intentions come to be "distanced" from the "meanings" of the work. In this sense, a text can be viewed metaphorically as "having its own intention." This "textual intention" has its genesis in the author's intention but is not exhausted by it. Therefore, we must not conclude that exegesis alone can exhaust the Spirit's speaking to us through the text. While the Spirit appropriates the text in its internal meaning, the goal of this appropriation is to guide the church in the variegated circumstances of particular contemporary settings. Hence, we realize that the Spirit's speaking does not come

through the text in isolation but rather in the context of specific historical-cultural situations and as part of an extended interpretive tradition.

The assertion that the Spirit appropriates the text of Scripture and speaks in and through it to those in the contemporary setting leads to the question of the goal or effect of the Spirit's speaking. What does the Spirit seek to accomplish in the act of speaking through the appropriated text of Scripture? An appropriate response to this inquiry suggests that through the process of addressing readers in various contemporary settings the Spirit creates "world." Sociologists point out that religion plays a significant role in world construction through a set of beliefs and practices that provide a particular way of looking at "reality." Wesley Kort suggests that certain specific types of beliefs are essential for the development of an "adequate" and "workable" world, such as those about temporality, other people, borders, norms, and values. He maintains that these types of beliefs are closely connected to languages and texts and "can be textually identified because they and their relations to one another are borne by language." This observation leads to the importance of "scriptures" in that such texts function by articulating "the beliefs that go into the construction of a world."⁵⁴ For this reason, Paul Ricoeur asserts that the meaning of a text always points beyond itself in that the meaning is "not behind the text, but in front of it." Texts project a way of being in the world, a mode of existence, a pattern of life, and point toward "a possible world."⁵⁵

In the Christian tradition, the Bible stands in a central position in the practice of the faith in that the Christian community reads the biblical texts as Scripture and looks to it as the focal point for shaping the narrative world it inhabits. As Walter Brueggemann maintains, the biblical text "has generative power to summon and evoke new life" and

holds out an eschatological vision that “anticipates and summons realities that live beyond the conventions of our day-to-day, take-for-granted world.”⁵⁶ This points to the capacity of the text to speak beyond the context in which it was originally composed. In short, as John Goldingay declares, the text “calls a new world into being.”⁵⁷ However, the point that needs to be stressed here is that this capacity for world construction, while bound closely to the text, does not lie in the text itself. Instead, this result is ultimately the work of the Spirit speaking through the text as the instrumentality of world creation. Further, the world the Spirit creates is not simply the world surrounding the ancient text nor the contemporary world, but rather the eschatological world God intends for creation as disclosed, displayed, and anticipated by the text. The claim that the Spirit speaks in and through the text, not in abstraction but in the context of particular cultural circumstances in this process of world formation, leads us to inquire about the relationship between Scripture and culture in the formulation of theology. However, before we address this question we must first consider the role and function of particular social, historical, and cultural circumstances in the task of theology.

Reformed Theology is Contextual Theology

The Reformed tradition acknowledges, both implicitly and explicitly, the contextual nature of theology. Theology is done as an attempt to confess and bear witness to the truth of the Christian faith in and for particular times and places. This concern for contextuality brings into view the nature and function of culture for the task of theology. The expression of Christian thought has taken shape and has been revised in the context of numerous social and historical settings. It has also developed in the process of

navigating a number of significant 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; and from the developed world to the third world. Currently, theology is grappling with the challenges raised by the transition from a modern to a postmodern cultural milieu. Throughout this ongoing history Christian theology has been shaped by the thought forms and conceptual tools of numerous cultural settings and 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. It also raises the question of the proper conception of the role of culture in the task of constructing theology.

Apart from a few notable exceptions, a near consensus has emerged among theologians today, which says that theology must take culture seriously. Colin Gunton states the point succinctly: “we must acknowledge the fact that all theologies belong in a particular context, and so are, to a degree, limited by the constraints of that context. To that extent, the context is one of the authorities to which the theologian must listen.”⁵⁸ This raises the question as to the proper form this “listening” to context should take. To address this we must first be clear on our understanding of the nature of culture itself. In recent years the notion of culture as traditionally conceived has come under such strident

and thoroughgoing criticism that some thinkers came to believe that the term was so compromised that it should be discarded. While a few favored this radical surgery, most anthropologists agree with James Clifford's grudging acknowledgment that culture "is a deeply compromised idea I cannot yet do without."⁵⁹ Thus, rather than eliminating the concept entirely, the criticisms of the term have led to a postmodern understanding of culture that takes the historical contingencies of human life and society more seriously.

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.⁶⁰ Culture is not an entity standing above or beyond human products and learned mental structures. In short, culture is not a "thing."⁶¹ The older understanding also focused 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."⁶² Rather than viewing cultures as monolithic entities, postmodern anthropologists tend to view cultures as being internally fissured.⁶³ The elevation of difference that typifies postmodern thinking has triggered a heightened awareness of the role of persons in culture formation. 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.⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵ 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.”⁶⁶ 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.”⁶⁷ Culture resides in a set of meaningful forms and symbols that, from the point of view of any particular individual, appear as largely given.⁶⁸ Yet these forms are only meaningful because human minds have the ability to interpret them.⁶⁹ This has led contemporary 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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

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 social-cultural

world of our own creation.⁷² 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.⁷³ 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.”⁷⁴ We inhabit 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 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. The question of the relationship between culture and theology has been implicit throughout the history of Christian theology. However, in the twentieth century the issue has moved to the forefront of theological concerns as the challenges of globalization and pluralism have infused the question with a new sense of urgency. Two approaches that

have gained widespread attention are those of correlation and contextualization. The chief difficulty with both of these methods is their indebtedness to foundationalism. Rather than acknowledging the particularity of every human culture, correlationists are prone to prioritize culture through the identification of some universal experience and fit theology into a set of generalized assumptions. Contextualists, in contrast, often overlook the particularity of every understanding of the Christian message and too readily assume a Christian universal that then functions as the foundation for the construction of theology, even though it will need to be articulated in the language of a particular culture. This is especially evident in models of contextualization that are based on a distinction between the transcultural gospel and its expression through neutral cultural forms.⁷⁵ Yet with few exceptions, most approaches to contextual theology move in the direction of some form of foundationalism that assumes the existence of a pure, transcendent gospel.⁷⁶

Despite the debilitating difficulties these approaches share as a result of their foundationalist assumptions, taken together correlation and contextualization point the way forward. The two models suggest that an appropriate theological method must employ an interactive process that is both correlative and contextual while resisting the tendencies of foundationalism. Theology emerges through an ongoing conversation involving both gospel and culture. While such an interactive model draws from both methods, it stands apart from both in one crucial way. Unlike correlation or contextualization, an interactionist model presupposes neither gospel nor culture as given, preexisting realities that subsequently enter into conversation. Rather, in the interactive process both gospel and culture are viewed as particularized, dynamic realities that inform and are informed by the conversation itself. Understanding gospel and culture in

this way allows us to realize that both our understanding of the gospel and the meaning structures through which people in our society make sense of their lives are dynamic. In such a model, the conversation between gospel and culture should be one of mutual enrichment in which the exchange benefits the church in its ability to address its context as well as the process of theological critique and construction.

We are now in a position to tie together the way in which Scripture and culture function together in the task of theology. Scripture functions as theology's norming norm because it is the instrumentality of the Spirit who speaks in and through the text for the purpose of creating a world that is concretely and particularly centered on the present and future Lordship of Jesus Christ. However, this speaking is always contextual in that it always comes to its hearers within a specific social-historical setting. The ongoing guidance of the Spirit always comes as a specific community of believers, in a specific setting, listens for and hears the voice of the Spirit speaking in and to the particularity of its social-historical context. The specificity of the Spirit's speaking means that the conversation with culture and cultural context is crucial to the theological task. We seek to hear the voice of the Spirit through Scripture, which comes to us in the particularity of the social-historical context in which we live. Consequently, because theology must be in touch with life in the midst of present circumstances, the questions, concerns, and challenges it brings to the Scriptures are not necessarily identical with those of contemporary exegetes or even the ancient writers themselves. Douglas John Hall states that what theology seeks "from its ongoing discourse with the biblical text is determined in large measure by its worldly context," in order that it might address that setting from "the perspective of faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."⁷⁷

In addition to listening for the voice of the Spirit speaking through Scripture, theology must also be attentive to the voice of the Spirit speaking through culture. While Western theology has tended to focus on the church as the sole repository of all truth and the only location in which the Spirit is operative, Scripture appears to suggest a much broader understanding of the Spirit's presence, a presence connected to the Spirit's role as the life-giver. The biblical writers speak of the Spirit's role in creating and sustaining life as well as enabling it to flourish. Because the life-giving Creator Spirit is present in the flourishing of life, the Spirit's voice resounds through many media, including the media of human culture. Because Spirit-induced human flourishing evokes cultural expression, we can anticipate in such expressions traces of the Spirit's creative and sustaining presence. Consequently, theology should be alert to the voice of the Spirit manifest in the artifacts and symbols of human culture. However, it should be added that the speaking of the Spirit through the various media of culture never comes as a speaking against the text. Setting the Spirit's voice in culture against the text is to follow the foundationalist agenda and elevate some dimension of contemporary experience or thought as a criterion for accepting or rejecting aspects of the biblical witness. Darrell Jodock notes this danger: "The problem here is not that one's world view or experience influences one's reading of the text, because that is inescapable. The problem is instead that the text is made to conform to the world view or codified experience and thereby loses its integrity and its ability to challenge and confront our present priorities, including even our most noble aspirations."⁷⁸

Therefore, while being ready to acknowledge the Spirit's voice wherever it may be found, we must still uphold the primacy of the text as theology's norming norm. While

we cannot hear the Spirit speaking through the text except by listening within a particular social-historical setting, the Spirit speaking through Scripture provides the normative context for hearing the Spirit in culture. Having said this, it must be affirmed that the speaking of the Spirit through Scripture and culture do not constitute two different communicative acts, but rather one unified speaking. Consequently, theology must listen for the voice of the Spirit who speaks normatively and universally through Scripture, but also particularly and locally in the variegated circumstances of diverse human cultures. This nonfoundationalist account of the relationship between Scripture and culture serves to secure the reforming principle of the Reformed tradition while affirming the Reformed commitment to theology that is biblically normed and culturally contextual. But what does this mean for the profile of the Reformed theology? Does not such an approach run the risk of sacrificing the distinctive material content of dogmatics from the Reformed perspective in the name of contextuality, innovation, and the formal concern to preserve the reforming principle? These questions bring us to a discussion of the confessional nature of Reformed theology.

Reformed Theology is Confessional Theology

Theology in the Reformed tradition is confessional theology. It is theology done with the intention of confessing the faith in contemporary circumstances and situations resulting in the production of confessional and catechetical documents that provide a historical record of that witness for future generations. It is also theology done in self-conscious engagement and dialogue with these past confessional statements that stand as living and concrete testimonies of the community's reception and proclamation of the

voice of the Spirit. This raises the question as to the status of these past confessional statements and their proper function in the contemporary task of Reformed dogmatics.

Confessions and creeds have long been a part of the Christian tradition and have played an important role in the formulation and construction of theology throughout the history of the church. Certain statements and symbols have become an integral part of the church's life in its various cultural locations. For example, the near universal acceptance by the global Christian community of ecumenical statements such as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed serves to make these "classic" symbols of the faith a vital resource for theology. Gabriel Fackre highlights this aspect of the tradition viewed as an ecumenical consensus inherited from the past: "Found in both official documents and formal statements of the undivided Church, such as the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, the doctrines of the Person of Christ and the trinity, the patterns of affirmation implicit in the worship and working of faith of the church universal, tradition is a weighty resource in Christian theology."⁷⁹ These "classic" statements and symbols of the historical community stand as milestones in the thought and life of the church universal and therefore have a special ongoing significance for the work of theology.

The role of these classic theological formulations is made clearer as we recall the implications of historical Christian confessions of faith for contemporary confession. Throughout the history of the church, Christian believers from successive generations and various social, cultural locations have confessed and witnessed to faith in the God revealed in Christ. In this act they have participated in the faith of the one church as co-confessors with all who have acknowledged the one faith throughout the ages. So also, in confessing the one faith of the church in the present we become the contemporary

embodiment of the legacy of faith that spans the ages and encompasses all the host of faithful believers. Rather than standing alone in this act, we confess our faith in unison with, and in solidarity with, the whole company of the church universal. Hence, although our expression of faith is to be contemporary, in keeping with our task of speaking the biblical message to the age in which we live, it must also place us in continuity with the faith of the one people of God, including both our forebears who have made this confession in ages past and our successors who will do so in the future. When we engage in the task of dogmatics, therefore, we do so conscious that we stand in the context of a community of faith that extends through the centuries and that has engaged in this task before us. Because we are members of this continuous historical community, the theological tradition of the church must be a crucial component in the construction of our contemporary theological statements so that we might maintain our theological and confessional unity with the one church of Jesus Christ.

In addition to ecumenically recognized confessions that are shared by the whole church, such as the Nicene Creed, various ecclesial traditions within the one church have sought to provide comprehensive commentary on the witness of Scripture through the production of catechisms and confessions. These statements intend to witness to the one faith from the perspective of a particular ecclesial and confessional context. As such they serve as particular, local witnesses to the one universal faith proclaimed and witnessed to in Scripture. Since the sixteenth-century, the Reformed tradition, due to its particular understanding of confession, has been especially prolific in the production of confessions and catechisms that bear witness to the faith in the midst of changing social, historical, and cultural circumstances. Among the best known of these from the sixteenth century

are the Scots Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Second Helvetic Confession (1566). In the seventeenth century the Canons of Dort (1619) and the Westminster Confession (1647), along with the Shorter (1647) and Larger (1648) Catechisms, have particularly important standing in the Reformed community. While these sixteenth and seventeenth century symbols are seminal and indispensable, the practice of confessing in the Reformed tradition continues. It continues as biblical scholarship offers more insight into the teaching of Scripture, as the scientific and social disciplines provide more accurate and detailed understandings of the created order and human beings, and as constantly shifting circumstances demand the response of the church as the herald of the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost and broken world and as a living and vibrant witness of its transforming power.

These catechetical and confessional statements arise out of the act of confession, one of the primary and defining activities of the church. In the act of confession the church seeks, in dependence on the Spirit, to bind itself to the living God and the truth and hope of the gospel of reconciliation and redemption. This act of confession, which should be a regular and continual aspect of the life and activity of the church, produces confessions whose purpose is to bear witness to the gospel and promote the ongoing confessional life and activity of the Christian community. In this way confessional statements and formulas function as servants of the gospel in the life of the church. When the church attempts to engage in its appointed tasks apart from the act of confession it runs the risk of losing sight of its relationship to the gospel. This can occur either through the decision to marginalize the confessional heritage of the church and function as though it did not exist by relegating it to the status of a museum piece or through the claim that a

particular confessional statement be viewed as virtually, if not absolutely, infallible. In the first instance the act of confession is severed from its connection to the past operation of the Spirit and so is easily held captive to the cultural, social, and intellectual norms of a particular age leading to the accommodation of the gospel. In the second, an awareness of the ongoing need for confession is blunted as a past confessional formulation, implicitly if not explicitly, is taken to be an adequate confession for all times and places. As John Webster comments, “the creed is a good servant but a bad master: it assists, but cannot replace, the act of confession.” The church cannot bypass the act of confession and yet retain the creed, “for to do so is to convert the event of confession into an achieved formula, graspable without immediate reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Whatever else we may say by way of commending the place of the creed in the life of the church, we must not promote the notion that the creed’s significance is merely statutory.”⁸⁰

A nonfoundationalist understanding of the status and function of creeds and confessions views the confessional heritage of the Reformed tradition as providing a hermeneutical trajectory in which the task of dogmatics is pursued in conversation with the normative witness of Scripture and the contemporary cultural situation. From this perspective, let us now summarize the basic character of church confessions in this confessional hermeneutical trajectory as subordinate and provisional; open-ended; and eschatologically directed. First, the creeds and confessions of the church are subordinate. They are subordinate to God and Scripture as theology’s norming norm. Confessions, creeds, and catechisms are responses to the revelation of God in Scripture and as such are normed norms. However, this should not lead to the conclusion that confessions and

creeds are merely poor, fallible human attempts to bear witness to the truth of the gospel. John Webster reminds us that to say that confessions and creeds are conditional or provisional is “worlds apart from the idea that the creed is merely one not-very-good attempt at pinning down a God whom we cannot really know.”⁸¹ To speak of the provisionality of confessions is not to be taken as an expression of skepticism or an attempt to undermine genuine confession but is simply a sober consequence of the fact that finite and sinful human beings cannot fully comprehend the revelation of God and an acknowledgement of the need for the ongoing reformation of the church’s thought and speech. However, such a reforming theology is not a matter of promoting the instability “of having everything open to revision all the time; such an attitude risks denying the reality of the gift of the Spirit to the church. All we are saying is that the creed is not God’s Word, but ours; it is made, not begotten.”⁸²

The provisional, subordinate nature of confessional statements stands as a challenge to those who ascribe binding authority to them. Such an approach runs the risk of transforming past creeds into *de facto* substitutes for Scripture. Furthermore, in the interest of securing an absolute and final authority in the church, this approach can actually hinder such a community from hearing the voice of the Spirit speaking in new ways through the biblical text. A helpful distinction may be drawn between “open” and “closed” confessional traditions. Closed confessional traditions hold a particular statement of beliefs to be adequate for all times and places. In contrast, the Reformed approach to confession is “open.” An open confessional tradition, in the words of Jack Stotts, “anticipates that what has been confessed in a formally adopted confession takes its place in a confessional lineup, preceded by statements from the past and expectant of

more to come as times and circumstances change.”⁸³ Such an approach also understands its obligation to develop and adopt new confessions in accordance with shifting circumstances. Although such confessions are “extraordinarily important” for the integrity, identity, and faithfulness of the church, “they are also acknowledged to be relative to particular times and places.”⁸⁴

To understand the confessional heritage of the church as providing a hermeneutical trajectory is also to acknowledge the importance of confessions without elevating them to a position of final authority because of the ongoing life of the church as it moves toward its eschatological consummation. Throughout the course of the ebb and flow of the history of the church the Spirit is at work completing the divine program and bringing the people of God as a community into a fuller comprehension of the implications of the gospel. This activity of the Spirit will reach consummation only in the eschatological future. Until then the church must grapple with the meaning and implications of the biblical message for its context as it listens patiently and expectantly for the voice of the Spirit speaking afresh through Scripture and yet in continuity with the Spirit-guided trajectory of the tradition and confessional heritage of the church. Gabriel Fackre describes the on-going theological dynamic that characterizes the life of the church and contributes to the development of church tradition prior to the consummation: “The circle of tradition is not closed, for the Spirit’s ecclesial Work is not done. Traditional doctrine develops as Christ and the gospel are viewed in ever fresh perspective. Old formulations are corrected, and what is passed on is enriched. The open-endedness, however, does not overthrow the ancient landmarks. As tradition is a gift of the Spirit, its trajectory moves in the right direction, although it has not arrived at its

destination.”⁸⁵ In short, at the heart of tradition and confession is the eschatological directedness of the Spirit’s work in guiding the community of faith into the truth, purposes, and intentions of God that comprise a divinely-given *telos* that is ultimately realized only at the consummation. The eschatological-directedness of the community as a whole gives a similar character to the theological reflection that becomes church dogmatics.

Developing a practice that expresses the approach to confession, confessions, and confessional theology described here is difficult and resistant to hard and fast legislation. This accounts for the tendency of the church toward either libertinism or authoritarianism with respect to its confessional heritage. As John Webster concludes, these common options “are not open to a church with any sense for the gospel. What is required more than anything else is the discernment and prudence that are the gifts of the Spirit and so matters not of policy but of prayer.”⁸⁶ Yet in spite its difficulty, it is precisely this sort of confessional theology that is crucial to the proclamation of the gospel and the proper practice of dogmatics in the Reformed tradition. The reforming principle must be practiced and maintained as the only proper response to the material convictions of the Reformed faith regarding the primacy and ultimate authority of God in the church and all creation and the finitude and sinfulness of created and depraved human beings. Yet this reforming principle must not be viewed as providing license for constructive theology to proceed apart from serious engagement with the confessional heritage of the church. Such a procedure effectively denies the manifestation and ministry of the Spirit promised to the church throughout the ages and thereby the authority of God. The task of Reformed confessional criticism, a proper and necessary component of the reforming principle,

must be done only through the careful, patient, respectful, and loving attention to the tradition and its confessions. Likewise, the task of appropriating the biblical message for constructive theological purposes in the contemporary, postmodern situation must be done in constant conversation with the confessional heritage of the tradition. Only in this manner will Reformed dogmatics be able to bear its distinctive formal and material witness to the church and the world as theology Reformed and reforming according to the Word of God.

Notes

¹This essay first appeared in *The Westminster Theological Journal* 65:1 (Spring, 2003): 1-26.

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³Michael Welker, “Travail and Mission: Theology Reformed according to God’s Word at the Beginning of the Third Millennium,” in Willis and Welker, eds., *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*, 137.

⁴Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 1.

⁵Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 3.

⁶Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998).

⁷For a more detailed critique of Reymond’s work, see Robert Letham, “Review of *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* by Robert L. Reymond,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 62:2 (Fall, 2000): 314-319.

⁸Letham, “Review of Reymond,” 319.

⁹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley, second ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 16.

¹⁰Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), ix-x.

¹¹Richard John Neuhaus, “A Voice in the Relativistic Wilderness,” *Christianity Today* (February 7, 1994): 34.

¹²Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), ix.

¹³Mark McLeod, “Making God Dance: Postmodern Theorizing and the Christian College,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 21/3 (March, 1992), 281.

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- ¹⁴Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 1.
- ¹⁵Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).
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- ¹⁸Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- ¹⁹Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
- ²⁰Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
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- ²²Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).
- ²³George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).
- ²⁴On the implications for theology of Wittgenstein's later writings, see especially the account of Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, second ed. (London: SPCK, 1997).
- ²⁵Dan R. Stiver, "The Uneasy Alliance between Evangelicalism and Postmodernism: A Reply to Anthony Thiselton," in David Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Wheaton: Bridge Point, 1995), 242.
- ²⁶Stiver, "The Uneasy Alliance," 243.
- ²⁷Stiver, "The Uneasy Alliance," 243.
- ²⁸Diogenes Allen, "The End of the Modern World," *Christian Scholar's Review* 22/4 (June, 1993), 341.

²⁹Terrence W. Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

³⁰Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

³¹For a helpful discussion of this rethinking of rationality, see J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

³²See, for example, Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

³³Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

³⁴For a more detailed description of foundationalism, see W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 77-104.

³⁵On this liberal-conservative debate concerning the proper foundation for theology, see Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 11-35.

³⁶John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 37.

³⁷Merold Westphal, "A Reader's Guide to 'Reformed Epistemology,'" *Perspectives* 7/9 (November 1992): 10-11.

³⁸J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, "Tradition and the Task of Theology," *Theology Today* 55/2 (July 1998): 216.

³⁹Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 52.

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