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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

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Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics  
*Scripture, Culture, and the  
Local Character of Theology*



*John R. Franke*

Spirituality as a term is necessarily more synthetic than analytic, since the Bible knows nothing of fragmentation of the divine-human relationship into sacred and secular, religious and social, etc. Contemporary usage of the term in Protestant circles seeks to integrate theological disciplines without denying their importance or utility.

T. R. ALBIN

*F*eed prayers on fasting.

TERTULLIAN

In the first two articles in this series we examined the character of Reformed dogmatics as a reforming enterprise; suggested that aspects of postmodern thought could be fruitfully appropriated in the task of Reformed dogmatics; and sketched an approach to divine self-revelation that affirms the contingencies and limitations of the human situation suggested by the linguistic and nonfoundationalist turns in postmodern thought. In this article and the next, we will turn our attention to the articulation of this postmodern, nonfoundationalist approach to dogmatics 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. In this article we will focus on the canonical and contextual aspects of Reformed theology and its local character while the next article will consider the relationship between Scripture and tradition and its confessional character.

### 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."<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup>

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."<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> 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. 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."<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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.

In addressing the nature of culture let us briefly remind ourselves of some of the observations from the first article in the series. 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. Culture is not an entity standing above or beyond human products and learned mental structures. Rather than viewing cultures as monolithic entities, postmodern anthropologists tend to view cultures as being internally fissured. The elevation of difference that typifies postmodern thinking has triggered a heightened awareness of the role of persons in culture formation in which they become active creators of culture through the process of social interaction. One of the most significant theorists in this construal of culture is Clifford Geertz, who suggested that cultures constitute "webs of significance" that people spin and in which they are then suspended.<sup>13</sup> He 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."<sup>14</sup>

From this perspective, culture resides in a set of meaningful forms and symbols that, from the point of view of any particular individual, appear as largely given.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as Ulf Hannerz points out, these forms are only meaningful because human minds have the ability to interpret them.<sup>16</sup> He maintains that culture involves the interplay between three aspects of social engagement: first, the ways in which people within a particular social unity share a way of thinking, involving the host of shared mental entities and processes, concepts and values, and meanings; second, the shared external forms of a particular people, the vehicles through which shared thought patterns and meanings are made public and hence accessible to the senses; and third, the ways in which cultural meanings and their external forms are spread over a population and its social relationships.<sup>17</sup> Terming his approach "interactionist," Hannerz argues that through their contacts with one another, people shape social structures. Societies and cultures, in turn,

emerge and cohere "as results of the accumulation and aggregations of these activities."<sup>18</sup>

This has led to the examination of the interplay between cultural artifacts and human interpretation as the context in which meaning is generated and the suggestion that meanings are created by the users of signs as opposed to the belief that meaning lies in signs themselves or in the relations between signs.<sup>19</sup> However, this does not mean that individuals simply discover or make up cultural meaning and significance on their own since even the mental structures by which they interpret the world are developed through explicit teaching and implicit observation of others. In this framework, cultural meanings are both psychological states and social constructions.<sup>20</sup> One of the primary concerns in this process lies in understanding the creation of cultural meaning as connected to world construction and identity formation. Social constructionists maintain that we live not in a prefabricated, given world but rather in a social-cultural world created through the process of our own social interactions. The purpose of this process is the attempt to impose some semblance of order and meaning on our numerous and diverse experiences, and in the development of such an interpretive framework we are dependent on the cultural contexts in which we are situated. Paul Heibert concludes that culture is comprised of "systems of shared concepts by which people carve up their worlds, of beliefs by which they organize these concepts into rational schemes, and of values by which they set their goals and judge their actions."<sup>21</sup>

Thus, culture can be viewed as the model that provides people in a particular society with a description and an explanation of reality. However, in the light of the fragmentation that characterizes society, postmodern anthropologists are less inclined to speak about grand, overarching cultural forms. Instead, they highlight smaller and seemingly simpler cultural units, together with the connections among them as the cultural models that bring persons together into social groups. By means of these shared cultural models persons construct and internalize cultural meanings. In this context,

people may be said to share a culture to the extent that they have similar experiences, those that follow the same general patterns as those of other participants and members of the society, mediated by shared assumptions and learned practices, which lead them to the development of a set of similar meaning-creating cultural models. The models provide the tools for ongoing identity formation, in that they comprise the framework for reconstructing memories of past events, for imparting meaning to ongoing experience and for devising expectations for the future.<sup>22</sup> Taken together, these socially constructed cultural models constitute the world a person inhabits.

While these constructed worlds give the appearance of being given universal and objective realities, they actually form, in the words of David Morgan, "an unstable edifice that generations constantly labor to build, raze, rebuild, and redesign."<sup>23</sup> From this perspective we conclude that 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. Thus, 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. This human situatedness raises the question of the interaction between Christian faith and various manifestations of culture. What difference does culture make to the ways in which we read and understand the Bible? How does culture influence our understanding and expression of Christian faith? It

is to these sorts of perennial questions that we now turn our attention.

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 a transcultural and universally definable gospel and its expression through neutral cultural forms.<sup>24</sup> Yet with few exceptions, most approaches to what has been called contextual theology move in the direction of some form of foundationalism that assumes the existence of a pure, transcendent gospel.<sup>25</sup>

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.

#### THE LOCAL CHARACTER OF THEOLOGY

We are now in a position to tie together the way in which Scripture and culture relate 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."<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

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 leads to the conclusion that all theology is local in that all attempts at doing theology will be influenced by the particular thought forms and practices that shape the social context from which it emerges and will bear the distinctive marks of that setting.<sup>28</sup>

Our awareness of the local character of theology raises a challenge for the practice of an appropriately catholic theology, the attempt to teach and bear witness to the one faith of the whole church. How do we do theology that is not accommodated to our own cultural assumptions and aspirations? Lesslie Newbigin, an important and influential missionary and ecumenical theologian, has addressed this question by observing that while the ultimate commitment of the Christian theologian is to the biblical story, such a person is also a participant in a particular social setting whose whole way of thinking is shaped by the cultural model of that society in ways that are both conscious and unconscious. These cultural models cannot be absolutized without impairing the ability to properly discern the teachings and implications of the biblical narrative. Yet as participants in a particular culture we are not able to see many of the numerous ways in which we take for granted and absolutize our own socially constructed cultural model. Given this state of affairs, Newbigin maintains that the unending task of theology must be to be wholly open to the biblical narrative in such a way that the assumptions and aspirations of a culture are viewed in its light in order to find ways of expressing the biblical story in terms which make use of particular cultural models without being controlled by them. He concludes with the assertion that this can only be done if Christian theologians are "continuously

open to the witness of Christians in other cultures who are seeking to practice the same kind of theology."<sup>29</sup>

This nonfoundationalist and interactionist account of the relationship between Scripture and culture affirms the local character of theology and 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 lead to a consideration of the relationship between Scripture and tradition and the confessional character of Reformed theology and we will address these concerns in the final article of this series.

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#### Notes

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