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Articles

Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics: Indirect Revelation and the Knowledge of God



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In the first article in this series we examined the character of Reformed dogmatics as a reforming enterprise committed to the continual reformation of theology according to the Word of God. The purpose of this reforming venture is that of bearing faithful witness to the truth of the gospel in the context of an ever-changing world characterized by a variety of cultural settings. This concern is captured in the Latin slogan *theologia reformata et semper reformanda*. Reformed theology is always reforming. We also suggested that postmodern thought could be properly and usefully appropriated for the task of Christian dogmatics from the perspective of the Reformed tradition. After providing a broad description of the postmodern intellectual situation we considered two aspects of postmodern thought that are of particular importance for Christian faith, the linguistic turn and the nonfoundationalist turn, pointing out their implications concerning the situated and contextual nature of all human interpretive activity. We concluded that one of the major questions arising from the linguistic and nonfoundationalist turns in postmodern thought concerns the nature of revelation. If all thought is situated and contextual, what does this mean for Christian belief in the ultimate authority of divine revelation? How do we account for situatedness and contextuality in our understanding and

articulation of revelation? And what are the implications of these concerns for the discipline of Christian theology? In seeking to address these questions we must first turn our attention to Christology since the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is the particular paradigm by which all Christian conceptions of revelation must be measured.

CHRISTOLOGY

The classical construction of ecumenical and orthodox Christology is the definition provided by the council of Chalcedon. The guiding purpose behind the Chalcedonian formulation is soteriological in that the saving work of Christ shapes its articulation of Christ's person. In the same way, its definition of the person of Christ serves as the indispensable premise of Christ's saving work. The person and work of Christ are inextricably related. A high view of Christ's person hardly seems necessary apart from an equally high view of his work, while a high view of his work is incoherent and difficult to sustain apart from an appropriately high view of his person.

The soteriological concern also shapes the way in which the aspects of Christ's nature, the divine and the human, are defined and related. On this point George Hunsinger notes that the minimalism of the Chalcedonian formulation has often not been fully appreciated. "Chalcedonian Christology does not isolate a point on a line that one either occupies or not. It demarcates a region in which there is more than one place to take up residence."¹ This region is circumscribed by certain distinct boundaries in that Jesus Christ is understood as "one person" in "two natures" meaning that both his deity and humanity are viewed as internal to his person. Jesus is not simply a human being with a special relationship with God or a divine being in who is not really human, but rather a single person who is complete and "perfect" in both deity and humanity.² No definition is provided of either Christ's deity or his humanity except to say that they are present in a way that is unabridged, perfect, and complete. Thus, while additional and further construals and articulations of Christ's deity and humanity are not excluded by the formulation, they

are not supplied. From the perspective of Chalcedon any conception of the two natures of Christ that does not meet this basic and minimal standard will be inadequate because it will not provide a sufficient understanding of the saving work of Christ. Apart from an understanding of Christ's two natures as complete in themselves, no fully adequate and coherent account of his saving work can be provided.

In addition to its soteriological concerns, Hunsinger observes that the minimalism of the Chalcedonian formulation also points to its significance as a hermeneutical construct.

It attempts to articulate the deep structure of the New Testament in its witness to the person of Christ. It arises from an ecclesial reading of the New Testament, taken as a whole, and then leads back to it again. It offers a framework for reading to guide the church as it interprets the multifaceted depiction of Jesus Christ contained in the New Testament.

Thus, the minimalism of Chalcedon is both constitutive and regulative. It is constitutive with respect to Christ's person in the work of salvation and regulative for the Church with respect to its interpretation of Scripture. As a hermeneutical construct, Chalcedon provides "no more and no less than a set of spectacles for bringing the central witness of the New Testament into focus" through the assertion that the truth of Christ's full deity does not negate the reality that he was also fully human, and that just because he was fully human does not mean that he was not fully divine. "When the New Testament depicts Jesus in his divine power, status, and authority, it presupposes his humanity; and when it depicts him in his human finitude, weakness, and mortality, it presupposes his deity. No interpretation will be adequate which asserts the one at the expense of the other."³

This Chalcedonian interpretation is guided not only by a minimalist definition of Christ's two natures in themselves but also by a particular construal of the way in which they are related in one and the same person. Chalcedon maintains

that Christ's two natures relate without "confusion" or "change" and without "division" or "separation" meaning that neither the deity nor the humanity of Jesus surrendered their defining characteristics in their convergence to form an indissoluble unity in the person of Christ.⁴ As with the definition of the two natures themselves, the Chalcedonian formulations are minimalist and open-ended. They are negatively, rather than positively, phrased such that any formulations which affirm or imply confusion, change, division, or separation are deemed unacceptable, while space is allowed for positive constructions within the framework of the definition. Nothing more is affirmed concerning the way in which Christ's two natures are related to each other except to rule out options that are untenable with an orthodox confession of Christ's person.

As Hunsinger concludes, each nature retains "its integrity while engaging the other in the closest of communions. The relation of Christ's two natures, as stated by Chalcedon, suggests an abiding mystery of their unity-in-distinction and distinction-in-unity."⁵ Therefore, Christology that is faithful to the Chalcedonian formulation will view Jesus Christ as one person in two natures who is at one and the same time complete and perfect in deity as well as in humanity in such a way that these two natures relate without confusion or change and also without division or separation. With this brief sketch of Chalcedonian Christology in mind, we now turn our attention to the Christian teaching concerning revelation and seek to provide a second-order theological construction of the doctrine that is in continuity with ecumenically orthodox Christian faith while at the same time addressing the particular challenges posed by postmodern thought.

INDIRECT REVELATION

In seeking to articulate a construal of revelation in the context of postmodern thought and orthodox faith, we return to our previous discussion of the linguistic turn and the assertion that rather than inhabiting a prefabricated, given world, we live in linguistically construed social-cultural world of our

own creation.⁶ This notion of the linguistically and socially constructed nature of the world raises a concern for Christian theology and the doctrine of revelation due to the corresponding conclusion of the inadequacy of human language to provide immediate access to ultimate reality. This "crisis of representation" raises the question of God and the very possibility of theology for many postmodern thinkers. It poses a challenge for Christian thought to provide a theological account of the meaningfulness of language in general and to address specifically the question concerning the way in which the Word of God comes to expression in human words. If we are immersed and imbedded in language, how can we speak of truth beyond our linguistic contexts? Some have suggested that the Christian position on revelation simply negates postmodern thought in that revelation must entail the notion that God "breaks through" language in order to provide access to "ultimate reality."⁷ Others, in seeking to affirm the potential implications of postmodern thought, have maintained that what finite human beings are really able to "know" about God is only his fundamental hiddenness and incomprehensibility.⁸ How might we address the challenge posed by the linguistic turn in postmodern thought?

We begin by asserting that God does not break through language and situatedness, but rather enters into the linguistic setting and uses language in the act of revelation as a means of accommodation to the situation and situatedness of human beings. This position arises out of theological commitments that are both Christian and Reformed. The Church has long maintained the distinction between finite human knowledge and divine knowledge. Even revelation does not provide human beings with a knowledge that exactly corresponds to that of God. The infinite qualitative distinction between God and human beings suggests the accommodated character of all human knowledge of God. For John Calvin, this means that in the process of revelation God "adjusts" and "descends" to the capacities of human beings in order to reveal the infinite mysteries of divine reality, which by their very nature are beyond the capabilities of human creatures to

grasp due to the limitations that arise from their finite and fallen character.⁹

The natural limitations of human beings with respect to the knowledge of God made known in the process of revelation extend not only to the cognitive and imaginative faculties but also to the creaturely mediums by which revelation is communicated. In other words, the very means used by God in revelation, the mediums of human nature, language and speech, bear the inherent limitations of their creaturely character in spite of the use God makes of them as the bearers of revelation. In Chalcedonian Christology, the divine and human natures of Christ remain distinct and unimpaired even after their union in Jesus of Nazareth. Reformed theological formulations of Christology consistently maintained that one of the implications of the Chalcedonian definition was the denial of the "divinization" of the human nature of Christ in spite of its relationship to the divine nature. With respect to the revelation of God in Christ, this means that the creaturely medium of revelation, in this case the human nature of Christ, is not divinized through union with the divine nature but remains subject to the limitations and contingencies of its creaturely character. Yet in spite of these limitations, God is truly revealed through the appointed creaturely medium.

This dynamic is captured in the dialectic of veiling and unveiling that animates the theology of Karl Barth and his notion of "indirect identity" with respect to the doctrine of revelation. This means that in his self-revelation God makes himself to be indirectly identical with the creaturely medium of that revelation. Such revelation is *indirect* because God's use of the creaturely medium entails no "divinization" of the medium; and yet at the same time God is indirectly *identical* with the creaturely medium in that God chooses to truly *reveal* himself through such mediums. This is the dialectic of veiling and unveiling which maintains that God unveils (reveals) himself in and through creaturely veils, and that these veils, although they be used of God for the purposes of unveiling himself, remain veils. Further, the self-revelation of God means that the whole of God, complete and entire, and

not simply a part, is made known in revelation, but nevertheless remains hidden within the veil of the creaturely medium through which he chooses to unveil himself. Hence, nothing of God is known directly by natural human perception.

In Christological terms, as Bruce McCormack observes, this means that the process by which God takes on human nature and becomes the subject of a human life in human history entails no impartation or communication of divine attributes and perfections to that human nature. This in turn means that

revelation is not made a predicate of the human nature of Jesus; revelation may not be read directly "off the face of Jesus." And yet, it remains true that God (complete, whole, and entire) is the Subject of this human life. God, without ceasing to be God, becomes human and lives a human life, suffers and dies.¹⁰

The consequence of this notion of indirect revelation is that it remains hidden to outward, normal, or "natural" human perception and requires that human beings be given "the eyes and ears of faith" in order to perceive the unveiling of God that remains hidden in the creaturely veil. In this conception revelation has both an objective moment, when God reveals himself through the veil of a creaturely medium, and a subjective moment, when God gives human beings the faith to understand what is hidden in the veil. In this instance, the objective moment is Christological while the subjective moment is pneumatological.

Another entailment of this position is its affirmation of the contextual character of revelation. Since the creaturely mediums God employs in revelation are not divinized, they remain subject to their historically and culturally conditioned character. It simply needs to be added that what is true of the human nature of Jesus Christ with respect to divinization is also true of the words of the prophets and apostles in canonical Scripture. The use that God makes of the creaturely medium of human language in the inspiration and witness of Scripture does not entail its divinization. Language, like the

human nature of Jesus, remains subject to the historical, social, and cultural limitations and contingencies inherent in its creaturely character. Yet, this does not in any way negate the reality of biblical inspiration as a gracious act of the Holy Spirit or detract from the authority of Scripture. It simply means that in approaching the text of Scripture, we do so with an understanding of the infinite wisdom and majesty of God, the limitations of our finite and fallen nature, the economy of God in revelation, and a corresponding awareness of our complete and ongoing epistemic dependence on God for our knowledge of God.

In the framework of indirect identity, we are able to affirm God's use of language in the act of revelation without denying our theological and existential awareness of its inherent limitations and contingencies as a contextually-situated creaturely medium. It should be added that Barth secures the divine primacy in God's epistemic relations with human beings by maintaining the "actualistic" character of revelation. In other words, revelation in this conception is not simply a past event that requires nothing further from God. This would imply that God had ceased to act and become directly identical with the medium of revelation. If this were the case, the epistemic relationship between God and human beings would be static rather than dynamic, with the result that human beings would be able to move from a position of epistemic dependency to one of epistemic mastery. Instead, God always remains indirectly identical with the creaturely mediums of revelation, thus requiring continual divine action in the knowing process and securing the ongoing epistemic dependency of human beings with respect to the knowledge of God.¹¹

NONFOUNDATIONAL THEOLOGY

This epistemic dependency that is the natural outworking of indirect revelation points to the nonfoundational character of theological epistemology. For Barth, theology is, humanly speaking, an impossibility. Where it nevertheless becomes possible in spite of its impossibility from the human side, it

does so only as a divine possibility. An approach to theology that takes these insights on board will be one that finds its ongoing basis in the dialectic of the divine veiling and unveiling in revelation. For Barth, this construal of revelation demands a theology that takes seriously the ongoing reality of divine action not only on the level of the theological epistemology it presupposes but also on the level of the theological method it employs. Apart from this, theology is reduced to something that is humanly achievable and subject to human manipulation and control in which it becomes "a regular, bourgeois science alongside all the other sciences."¹²

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."¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.

Nonfoundationalist theology also points to the contextual character of the discipline. The sociology of knowledge reminds us that all forms of thought are embedded in social conditions, and while this does not mean that those conditions unilaterally determine them, it does point to their fundamental situatedness. It is not the intent of theology simply to set forth, amplify, refine and defend a timelessly-fixed

orthodoxy. Instead, theology is formulated in the context of the community of faith and seeks to describe the nature of faith, the God to whom faith is directed, and the implications of the Christian faith commitment in the context of the specific historical and cultural setting in which it is lived. Because theology draws from contemporary thought-forms in theological reflection, the categories it uses are culturally and historically conditioned. Moreover, because the context into which the Church speaks the message of the gospel is constantly changing, the task of theology in assisting the Church in the formulation and application of its faith commitments in the varied and shifting context of human life and thought never comes to an end. As Garrett Green states:

Like all interpretive activity, theology will therefore be historically and culturally grounded, not speaking from some neutral vantage point but in and for its human context. One corollary is that the theological task will never be completed this side of the Eschaton, since human beings are by nature historical and changing.¹⁵

Thus, the contextual and ongoing task of theology is best characterized by the metaphor of pilgrimage.

The contextual nature of all human thought suggests the notion of theology as a "second-order" discipline and highlights its character as an interpretive enterprise. As such, the doctrinal and theological formulations of theologians are viewed as the products of human reflection on the primary stories, teachings, symbols, and practices of the Christian community and therefore must be sharply distinguished from these "first-order" commitments of the Christian faith. For example, theological constructions and doctrines are always subservient to the content of Scripture and therefore must be held more lightly. In other words, theology is a metadiscourse on the first-order language of the Christian story narrated and expounded in Scripture. The content of this theological metadiscourse should always be viewed as a second-order, interpretive venture, subject to further clarification, insight, and correction.

The adoption of a nonfoundationalist approach to theological method has raised concerns for many in the 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.¹⁶ 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 the world, albeit always in accordance with the normative witness to divine self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and canonical Scripture.

Put another way, nonfoundationalist theology means the end of foundationalism but not "foundations." However, these "foundations" are not "given" to human beings. As 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."¹⁷ 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. On this basis Barth concludes:

The focal point and foundation themselves determine that in dogmatics strictly speaking there are no comprehensive views, no final conclusions and results. There is only the investigation and teaching which take place in the act of dogmatic work and which, strictly speaking, must continually begin again at the beginning in every point. The best and most significant thing that is done in this matter is that again and again we are directed to look back to the center and foundation of it all.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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.²⁰

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 theological framework for the maintenance of the reforming principle. In the last two articles in this series we will turn our attention to the articulation of this postmodern, nonfoundationalist approach to theology as it might be situated in the context of the Reformed confessional tradition. In the next article we will consider the function of Scripture in the task of dogmatics and its relationship to culture and the local character of theology.

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Notes

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