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Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics:
*Scripture, Tradition, and the
Confessional Character of Theology*



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In the previous article we suggested that Scripture is authoritative because it is the vehicle through which the Spirit speaks and the instrumentality of the Spirit in the process of world creation. Further, we have maintained that the Spirit's speaking through Scripture is always a contextual speaking that is addressed to particular social contexts and historical situations. Hence, Scripture, which functions as theology's norming norm, is always in conversation with culture, which functions as theology's embedding context. In this way the Spirit continually speaks to the believing community in its present situation through the witness of Scripture to the paradigmatic events of God's revelation in Jesus Christ as a means of providing ongoing guidance for the church as it grapples with constantly changing circumstances. This raises implicitly the question of the role of the Christian tradition, as the historical witness to the speaking of the Spirit, in the task of contemporary theological construction. We also maintained that a 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 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 relationship between Scripture and tradition and an articulation of the confessional character of Reformed theology.

SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

Addressing this question leads us to the centuries old debate between Roman Catholics and Protestants concerning the relationship between Scripture and tradition. While recent conversations between Catholics and Protestants about the relationship between Scripture and tradition have started to close the breach of the sixteenth century, significant differences still remain.¹ At the heart of the discussion lies the question of primacy, which has priority, Scripture or the church and its tradition? This fundamental difference still animates contemporary dialogues between Catholics and Protestants. However, posing the question in this manner is ultimately unhelpful in that it rests on foundationalist understandings of the derivation of knowledge. Shifting to a nonfoundationalist conception can assist in moving the discussion beyond this impasse.

As we have already indicated, the close connection that the Reformers sought to maintain between Word and Spirit means that the authority of Scripture is ultimately derived from the authority of the Spirit who speaks in and through the text. This Reformation understanding of the relationship between Word and Spirit suggests the possibility of a parallel connection between the Spirit and tradition. The pathway to such an understanding, however, proceeds indirectly, through ecclesiology. The same Spirit whose work accounts for the formation of the Christian community also guides that community in the production and authorization of the biblical texts. This characterization of the role of the Spirit points toward an appropriate pneumatological-ecclesiological understanding of tradition. Crucial in the development of such an understanding is the observation of Catholic theologian Avery Dulles, who speaks about the process of "traditioning," which began before the

composition of the inspired books and continues without interruption through the ages.² This stands as a reminder that the community precedes the production of the scriptural texts. In a certain sense, the faith community was responsible for both the content of the biblical books and for the identification of particular texts for inclusion in an authoritative canon to which the community has chosen to make itself accountable. Apart from the Christian community, the texts would not have taken their particular and distinctive shape. Apart from the authority of the Christian community, there would be no canon of authorized texts. In short, apart from the Christian community the Christian Bible would not exist.

Viewed from the historical perspective, the Bible is the product of the community of faith that produced it. The compilation of Scripture occurred within the context of the faith community, and the biblical documents represent the self-understanding of the community in which they were developed. As Paul Achtemeier notes, the "major significance of the Bible is not that it is a book, but rather that it reflects the life of the community of Israel and the primitive church, as those communities sought to come to terms with the central reality that God was present with them in ways that regularly outran their ability to understand or cope."³ The Scriptures witness to the claim that they are the final written deposit of a trajectory or a traditioning that incorporates a number of varied elements in their composition, including oral tradition and other source documents. The community of faith recognized these writings as authoritative materials, and these materials in turn were interpreted and reapplied to the various contemporary situations. Under the guidance of the Spirit, the community engaged in the task of preserving the canonical documents for the sake of the community's continuity. These writings contain the literary witness to the events that had given shape to the community, the prophetic interpretation of those events, and the various context-sensitive instructions regarding the implications of these events to the community's ongoing life.

That same faith community has corporately confessed the Spirit-inspired character of the canonical texts as a distinctive

collection of documents to which it makes itself accountable.⁴ Awareness of the role of the community in the production of the writings of Scripture, that is, to the process of traditioning present already within the biblical era, leads to a broader concept of inspiration. While inspiration includes the composition of particular writings produced by individuals, it also incorporates the work of the triune God in leading the people of the Hebrew and early Christian communities to participate in the process of bringing Scripture into being. By extension, the direction of the Spirit permeated the entire process that climaxed in the coming together of the canon as the book of the Christian community. Thus, although the church precedes Scripture chronologically and is responsible for its formation, it has nevertheless, by its own corporate affirmation in the establishment of the canon, made itself accountable to Scripture as the norming norm for its life, faith, and practice. In this sense, the text produces the community.

What unifies this relationship between Scripture and communal tradition of the church is the work of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who stands behind both the development and formation of the community as well as the production of the biblical documents and the coming together of the Bible into a single Canon as that community's authoritative texts. The community found these texts to be the vehicle through which the Spirit of God addressed them. The illuminating work of the Spirit brought forth these writings from the context of the community in accordance with the witness of that community. This work of illumination has not ceased with the closing of the Canon. Rather, it continues as the Spirit attunes the contemporary community of faith to understand Scripture and apply it afresh to its own context in accordance with the intentions of the Spirit.

The contemporary process of illumination parallels that experienced by the ancient faith communities insofar as the Bible contains materials that represent the appropriation by the community of the writings and oral traditions of their heritage, some of which are rejected as being contrary to the established trajectory of the community. Hence, the Scriptures

contain sharp critique and condemnation of some of the attitudes and actions of the ancient faith communities. At the same time, however, there is also a significant difference between the experience of the ancient faith communities and our relationship to Scripture. The people of Israel and the early Christian communities engaged in the interpretive task within the process of the formation of the Canon. After the closure of the Canon, the Christian community receives the illumination of the Spirit speaking through canonical Scripture. Thus, in terms of the basic character of the relationship between Scripture and the tradition of the church, canonical Scripture is on the one hand constitutive of the church, providing the primary narratives around which the life and faith of the Christian community is shaped and formed, and on the other hand is itself derived from that community and its authority. In the divine economy Scripture and tradition are in this manner inseparably bound together through the work of the Spirit.

For this reason, to suggest that the Protestant slogan *sola scriptura* implies an authority apart from the tradition of the church, its creeds, teachings and liturgy is to transform the formula into an oxymoron.⁵ Separating Scripture and church in such a manner was certainly not the intention of the Reformers.⁶ Indeed, historian Heiko Oberman contends that the issue of the Reformation was not Scripture or tradition but rather the struggle between two differing concepts of tradition.⁷ Commenting on the role of the community in the process that led to the production and identification of Scripture, Achtemeier notes:

If it is true, therefore, that the church, by its production of Scripture, created materials which stood over it in judgment and admonition, it is also true that Scripture would not have existed save for the community and its faith out of which Scripture grew. That means that church and Scripture are joint effects of the working out of the event of Christ.⁸

This "working out" is carried on under the guidance and illumination of the Spirit. In this conception, Scripture and

tradition function together as distinguishable but inseparable aspects of the Spirit's work in guiding and directing the church in its mission to serve the world as the people of God in the contemporary setting. From the perspective of this general account of the relationship between Scripture and tradition, we now turn our attention to the ways in which this understanding is worked out in the context of the Reformed theological tradition and Reformed dogmatics.

THE CONFSSIONAL CHARACTER OF REFORMED 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.⁹

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, and 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.¹⁰

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.”¹¹ 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.”¹²

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.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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-directness 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."¹⁶ 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.

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Notes

1. For a helpful summary of these conversations and developments, see Avery Dulles, "Scripture: Recent Protestant and Catholic Views," in *The Authoritative Word*, edited by Donald McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 250.
2. Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 96.
3. Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 92.
4. Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 19.
5. Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 28.
6. On the relationship between Scripture and tradition in the Reformation, see, D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 173-204.
7. Heiko A. Oberman, "Quo Vadis— Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani Generis," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 (1963): 225-55.
8. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, 116.
9. Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine*, 18.
10. John Webster, "Confession and Confessions," in Christopher R. Seitz, editor, *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 120.
11. Webster, "Confession and Confessions," 129.
12. Webster, "Confession and Confessions," 129.
13. Jack L. Stotts, "Introduction: Confessing after Barmen" in Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, translated by John Hoffmeyer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 11.
14. Stotts, "Confessing after Barmen," 11.
15. Fackre, *The Christian Story*, 18-19.
16. Webster, "Confession and Confessions," 131.