Preaching and the Question of Reformed Theology

John S. McClure and Burton Cooper
Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

Presbyterian preachers and preachers in other denominations that claim a Reformed heritage are asking a question which comes in three variants: What is Reformed theology? What is the Reformed tradition? What is the Reformed perspective? The way that a preacher answers this question will have significant homiletical implications. We shall speak to this question provocatively and not definitively, making several observations that are more in the way of being a prolegomenon to the discussion than an answer to the questions; though we will not completely refrain from the latter.

Observation 1: The Plurality and Ambiguity of Traditions

The kind of question we are asking - a question which concerns the character and spirit of a heritage - is of the type which evokes a multiplicity of legitimate answers, some of which may sharply conflict with others. The problem is not to ferret out the one true answer from a den full of false answers - though certainly there may be some false answers - but to recognize that truth in this case as in many others lends itself to a plurality of formulations. Within the family Reformed, there are many ways to be and to think Reformed. Tracy has said that "there is no tradition that does not eventually have to acknowledge its own plurality and ambiguity."[1] The reasons for this are many and diverse: from conflicting strains in the origin and development of the Reformed churches' life and thought, to the fact that there are no noninterpretive, ahistorical essences to be found in the Reformed tradition (or in any other tradition for that matter), to the inherent ambiguity in the interpretive process itself (who are the interpreters? how has class, race, sex affected their ways of understanding? what time/place shapes their thinking? are they shaped by the 17th century scientific revolution, the 18th century Enlightenment, the 19th century Industrial Revolution, the 20th century socio-psychological, historical consciousness and technological revolution?), and, finally, even to the unresolved tensions in Calvin's psyche (as a recent biographer, Bouwsma, suggests).

Observation 2: The Importance of Traditions

Our relation to any tradition, and certainly to a religious tradition, is one of considerable complexity that demands from us a degree of reflection that on the one hand challenges any easy participation in our heritage and on the other hand disabuses us of any notion of living meaningfully outside of any heritage. The old enlightenment notion that reason untrammeled with oppressive tradition will free us to think both for ourselves and more objectively about truth and meaning has turned out to be doubly false. Traditions, including enlightenment traditions, are precisely the ways in which the values and meanings of the past participate in or are appropriated into the present. Without this inheritance of past values and meanings in our present, "enlightened" reason alone would provide us with increasingly thinner servings of what counts for truth and meaning. On the other hand, our heightened historical consciousness, our understanding of the way in which time enters into all thought, and our awareness of the ways in which class, sex, and race are consciously and unconsciously woven into all our perspectives make it impossible for us to naively

and innocently embrace a tradition. Our relation to our tradition is a dialectical yes and no. We cannot simply return to our traditions but we must return to them, albeit with a critically formed eye in order to avoid bringing the repressions and oppressions, the exclusions and the occlusions of the past into our present. What we need is not less attention to our tradition but more. The reason for this is that the efficaciousness of our traditions, for both good and evil, depends upon our decisions, conscious and unconscious, in the present.

Observation 3: There are Different Ways to Define Traditions

The definition of a particular tradition or theology can be substantive, dynamic, or structural, or a mix of all three. Failure to be conscious of our basic methodological decision in this regard can lead to opposing parties talking past each other rather than to each other.

1. Substantive definitions

Substantive definitions find the identity of a heritage or tradition in some *unchanging, basic propositions.* On the most simple level, the "tulip" acronym (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints)[2] or the list of "fundamentals" presupposes a substantive understanding of identity. But substantive definitions prevail wherever a tradition holds that the doctrines through which it defines itself are not simply normative but permanent and separate from the common structures of human experience. The cultural-linguistic understanding of doctrine, advanced by George Lindbeck,[3] provides a highly sophisticated approach to substantive definitions which could be applied to the Reformed tradition. In this approach, the Reformed tradition could be defined by locating the dominant "intratextual norm(s) of faithfulness"[4] within the biblical canon which undergird its identity (Gen. 1-3, Gen. 12, Exod. 20, Luke 5, Rom. 8, Gal. 9, 2 Cor. 5 among others). Lindbeck's approach separates the regulative principles of a Christian tradition from any (extra-"canonical"[5]) form of continuity with the principles governing non-Christian culture and experience, and defends the absolute normativity[6] and permanence[7] of these principles.

2. Dynamic Definitions

Dynamic definitions look for *principles of continuity and relatedness*: principles that allow for and even presuppose change. Tillich's Protestant principle (the protest against all human pretensions to unconditional or absolute authority) or H. Richard Niebuhr's restatement of it (God dethrones all our absolutes) or the early Barth's dialectical or crisis theology (with its divine No to our pretensions to goodness and progress) are examples of dynamic definitions. Tillich's distinction between Protestant principle and Catholic substance was intended not as an invidious comparison (in theory, the ideal theology would dialectically relate the two) but to focus on defining characteristics of two great, historic, theological traditions.

Reformed theology carries the burden in the Christian theological tradition of what Tillich calls the Protestant principle. If this is correct it would then be appropriate for the weight of a Reformed theological definition to be on the dynamic side rather than the substantive side. Karl Barth, for example, once explained to a group of ministers how he came to write his Commentary on Romans.

> For twelve years I was a minister, as all of you are. I had my theology.

It was not really mine, to be sure, but that of my unforgotten teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann, grafted upon the principles which I had learned less consciously than unconsciously in my native home - the principles of the Reformed churches....It simply came about that the familiar situation of the minister on Saturday at his desk and on Sunday in his pulpit crystalized in my case to a *marginal note to all theology* (our emphasis), which finally assumed the voluminous form of a complete commentary on the Epistle to the Romans....And so there grew what threatens now to broaden out somewhat into "my theology" or let us say a *"correction" theology* (our emphasis).[8]

When one considers Barth's theology, particularly his early theology, it is clear enough what he has in mind when he suggests that the character of Reformed principles led him not so much to a theology (such as Herrmann's or anyone else's, including that school of thought called Barthianism) as to a "marginal note to" or "correction" of existing theologies. Barth's marginal or corrective note is sounded against our tendency to transform God's revelation into a human possession or attitude. This is true whether the reference is to a too easy identification of experience with revelation (the liberal temptation) or a too easy identification of God's authority with scripture and/or doctrine (the conservative temptation). This marginal note functions dynamically because when it is sounded and heard - or, if you will, when the principles of Reformed theology are rediscovered and reapplied - it leads to repentance and reform within the life and thought of the church. The church's tendency will be to develop the reforming note into a substantive theology. It is not always inappropriate for churches in the Reformed tradition to construct substantive theologies but what makes them Reformed is their (later) discovery of the marginal note sounded against their own necessarily finite theology - or rather against the pious righteousness consequent to a too easy complacency with their theological self-understanding.

Dynamic definitions suggest that closed, substantive self-understandings potentially work against the health of Reformed churches. Still we feel the need to face the fact that Christians are flocking to traditions which affirm unchangeable, fundamental propositions or promise unambigious experiences of God. The reason for this is that there is an intimate and existential relation between a church's tradition and its members' sense of identity. A tradition that emphasizes the dynamic over the substantive, that is, change over order, is felt as threatening to our sense of identity. We fear that too much change will lead to loss of identity. It does not always help to allay that fear by suggesting that according to Reformed theological principles we are to look to God and not to a secured tradition for the securing of our identity.

3. Structural Definitions

Structural definitions look for the fundamental grammar or worldview of a tradition.[9] Such an approach asks how a tradition orders the pieces of its symbolic life into a comprehensive system of meaning. Unlike substantive uses of structural arguments (Frei, Lindbeck, Hauerwas) this approach assumes that there are common structural features between the Biblical-Christian grammar and other fundamental grammars of human experience.

In this respect, two observations might be made about the Reformed tradition. First of all, its grammar or worldview is essentially iconoclastic,[10] as the Protestant principle indicates. No matter how this grammer is articulated theologically, it

always expresses a situation that is in a constant state of flux, contradiction or repair. It is an open-ended grammar, generating and expressing theology as an open system. Within this grammar, the symbolic pieces of the theological heritage are unable to settle into a fully sedimented system of theological meaning. Contradiction is essential to the grammar of Reformed faith. Whenever the pieces of the theological system seem to be settling into a neat, coherent pattern of relations, the Reformed grammar introduces new contradictions, antitheses, or reversals that suggest that we may have been dealing with only half a deck of cards all along. When this happens Reformed theologians may find themselves appealing to broad substantive categories such as "the sovereignty of God" or to broad dynamic principles such as theocentricity or moral ambiguity. At the structural level, however, it is possible to speak of a Reformed grammar of contradiction or reversal. This iconoclastic grammar is constantly breaking open theological systems precisely when they approach iconic closure.

The problem with iconoclasm is that it can easily smack of theological irresponsibility. The iconoclastic spirit leads many to speak of throwing away theological systems altogether and "getting back to the Bible." Reformed preachers and theologians can inadvertently communicate that the Christian faith is a kind of chameleon reality that cannot be recognized, because when it begins to be identified as "this" or "that," the Reformed grammar changes its color. Iconoclasm can easily degenerate into theological irresponsibility or confusion.

This brings us to the second part of our structural observation: that the grammar of contradiction is not only a *contradiction of*, but a *contradiction toward*. When one theological system is contradicted, it is contradicted in relation to and in favor of another system which provides new insight at precisely the point where the contradicted system had become closed. *It is the failure to own and utilize this other, favorable system in its fullness that leads to theological irresponsibility or confusion.* It is at this point that the grammar of the Reformed tradition is inherently dialogical and embraces pluralism. It thrives in a context where different and differing theological systems are reminding one another of their limitations and of alternative possibilities for understanding, all of which, of course, remain in a permanent state of anticipated contradiction (of/toward). The Reformed grammar is constantly generative of (and open toward) new theological paradigms. It is also open to return to older theological formulations and resources.

Implications for Preaching

The Reformed preacher will certainly need to know the original substance of the various Reformation traditions that inform his or her homiletical practice. This will mean knowing Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, Bucer, Bullinger and others who provided the original theological substance of the Reformed tradition. Likewise, the Reformed preacher will need to identify and preach the dominant biblical "norms of faithfulness" held by Reformation theologians.

The Reformed preacher, however, will realize that the substantive theological propositions and canonical norms of Reformation theologians are dynamic in their existential application and meaning. For example, theocentricity warns us against our temptation to anthropocentricity, a warning which even Barth may not have sufficiently heeded, and one which certainly is the Achilles heel in John Hick's much acclaimed theodicy; the doctrine of divine sovereignty (God alone is sovereign) and of salvation through Christ alone warns us against our tendency to use God, Christ,

and scripture to sanction an uncritical social messianism and cultural visionism; the doctrines of human sin, divine judgment and forgiveness remind us of the moral ambiguity of even our best efforts; the centrality of the biblical texts, and the need to hear them through the Holy Spirit, warn us against our temptation to provide final interpretations of Christian faith.

Beneath these dynamic principles rests the fundamental grammar or worldview which informs Reformed preaching and congregational life: the iconoclastic grammar of contradiction, antithesis or reversal. Reformed preaching will seize opportunities to stand in contradiction to substantive theologies which have atrophied and become closed systems of meaning. Such preaching is, in Jean Dominic Crossan's words "parabolic" in function: it discovers ways over time to reverse hearer expectations in the structure of homiletical expression in order to render all theological systems relative or tentative.

This does not mean, however, that the preacher refuses to commit to a theological system. The Reformed preacher does not vacuously preach "Jesus" or "God" as if theological reflection in a post-modern world did not exist. The Reformed preacher's message is not only a contradiction *of* atrophied theological systems, but is a contradiction *toward* systems which enable new and vital interpretations of the biblical message. Reformed preachers are active theologians, committing themselves to theological models which they recognize as tentative and relative. Theological responsibility cannot be shirked in Reformed preaching, even in the name of an iconoclastic worldview.

The Reformed preacher, therefore, is free to be in dialogue with other theological models and to assert the value of a contemporary model which reveals more clearly the biblical message for today's world. Commitment to a theological model is substantive, it means learning the substance of that theological position, and preaching *toward* that substance. But at the point where that substance begins to claim absolute status the Reformed preacher's message must become a contradiction *of* this theological system also.

Most importantly, the Reformed preacher will not confuse theological responsibility with substantive closure. It could be a responsible re-forming action to hear liberation, feminist, or process theologies as it could be to rehear, or hear freshly, earlier forms of "Reformed" or "Orthodox" theology. Such "hearings," however, need to avoid a nondynamic form of iconic closure which does violence to the fundamental iconoclastic worldview of the Reformed tradition. Reformed preachers will need to investigate their motives and keep an ironic distance between their faith in God and their theological commitments. A Reformed perspective is not for the preacher who wants the certainty of "gnosis."

NOTES

[1] David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), ix.

[2] Known as the "five points of Calvinism," these doctrines are sometimes listed as total inability, unconditional election, limited atonement, efficacious grace, and the perseverance of the saints. See Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936), 59-182

[3] cf George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1984).

[4] *Ibid*, 122

[5] *Ibid*, 122

[6] Lindbeck expresses a desire for a Christian religion with the "requisite *toughness*" to make "*the claim that it is significantly different and unsurpassably true* " Ibid., 127.

[7] Lindbeck speaks of the permanence of the regulative principles of the Christian tradition as rooted in

the "quasi-transcendent (i.e., culturally formed) *a priori*" quality of "expressive and communicative symbol systems." Ibid., 36. Alister McGrath critiques Lindbeck's *a priori* understanding of the Christian idiom as "a-historical." He argues that Lindbeck essentially dissociates doctrine from the "history" that "brought it into being." Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 30-31.

[8] Karl Barth, *Word of God and Word of Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Torch Book Edition 1957), 100 ff.

[9] Structural approaches take their methodological cue from cultural anthropology and linguistics, literary theory, and semiotics or semiology. See, for instance, Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), *Structural Anthropology* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967), Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic books, 1973), Jean Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story* (Niles: Argus Communications, 1975), James Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York: Orbis books, 1985).

[10] See John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 125-132.

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