A Re-Presentation of Reformed Theology

by Jules Grisham

In addressing the question of how we might re-present Reformed theology as we enter the twenty-first century of the Christian Church, we should note that our answers will be different, depending on whether the outreach we have in mind is evangelistic (to the non-Christian world at large) or inter-denominational (to the great body of those who already profess Christ). The latter, for example, might entail a more pedagogical emphasis than the former. This essay will focus on the re-presentation of the Reformed tradition to the world at large.

The Re-Presentation of Reformed Theology, Considered Evangelistically

> "To spread abroad among barbarians and heathen natives the knowledge of the Gospel seems to be highly preposterous, in so far as it anticipates, nay even reverses, the order of Nature." – General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1796[1]

> "Sit down, young man. When it pleases the Lord to convert the heathen He will do it without your help or mine." – rebuke delivered to William Carey, the later-to-be missionary to India, by a gathering of Baptist ministers[2]

These quotes open Richard Fletcher's book, *The Barbarian Conversion*, and serve perhaps as tragicomic examples of how the Reformed tradition should *not* present itself as we move into the twenty-first century. To hear a group of Scots talking thus, who themselves were the recipients of God's grace through the agency of missionaries a few centuries earlier, one doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. And while this may represent an extreme – and therefore unfair – example, it nonetheless vividly brings to light one of the least likable tendencies always lurking in Calvinism's doctrinal fortress, which is the confusion of the biblical concept of "elect" with that most distasteful one of "elite."

I am convinced, sadly, that if we were to change the settings of the above quotes from missions in centuries past to reaching out to our own society today, we might hear similar sentiments – say, for example, on how the church need not be "user-friendly," and how it mustn't concern itself with people's needs or wants, as that would somehow debase the true proclamation of the Word of the Sovereign God. "Our job," so goes the argument, "is to preach the word as-is and to let God do the rest." But I believe that this

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[1] Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (New York, 1997), p. 1.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 1.

view undermines the very spirit of the Great Commission, if only less explicitly than did the Baptist ministers who rebuked William Carey.

I would argue that we are rather to do everything in our power to facilitate not just the hearing but the understanding of the gospel by all those to whom we preach and among whom we live. Paul asks that we do nothing less when he suggests that we imitate his example of being "all things to all people" (1 Cor. 9:22). What does this possibly mean but that we are to reach out to all people using all idioms and categories at our disposal that they may come to know Christ? We must be prepared to speak in terms meaningful to them, using categories of thought with which they are familiar, and providing answers to the questions they have.

This sustained effort to "speak the language" of those to whom we proclaim the gospel is of foundational importance in any re-presentation of Reformed theology, and is really a most basic reaffirmation of Protestantism's origins among men who sacrificed their lives in order that God's word be liberated from its antique unintelligibility and made comprehensible to ordinary people. William Tyndale's translation of the Bible, a crime for which he was ultimately executed at the instigation of "Saint" Thomas More, was written so that even a "ploughboy" might understand the riches of God's word. May his example of courage inspire our own re-presentation of the faith.

But, in all fairness, no one is stopping anyone from translating the Bible today. What then is the issue for us? Why do we need to "re-present" anything? And, in re-presenting Reformed theology, what must *not* be changed? That is, what essential characteristics of Reformed theology must shine clearly through any re-presentation of its "language of presentation"? We will address these issues in reverse order.

Let us begin by asserting that we believe the gospel of Christ and seek to proclaim it to others, that they may come to know him and be saved unto life. We further believe that the Reformed tradition is the one which has in the past and continues in the present to represent best the fullness and truthfulness of that gospel message. The Reformed emphases on the unique authority of the Bible as God's Word; on the sovereignty of God; on the unity of the covenants in God's plan of redemption; on the sinful nature of fallen man, and on the fact of our salvation by grace alone through faith alone; on the nature of the church as the assembly of God's people, chosen by the God the Father before creation, redeemed by God the Son at the cross, and regenerated by the God the Holy Spirit, being gathered and mystically joined in Christ, whose kingdom is already present but not yet in fullness — all of these teachings and more combine in the corpus of "Reformed theology" to form, so we believe, the most comprehensive response which accords with the teaching of Scripture yet elaborated.

I shall argue, however, that we must re-present our Reforming faith[3] with a revised apologetic methodology. I shall argue that the newly emerging "postmodern" mindset presents a new set of challenges and opportunities to which we might best respond by re-presenting the Reformed tradition with less reliance on the presumed unassailability of our logic, and more emphasis on the role of subjective persuasion.

Advocates of so-called "classical apologetics" will no doubt disagree with this approach, arguing that this emphasis on persuasion undermines the sufficiency of Scripture. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," they might say. But it is broken. The "classical" apologetic for Reformed theology is unconvincing in our increasingly postmodern context, as we will see. I fear that rigid adherence to it often more reflects an unfortunate comfort with modernist-rationalist methodology than it does a commitment to the Great Commission which calls us to take the risk of making ourselves understood.

The Westminster Confession of Faith remains a superb systematization of Christian doctrine (as do, for that matter, the still-incontestable Nicene creed and Chalcedonian teaching on Christ), but simply repeating it to new generations fails for two reasons. First, simple repetition without contextualization fails the test of application. In other words, what you say may be true, but if it doesn't answer my questions, it will remain meaningless to me, and I will be unaffected (let alone unchanged) by it. Second, by simple repetition of time-tested phrases we risk substituting formulas for the Bible itself, and thereby of undermining the unique authority of Scripture. We must guard against this tendency to let our theology become sanctified with airs of divine authority. Rather, we must remember that our theology will always fall short of the biblical standard. Yet, though we be aware of this, we are still to engage the task of theology — despite its known risks of falling into some error — in order that God's Word be proclaimed and received as meaningful.

There is nothing radical in any of this. It merely represents obedience to the Great Commission, and to the Reformation principle of *semper reformanda*, by which we know that we must always keep reforming, and that we are not to be deterred from doing so by the persistence of imperfections in any system.

A Note on the Use of Logic in Theology, and a Modest Proposal for Limiting its Applicability

All of this is fine, to the extent that most everyone would agree that we are in the business of applying the Bible all the time. Frame provides us with an example of such

[3] By "Reforming faith" I mean to convey the thought that we hope to transmit faithfully not just our tradition, but our faith, albeit elaborated in the Reformed – or more specifically, the Reforming – context.

application in the manner by which we come to be assured of our own salvation.[4] The Bible clearly teaches that all those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved.[5] Through the application of logic we know that this refers to us individually, should we meet the condition of being part of that group of "all those who believe in Jesus." Though my name is not specifically mentioned in the Bible, I know by the use of logic that I am included in that group. The statement "I know I am saved because I believe Jesus is the Christ" is not biblical, in the sense that this is not a literal recitation of some passage of Scripture, but it is a nonetheless a true statement deduced from the Bible.

Moreover, this process of deduction is necessary if we are to understand the Scripture at all. Simply asserting that "all who believe..." without deducing its logical implications is to fail to understand the Bible's intended application to particular lives. This re-presentation of God's word is thus a process by which the Bible is effectively "translated" into statements which are meaningful, and thus understandable, to me. And the important aspect to note in this simple example is that nothing new was added to it, even though we deduced information that was not literally present in the Bible. We have not fatally undermined the principle of *sola Scriptura*, because the truth of this application was already resident in the original statement. Our use of logic, by which we applied the Scripture to a particular context, merely brought to light a truth already inhering in the statement. The use of logic in the task of theology, then, is justified, good, and necessary. It is a primary tool by which we come to understand the meaning of God's Word for us.

Can we then go too far with logic? Can we attempt to extract more precision than God's Word has given us warrant to deduce? I would argue that the answer is yes. I believe that we in the Reformed tradition, famous for our relentless application of logical deduction, routinely overstep our bounds, positing certainty where there is mystery.

Haggai 2:11-14 reads: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says: If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil, or other food, does it become consecrated?'" The priests answered, "No." Then Haggai said, "If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?" "Yes," the priests replied, "it becomes defiled." Then Haggai said, "'So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,' declares the LORD, 'whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.'"

I propose that we use this very interesting passage as a guide for a more proper use of logic in our theology, founded on the principle of "consecration" by direct contact with Scripture. Haggai's first question refers to Leviticus 6:27, which instructs that "whatever

[4] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, 1987), p. 252.
[5] John 3:16-17

touches any of the [consecrated] flesh will become holy"; and his second question recalls Numbers 19:22, by which "anything that an unclean person touches becomes unclean, and anyone who touches it becomes unclean till evening." The principle at work here is that while consecration is passed only through one level of contact – the holy thing to the object it touches – uncleanness can be transmitted through multiple layers of contact. It is easier to defile than to sanctify.

When we are engaged in the theological task, we will – we must – use logic in order to understand the Bible. But in dealing with God's holy and infallible Word, we should be aware that our logic is formulated in a contaminated source – ourselves. It is the Scripture which "consecrates" our logic, and not the other way around. In fact, the misapplication of logic may well "defile" our entire theological project of seeking to understand God's Word-for-us. So when we hold the Bible answerable to our standard of logic, we are doing a terrible thing — we are holding its perfection down to our standard of defilement. Following the principle of Haggai, we might instead consider the Scripture as a holy thing which may consecrate other things by contact — but only by *direct* contact. In other words, we may consider "good and necessary" inferences drawn from Scripture to be blessed by the stamp of certainty; but those inferences which are drawn from other inferences and earlier deductions, those conclusions which are not derived directly but only indirectly from the Bible, must be held to be far less authoritative.

Thus, to return to our example of assurance of salvation: when I deduce my own salvation on the basis of the words of Scripture, I can be certain that what I assert is true, that it extracts a meaning-for-me which was already implicitly resident in the Bible passage itself. We should be exceedingly cautious, however, in moving beyond this to drawing conclusions based on conclusions we drew earlier. The consecration of contact with God's truth gets lost in the layering, and the probability multiplies that we are stumbling into error, proclaiming more certainty than the given passages warrant, and fancying a firm comprehension where there is in fact a great mystery.

So with this proposed "Rule of Haggai" in mind, let's examine the cultural context in which we are to re-present our faith-in-tradition.

The Challenge Represented by Postmodernism

We said above that the methodology by which our faith is being presented is somehow inadequate to the needs of the emerging culture of postmodernity – and, specifically, that "classical" apologetics' pronounced emphasis on reason is increasingly unconvincing in this new environment. Let's examine this briefly.

In the beginning (for our purposes) was mysticism, enforced by the pervasive authority of men. This was and is Eastern Orthodoxy. That is to say, the early, Eastern church was open to the mystical experience of God and to non-rational realms of experience, and this mindset was reinforced by the authority of church tradition which included not only the Scriptures but also the varied writings of the Church Fathers and the teachings of the emerging magisterium. The medieval Latin church took a giant step in the direction of modernism as it began under the influence of scholasticism to shed its earlier preference for the mystical and to ground itself more and more in rationalism. This perhaps sounds strange to we (post-?) moderns, who are used to thinking of the medieval period as one of intense superstition and otherworldly mysticism, which of course it was. But the methodology of the church became increasingly rationalistic, even as the authority of men — "Tradition" — remained pervasive. The rationalistic methodology of scholasticism remained dominant in the Protestant revolt against papal tyranny, and the scholastic program — the systematic application of Christian authority to all areas of human life — was continued by the Reformers and persists even today in our so-called "cultural mandate." The only difference between Catholic and Protestant scholasticism (an immensely important one, we should note) was in defining what precisely constituted that Christian authority, with the Reformers arguing against the traditions of men and for the Bible alone.

The development of modernism reached its fullness of maturity, however, when the Bible itself — and the very idea of revelation — came to be considered merely an external claimant to authority, to be tested like any other. Accordingly, reason became the arbiter of truth and the rationalistic worldview its companion. Three centuries later, however, the age of modernity is now in deep crisis. Any sustaining authority beside reason having been discarded, and reason itself having begun to be suspected as inadequate to the task of certain knowledge, there is now a trend returning to openness to non-rational realms of experience, back to the mystical. Yet, unlike in the earlier (Eastern Orthodox) period of mysticism, there is now no prevailing authority. This muddy situation is what is being called the emerging postmodern ethos, which is characterized by: the dissolution of our society's legitimizing meta-narrative, and its replacement by many local narratives; an explosion of radical pluralism; a profound pessimism with regard to progress; and a deep hostility to any claims of universal applicability.[6] Most interestingly, perhaps, and rather disturbingly, the power of reason to compel consent and assent, which we had simply assumed during the heyday of modernism, is breaking down. In several fields of human endeavor, the older assumptions of the unity, goodness, clarity, simplicity, objectivity, and certainty of knowledge (as arbitrated by reason) have been undermined.

In short, then, we've seen two patterns in this history of worldviews and methodologies, one cyclical and one linear. On the one hand, we appear in to have gone

[6] Stanley J. Grenz, A Primer on Postmodernism (Grand Rapids, 1996), p. 44.

full circle with regard to our ultimate criterion of reality, from the mystical and non-rational, to the naturalistic and rational, and back. On the other hand, our methodological approach has proceeded steadily from the pervasive authority of the words of men, to the authority of God's Word, to the authority of our reason, to no authority.

This new mental landscape of the global civilization which is arising out of the modern West presents a great opportunity and a great challenge for Christian outreach. On the one hand, people are generally more open to the mystical/religious experience, less skeptical and less materialistic (in profession if not in practice), than they were in the long reign of the modern. On the other hand, however, there is a pervasive hostility to the very absolutist principles which Christianity most clearly represents. So, the challenge is this: how do we re-present our Reforming faith to a culture which is open to the mystical experience of God but closed absolutely to claims of universalism? How do we proclaim the Christian faith not just as a valid way of experience, but as the Way, and as the Truth?

An Apologetic of Application, Emphasizing Persuasion

Let's summarize the issues we've addressed so far. On the one hand, we have argued that logic is a crucially important tool in the task of theology, by which we apply Scripture to our lives and come to understand its meaning-for-us. And we have shown how, used properly, logic adds nothing that wasn't resident in Scripture already. On the other hand, we have also argued that logic can be misapplied, as when it is used to extract greater certainty than is warranted by Scripture, or when it is held up as the standard to which the Bible must conform. This last is especially insidious, as it constitutes a form of idolatry, by which *logic* is made to be the ultimate criterion of reality. It is this over-confidence in logic which undermines the unique authority of Scripture, and it is to be rejected.

In light of this, we have proposed the "Rule of Haggai," by which the tendencies of logic to push for too-great a precision or too-exalted an emphasis are to be kept in check. Scripture is thus proclaimed as the criterion to which we — and our logic — are answerable. Scripture confers the "consecration" of certainty. Our "Rule" forces us, as it were, to keep our logic in direct contact with God's word. To the extent we stray from that direct contact, we do so at our own risk.

Next, we turned our attention to the postmodernist mindset, and described its suspicion of all forms of universalizing narrative, including even the claims of reason. In the new cultural constellation we have on one side the postmodernists — open to experience, with a strong disposition to subjectivism, and overtly hostile to the universalist rationalism of classical apologetics. On the other side are the classical apologists, in the bizarre position of defending modernist methodology and equipped with

an apologetic that fails to address the categories of postmodernism. It's rather interesting, then, that both sides seem to need the same thing in order to break the impasse: a re-presentation of the Reforming faith, with an increased emphasis on persuasion, on the power of subjective certainty. The postmodernists would benefit because an emphasis on the experiential would conform to their categories of thought, as would the apologists in light of their need to supplement reason with another basis of certainty in order not to make an idol of logic. Even so, we can expect that these latter might react with suspicion to the demotion of reason in favor of more a subjectivist emphasis. "Persuasion" — the "godly sense of satisfaction" — doesn't sound rational enough, doesn't sound certain enough. As John Frame asks in the *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, "Is this 'satisfaction' [persuasion] a new revelation of the Spirit? Is it an addition to the canon? Is it an additional norm? If not, then what is it?"[7] His answer is worth quoting at some length:

> "I strongly defend the Reformation doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. But the Reformers saw no difficulty in affirming both the sufficiency of Scripture and the necessity of the Spirit's testimony. They made it clear (for even in their time there were misunderstandings in this area) that the Spirit's testimony was not a new revelation; rather, the Spirit's work was to illumine and confirm the revelation already given... Still, Scripture is not reluctant to describe this work as a work of revelation (Matt. 11:25 f.; Eph. 1:17). It is revelation in the sense that through the Spirit's ministry, we are learning something of which we would otherwise be ignorant; we are learning the Word of God. Or, put differently, we are being 'persuaded.'"[8]
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> "Much of the Spirit's work in our lives is of this nature — assuring us that Scripture applies to our lives in particular ways. The Spirit does not add to the canon, but His work really is a work of teaching, of revelation. Without that revelation, we could make no use of Scripture at all; it would be a dead letter to us."[9]

Thus we begin to see that an apologetic of persuasion is one which answers profound misgivings in the postmodernist mindset about the exclusivist claims of reason, while holding forth the possibility of an experience of God's power. In other words, we downplay the power of our arguments and emphasize the power of our God, which, once experienced, will serve as the ground of subjective persuasion – the presupposition – in light of which we would then be free to apply reason.

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[7] Frame, p. 156.
[8] Frame, p. 156.
[9] Frame, p. 158.

Three Proposals for Re-Presenting the Reforming Tradition

Three characteristics of postmodernism fit nicely with a balanced approach to biblical interpretation and application.

(1) Postmodernism's relational and "power of text" emphases can be addressed by the exegetical approaches of biblical and literary analysis, respectively;
(2) Postmodernism's subjectivist leanings can be addressed by an emphasis on the persuasion of the Holy Spirit in the development of one's personal judgment;
(3) Postmodernism's stress on communitarianism can be addressed by our church in its community element.

(1) An "Historical, Relational, and Personal" and "Power" Apologetic, in the Context of Exegesis

The postmodern mood tends to emphasize an outlook which is, according to Grenz, "historical, relational, and personal,"[10] as opposed to the modernist one, which was mechanistic and dualistic. This postmodernist trio is exactly how the Bible unfolds itself to us. What a great potential corrective to the excesses of systematic theology which, though quite useful in providing us a comprehensive overview of the shape and outline of God's plan of redemption, nevertheless miss the very unfolding aspect which is the strength of Biblical Theology. An evangelistic emphasis on the historical, relational, and personal nature of God and of the Christian message would be comprehensible to postmodern ears.

Additionally, the postmodern emphasis on the "power of texts" is rather interesting and seems to open many possibilities for successful outreach through an emphasis on literary analysis, by which we come to see more clearly the factors of authorial intent as a carefully constructed effort to appeal to a given audience applying language and categories meaningful to them.[11] It might seem surprising at first glance that the postmodern mindset, which has gone the farthest in rejecting all external authority — even, increasingly, that of the compulsion of reason — as culturally conditioned, should have been the one to rediscover the central Christian doctrine of the power of the Word.[12] Now it is true that the postmodern response to this appreciation of the power of the text is to "deconstruct" it, but the possibilities of a dialogue loom promising — for example, on the power of the Word, which appeared in history, which seeks to relate to us, which is incarnate in the person of Christ, which does in fact come with power to destroy and to create.

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[10] Grenz, p. 7.
[11] Class notes on Literary Analysis.
[12] Grenz, p. 6, 123-38.

(2) An Apologetic of Persuasion, in the Context of Christian Living

With regard to the issue of personal judgment, I would reiterate the proposal mentioned above. Let us adopt the "Rule of Haggai," by which we are to apply logic freely and with fair certainty as it is deduced directly from the Bible, but by which we are to adopt increasing caution in our methodology and increasing humility in our claims for certainty as we move away from direct contact with the Bible. We should avoid the tendency towards relentless deductionism, both because the likelihood of error accelerates as we move from the sure standard of God's Word and because excessive specificity is often not warranted by the Scripture. And in place of this drive for objective certainty under the banner of reason, let us emphasize more the subjective certainty, which is the persuasion of the Holy Spirit and the gift of faith.

Anecdotal evidence is, I'm aware, the weakest form of argument, but it's what my life has given me, and it's valid as far as that goes. When as a non-Christian in college I read Augustine and Aquinas, I remember being frustrated by Augustine's requirement that I believe in order that I might more fully understand. After all, I thought, isn't he trying to convince me? How can I believe unless he first convinces me of his rightness? He went on to make brilliant arguments, including an original *cogito,* along the lines of "I doubt, therefore I am." Despite its brilliance, however, and as promised, I was not convinced. We went on to Aquinas, and this man floored me. Unlike Augustine, St. Thomas had no compunction to warn me of the inadequacy of logic. He would prove it, he proclaimed, and convince me he almost did. He subjected me to some of the deepest thinking I'd ever done to that point in my life. I remember being in awe, even considering for a moment becoming a Thomist! But then the weeks passed and the wave receded, and I began to see more and more of the assumptions which he had made, and which I could not accept without better proof. As time passed, in other words, I "recovered" from Aquinas (remember, I was a non-Christian!), but Augustine's challenge remained a stumbling block in my path, that I could neither accept nor entirely reject — until the Holy Spirit helped me.

What's my point? Simply that the challenge that I need to believe in order to understand was more powerful in the final analysis than was logical argumentation. In fact, where logical argumentation becomes arrogant, where it is assumed that one can prove the truth of our faith, it may actually be to the detriment of our faith as an apologetic when that logical argument (inevitably) fails to convince or proves fallible. The challenge of the need for persuasion strikes me as a valid apologetic tool, in accord with both the new postmodernist subjectivist orientation of openness and with the Bible and the teaching of the church.

(3) An Apologetic of Action, in the Context of the Christian Community

With regard to the postmodernist emphasis on communitarianism, what greater perversion of Christianity by late modernism is there than its often excessive emphasis on individualism. We are a covenant community; and we are many local communities interacting within that covenant community. The Christian Church, the body of Christ, is in many senses — though this certainly be as yet unknown to them — the ideal social construction for the postmodern ethos. Here again, we face the problem of postmodernists' rejection of absolutism. We in the Reformed tradition speak of the covenant community, but we don't tend to emphasize it in fact. This is the other side of the persuasion equation. If we are to challenge postmoderns that they must believe in this environment of dethroned reason, and offer them the glimmers of comprehension that we believe because we are persuaded to do so by God's power indwelling in us, then we must persuade them of the reality of our doctrines through our actions.

Jaroslav Pelikan writes in the first volume of his *The History of Christian Doctrine*, "When the Old Testament speaks about 'instruction' or the New Testament about 'the doctrine,' this includes teaching about both confession and conduct, both theology and ethics. A separation between them is fatal, a distinction unavoidable, just as in the New Testament itself 'faith' and 'works' are distinguished without being separated."[13]

It is my conviction that we should strive to effect a more action-oriented doctrine, in the manner of Paul himself, who would always follow-up the teaching of the faith with exhortations to act in accordance with that faith. In our Reformed tradition we manifest a "Mother Theresa gap" — that is, we are heavily focused on doctrine, and much less so on service. Therefore, as Paul might exhort, let us build up the body. This would address a critical weakness in our modern, rationalistic church, and at the same time would serve as a powerfully persuasive apologetic to the greater postmodern culture in which we find ourselves.

[13] Jaroslav Pelikan, The Christian Tradition, Volume 1 (Chicago, 1974), p. 11.