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Thomas R. Wolthuis

Dordt College

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A Reformed Hermeneutic: An Outline



by Thomas R. Wolthuis

Is there a Reformed hermeneutic? What might be distinctive in a Reformed reading of Scripture, and what is shared with other traditions? Are there different legitimate ways to reading Scripture within the Reformed tradition? Can the word *literal* be used? What is the role of the higher critical practices? How has Reformed hermeneutics been defined in the past? How is Reformed hermeneutics tied to the pre-critical methods and the four-fold meaning of Scripture?

In the midst of all these questions, let us be-

Thomas R. Wolthuis is Professor of Theology at Dordt College.

gin with some definitions. Defining “Reformed” can take many different approaches. Of course, “Reformed” can be defined historically as the tradition arising from, and developing, the attempts in the 1500s to call the Western (Roman) Church to be reformed. Martin Luther protested, hence the Protestant tradition. John Calvin sought reform. Luther’s protest was more personal and became political. Calvin’s was more biblical and theological. The Protestants were fractured over the understanding of the Lord’s Supper and divided themselves into political jurisdictions. Major strands of the Calvinist Reformed tradition then developed in the Netherlands and, under the leadership of John Knox, in Scotland. Immigrants from both these groups significantly influenced the United States’ religious development.

These historical developments led to confessions in the midst of divisions and persecution. Hence, “Reformed” can be defined confessionally. In 1559 Calvin wrote a confession for the French Reformed churches. The standard confession was written by Guido de Bres in 1561 for the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, the “Belgica,” and is thus called the Belgic Confession. This confession was fully adopted by the Dutch Synod of Dordt in 1618-1619. This synod also developed the Canons of Dordt to clarify and clearly state the Reformed churches’ understanding of salvation in counter-diction to the positions of Jacob Arminius, a theology professor at Leiden University in the Netherlands. The Synod of Dordt also adopted the

Heidelberg Catechism, a Reformed catechism written by Zacharius Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus in 1563 for the Palatine province of Germany. In the Scottish Reformed tradition, the Westminster Confession and Catechism was adopted by the Westminster Assembly of Divines in 1647. The Reformed tradition is, thus, a confessional tradition. It has always sought to articulate its understanding of Scripture. This paper hopes to be a contribution to that articulation.

Through the Confessions, key doctrinal words and biblical texts come to the fore. Dr. Robert De Moor (*Reformed: What It Means, Why It Matters* [Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2001], building on the work of Rev. Duane Kelderman (*What It Means to Be Reformed* [Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2001]), lists sixteen keywords and texts:

1. Scripture (2 Tim. 3.16);
2. Grace (Eph. 2.8-10);
3. Creation, Fall, Redemption, Recreation (Col. 1.15-20);
4. Covenant (Jer. 31.31-34);
5. Common Grace (Matt. 5.43-48);
6. Personal relationship to Jesus (Rom. 8.38-39);
7. The Holy Spirit (Rom. 8.1-17);
8. Gratitude (Col. 3.15-17);
9. the Church (Eph. 4.1-16);
10. Word and Deed (James 2.14-17);
11. Jesus is Lord (Philip. 2.11);
12. Kingdom (Matt. 6.10);
13. the Cultural Mandate (Gen. 1.27-28);
14. Christian Education (Prov. 9.10);
15. Christian Vocation (Eph. 4.28); and
16. Justice (Mic. 6.8. (70-71))

De Moor and Kelderman build on the work of James Bratt (“The Dutch Schools,” *Reformed Theology in America* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 135-152) by delineating these key concepts in three emphases, minds, or streams: the Doctrinalist (1-5), the Pietist (6-10), and the Transformationalist (11-16).

The Doctrinalist or Confessional emphasis, which addresses the head or mind, stresses the Belgic Confession and especially its clarification in the Canons of Dordt. The Canons are often summarized, in a poor re-ordering, with the acronym TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. This emphasis is often called “Five-Point Calvinism.” It also emphasizes the central section of the Heidelberg Catechism, catechetical preaching, and witnessing to the truth of the faith.

The Pietist or Antithetical emphasis, which addresses the heart, stresses the comfort of the first Question and Answer of the Heidelberg Catechism and the grateful response of the third section, emphasizing prayer and morality. This emphasis fueled the division in the Dutch Reformed Church called the *Afscheiding*, led by Hendrik de Cock, in Ulrum, 1834.¹

The Transformational or Reformational emphasis, which is often tied to the thought and work of Abraham Kuyper, who led the Doleantie movement in the Netherlands in the 1880s, stresses Christian hands involved in culture and the development of a Christian culture. It emphasizes the positive application of the Commandments in the Heidelberg Catechism and comes to fuller expression in the Contemporary Testimony “Our World Belongs to God” and the Belhar Confession. Its stress is on practical preaching, i.e., how the message affects daily work with purpose and hope.

These three streams all agree on the cesspool reality of human sin and seek to be streams of living water flowing from the temple of God. As such, they reflect, in some ways, Paul’s triad of faith, hope, and love. They also form part of the Reformed tradition as well as aspects of my heritage.²

What does this history mean for how the Reformed tradition approaches Scripture—for a Reformed hermeneutic? Hermeneutics seeks to understand how meaning is communicated. The word roots back to the Greek myth of Hermes (Mercury in the Latin tradition), the winged messenger of the gods. Traditionally within modernist approaches, hermeneutics was defined as the science of interpretation and was closely tied to method. In the last century it has flown into the realms of philosophy, mainly epistemology. Here I will stay earthbound and explore the contexts in which the Reformed tradition places the interpretation of Scripture.

My thesis is that the heart of a Reformed hermeneutic is an understanding that the Triune God is at work redemptively in history, for and with humanity, through words—words for his people in worship and the mission of re-creation. This statement sets forth seven contexts or descriptors for a Reformed hermeneutic. It is a theological hermeneutic, a redemptive hermeneutic, an historical

hermeneutic, a literary hermeneutic, a Christian hermeneutic, a worship hermeneutic, and a missional hermeneutic.

Each of these requires an outline of description, key biblical texts, guidelines for application, connections to method, and an explanation of ties to significant themes in Reformed theology.

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A Theological Hermeneutic

A theological hermeneutic is based on the *Triune God at work in his creation*. This statement is foundational to understanding Scripture and its message. The Scriptures foundationally address the questions of who God is and what God is doing in the world. The answer to the modern question of whether there is a God is assumed in the affirmative in the first words: “In the beginning God.” The question of who God is, is answered mostly through the actions of God. Scripture presents the God who acts: “In the beginning God created....” This title, “God,” is only a generic title. Through Scripture, God reveals himself more specifically to answer the question of who God is. Genesis 1 shows us the God who acts in creation. Genesis 2 presents us with the more personal, interactive God named Yahweh (the LORD). This name of God is best expressed in Exodus 3.11-15:

But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I

who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.” Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you....’ The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.” (NIV)

Although the translation of the names has long been debated, I understand this passage as the promise of God’s presence with his people. It is tied to the fundamental, theological theme of Scripture—God’s presence—which is expressed in context in Exodus 3.12: “I will be with you.” That presence has been there from the beginning, in God’s walking in the garden, and with the Patriarchs. That presence is now with Moses and will continue “from generation to generation.” That presence is Immanuel, according to Immanuel’s promise: “And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt.28.20). And these promises are all brought together in celebration in John 1.1-18.

This present Lord acts. He acts in creation by words of power and blessing. He acts in judgment and promise in a rebellious world (Gen. 3.14-19; 9.8-17). He calls forth a new people to serve him in the world (Gen. 12.1-3; Ex. 3.3-10; Josh. 1.6-9; 1 Sam. 3; 1 Sam. 16; Is. 6, Jer. 1; Ez. 2-3; Luke 1.11-17; Matt. 4.18-22; Eph. 2.; 1 Pet. 2.9-12). The Lord delivers out of oppression, exile, death and into his presence (Ex. 3.8, 20.1; Is. 40; Matt. 14.22-33; Rom. 10.9-13; Rev. 21.1-4). He provides (Gen. 22.8, 14).

Within this theological context, reading Scripture is a spiritual experience. God acts in and through Scripture. There, the Lord encounters us. The Triune God is addressing us, so we should listen. Christ is leading us, so we should follow. The Spirit is assisting us, so we should pray. Reading Scripture should be done in the context of experiencing God with excitement and expectation.

A theological hermeneutic trusts God; it believes God is at work in and through Scripture. One is to read Scripture in an awareness of the presence of God and an anticipation of the work of God. One reads in the present tense, asking, “Who is this God?” and “What is this God doing?”

Those advocating a theological interpretation of Scripture emphasize this perspective. Kevin Vanhoozer defines this perspective: “The theological interpretation of the Bible is characterized by a governing interest in God, the word and works of God, and a governing intention to engage in what we might call ‘theological criticism.’”³ He explains the purpose of *The Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*: “The dictionary editors believe that the principal interest of the Bible’s authors, of the text itself, and of the original community of readers was theological: reading the Scriptures therefore meant coming to hear God’s word and to know God better.”⁴ Vanhoozer concludes his introduction:

Theological interpretation of the Bible achieves its end when readers enter into the world of the biblical texts with faith, hope, and love. When we make God’s thoughts become our thoughts and God’s word become our word, we begin to participate in the world of the text, in the grand drama of divine redemption. This is perhaps the ultimate aim of theological interpretation of the Bible: to know the triune God by participating in the triune life, in the triune mission to creation.⁵

A theological hermeneutic requires what Calvin Seerveld advocates as a Reformational reading of Scripture, in contrast to a Fundamentalistic/Moralistic, Higher-Critical/Humanistic, or Dogmatic/Scholastic reading. He illustrates this theological approach in his Reformational reading of the Balaam story, in Numbers 22-24:

It listens for the Good News, but in terms of direction rather than maxims; it honours research as an enriching factor, not as a precondition; it acknowledges that the message of the passage is given to be confessed, but then positively instead of apologetically, and fully rather than only in matters of dogma and morals.⁶

A theological hermeneutic aligns with fun-

damental emphases in Reformed theology. Many highlight the emphasis on the sovereignty of God as the essence of Reformed theology. While this approach emphasizes a God at work in all things, it can, unfortunately, become distorted into a determinism that makes God the cause of all things. Scripture shows us how God has been at work in the past to help us see God still at work today. Scripture interprets events in terms of God’s purpose, yet it also warns us, especially in the book of Job, that often we will not understand and cannot explain why things happen. Reformed theology not only holds that God is at work in all things but also requires God’s revelation for us to understand what God is doing. Scripture is understood as the revelation of God, not first of the nature of God but of the actions of God. Thus, a theological hermeneutic expresses the fundamental Reformed emphasis on God at work and the need for and gift of God’s revelation for humans to know God.

A Redemptive Hermeneutic

The redemptive hermeneutic is based on the Triune God *at work redemptively*—the adverb is important. The fundamental meaning of redemption is release from an obligation or debt or ransom from slavery. Each is an apt metaphor of the human problem and God’s action. Hence, humans owe a debt to God because of our rebellion, squandering of God’s gifts, and failure to fulfill God’s purposes in the world. Humans have become enslaved to the forces of opposition to God, which can be seen as spiritual forces, but the enslavement has often been physical. Joseph was enslaved in Egypt and was soon followed by the other descendants of Israel. Later, Israel and Judah were defeated and exiled. Those who returned from Exile were still oppressed by the empires of the world. Political, economic, and social systems have enslaved people throughout history and still enslave people today.

However, redemption is a word of intervention, victory, freedom, and new value. Few things are redeemed today—coupons and gift cards. The metaphoric power of this word has lessened, but other religious words are too weak or limited to express the meaning of redemption. “Victory” is a strong image in our world, but it carries with it too much of the world’s concepts of victory—power

and conquest. “Freedom” has been distorted into individualism and the total rejection of any constraints. “Saving” often only means spiritual, not physical, deliverance. “Restoring” is good, but it does not accentuate development.

Through the story and imagery of Scripture, the word “redemption” can be redeemed. The redemption image is clearly expressed as the foundation of our relationship to God: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Ex. 20.2). Isaiah looks for a new Exodus out of the Exile (Is. 52). Luke sets the context for Jesus in the temple for “all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2.38). Redemption is not only physical and corporate but also personal and spiritual. Paul speaks of redemption as the forgiveness of sins in Ephesians 1.7 and Colossians 1.14.

The redemptive context sees spiritual redemption, as explained in Scripture, as one part of the story of God’s work, centered in Jesus Christ. However, redemption is not limited to spiritual salvation from sins: redemption is also historical and physical. Redemption has come but is not complete because not all of God’s children have been redeemed; not all God’s creation has been redeemed.

A redemptive hermeneutic also highlights the significance of Scripture as story and as Good News. God is a God of process who will accomplish his purpose. Texts like Jeremiah 29.10-14 need to be read in historical, narrative context, but they do bring good news to today in a redemptive context, even noting the pain of the on-going process:

This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” (NIV)

The word “redemptive” expresses the heart of God’s work, for it addresses the how and why God is at work. This emphasis is developed in biblical theology that seeks to express how the themes of individual biblical books and larger units in Scripture fit together in the history of redemption.

Further, Reformed theology has sought to highlight God’s redemptive grace. The wonderful first answer in the Heidelberg Catechism shows that grace. It states that our comfort is in the fact that Jesus “has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.”

Finally, Reformed theology has an “already but not yet” eschatology. It stresses that God’s work of redemption has already entered the world, especially in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

The Reformed hermeneutic is also based on the Triune God at work redemptively for humanity and with humanity in history.

Jesus has paid the price of sin, Jesus is victorious over sin and death, and the eschatological gift of the Spirit has been given. Yet the mission and the battle are on-going. Not all have bent the knee to the Lord, and the creation has not yet been fully regained.

A Historical Hermeneutic

The Reformed hermeneutic is also based on the Triune God at work redemptively *for humanity and with humanity in history*. He works in human events, as Joseph famously states: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen. 50.20). He calls humans to his work (Noah, Abram, Moses, Israel, Joshua, Samuel, David, the prophets, John the Baptist and his parents, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the disciples, Paul). He calls people to action, interpretation, and proclamation (Amos 3.7; Matt. 17.5 and 28.18-20; Acts 9.5; 2 Peter 1.20-

21). And He believes in commissioning (Gen. 12.1-3; Gen. 22.15-18; Ex. 3.7-10 and 19.4-6 ; Josh. 1.6; 1Sam. 7.8-11; Is. 6.8-9; Matt. 28.18-20; Acts 26.15-18).

This understanding sets the context for the historical study of Scripture. Scripture interprets God's redemptive work in history for and with humanity. It is related to real historical and human events, but it is not just a divine or just a human recording of those events. Scripture arose as an interpretation of events for God's historical people in a historical situation. One looks at the interpretation of events in the narrated setting and at the setting of the narration—what is written about the setting and why it is written. Scripture still addresses *us* in our historical context and commission.

This understanding also leads us from encountering God in the text to exploring, as well, the human and historical situation of the text. An enhanced understanding of the text makes our commission in our historical situation more specific. The theological-redemptive reading makes our relationship to God more specific. The historical-literary reading makes our relationship to the world more specific. In addressing what God did—where, when, and with whom—we can better address what we should do—where, when, and with whom.

The Historical-Critical methods, not necessarily several scholars' results, must play a role in a Reformed hermeneutic. We hold to the legitimacy and necessity of textual criticism. As Scripture came about through human historical means and was transmitted through fallible human processes, we must try to ascertain the most likely original text.

The Jewish and Christian Scriptures are not to be understood like the Muslim understanding of the origin of the Koran. The Koran presents itself as a recitation of the heavenly books that Mohammad heard and memorized and that was later written down word for word. This understanding eliminates most human agency by making Mohammad only a recorder. The Jewish and Christian understanding of Scripture is much more interactive between God and humanity and a historical process. This interaction raises interesting, difficult questions on the authority of texts, like the ending Mark's Gospel (16.9-20), which does

not seem to be the original ending. Still, it shows the God who chose in the beginning to work with and through humanity in the development of his world. God has never gone back on that decision, even after humans rebelled and brought corruption into the world.

In the tradition of Historical-Critical methods, Source, Form, and Redaction Criticisms explore the historical development of texts at various levels. Source Criticism seeks to recover or hypothesize about different traditions that were combined into Scripture. Form Criticism seeks both to identify specific literary forms in the Scriptures and to give historical or social setting to the use of these forms. Redaction Criticism seeks to identify the specific contributions and interpretations of the writer who composed the text that became Scriptural from the sources and forms.

The methods and results of these criticisms have been significantly questioned. Is there enough evidence to get behind the text in these ways? What counts for evidence? What is gained by these historical reconstructions? While the reconstructions should not be used to critique the text, they can give possible explanations for certain aspects of the text and for differences between texts.

The Historical-Critical methods that seek to understand what was happening at the time of the narrated setting of the text or the possible time of its writing are helpful in explaining both the events of the text and the setting of its telling. They help us understand how God's people were like their neighbors; how they were, or were supposed to be, distinctive; and how Israel and the early church understood the world in continuity and distinction from surrounding cultures. The historical studies of the life and teachings of Jesus show us his connection to the expectations and practices of his day and people. Historical study gives us the meanings of words, phrases, and practices within the Scriptures. It also ties the Scriptures to human and historical existence and action.

In this context, one can speak of the literal meaning of Scripture. Literal usually means what happened, when, and where. Yet Scripture is not concerned only with "factuality"; it is also concerned with presenting an interpretation of what happened. Events are presented not to prove that

they happened but to present their meaning for the present. True meaning can be presented in a way that is not totally factual. Chronology can be changed to accentuate importance. Literary patterns can be thematic, not chronological. What we might take as a factual statement may have greater symbolic meaning than factual. Not all narrative is meant to be historical narrative, and not all things in historical narrative are meant to be factual. Often the debates over literal meaning and historical factuality are about far more than the meaning of the text; these debates can even distort and reduce the meaning of the text.

As a result, Reformed theology holds to a Chalcedonian Christology, a doctrine of Scripture, and a covenantal understanding of God and human work in the world. The Council of Chalcedon, in 451, declared that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures united without confusion, change, division, or separation. The Reformed tradition holds to an organic view of the inspiration of

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Scripture, which understands God working with and through human beings to inspire the writing of his Word in a way that does not overrun or neglect the writer's humanity. Thus, Scripture is 100 percent the Word of God and 100 percent human words. These two natures are not to be played off against or separated from each other: "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture

came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1.20-21, *NIV*).

This cooperation is true for understanding God's covenantal work in the world, of which Christ is the supreme expression. In human activities, one should not say that God is in no way involved in a certain action, yet God does not become the author of evil and sin. In God's redemptive actions, one should not say that human agency is irrelevant. We do not and cannot save ourselves, but God can use us to bring about his salvation for others:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph. 2.8-10 *NIV*)

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Philip. 2.12-13 *NIV*)

Reformed Christology and covenantal theology, then, affirm the Reformed emphasis on this created world. God calls us to be his people in this world and for this world. The history of this world and our actions in it has everlasting significance.

A Literary Hermeneutic

A literary hermeneutic is based in the Triune God at work redemptively in history, for and with humanity *through words*. Listing the hermeneutical components—concerning the order of historical and literary significance—can be debated: which should come first? Usually God acts in history with humans before the events are interpreted and written down, but at other times the very writing down of the interpretation is the event. Although the event may be first, we can only get to the event and its meaning through the text. From history's perspective the event is usually first. From our perspective the text comes first.

God works through words. It is not the only way God acts, but it is a primary way. God acts in creation, but even there, his work is expressed as through words: “God said.” God acts in Jesus Christ, but Jesus is even called “the Word” in John 1. God acts through his Spirit, but the Spirit seems often to speak through the word of Scripture. In fact, the written word of Scripture is a primary way God reveals himself and his will to us. The interpretation of Scripture has always been at the center of Reformed faith and practice—The Westminster Confession begins with statements about Scripture, and the nature of both revelation and Scripture is explained in Articles 2-7 of the Belgic Confession.

In addition to organic inspiration of Scripture, we believe that inspiration is also plenary, or all of Scripture, and verbal, the very words are important and inspired. These points are usually tied to 2 Tim. 3.16-17: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” The emphasis on verbal inspiration led to this view’s being called “grammatical” exegesis, but a fuller understanding of textual communication of meaning makes “literary” exegesis a better designation.

The literary context helps us see that Scripture addresses us differently through many literary genres and forms. Words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, passages, and whole books need to be understood in their literary context, especially within Scripture. In this way Scripture interprets Scripture.

Much recent biblical scholarship has developed methodologies for the literary study of Scripture. As Jeffrey Weima writes,

Today the gap between biblical scholars and non-biblical literary scholars has been largely bridged as both communities share a number of convictions about what literary criticism involves: an appreciation for the sophisticated artistry and aesthetic quality of biblical texts; a concern with the diverse literary genres (e.g., narrative, poetry, gospel, letter, apocalypse) found in the Bible; a preoccupation with formal features of the text and the function that these formal features have in communicating information; a commitment

to treat texts as finished wholes rather than as patchwork collections or originally independent sources; and a growing awareness that the Bible is a work of literature and that the methods of literary scholarship are thus a valid and necessary part of the interpretation process.⁷

Literary criticism studies how a text communicates. It explores how different genres work. As narrative functions with the interaction of character and events in a plot structure, the literary critical study of narrative looks at the role of setting, action, and dialogue in the story and at how the story is told in terms of pace and narration. The form and function of law code differs from that of oracular prophecy. And, while poetry transcends historical setting through its own internal structure and imagery, epistles are closely tied to their occasion.

In addition to exploring how genres function, literary critics explore discourse structures on various levels. George Guthrie defines discourse analysis:

Broadly speaking, discourse analysis concerns a wide array of *linguistic dynamics* that interplay in language, various *forms* of discourse expressed within languages, and specific *contexts* in which those forms are expressed. Essentially, it concerns language as used as a tool of human communication;...for our purposes at present, *discourse analysis* may be defined as “a process of investigation by which one examines the form and function of all the parts and levels of a written discourse, with the aim of better understanding both the parts and the whole of that discourse.”⁸

In addition to forms and contexts, a critic looks at how words relate to each other grammatically, logically, and affectively. This area of literary criticism is answered in the study of semantics. Syntactical analysis explores how phrases interact with each other. Surface structural analysis seeks to outline units according to the nature of the genre. Literary analysis looks at how words, stories, and images in one setting reference or allude to their usage in other writings—intertextuality.

Exegesis of Scripture has been and is at the center of the Reformed tradition. Even the traditional design of many Reformed churches fo-

cuses on the preaching of the Word. The pulpit is centered, often with a large pulpit Bible on it. Reformed liturgy gives the central position and the most time to the preaching of the Word. Reformed piety focuses on reading Scripture, personally and in family settings. Children are taught the stories of Scripture from an early age. The stories, images, and language of Scripture permeate Reformed theological and daily language. A literary hermeneutic, thus, centers the reading of the Scriptural text in the same way Reformed theology has centered Scripture—as the fundamental authority for faith and practice. The reading of Scripture is necessary, sufficient, and clear for the church, as the Westminster Confession states: The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture (6). It also states, “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all (2 Pet. 3:16), yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them (7).”⁹

A Christian Hermeneutic

A Christian hermeneutic is based in the Triune God at work redemptively in history for and with humanity through words *for his people*. Scripture is first and foremost an internal document for the people of God. The “Old Testament,” or Jewish Scripture, was written for the Jewish people to give them identity and direction. When the early church claimed these Scriptures and added other writings as authoritative Scriptures, it was claiming this identity as the people of God.

This claim does not mean that others cannot read and understand Scripture. If they believe the message, it addresses them. If they do not believe the message, it does not fully address them—they have not heard God speaking; they have not fully understood the Word. This understanding is difficult and parallel to the Reformed ideas of election, limited atonement, and irresistible grace. God

is working redemptively in history for humanity, but not all humans receive this work. In spite of the mystery of belief here that Scripture does not fully explain, we believe as well in a common or creational grace: non-Christians can benefit from Scripture and add insights to the Christian reading of it.

This communal understanding does mean that

In spite of the mystery of belief here that Scripture does not fully explain, we believe as well in a common or creational grace: non-Christians can benefit from Scripture and add insights to the Christian reading of it.

the Christian community is an interpretive community. The reading of Scripture is influenced by the Christian perspective in which one is raised and lives. Christian communities are acculturated communities, influenced by their history, experiences, present situations. These factors influence both interpretation and application. Hence, interpretation is not objective: it is an interactive process. Scripture shapes community; community shapes Scripture. As a result, the idea of “sola Scriptura” is right and good but not fully possible. While tradition should not trump Scripture or be co-equal in authority with Scripture, it is never absent.

Scripture is primarily addressed to God’s people. The Moses tradition was given to Israel to help them develop their identity as the delivered, elected, covenanted, missional people of God. The Former Prophets were written to help God’s people understand why they were in Exile. The Latter Prophets do at times address the nations, but this is primarily a secondary address. The primary address is still to Israel to comfort them with the promise of divine justice and the defeat of their enemies. The wisdom writings seem to borrow from other cultures, but still they put everything in the

context of those who fear the Lord. The Gospels and Acts are primarily documents to encourage, form, and guide the early church, not missionary addresses. The Epistles are written to churches and subversively address persecuted believers within the Empire.

The need and interpretation of Scripture by God's people is evident throughout the Bible. Its needed and desired effect on community is clear in Deut. 6.1-9. The effect of community on interpretation of God's work is clear in the varying reactions to Pentecost in Acts 2. Some are empowered, others are perplexed, others mock, and some repent. The involvement of the community in interpretation leads not only to a respect for tradition in the Reformed faith but also to "reformed and always reforming." As we give expression to the meaning of Scripture, we recognize that that expression is shaped by both Scripture and historical setting. We ask why Scripture was interpreted a certain way in a certain setting.

A community hermeneutic includes aspects of Reader-Response Criticism and Socio-Scientific Criticism. Socio-Scientific Criticism explores the implied social purpose of the text in its original setting. Part of Reader Response explores the role of the implied reader within the text and is an aspect of Literary Criticism. Another part of Reader Response is to look at how actual readers read texts, including the way later Old Testament passages may use earlier ones, the way the New Testament uses the Old Testament, and the history of the interpretation of Scripture in the church.

A community hermeneutic also expresses the doctrinal emphasis of the Reformed tradition, which is in continuity with what the church had called the allegorical interpretation. The term "allegorical" does point to some abuse of Scripture through allegorical methods, but it fundamentally means the doctrinal meaning of the text that one should believe. It might be better to call this the analogical meaning.

While a community hermeneutic respects the Confessions, it also understands them to be historical documents. Subscribing to the Confessions does not commit one to all their details, all their use of Scriptural support, nor all their specific historical applications. It makes an opening for new inter-

pretations and applications of Scripture to address changes in the church and society. Reformed theology respects the historical church, exercises community discipline to judge some interpretations as contrary to Scripture and doctrine, and continues to enhance the scholarly study of Scripture to lead the church into new insights—"Reformed and always Reforming."

A Worship Hermeneutic

The Triune God is at work redemptively in history for and with humanity through words for his people *in worship*. Reformed theology is theocentric and doxological. The Lord God is a jealous God, desiring exclusive love and loyalty from his people; he commands his people, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength" (Matt. 22.37). Reading Scripture leads to an experiencing of the presence of God and a worshipful response to that presence. The Westminster Catechism states this point strongly in its first question and answer: "What is the chief and highest end of man? Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever."¹⁰

This is not the only end for humans; for it is only one half of the Great Commandment and Covenant, albeit the first. When asked "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt. 22.36-40). Included in these two commandments is the Old Testament treatment of worship.

Isaiah 6 expresses the flow of Reformed worship. First, we come before God in praise as he encounters us in our need (Is. 6.1-3). In response to the holy and awesome God, we recognize our sinfulness and confess our need (Is. 6.4-5). Next, God acts to assure us of his atoning forgiveness (Is. 6.6-7). Then, we listen to God's redemptive desire and call (Is. 6.8a). We respond by committing ourselves to service (Is. 6.8b). Then, God commissions us with his blessing to go out and proclaim (Is. 6.9a). Thus, a worship hermeneutic leads us in the experience and application of Scripture. Scripture leads

us to experience the presence of God in the Spirit and God's forgiveness and victory in Jesus Christ. Scripture leads us in our response to God.

A worship hermeneutic also picks up the Pietist stream of the Reformed tradition, in the belief that Scripture is to be interpreted and experienced at a personal level. As such, it addresses the question "How should I respond to God?" That response is worship and a moral life that shows to the world our gratitude to God and the Gospel before the

A worship hermeneutic also picks up the Pietist stream of the Reformed tradition, in the belief that Scripture is to be interpreted and experienced at a personal level.

world, hence the moral sense of Scripture—what we should do. This worship emphasis is expressed in key phrases of the Reformed tradition. It is expressed in John Calvin's emphasis on "Knowledge of God and Knowledge of Self." Calvin begins *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* with these words:

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes, and gives birth to the other. For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone.¹¹

Following Calvin, the Reformed tradition has emphasized that life is to be lived "coram Deo," before the face of God. The "priesthood of all be-

lievers" emphasizes that all believers have equal access to God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit. "Soli Deo Gloria," "to God alone be the glory," the motto of Dordt College, states the goal that all of life is to be a worshipful response to God.

At the heart of Reformed worship has been the Psalms. Most Reformed churches still sing from a *Psalter*, and some will sing only Psalms—the Scriptures' book of worship. Their importance in Reformed worship testifies to Reformed spirituality and worship hermeneutic. Many Reformed worship services have been and are begun with Psalm 100, and Communion has traditionally been closed with the words from Psalm 103.

A Missional Hermeneutic

Finally, the Triune God is at work redemptively in history for and with humanity through words for his people in worship and *the mission of recreation*. This is the other half of the covenant. We are called to serve God in this world. We are elected by God to be his people in this world, to be a blessing to the nations. Even though the word "missional" has become a new word for identifying certain types of church and their vision for ministry, it is not a new concept. Abram was called to be missional. Israel was delivered from Egypt to be missional (Ex. 19. 4-6). The Prophets looked forward to a renewed missional people (Is. 60.1-3; Zech. 8.20-24). Jesus called his disciples to be "fishers for people" and pictured their nature as the "salt of the earth" (Matt. 5.13-16). He also commissioned them: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28.19-20, *NIV*). Scripture then ends with the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21.1-5).

This missional hermeneutic is, thus, not only creational but *recreational*. It finds its origin in God's vision set forth in Genesis 1-2 and its end in heaven coming to earth pictured in Revelation 21-22. It is not only restoration and regaining of creation but also development, moving from a garden to a city.

This missional hermeneutic motivates and guides the application of Scripture. God's people live the story of Scripture in partnership with God:

God's people are to love and serve God by loving and serving their neighbor and developing God's whole creation.

This creational missional hermeneutic, then, addresses the question of how we are to serve God in this world. As a result, the missional hermeneutic ties, methodologically, to many of the emphases of Rhetorical Criticism. Rhetorical Criticism explores the reason for a given communication and the means used to effect, or bring about, that purpose. Words are used to effect a mission. This creational missional hermeneutic corresponds to the analogical sense in the medieval system. The analogical, as the Greek name of "going up" implies, looks at what we hope for. Yet the name also points to a theology that was not fully creational.

By contrast, Reformed theology has greatly emphasized and developed a creational theology. It often speaks of the human role within creation as response to the "Cultural Mandate." Some find this idea in Genesis 1.28-30, where God tells humans to "fill the earth and subdue it" and "Rule over it" and in which he give them "every seed-bearing plant...for food." While this statement sets forth humans as God's vice-regents in the creation, it is not fully a "mandate." Rather, it is explicitly stated to be a "blessing." It is God's gift and empowerment of humanity in his world.

Others tie the "Cultural Mandate" to Genesis 2.15, in which "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (*NIV*). Here, humans are not to rule in an abusive way in the creation; they are to be stewards who protect and develop the creations. The language used here is that of priests who mediate God's care to the creation. Again, this statement is not officially a mandate, a command. It is a statement of purpose.

The Reformed tradition emphasizes this creational missional hermeneutic through many key phrases. Again Latin reappears in the phrase the "missio dei," the mission of God. The phrase "Cultural Mandate" does reflect what may be an overemphasis on God as a commanding God who must be obeyed. Still obedience is seen properly in the context of gratitude, service, calling, and mission. Part of that gratitude is vocation.

The Reformed tradition has so emphasized

the concept of earthly calling or vocation that it is often known as the "Calvinist work ethic." The anointed roles of the Old Testament—priest, king, and prophet—have even been applied to the work of both Jesus and his followers. As a result, Reformed Christians work for justice and advocate a "word and deed" ministry in its missiology, just as did the ministry of Jesus.

The emphasis on the believer's mission now, in this present world, under the present Lordship of Jesus Christ, fits the Reformed eschatology, which is primarily a-millennial. Escapist views, which emphasize going to heaven, and Annihilationist views, which see this present creation being destroyed, are resisted in terms of a Restorationist view, which emphasizes the new creation with both continuity and discontinuity with this creation (1 Cor. 15.54-58). This creational, missional hermeneutic emphasizes the Transformational or Reformational perspective in the Reformed tradition.

Conclusion: Missing Elements— Calvinism for the Twenty-First Century

As this paper outlines the emphases and strengths of the Reformed Hermeneutical tradition, we must ask "What is missing?" "What are weaknesses in the tradition or emphases that need development?"

First, the three streams of the tradition—Doctrinal, Piety, and Transformation—have contributed much, but they do not cooperate very well. In fact, the Reformed tradition is schismatic from other Christian traditions and within itself. Over twenty denominations in the United States trace their lineage to the Dutch Reformed tradition alone. Is it possible to give greater response to the Lord's prayer in John 17.20-23?

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (*NIV*)

There may be hope—in the forming World Communion of Reformed Churches—for bringing together the Reformed Ecumenical Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Still, how will this union affect church cooperation at the local level? Would it be possible and make sense to have one church in every community with multiple congregations? How expansive could this one church be? Would a community council only include the congregations of its denomination? Could it bring together churches of the same tradition? Could it even be a community council of all Christian churches in the community so that there is only one church of Christ in a community with multiple traditions and congregations?

The church has shown that it cannot find unity in the details of doctrine. Styles of piety, especially worship, have divided churches. Can unity be found in mission? Churches need to stop competing against each other in their community and to refocus on combating the oppressive evils in their midst. Church can and need to cooperate in addressing community poverty and the individual poor, in addressing abuse and the abused, in addressing addictions and addicts, in addressing youth needs and the youth, in addressing crime and the victims and criminals, in addressing health care and the sick, in addressing the world with the Gospel in word and deed. Can churches in local communities worship together, pray together, work together more? This unity may not affect how we read and interpret Scripture, but it will show that we are reading, listening, and responding.

Second, not only has the Reformed tradition often divided against itself; it has also divided itself from the world. Although its hermeneutics is one of creational and cultural engagement, its practice has been one of separation. It forms colonies and enclaves. Instead of being the city of light on a hill, it has often hidden under a bushel. The Reformed community has built a very good world under the bushel. It has sought to keep itself unstained by the world. It has raised up new generations, taught them well, often within its own schools, and kept them close to home.

However, this isolation from the greater community is breaking down. With greater communication, media, and mobility, the next generation is

not staying under the bushel. Will this moving out from under the bushel lead to a loss of Reformed identity and community hermeneutic or a new missional engagement? Will it lead to the demise of Reformed education, especially day schools, or revive them as a gift to the world? Education has been a strength of the Reformed tradition. How can it be continued and expanded?

At the same time that the next generation is moving away from isolation, the Reformed perspective on life is growing in influence. “New Calvinism,” which is primarily a revival of Reformed theological and redemptive hermeneutics, is gaining national attention. The Reformed hermeneutic is affecting more and more Christian colleges and educational systems. Yet the traditionally Reformed schools are struggling. Will we need to give up some of our separatism and distinctive institutions? Do we need to explore better ways to be leaven in the dough rather than baking our own bread? How can we increase our contribution?

The emphasis on the believer’s mission now, in this present world, under the present Lordship of Jesus Christ, fits the Reformed eschatology, which is primarily a-millennial.

Third, where is the celebration? Although the Westminster Catechism says, in the first answer, that we are “to enjoy God forever,” joy and celebration have not been hallmarks of the Reformed tradition. Many people see and show the Reformed tradition as stoically repressing emotions, harshly demanding obedience, and judgmentally condemning those outside and, at times, those inside. Too often the Gospel is missing. There is also a danger of legalism, Pharisaic superiority, and triumphalism. It seems that people have to work their way into the Reformed tradition; it is too seldom the evangelistic starting point.

The redemptive hermeneutic, then, needs greater highlighting. We need to develop spiritual and rhetorical passion that appeals to ethos, pathos, camaraderie, and credibility. Passion is needed, not just logos, the appeal to logic and argument. The creational/missional hermeneutic is needed to help us see and show the beauty of God’s world—in worship and work. We need our artists to inspire us and the world with visions of the Triune God at work redemptively in history, for and with humanity, through words for his people in worship and the mission of recreation. We could also use some comedy to bring humor and *joy* to this life and mission.

Endnotes

1. This is the town of my family heritage on my father’s side where the Wolhuis’ were church organists for over 200 years. The roots of the Christian Reformed Church are found, in part, in this early separation from the Dutch Reformed state church. These separatists emphasized biblical and Gospel preaching, reverent worship, and loving God.
2. My family heritage goes back to Ulrum. My father’s home church and mine during my high school years was Grace Christian Reformed Church of Kalamazoo, Michigan, which was the Grace Protestant Christian Reformed Church in the doctrinal debates over common grace in the 1920s and 1930s. My wife’s grandfather was William Hendriksen, who stressed biblical interpretation, piety, and practice.

I was educated in the Christian school system from kindergarten through college and seminary at Calvin College and Theological Seminary. I have been a teacher at Calvin College, am a pastor who has helped plant missional churches in the Christian Reformed Church, and presently teach at a Reformational school, Dordt College.

3. K. J. Vanhoozer, C. G. Bartholomew, D. j. Treier, and N. T. Wright, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London; Grand Rapids, MI: SPCK; Baker Academic, 2005), 22.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 24.
6. Calvin Seerveld, *How to Read the Bible to Hear God Speak* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2003), 40.
7. Jeffrey Wiema, “Title of Essay?” *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, Ed. D. A. Black & D. S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 151.
8. George Guthrie, “Title of Essay?” *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, Ed. D. A. Black & D. S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 255.
9. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).
10. *The Westminster Larger Catechism* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).
11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 1, ed. H. Beveridge (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2010), 47-48.