Introduction

This book is about the form of Reformed theology, about its metaphysical and epistemological character, and about its method or methods. By "Reformed theology" is understood a theology that endeavors to express and to be faithful to Scripture while standing in the tradition of the ecumenical creeds, the confessions of faith of the early generations of the Reformed era, and subsequent Reformed Orthodoxy. It professes that faith through successive cultures, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernism, and so on. Its articulation has two aspects: the development of its intentions to be consistent with and faithful to Scripture and the creeds, and to express the nature of our knowledge of God and of ourselves that Scripture conveys.

This is a tradition of "catholic Protestantism," as Oliver Crisp has argued. And as Richard Muller and others have convincingly shown, this theology was worked out with great sophistication in the era of Reformed Orthodoxy. Muller has demonstrated that within Reformed Orthodoxy there are various strands of theological thought having a basic unity, and with a somewhat eclectic attitude to philosophy, and thus to the relations between theology and philosophy. The names of French theologians such as John Calvin and Theodore Beza, of Italians such as Jerome Zanchius and Francis Turretin, English Puritans such as Stephen Charnock and John Owen, Scots such as Robert Rollock and Samuel Rutherford, and Dutch theologians such as Peter Van Maastricht and Gisbert Voetius are representative of numerous other theologians whose views are so carefully examined and collated by Muller.[1] The work of Jonathan Edwards and the Baptist theologian John Gill, were indebted to this orthodoxy. In the nineteenth century the theology of the Hodges and B. B. Warfield at Princeton, W. G. T. Shedd of Union Theological Seminary, New York, Scottish theologians such as William Cunningham and George Smeaton, and in the early years of the twentieth century, Herman Bavinck of the Free University of Amsterdam,

1. See Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics.*

and many others continue in this tradition. I shall refer to this tradition as Classical Reformed Theology (CRT).

To think of the identity of Reformed theology in these terms may seem somewhat arbitrary. There are other ways of cutting the cake, no doubt. But I think it is fairly clear that these other ways are more amorphous and harder to handle. For example, B. A. Gerrish discusses Reformed theological identity in broadly institutional terms, the continuous theological output of what Friedrich Schleiermacher called "the Reformed school," and he allows this school to embrace profound differences in theological and philosophical outlook. The fact that Calvin and Schleiermacher each manifest an intense interest in religion is allowed to prevail over the very different conceptions each had of it.[2] The great advantage of taking one's lead from the creedal and confessional tradition and its numerous exponents is that it provides a body of thinking in the considerable body of theological literature, which one can, so to speak, nail down, describe, and evaluate using the usual academic tools.

But it would be mistaken to think of CRT as monochrome. As Muller has also shown,[3] CRT provides a rich as well as a somewhat diverse heritage, and an eclectic attitude towards philosophy. Yet although they occasionally differ among themselves about method, and on doctrinal detail and emphasis, theologians of this tradition exhibit a remarkable harmony in their general theological outlook. It is the parameters and presuppositions of this outlook that will concern us here, not the discussion of particular doctrines except as these exemplify that tradition is some respect. Standing to one side of this confessional tradition, though remaining under a wider umbrella of Reformed theology, are revisionist theologians such as Schleiermacher and Barth. Their thought by and large falls outside this book. Such revisionists recognize an indebtedness to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant,[4] whereas as a general rule the intellectual currents of confessional orthodoxy flow from the medieval theologians, and more recently show some indebtedness to Thomas Reid.

Of course a tradition is always open to revision, especially one that stresses human sin and fallibility as much as the Reformed faith does.

2. See for example, Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage*, especially chapter 12, and his *Continuing the Reformation: Essays on Modern Religious Thought*, Part Three.

3. For example, Muller, "*Ad fontes argumentorum*: The Sources of Reformed Theology in the Seventeenth Century."

4. Several of the essays collected together in McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, clearly show Barth's indebtedness to the epistemology of Immanuel Kant.

Nevertheless, any responsible revision must always be undertaken for good reason, and in an intellectually thorough manner. Apart from such a reason, Reformed theology is confessed to be a legitimate expression of the permanent Christian gospel. The mantra *semper reformanda* is usually taken, without any discussion, to mean that those in the Reformed tradition should be active in seeking doctrinal revision and new departures in theology. However, the phrase was originally, "The church is reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God." What it means is that the church should continually reform its life and witness by reference to the theological principles of the Reformation and, of course, of Scripture. It should be emphasized that what follows is not intended as a defense of the validity of CRT, either by historical precedent or by theological and other forms of reasoning. Rather it takes it as a given tradition, endeavoring to sketch its basic thrust and temper, and against it to measure more recent proposals to reconstruct it.

So this study is a reconsideration of some of the central intellectual presuppositions and working methods of that tradition, but one that, I hope, recognizes the differences within it, as well as what unites it. Its outlook is emphatically not confessional in the narrow sense, seeking to defend every jot and tittle of a Confession at all costs. It is written at a time when seriously intended questions about both its theological method and content are being raised from within that general tradition. The chief aim is not only to re-present the methodological outline of such theology, but to do so in a way that demonstrates that the arguments for a radical change in the method and outlook of CRT offered by "post-conservatives" and "post-foundationalists"[5] are weak and unconvincing. For CRT to be overturned, or relegated to the museum, the arguments for doing so will have to be considerably stronger than those currently available. So, I judge, anyone who wishes to retain the theological stance and method of CRT, and re-state it in the modern culture, may do so undeterred. He or she need not be discomfited by these new proposals, or fear that what they have to say has undermined or significantly skewed that great theological tradition.

To show this involves consulting and citing theologians from the CRT. I have tried to provide a representative range of these. But the bulk of the book is my own attempt to explain and defend its theological procedure in what I hope is a fresh and up to date way, and to do this in the light of current misunderstandings of CRT by the protagonists of new proposals that are intended to supplant it. Part of this project is a thesis about the

5. See Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 278f. for Vanhoozer's post-conservative approach, and 291f. for his post-foundationalist outlook.

connection between manner and matter. Certain methods and results are intrinsic to CRT. This is not to say that there is one philosophical orthodoxy. But there has to be a philosophical outlook that ensures the objectivity of knowledge, for example. However, from the point of view of Reformed theology it does not matter what exactly the provenance of that outlook is provided that the philosophical tools are subordinate to the faith. As we shall see, there has in fact been a fairly eclectic approach to the sources of those philosophical tools that help to provide understanding for the faith. It is impossible to shed its theological methods and their presuppositions and to ensure the survival of Reformed theology in some other way. If you throw out the bathwater, then you throw out the baby as well.

I have chosen to focus upon the work of Kevin Vanhoozer[6] and John Franke[7] as exemplars of these new proposals because they are among the ablest and certainly the most prolific writers on theological method from the confessional Reformed stable. Each is often self-conscious about the fact. In his latest book *Remythologizing Theology*, Vanhoozer discusses not only how the theological metaphysics of theo-drama impacts upon features of classical Christian theism such as God as creator, his almightiness, his impassibility and his speech, but also upon distinctive features of Reformed theology such as the *pactum salutis* and the idea of effectual calling.

The revisionary proposals of such as Vanhoozer and Franke, considered together, have the following characteristics; they move away from the view of Christian theology as consisting of sets of truths. They advocate a decidedly conditional epistemology, qualified in terms of "context" or "perspective" and in Vanhoozer's case (less so in the case of Franke), *they think of theological construction in terms of the development of a kind of narrative* (following Von Balthasar), as a "theo-drama." In this they not only swim with a strong contemporary theological current, but also swallow a good deal of the postmodern attitude to metaphysics and epistemology. But other practitioners might easily have been chosen. For example, the Reformed theologian Michael Horton also exemplifies much of what Vanhoozer says. In his book *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* there is, as the title of the work suggests, an emphasis upon drama. "Our goal all along will be to defend the definition of theology as *the church's reflection on God's performative action in word and deed and list own participation in the drama of redemption.*"[8] And there is the desire to engage in theology in

6. Besides Vanhoozer's *The Drama of Doctrine,* see, for example, his *Remythologizing Theology,*

7. Franke, *The Character of Theology: A Postconservative Evangelical Approach.*

8. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology,* 4

a post-foundationalist mode. "The more that modern foundationalism is shaken off, the greater the openness to particular confessional theologies."[9] Chapter 9 of *Covenant and Eschatology* is entitled "Community Theater, Local Performances of the Divine Drama," and Horton rejects the attitude to Scripture that reckons it to be "a sourcebook of timeless truths," "timeless propositions," or timeless ideas.[10] So, plenty of common ground here: a suspicion of theology as "timeless truth," the rejection of foundationalism, and the preponderant stress on the dramatic and the performative. We might reasonably say that the theologians selected for attention here, Kevin Vanhoozer and John Franke, are representative of a wider contemporary wave. Together they exemplify, in an overlapping way, the effect of the postmodern attitude on Christian theology. It is this attitude that the book critically scrutinizes. It is hoped, though, that this scrutiny will be of interest in other traditions of the church on which post-conservatism and post-foundationalism are bearing down.

The discussion that follows does not have for its conclusion that post-foundationalism as a method of doing theology ought to be rejected. That's not the argument. Rather, the argument is that Vanhoozer and Franke are not consistent proponents of the main spine of Christian theology, but in trying to combine it with other positions they run into inconsistency. In the case of Vanhoozer his treatment of what he calls "propositonalist" theology is skewed to the point of caricature. As we shall see, properly understood both Scripture and Classic Reformed theology are consistent with the speech act emphasis on language that he favors. And so his critique of "propositionalism" is largely beside the point.

The chapters of the book contain a number of fresh discussions of the logical, metaphysical, and epistemological matters that undergird CRT and that bring into relief the weakness of the new proposals. Taken together they present a cumulative case that endeavors to show the weaknesses of the current postmodern and post-foundationalist proposals that preoccupy the Reformed segment of worldwide Christian theology. This case offers, I realize, a negative thesis, but it may be put positively: a Christian theologian who is attracted by the post-foundationalist "turn" in theology, either by its methods or by its theological conclusions, will find in those claims and conclusions no good reason to depart from the doctrinal pattern of CRT, though the responsibility remains on any systematic theologian to restate

9. Ibid.

10. See ibid., 30, 125, 240 respectively. Horton has more recently undertaken a systematic theology of a more conventional kind: *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*.

Christian doctrine in a contemporary manner as the cultural context warrants this.

Those who engage in issues of theological method must also become seriously engaged in philosophical questions and issues. This is because it is impossible to do systematic theology without having a view about the nature of divine and human reality, and about the sources of knowledge of God and of ourselves, and so to interact with the culture. Part of the problem with the proposals exemplified by John Franke and Kevin Vanhoozer is that they have not allowed themselves to be sufficiently philosophical. Key issues have been glossed over or left unclear, for the conceptual and philosophical side of things has not been sufficiently penetrating or sustained.

Each chapter of what follows sets out a distinctive argument or set of arguments. The first two chapters are intended to articulate and to defend the ontological and epistemological character of CRT, with particular stress being laid on its systematic character. This sets the stage for the critique. The arguments of the later chapters engage with the innovative proposals on a number of fronts. The aim is to show that the proposals, considered as offering appealing alternative methods, are almost without exception unconvincing, and in some respects confused. If this thesis is cogent then it follows that those who wish to share the theological outlook of CRT have good reason to reject the innovative proposals.

Chapter 1 sets out the parameters of classical Reformed theology, and particularly what is understood by its being *systematic* theology. The next chapter has to do with the epistemological bases of the theology, particularly with the issues of metaphysical realism, objectivity and certainty, and the relation between nature and grace. These two chapters set the scene. The next three chapters are, broadly speaking, concerned with what has been referred to as the narrative turn in theology. The "post-foundationalists" appeal to a general phenomenon that has had a considerable impact on how theology is currently understood and practiced. Here I shall have in mind Vanhoozer's idea of theo-drama and the theological proposals that he has recently drawn from it in his latest book, centering on the idea of God as a communicative agent. We shall look at the theological consequences of privileging narrative over systematic connectedness, and we shall provide an assessment of some of the arguments that are offered for making such a shift. So in chapter 3 we shall examine the logic of narrative, and the relation between being and doing. Which, in theology, comes first, logically speaking: the study of reports of activity, human and divine, or the study of the being and character of God and of humankind? In the next chapters, 4 and 5, we examine one source of unease that revisionists have with classical theology, that it is "propositionalist" and "rationalist" and "timeless." Broadly

speaking these three chapters have to do with the metaphysical framework in which classic systematic reflection of the Christian faith does and should take place.

Then, in the second half of the examination of the new proposals, chapters 7 to 9, we shall consider certain epistemological issues, particularly the confusion between the *identification of* and the *identity* of God, the place of induction and deduction in theological reasoning, the much-publicized issue of "foundationalism," and the character of the knowledge and beliefs about God and ourselves that it is possible to have. Chapter 10 is a short conclusion.