

## INAUGURAL LECTURE

### RAGE, RAGE AGAINST THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

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#### I. *Introduction*

Having been unable to find a suitable quotation from Bob Dylan as a title for my inaugural lecture, I have chosen instead a line from a famous poem by his partial namesake, Dylan Thomas. The whole stanza reads as follows:

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

My reason for choosing as my opening shot Dylan Thomas's rant against the passive resignation of old age in the face of death is simply this: today, both old age and church history are generally regarded as irrelevant. In a culture obsessed with youth and driven by consumption, old age is something of an embarrassment. It is an unproductive, unmarketable concept; and, in a church which so often apes the larger culture, church history is usually regarded as having little or nothing of use to say. My purpose, therefore, is to cast a critical eye on this assumption, and to indicate that Westminster Seminary church historians are not simply going to acquiesce in the consensus concerning their irrelevance, but that they fully intend to rage, rage against the dying of the historical light.<sup>1</sup>

A variety of factors contribute to the anti-historical thrust of the modern age, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say today, however, that I believe that in a society dominated by ideologies of novelty and innovation—ideologies driven by the agendas of science, capital, and consumerism—the past will always be cast in terms which put it at a disadvantage in relation to present and future. In fact, it is vitally necessary in such societies for the past to be inferior; this is one important means of validating the present and justifying the future.

*This article is a revision of Carl R. Trueman's inaugural lecture as Professor of Historical Theology and Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, delivered on 16 November 2005.*

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Westminster embodies this counter-cultural trend in the emphasis it gives to church history in the curriculum, with full courses being taught on ancient church, medieval church, the Reformation, and modern age. Most seminaries now compress church history into two courses, covering early church to medieval, and Reformation to modern.

<sup>2</sup> See "Reckoning with the Past in an Anti-Historical Age," in Carl R. Trueman, *The Wages of Spin* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2004), 15-38.

Dare one say it, in America, a nation built on notions of an expanding frontier and of manifest destiny, a nation whose self-actualization is always seen as being just over the next horizon, such present-future orientation is particularly strong. But it is not just in America that such a viewpoint exerts its grip; it is a Western phenomenon as a whole, with even our language indicating this underlying value scheme: *innovative, original, ground-breaking* have, on the whole, positive connotations; *traditional, conservative, old-fashioned* have, on the contrary, negative ones. Within such a cultural framework, can history really serve any function other than that of a traveling freak show which parades the grotesques, the monsters, and the mediocrities of the past in order to allow the modern world to feel good about itself and its future?

A further problem for history as a discipline is the cluster of philosophies which are bracketed together under the general term *postmodernism*. Postmodernism has allegedly rendered implausible the whole idea of grand narratives and of the accessibility of truth in any traditional way. In a world of no grand narratives, of course, there can be no history in any referential sense, only various incommensurable narratives by which historians express their own values and tastes. Writing history is thus swallowed up in the politics of the present. Postmodernism tells us that because of this radically relativizing insight we therefore live in an age of epochal change, where everything once certain is now exposed as negotiable and volatile and that a fundamental cultural paradigm shift has occurred.<sup>3</sup>

As a historian, of course, I am never impressed by claims about epochal events and paradigm shifts. I am too well aware that every age has made claims to being epochal; the great Bob Dylan may well have sung, “Oh my name it is nothin’, my age it means less,” but nobody has ever really believed such sentiments about themselves and their own time. On the contrary, human beings have consistently and continuously engaged in the creative struggle to transform culture and to leave their mark on the world around them. This surely indicates something about the amazing and awesome human drive to make a difference, to make my name and my age the decisive one. Is the postmodern turn of epochal significance? Only time will really tell, but if I were a betting man, I would wager heavily against it being so.

At a more sophisticated level, my skepticism about postmodernism is rooted in my attraction to the arguments of critical theorists like Frederic Jameson, Perry Anderson, and Terry Eagleton.<sup>4</sup> They argue that postmodernism, with

<sup>3</sup> A good grasp of the epistemological impact of postmodernism on the practice of history can be gained from reading Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997; repr., London: Routledge, 2006). This book has become a standard text in deconstructionist approaches to history. A useful analysis of and thoughtful, moderate response to postmodern historical method is Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Among Frederic Jameson’s voluminous critical works, see esp. *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); and *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the*

all of its vibrantly creative, chaotic, challenging, and exciting insights, is actually *the cultural logic of late capitalism*, to use Jameson's phrase. I myself prefer to speak of the cultural logic of *advanced consumerism* so as to avoid the prescriptive political and eschatological implications of Jameson's Marxism, but his basic point is, I believe, sound. To defend this thesis would take too much time today, so a single quotation from Karl Marx himself will have to suffice. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx describes with unnerving foresight the epistemological and ethical anarchy which modernity, extended to its very limits, globalized, and universalized, will bring with it:

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. . . . Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.<sup>5</sup>

*All that is holy is profaned*: pardon the pun, but full marks to Marx for here predicting precisely the kind of anarchic world which would produce both the highly sophisticated philosophical hedonism of Michel Foucault and the crass redneck shenanigans of the Jerry Springer Show.

If, of course, postmodernism, with all of its disdain for history in any traditional sense, is the ideology of advanced consumerism, then it can just as easily be described as the quintessential ideology of modern America; indeed, in modern America, and in the West which follows America's social and economic lead, it is surely interesting to note that just about anything can be believed, however absurd, and any moral precedent can be overturned, however well-established, provided that such action can be successfully marketed as enhancing the American consumerist dream. Whether it is the nature of human sexuality, the definition of marriage, or access to abortion and euthanasia, American public morality is increasingly that of the marketplace, and moral truth is that which the cultural market forces permit, or, in some cases, demand. Think, for example, of the recent emergence of phenomena such as gay tourism and gay television channels. Would these things happen if they did not present opportunities for money-making? And can one overestimate how these things themselves then

*Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002). Perry Anderson's basic thesis on postmodernity is detailed in *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998). Terry Eagleton's work possesses that unique combination for someone writing on postmodernism of being witty, incisive, and comprehensible: see his *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); and *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2004). Many of the essays in Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), also demonstrate lines of critique regarding many of the metanarrative claims made by postmodern thinkers.

<sup>5</sup> From "The Communist Manifesto," in Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848: Political Writings; Vol. 1* (ed. David Fernbach; London: Penguin, 1973).

feed into and reinforce the social normalization of homosexuality as a lifestyle *choice* (and I use the word *choice* precisely to make the point about the connection with the consumer mentality).<sup>6</sup>

This is where my narrative today connects to evangelicalism. If post-modernism was always destined to be the cultural logic of modern America, with its consumer-driven economy and cultural mores, then it was arguably inevitable that it was also destined to be the ideology of evangelicalism, which, with its individualism, its pragmatism, and its functional disdain for history, is Americanized religion par excellence.<sup>7</sup>

Now, there has been much hoo-hah over recent years about how the church in general, and evangelicalism in particular, must embrace many aspects of the (nebulous) cultural conditions called postmodernism.<sup>8</sup> In part this is built upon a historiography which I shall presently call into serious question. First, however, I want to draw attention to the fact that the proponents of postmodern or post-conservative evangelicalism generally consider themselves to be saying something new. They are calling, as they see it, for a fundamental recasting or revisioning of evangelical theology in postmodern, anti-Enlightenment categories. At this point, I want to begin to demonstrate the value of history as a *critical* discipline by applying to postmodern evangelicalism the principle articulated so well by Quentin Skinner, the Cambridge historian and philosopher: when reading an historical text, Skinner points out, one must not simply ask what the writer of the text is *saying*; one must also, and more importantly, ask what the writer of the text is *doing*.<sup>9</sup>

Now, when one approaches the major texts of postmodern evangelicalism and asks what they are saying, the answer is exciting: they claim they are opening up

<sup>6</sup> Of course, I assume here that the dynamic or logic of the marketplace is itself complex and not something which is simply driven either by supply or by demand. Rather, there is a complex negotiation between supplier and consumer which also takes into account wider cultural factors, such as previous history, established values, etc. Thus, e.g., programs like *Will and Grace* and *Friends* in the U.S. or *Eastenders* in the U.K. which have undoubtedly done much not simply to reflect but also to shape wider cultural understandings of sexual morality, relationship, etc., have not simply done so by presenting an alternative reality which the public has then absorbed in some uncritical manner; other factors, such as the rise in disposable income, the material limits and possibilities of professional urban life, the wider significance of the televisual media in general, along with many other factors, have all played their part. Yet I believe my central point is sound: the marketplace is perhaps the single most powerful nexus of cultural forces in the modern Western world.

<sup>7</sup> The one possible rival to this characterization of evangelicalism as the quintessential American religion is Mormonism: see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). For a thorough critique of the impact of consumerism and American values on evangelical Protestantism in the U.S., see the tetralogy by David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth; or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); and *Above all Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), esp. 161-74; Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); also John R. Franke, "Reforming Theology: Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics," *WTJ* 65 (2003): 1-26.

<sup>9</sup> See Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," in *Visions of Politics* (3 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1:57-89.

radical new directions for theology; but when one approaches the same texts and asks what they are *doing*, the answer is somewhat more prosaic. Far from pointing to new ways of doing theology, these texts are on the whole appropriating an admittedly new idiom, that of postmodernism, in order to accomplish a very traditional and time-honored task: they are articulating a doctrinally minimal, anti-metaphysical “mere Christianity.” Like pouting teenagers in pre-torn designer jeans and Che Guevara tee-shirts, they look angry and radical but are really as culturally conformist and conservative as a tall latte from Starbucks.

Any historian worth his salt can see that this “mere Christianity” agenda has a well-established pedigree in Christendom. At the time of the Reformation, Erasmus, writing against Luther, used a combination of Renaissance skepticism, intellectual elitism, and contemporary Catholic teaching on church authority to argue for a Christianity which was essentially practical in orientation and minimally doctrinal in content.<sup>10</sup> In seventeenth-century England, Richard Baxter adopted a linguistic philosophy suggestively akin to that of his contemporary Thomas Hobbes in order to undercut the traditional metaphysical basis of Christian orthodoxy and offer a minimal account of the doctrines of the faith.<sup>11</sup> In the early nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher responded to Kant’s critical philosophy by fusing pietism, Romanticism, and a post-Kantian anti-metaphysical bent to reconstruct Christian doctrines as statements about religious psychology, not transcendent theological truths. And evangelicalism, from its roots in revivalism and pietism, through its development in the pragmatic, anti-speculative culture of America, to its current existence as a more-or-less amorphous, transdenominational coalition, has historically embodied in its very essence an antipathy to precise and comprehensive doctrinal statement.<sup>12</sup> To make the point of immediate relevance in a Westminster context, it was this kind of evangelical position, and not really true liberalism in the technical sense, against which Machen was fighting at Princeton prior to 1929. Therefore, it would seem at least arguable from the perspective of history that the evangelical appropriation of certain aspects of postmodernism is not really a radical break with the past. It might simply be a co-opting of the latest cultural idiom to give trendy and plausible expression to a well-established and traditional ideal of “mere Christianity.”<sup>13</sup>

Let me interject a clarification at this point lest I be misinterpreted as saying that mere Christianity is something wrong in itself, a matter to be despised. That is emphatically not what I am saying at all. Salvation does not depend upon the individual’s possession of an elaborate doctrinal system or a profound grasp of intricate and complex theology. Yet this is not my point. What I am

<sup>10</sup> See Bernhard Lohse, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 162.

<sup>11</sup> See the analysis of the linguistic logic underlying Baxter’s ecumenical theology and its impact upon the nature and scope of theological formulation in Carl R. Trueman, “Richard Baxter on Christian Unity: A Chapter in the Enlightening of English Reformed Orthodoxy,” *WTJ* 61 (1999): 53-71.

<sup>12</sup> The obvious example of this is the reception within evangelical ranks of C. S. Lewis, the impact of whose book *Mere Christianity* within American evangelical circles has been immense.

<sup>13</sup> See D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

claiming is that *mere Christianity*, a Christianity which lacks this doctrinal elaboration, is an insufficient basis either for building a church or for guaranteeing the long-term stability of the tradition of the church, that is, the transmission from generation to generation and from place to place, of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. What is disturbing is that the advocates of postmodern mere Christianity are not debating how much one must believe to be saved; they are actually proposing a manifesto for the life of the church as a whole, a somewhat more comprehensive and ambitious project. It is the validity of this that I question.

To return to my main point: eclectic, simplistic, and popularized appropriation of Wittgensteinian linguistics and uncritical engagement with pop culture finds fertile soil in a movement committed not so much to the real implications of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language as to the defusing of the problems faced by a transdenominational movement seeking a place at that oft-mentioned but somewhat nebulous "table." Evangelicalism is, after all, based not upon comprehensive dogmatic formulation but upon a loose collection of elective affinities, only some of which are doctrinal.<sup>14</sup> I would argue, therefore, that seen in this light, the long-term contribution of postmodernism to evangelicalism will ultimately be seen to be more of form than of substance; ho-hum, the singer changes yet again, but, in the words of Led Zeppelin, the song remains the same. This is surely why evangelical expressions of postmodernism are often so tame and uncritical compared to their counterparts in the secular academy; and why they are rarely taken seriously by those outside of the evangelical subculture. In my admittedly limited experience it does not really seem to be the case that postmodern evangelicals want to engage with the truly radical philosophical implications of the various postmodern philosophies; it is rather that evangelicals are drawn to the idiom of postmodernism because it facilitates a hip, trendy, and culturally plausible in-house defense of the classic, established evangelical notion of a mere Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

Further, evangelical postmodernism often fails to subject postmodernism itself to any radical critique. Instead, it seems to assume its basic validity as a given and

<sup>14</sup> The dilemma created at Wheaton College by the conversion of faculty members to Roman Catholicism and that created in the Evangelical Theological Society by the conversion of office bearers highlight the problems faced by institutions and organizations with minimal, albeit evangelical, doctrinal bases. In the cases of Joshua Hochschild at Wheaton and Francis Beckwith in the ETS, both men made good claims to be able to sign the relevant doctrinal bases while yet being good Catholics. In my opinion, their positions were certainly arguable by the letter of the law, even if at odds with its spirit.

<sup>15</sup> For example, I have never come across a self-proclaimed postmodern Christian who regards the biblical prohibition on child sacrifice as being purely contingent and contextual; yet in the university setting where I initially worked as an academic I had numerous friends who regarded child sacrifice as definitely not something one would want to do in the Senior Common Room of a British university but who also regarded any attempt to make the prohibition a universal moral imperative, binding on all contemporary societies, as an act of Western imperial hubris. I address some of these issues in my response to Franke's "Reforming Theology" (see n. 8 above); I leave it to the reader to decide if his attempt to answer the challenge is a cogent one: see Carl R. Trueman, "It Ain't Necessarily So," *WTJ* 65 (2003): 311-25; John R. Franke "Postmodern and Reformed? A Response to Professors Trueman and Gaffin," *WTJ* 65 (2003): 331-43.

therefore, by implication, as ideologically neutral. Postmodernism's allegedly overwhelming cultural dominance does not, of course, in any way prove its validity; yet one must search hard for any serious postconservative evangelical discussion of the possibility, articulated so well by Jameson, Anderson, and Eagleton among others, that postmodernism might itself be a highly ideological modernism extended to its absolute limits. The reason for this critical lacuna? To quote Bob Dylan again, you never ask questions with God on your side; and to the extent that postmodernism is the all-embracing, omnipresent, god-like cultural system which imperiously castrates and internalizes all opposition; and to the extent that mere Christianity is the evangelicals' God-given ideal, there is no need to ask the really critical questions.<sup>16</sup> Postmodern evangelicalism, like much of postmodernism, presents itself to the world with all the smug self-importance of a radical revolution. Yet this is an illusion, because the end result at which it aims is as old as the hills, as exclusively doctrinaire as it can be, and as traditional and conservative as it comes: an old-hat, mere Christianity, articulated in a contemporary cultural idiom which actually renders it utterly powerless to challenge the dominant culture and yet impervious to criticism.<sup>17</sup>

## II. *The Problem of Reformed Orthodoxy*

This brings me to the issue of Reformed Orthodoxy.<sup>18</sup> The postmodern evangelical literature has little time for Reformed Orthodoxy, typically characterizing it as an example of how Enlightenment rationalism infected and perverted

<sup>16</sup> Examples of this abound. Take, e.g., the use which the late Stanley Grenz makes of *Star Trek* for understanding Grenz, who is rare among writers on postmodernism in being able to make the subject accessible and entertaining, certainly makes numerous helpful observations on how one can track wider cultural changes in society by looking at how humans are portrayed vis-à-vis aliens in the various incarnations of the *Star Trek* franchise, from the 1960s to the 1990s. Yet he never asks the really interesting questions, such as "Who is paying for this?" "Why do they project these images the way they do?" "Why is *Star Trek* on this channel at this particular time of day?" In other words, for all of the criticism of modernism as aspiring to presenting reality as it really is, there is a sense in which Grenz himself operates with the assumption that what is portrayed on *Star Trek* is, in a deep and real sense, a mirror of reality. See Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 1-10. The same critical thinking might be applied to *The Simpsons*. Rather than simply worrying about the fact that Ned Flanders is such a pious goof and thus about how the church needs to shed this public image (a most laudable intention with which I have no quarrel!), Christians should first ask if the reason why Christians are portrayed this way has more to do with the agenda of the scriptwriter or the network than the reality of Christianity in America. It is surely worth a moment's pause to wonder why Fox, the most politically conservative of all stations, chooses to give *The Simpsons* a nightly slot just after dinner time.

<sup>17</sup> The politically disempowering impact of postmodernism is clearly identified by Terry Eagleton: see his *Illusions of Postmodernism* and *After Theory*; by analogy, the same disempowerment applies to theology and to the gospel.

<sup>18</sup> I define Reformed Orthodoxy as that theological movement which arose after the Reformation (ca. 1560 onwards) and sought to consolidate the insights of the earlier Reformers within the wider culture of the university and the church, evidenced particularly in the development of ecclesiastical confessions and catechisms. In addition, in the increasingly complex cultural, polemical, ecclesiastical, and pedagogical environment, Reformed theology during this time underwent considerable doctrinal elaboration, an elaboration which should not be interpreted by misusing categories such as *scholastic* and *rationalism* to explain developments. The major study of doctrinal elaboration during this period is that of Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

Christian theology.<sup>19</sup> Yet I would suggest that the real problem which postmodern evangelicalism has with Reformed Orthodoxy is not so much that it is a form of rationalism. That claim can be, and has been, easily debunked time and time again.<sup>20</sup> The claim's persistence as received truth therefore indicates that something else, other than the actual evidence, is keeping it alive. Let me therefore indulge in a moment of speculation: the problem, I suspect, is rather that Reformed Orthodoxy is, well, *orthodox*, that it offers a fairly detailed and extensive account of the Christian faith which stands in clear opposition to the traditional mere Christianity which evangelicals have co-opted the idiom of postmodernism to help them express. Therefore, those postmodern evangelicals who criticize orthodox responses to their positions as being too preoccupied with epistemology are, I think, quite correct: the postmodern evangelical project is not primarily an epistemological one; it is rather one of aesthetic preference, bound up with matters of taste; I speculate, but perhaps postmodern evangelicals simply find distasteful extensive and detailed doctrinal statements which aspire to universal validity; and their epistemology is on the whole simply instrumental to validating such a preference. Indeed, it is arguable that taste is the key to truth these days, a fulfillment of what Friedrich Nietzsche (a much-neglected prophet of postmodernism) anticipated in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: "And do you tell me, friends, that there is no dispute over taste and tasting? But all life is dispute over taste and tasting!"<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The portrayal of Reformed Orthodoxy in Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, is most misleading. For example, while the work of Richard A. Muller is cited on the issue of scripture, the authors demonstrate no actual knowledge of his argument at all in the way they present Reformed Orthodox approaches to scriptures as leading to a radical methodological antithesis between scripture and tradition: see *Beyond Foundationalism*, 102-4. Beyond this misuse of Muller, the authors ignore all of the massive volume of scholarship on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century exegesis and theological method which has been produced in this field over the last thirty years, and this critical lacuna in their argument feeds directly into their analysis of the subject.

<sup>20</sup> See Muller, *Prolegomena to Theology* (vol. 1 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*); see also Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1999); Willem J. Van Asselt and Eef Dekker, eds., *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); Jeffrey Mallinson, *Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza, 1519-1605* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1997); and Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: John Owen's Theological Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> "Of the Sublime Men," in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (trans. R. J. Hollingdale; London: Penguin, 1969), 140. Despite the emphasis in the literature on postmodernism representing a *linguistic* turn, it is also arguable that it represents just as much of an *aesthetic* turn, whereby matters of taste become determinative of that which is deemed to be true and good. For example, much of recent anti-theism argumentation, such as that of Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens, has emphasized the *distasteful* results of religious commitment in attempting to refute theism as a viable option. On postmodernism as an aesthetic movement, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); also his application of this approach in *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). An interesting example of this kind of approach is provided by Franke in his rejoinder to my response to his "Reforming Theology" article (see nn. 8 and 15 above). His response starts with objections to my tone, and thus the rhetorical strategy is from the start an aesthetic one which helps to obscure the more substantive issues raised in the initial exchange. In other words, the rejoinder is itself a good example of postmodern idiom: see his "Postmodern and Reformed?"

Given Westminster's commitment to upholding the Westminster Standards, it is inevitable that the church historians on faculty must justify their existence by fulfilling their role in this larger institutional task. On one level we can do this by doing what I have tried to sketch out in the first section of this lecture: by placing the latest cultural trends in the context of history and thus exposing as premature and uncritical all the hype and the hoo-hah that so often surrounds new trends. A world, and a church, which is hooked on novelty like some cultural equivalent of crack cocaine needs the cold, cynical eye of the historian to stand as a prophetic witness against it. And make no mistake, when it comes to my approach to trendy evangelical claims to epoch-making insights, beneath the cold, cynical exterior of this particular historian beats a heart of stone.

The other level at which we must fulfill our task as Westminster historians is by exposing the incorrect historiography on the basis of which the postmodern evangelical pundits so often dismiss Reformed Orthodoxy as a necessary prelude to asserting their own theological claims. It is to this that we now turn our attention. The typical picture of Reformed Orthodoxy offered by the popular postmodern evangelical market is that which we find, for example, in a recent volume which offers an analysis of the tradition based upon a very selective examination of the writings of Charles Hodge. The picture that emerges from this slender reading of Hodge is first read back into Turretin and then extrapolated as if normative for the whole of the confessional Reformed tradition. At the same time, an understanding of scholasticism as an essentially rationalist and deductive method is thrown into the mix. Thus, a particular picture of Reformed Orthodoxy is transmitted to the pulpits and the bookshops which inform the literate wing of evangelicalism, a picture which is as depressing and pejorative as it is historically inaccurate.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The portrayal, and use, of Charles Hodge in Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, is inaccurate and misleading. For example, the authors state that he basically follows the scholastic paradigm (14). The problem here is that scholastic paradigm, even within Reformed Orthodoxy, could be used to express a significant variation of theological opinions and detailed content; it is a category mistake to confuse scholasticism with content. Further, by eliding the difference between Hodge and the variegated Reformed tradition, it also sets the tone for using Hodge throughout the work as the touchstone of what Reformed Orthodoxy says, thus obviating the need to deal with the variations within that tradition on key doctrinal and hermeneutical issues. More importantly, given the constructive project Grenz and Franke are proposing, this move effectively cuts off the seventeenth century as a possible resource for contemporary theological reflection. None of the major historical work of, say, Richard Muller on scholastic method and Reformed Orthodoxy, nor any of the constructive philosophical work of scholars such as Antonie Vos and Paul Helm, both of whom appropriate seventeenth-century Reformed theology for contemporary philosophical and theological projects, is cited, utilized, or even critiqued. Indeed, it is also surprising to see that Grenz and Franke still seem to hold to the long-discredited central-dogma theory of divine sovereignty as the structural center of Reformed Orthodoxy: see *Beyond Foundationalism*, 263-64 (where the authors seem unaware that Hodge is actually quoting the Westminster Shorter Catechism on the decrees, a document which clearly gives neither the structural nor the dogmatic significance to the decrees which the authors impute to Hodge). On the fatal flaws in the central-dogma theory of Basil Hall, Ernst Bizer et al., see the following examples of the growing body of literature on this topic: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957),

First, the authors of such works have failed to engage either with the range and complexity of the seventeenth-century sources of Reformed Orthodoxy, or with the problem of historical development, or with the relevant secondary scholarship in the field. Had they done so, they would have realized that, for example, their definition of scholasticism as essentially rationalist is historically untenable. Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, William of Occam, Jacob Arminius, Francisco Suarez, John Owen, Johannes Cocceius, Thomas Barlow, Francis Turretin: all were scholastics, yet represent a diverse and, in some cases, mutually exclusive range of epistemologies, philosophies, and theologies. Scholastic method does not demand a particular doctrinal or philosophical position; it is simply a basic way of arranging, investigating, and describing objects of study, which was developed in the schools (hence it is *scholastic*), and which demands no single philosophical or theological conviction.<sup>23</sup>

Further, the highly contentious assumption that the nineteenth-century Charles Hodge is typical of the Reformed tradition should set the alarm bells ringing. To take those areas in which Hodge is most often used in such literature as being representative of the tradition as a whole, those of epistemology and revelation, it is arguable that these are the very issues where he deviates most significantly from the seventeenth-century confessional tradition. Most telling in this regard is Hodge's failure to pick up on and develop the distinction between archetypal theology (generally, God's infinite knowledge of himself) and ectypal theology (that knowledge of God which is revealed in finite forms to finite creatures), a point on which I myself erred in a discussion of Hodge some years ago.<sup>24</sup> This distinction was formally developed by Francis Junius in the late sixteenth century but it has roots in the voluntarism of late medieval Scotist understandings of God and of how language refers to God.<sup>25</sup> In Reformed theology, the distinction functions in such a way as to delimit human knowledge of God and to underline the fact that theology is utterly dependent upon God's act of condescending to reveal himself. This acknowledgement ensures that theological statements are only apprehensive, not comprehensive, of the truth as it is in God.

77-78 (where Barth seems to think that the Reformed Orthodox in practice paid too little attention to predestination, not too much!); also Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> On the definition of scholasticism, see James A. Weisheipl, "Scholastic Method," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 12:1145-46; Richard A. Muller, "The Problem of Protestant Scholasticism," in Van Asselt and Dekker, eds., *Reformation and Scholasticism*, 45-64; Trueman and Clark, introduction to *Protestant Scholasticism*, xi-xix; also Van Asselt and Dekker, introduction to *Reformation and Scholasticism*, 11-43.

<sup>24</sup> See my review of Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism*, *WTJ* 59 (1997): 135-38. I still think it is arguable that the content of the distinction is present in Hodge, but the terminology is absent, and any critical impact it has upon his theology is somewhat muted.

<sup>25</sup> Francis Junius, "Tractatus de Vera Theologia," in *D. Francisci Junii Opuscula Theologica Selecta* (ed. A. Kuyper; Amsterdam: Brockhaus, 1882), 37-40. The major difference between the Scotist use of this type of distinction and that of the Reformed is that, for Scotists, the epistemological problem is primarily an ontological one which points to the problem of a finite being's knowledge of an infinite being; for the Reformed, the noetic impact of sin is also a fundamental part of the problem.

Language can thus be referential, but there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between human words and divine realities as they exist in God himself. The presence and function of this distinction in, say, the *Leiden Synopsis*, or Francis Turretin or, later, in Herman Bavinck, denotes a theological sensitivity to the innate weakness of human language when talking of God; and it roots such God-talk not in any true rationalism but in the free, condescending, revelatory acts of God himself. Such language is still referential; and truth still has a non-negotiable objectivity; but it is not rationalism in any recognizable Enlightenment sense.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the archetype/ectype distinction in fact precludes any possibility of natural theology in the Enlightenment sense. There can be no autonomous knowledge of God built independent of God's continuing, active, sovereign condescension. Thus, the virtual absence of this conceptual distinction in Hodge marks his deviation from the dominant tradition and effectively disqualifies him from being used as typical on this point. One might also add that the distinction's all-pervading presence in the Reformed Orthodoxy of the seventeenth century makes the latter somewhat less vulnerable to the later Kantian epistemological critique than might otherwise have been the case. Indeed, it is an established historical fact that it was precisely the Arminian rejection of this distinction which left the theology of the Remonstrants peculiarly vulnerable to incursions of rationalism in the later seventeenth and then the eighteenth centuries.<sup>27</sup> To decry Reformed Orthodoxy as a whole as rationalistic and a precursor of the Enlightenment is thus historically indefensible. History shows that it was the Arminians and figures such as John Locke, advocates of an embryonic form of mere Christianity, who ultimately had difficulty in maintaining any semblance of historic orthodoxy.<sup>28</sup>

Epistemology is not the only area where Reformed Orthodoxy is habitually misrepresented as a prelude to being rejected. Another frequent allegation is that Reformed Orthodoxy is overly concerned with pedantic doctrinal precision and little else. This may indeed be so in certain individual cases; but, to

<sup>26</sup> Johannes Polyander, Andreas Rivetus, Antonius Walaeus, and Antonius Thysius, *Synopsis purioris theologiae* (Leiden, 1625), 1.3-4; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Giger; 3 vols.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992-1997), 3.2.6; Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena* (vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 212. For discussion in the secondary literature, see Muller, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 225-38; Willem J. Van Asselt, "The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Thought," *WTJ* 64 (2002), 319-35. That Grenz and Franke in *Beyond Foundationalism* do not address this basic distinction in their critique of Reformed Orthodox views of God renders their analysis inadequate. One cannot dismiss Reformed Orthodoxy on the basis of Charles Hodge: what about the basic work of Amandus Polanus von Polansdorf on prolegomena? Or the summaries of Reformed epistemology found in works such as the *Synopsis purioris theologiae*? To ignore works such as these is fatal to any analysis of the epistemology of Reformed Orthodoxy.

<sup>27</sup> Van Asselt, "The Fundamental Meaning of Theology," 335.

<sup>28</sup> Indeed, we can see the inroads of rationalism into Reformed Orthodoxy precisely in the work of a man like Richard Baxter whose agenda was the simplification of Orthodoxy: see Trueman, "Richard Baxter on Christian Unity"; Trueman, "A Small Step Towards Rationalism: The Impact of the Metaphysics of Tommaso Campanella on the Theology of Richard Baxter," in Trueman and Clark, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism*, 147-64.

borrow a thought from the National Rifle Association, doctrines don't kill people; people kill people. Yes, there has been much unpleasantness in the history of Reformed theology, but that is the product of the unpleasantness of the theologians rather than any overly-dogmatic essence of Reformed Orthodoxy. Indeed, careful historical work can be of benefit here. When one looks at those confessions which constitute the ecclesiastical expressions of Reformed Orthodoxy, it is quite amazing how economical they are, defining very clearly indeed those issues upon which they pronounce, but leaving much scope for legitimate disagreement in areas where they decline to speak. In comparison either to the Canons of Trent or to the Lutheran Book of Concord, Reformed confessions are, on the whole, concise and sparing in their statements.<sup>29</sup> This pattern is repeated in seventeenth-century discussion of fundamental articles (those minimal things which one must believe to be a credible Christian). Again, the Reformed Orthodox lists of such articles are remarkably short. Thus, to reduce the tradition to dry, pedantic, overly-elaborate orthodoxy is again historically incorrect.<sup>30</sup>

While on the subject of Reformed Orthodoxy's alleged doctrinalism, it is also worth noting that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed were deeply rooted in the ongoing Western theological tradition. There is indeed an irony in the postmodern evangelical accusation that Reformed Orthodoxy involves an arrogant isolation from the wider theological impulses of both West and East. Given that postconservatism itself frequently seems to articulate views of language, of knowledge, and indeed of God, of Christ, and of divine revelation, which are without orthodox precedent within the bounds of historic Christianity since patristic times, such criticism begs obvious questions about who exactly it is who is indulging in hubris with regard to the wider Christian tradition.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, to address the matter positively, when one analyzes, say, the work of a figure such as John Owen or George Gillespie or William Perkins or

<sup>29</sup> As a source for Reformed confessions, the best collection available is that in E. F. K. Müller, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1903), a far more comprehensive collection than that available in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983). Reading through Müller is an excellent way of seeing the theological unity in cultural and ecclesiastical diversity of the Reformed faith in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

<sup>30</sup> The Reformed Orthodox wrestled long and hard with exactly which items of the Christian creed were necessary to be believed for credible Christian profession and which found expression in the various lists of *fundamental articles* which exist. While there was no confessional consensus on exactly which articles, and how many, should be included, a representative list can be found in Turretin, *Institutes* 1.14.24. On the whole issue of fundamental articles, see Müller, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 406-30; Martin I. Klauber, *Between Reformed Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism: Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671-1737) and Enlightened Orthodoxy at the Academy of Geneva* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), 165-87.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: A Postconservative Evangelical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). I am intrigued by the philosophy of language articulated by Franke, which seems to me by and large a popularization of the later Wittgenstein and yet to lack clarity as to whether or not the world is a linguistic construct: this seems to be the thrust of his argument on pp. 23-26, yet the following statement offers qualifications the precise import of which is both crucial and left unclarified by the writer: "[T]he world we experience is mediated in and through our use of

Amandus Polanus von Polansdorf or Gisbertus Voetius or Francis Turretin, one finds in every single case a vast range of historic theological sources being used. The pages of their theologies overflow with citations of rabbis, of patristic authors West and East, of medieval scholastics, from Anselm to Occam, and of contemporary theologians and thinkers, Protestant and Catholic; and their library catalogues confirm the voracious catholicity of their reading habits.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, I have myself argued that John Owen's theology needs to be understood as, on one level, a Protestant modification of an essentially Augustinian-Thomistic theology, and the work of Antonie Vos at Utrecht has pointed to the significant dependence of Reformed theology on the metaphysics of Duns Scotus, particularly on discussions of necessity and contingency.<sup>33</sup> Theological sources do not come more catholic, in every sense of the word, than those used by the Reformed. In addition, the classic creedal categories of Trinitarianism and Christology are central to the Reformed Orthodox project, giving a catholic foundation to all Reformed reflection upon God and salvation.<sup>34</sup>

It is true, of course, that Reformed Orthodoxy does break with the established tradition in key areas. For example, the Reformed uniformly reject the medieval notion that Jesus Christ is mediator only according to his human nature; instead, they insist on mediation according to both natures, and this

language, meaning that *to some extent* the limits of our language constitute the limits of our understanding of the world. Further, since language is a socially construed product of human construction forged in the context of ongoing interactions, conversations, and engagements, words and linguistic conventions do not have timeless and fixed meanings that are independent from their particular usages in human communities and traditions. *In this sense*, language does not represent reality as much as it constitutes reality" (26; emphasis added). To what extent do the limits of our language constitute the limits of our understanding of the world? What exactly does it mean to say language does not represent reality as much as constitute it? These are questions which Franke does not appear to answer, leaving this reader with the suspicion that he wants to have his cake and eat it too when it comes to language and truth claims.

<sup>32</sup> See Richard A. Muller, "*Ad fontes argumentorum*: The Sources of Reformed Theology in the Seventeenth Century," in *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press), 47-62; also Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 5-33. In addition to the various library catalogues for seventeenth-century divines which are extant (e.g., those of Arminius, Baxter, Owen), there is a fascinating work by John Owen's Oxford tutor, Thomas Barlow, which is a recommended basic reading list for theological students at Oxford (presupposing, of course, a B.A. degree as a prerequisite). Barlow was a vigorously Reformed Orthodox theologian, bishop, and philosopher, and the catholicity of his reading list (together with a marked emphasis upon biblical textual and exegetical works) is most instructive for understanding Reformed Orthodoxy as it really existed: see his *Autoschediasmata de Studio Theologiae; or, Directions for the Choice of Books in the Study of Divinity* (Oxford, 1699).

<sup>33</sup> See Carl R. Trueman, "John Owen's *Dissertation on Divine Justice*: An Exercise in Christocentric Scholasticism," *CTJ* 33 (1998): 87-103; Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic*, 58; Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 62-64, 181; Antonie Vos, "De kern van de klassieke gereformeerde Theologie," *Kerk en Theologie* 47 (1996): 106-25; Vos, "Reformation and Scholasticism," in Van Asselt and Dekker, eds., *Reformation and Scholasticism*, 99-119; also Andreas Beck, "Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676): Basic Features of His Doctrine of God," in *Reformation and Scholasticism*, 25-26.

<sup>34</sup> See Muller, *Christ and the Decree*; also Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*. My central thesis in this book is that Owen's theology represents a self-conscious attempt to integrate classic, creedal, catholic Trinitarianism with anti-Pelagian notions of grace in the context of Reformed Protestantism's modifications of western Christology.

change is introduced in order to underscore that mediation is the act of a person, not of an impersonal nature. In other words, the more speculative and metaphysical thrust of certain aspects of patristic and medieval theology is tempered by the Reformed emphasis upon the importance of the historical person of the mediator, and the need to do justice to biblical history.<sup>35</sup> Yet even such breaks with tradition arise out of a serious attempt to connect the new insights of the Reformation with longstanding traditions of theological and conceptual discussion. The greatness of seventeenth-century Reformed Orthodoxy, and of the Westminster Seminary tradition which stands in its line, is that it is possible to have one's cake and eat it: all the greatest theology of the church can be co-opted in the process of theological formulation. And it is the role of Westminster's church historians to demonstrate how this catholicity worked itself out in history; and that not in some amorphous relativism or in a mere Christianity but in clear, thorough, and principled confessional formulation and subsequent ecclesiastical life.

Another area where careful historical work can undo much of the misrepresentation of the popular notion of a vast cultural gulf between today and the world of the past is in the whole area of context and contextualization. Now, it is certainly true that we today have a better conceptual vocabulary for reflecting self-consciously upon issues of context, but it is important to note that both the Reformers and their successors were acutely aware of many contextual issues. At a simple level, the theologically driven desire to produce Bible translations and vernacular liturgies bears witness to this fact; further, sensitivity to context is evidenced by the variation among the Reformers on matters such as worship practices, church-state relations, pastoral counseling, and discipline. For example, the existence of Stranger Churches of European exiles in London during the reign of Edward VI indicates a clear awareness of ethnic differences and a repudiation of the "one size fits all" monolithic mentality so often laid at the door of the Reformed Orthodox.<sup>36</sup> And in an era where almost continual political upheaval made exile and geographical displacement fairly typical experiences for many Protestants, issues related to these points were never far from the surface. Indeed, Calvin spent almost his entire theological career as an exile, and did more than his fair share of theologizing against the background of ethnic tensions between old Genevan families and French immigrants.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to this, one might also add that Reformed Orthodoxy emerged from and was articulated in a variety of European cultures and contexts which

<sup>35</sup> See the discussions of the Reformed break with medieval Christological paradigms in its insistence on the mediation of Christ according to both natures in Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 29-33, 142-49; and Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic*, 80-81. The Reformed Orthodox were quite capable of breaking with tradition when exegesis demanded it; and the result was a theology considerably less speculative than its medieval antecedents.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., Andrew Pettegree, *Foreign Protestant Communities in Sixteenth-Century London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>37</sup> As yet there is no major study of Calvin and his theology in terms of his context and identity as an exile. Nevertheless, the excellent work of William G. Naphy on the impact of immigration patterns and ethnic tensions on the Genevan Reformation is highly suggestive of work which could be done in this area: see his *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); on the Geneva Academy as a *European* center of learning, see

were arguably more diverse in terms of political, social, and economic culture and organization than that of the rather uniform McDonald's/MTV/Disney-saturated modern West.<sup>38</sup> Even the attempts by Marxist historians such as Christopher Hill to argue that Puritanism appealed to particular class interests now lie in ruins. Careful work over recent decades has demonstrated that religious conviction in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries cut right across the various categories—ethnic, class, gender—which later critical theory might anachronistically wish to impose.<sup>39</sup> Again, Westminster church history can make a signal contribution at this point both by emphasizing that problems of context are as old as the Reformed faith itself, and by pointing to the ways in which the Reformed have addressed this issue in the past.<sup>40</sup>

Yet for all of this massive cultural, linguistic, political, social, geographical, and economic diversity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, careful examination of the primary texts of Reformed Orthodoxy—whether Scottish or Hungarian, whether by an aristocratic Episcopalian such as Daniel Featley, or a down-at-heel tinker such as John Bunyan—reveals through the diversity a remarkably coherent and unified voice. The basics of the gospel and the Reformed faith were actually understood in astoundingly consistent ways across national, linguistic, cultural, and economic boundaries. Further, it is clear that this was not simply a coincidental unity, but arose from the positive, self-conscious conviction of its various advocates that they did indeed speak with a substantially unified voice. Again, historians are well-placed to explain how this was possible.

Karin Maag, *Seminary or University? The Genevan Academy and Reformed Higher Education* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., the essays in Karin Maag, ed., *The Reformation in Eastern and Central Europe* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Hill's writings in this area are extensive, but perhaps the best expression of his Marxist analysis of the English Civil War is his *The World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Viking Press, 1972). His approach has been subject to widespread critique in recent years, where other issues (e.g., religion and Anglo-Scottish politics) have come to take center stage in the analysis: see Conrad Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); John Adamson, *The Noble Revolt: The Overthrow of Charles I* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007). Even a history which focuses on "the people" demonstrates that Hill's class-based categories of analysis of seventeenth-century society and religion are too simplistic and fail to do justice to the diversity then in existence: see Diane Purkiss, *The English Civil War: Papists, Gentlewomen, Soldiers, and Witchfinders in the Birth of Modern Britain* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Some may object that, in fact, the patterns of immigration which the West has experienced over the last century or so do radicalize the diversity of society in an unprecedented way. For example, many of us now have Jewish, Moslem, and Hindu neighbors in a way that would have been impossible in the sixteenth century. This is certainly true, but I would offer two thoughts by way of laying the foundation for response. First, these differences must be set against the background of a vast amount of common popular culture "glue" which often creates a deeper unity than these other phenomena might suggest (e.g., sports teams, TV programs, commercial chains, designer labels, etc); and also that the situation on the ground in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was more diverse than can be ascertained through a study of elite cultural patterns, artifacts, and practices. Take, e.g., the work of Margo Todd whose study of kirk session records in the early modern period reveals a much more complicated world at the grass roots level in the church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than an exclusive focus on published literary texts would suggest: see *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

Any historically attuned study of Reformed Orthodoxy will see that the seventeenth-century theologians of, say, the Westminster Assembly, clearly understood humanity, made in the image of God, as a universal. Human beings were not simply cultural constructs, despite all of the diversity that existed between people of different cultures. It was this belief in human nature that then allowed the Reformed to set context, as it were, in context. While the French spoke French and lived under an increasingly absolutist Catholic monarchy, and the English spoke English and established a Puritan commonwealth, and the Dutch spoke Dutch and organized society itself along ecclesiastical-confessional lines, the shared human nature of each of these national groups provided an ultimately unified horizon. This meant that communication was possible between such disparate groups, and that theological content, while only ever occurring in specific space-time contexts, was never reducible to, or bounded by, such contexts. Culture was an artifact of human beings made in the image of God. Human nature thus logically preceded culture and provided the ultimate created context for all other contexts.

The other universal pole was the ectypal, revealed theology of which we have already spoken: God's revelation was just that—a revelation of God, not an expression of the psychological self-consciousness of the religious individual or community. Taken together, the human knower and the divine known provided a fusion of shared, universal horizons which had logical and methodological priority over all other particular contexts. The hyper-Kantian move of dissolving everything, even the human self, into language was—and, one might add, is—anathema to Reformed Orthodox theology. This is why claims that the opening lines of Calvin's *Institutes* offer a principle and a precedent for a post-modern contextual reconstruction of Reformed theology miss the point, both historically and theologically. What Calvin is saying in *Institutes* 1.1 is that our knowledge of who we are is intimately connected to our knowledge of God and *vice versa*. If he is making a claim about context at all, it is that God, and God's image in us, is the ultimate context for understanding God and humanity and the relationship which exists between them; he is not suggesting that "in the discipline of theology we must take account of the particular social and intellectual settings in which we engage in theological reflection and exploration." Important as these are, it is not what Calvin teaches in *Institutes* 1.1.<sup>41</sup>

There is much more that could be said about the misrepresentation of Reformed Orthodoxy in contemporary evangelical presentations: for example, I could address the typical allegation that the Reformed were prooftexters who did not understand the nature of exegesis or canonical formation. I have, you will be relieved to know, no time today to deal with this in detail. Suffice it to say that the seventeenth century was the golden age of Protestant linguistics, of biblical commentary, of thoughtful sifting and collating of traditions of exegesis, and of careful attention to the relationship between exegetical work and doctrinal formulation.<sup>42</sup> Again, underlying all this was a commitment to scripture as ectypal

<sup>41</sup> *Contra Franke, The Character of Theology*, 13-14.

<sup>42</sup> On this, see the essays on the exegetical methods of the Westminster Divines in Richard A. Muller and Rowland S. Ward, *Scripture and Worship: Biblical Interpretation and the Directory for Worship*

theology, as the revelation of the one God speaking one message through finite human words. This commitment demanded the development of such linguistic and textual studies; yet it also controlled and regulated those studies in a way that made normative theological formulation possible, indeed imperative for the well-being of the church. Criticism of alleged Reformed Orthodox proof-texting by modern authors who themselves engage in almost no biblical exegesis as they offer their alternatives does raise obvious questions again about the difference between what is apparently being said and what is really being done. One might perhaps argue with some justification that the game being played today by post-conservative pundits is not so much that of challenging orthodox exegesis as that of questioning the very notion that it is actually possible to make ecclesiastically normative theological statements on the basis of scripture. But that is a long story, and one to be saved for another day. Suffice it to say that Westminster church historians are charged with making sure that the historiography behind such arguments is gently but firmly exposed for the illusion that it is.

### III. *Conclusion*

There is a line in one of The Who's greatest songs, "Who are you?" which goes as follows: "I remember throwing punches around and preaching from my chair." I do hope that when I look back on my inaugural day in years to come, my memories will be a little more positive than that. Yet, it is part and parcel of being an academic, particularly at an institution such as Westminster, that one should throw some punches around and use one's chair as a place from which to preach. Indeed, I hope that I have today been quite polemical at points; critical thinking and scholarly engagement necessarily require polemic, and such polemic is ultimately a positive, healthy, and vital exercise.

Will Westminster church history win a hearing in the wider evangelical culture? Possibly not. After all, the wider evangelical culture has drunk deeply at the anti-historical wells of the contemporary American scene. The task of history itself is thus one which finds little or no natural sympathy in today's world. In addition, the study of Reformed Orthodoxy requires that we do justice to its sophistication, its nuances, its catholicity, its failure to conform to the expected clichés of postmodern consumerism. With the best will in the world, these are not particularly marketable qualities. Thus, I suspect that those who declare confessional Reformed theology to be some species of, say, rationalism, proof-textism, and/or ahistorical dogmatism, will continue to shape its popular image. After all, they tell a story which sells books, a nice, simple, straightforward story which confirms the popular belief in the superiority of a pragmatic, anodyne, merely Christian present that needs to forget its past and move on. That this story is told with a necessarily light scholarly apparatus and is demonstrably untrue in its principal historical claims is not a particular problem: it says what people want to hear; it is buoyed along by strong cultural currents; like

(Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007). For an example of the integration of dogmatic, traditionary, and exegetical concerns in doctrinal formulation, see my discussion of the covenant of redemption: *John Owen: Reformed Catholic*, 80-87.

postmodernism itself, it speciously hides its conservatism under the language of radicalism; and it has the advantage that those books which tell the true story of Reformed Orthodoxy are not themselves easy reading.

Yet the Westminster church history department will never cede cheap ground to the arrivistes of evangelical historiography or to the aesthetics of the contemporary postmodern evangelical world. And, while it may salve the surprisingly sensitive aesthetic consciences of some to convince themselves that our critiques are simply in bad taste, nothing more than the routine rants of rabid Reformed rottweilers, this is simply not the case. Not at all. I am most happy to acknowledge that the issues which the postmodern evangelicals are addressing and the questions they are asking are very important and need to be addressed with thought and not dismissed out of hand; but these things can only be done in any sound or effective manner on the basis of careful and precise historiography. One cannot critique the inadequacies of the past until one has understood the past; one certainly should not abandon the past on the basis of a caricature; and the kind of historical misrepresentations which undergird certain postconservative analyses of the tradition stands at odds both with the possibility of such critique and with the claims of the very same people that we need to engage with tradition in order to meet the challenges of the contemporary world. Thus, let me put this as precisely as I can: the vigor of my criticism of such writers is provoked as much by their seriously problematic historiography as by any serious heterodoxy within their theology; indeed, the careful reader will note that I do not offer any criticism of their theology as that is beyond the scope of this lecture.

This message is unlikely to prove popular in some quarters of the evangelical world, but that is of little consequence. Neither I nor my colleagues in the department do what we do in order to be well-liked, popular, or successful. Rather, we do what we do because we simply refuse to allow to go unchallenged the received mythology concerning the evils of Reformed Orthodoxy; we do what we do because we love the Reformed faith as much as we dislike shoddy historical writing; we do what we do to make our own small contribution to criticism of the bland aesthetic tastes of modern evangelical theology; and, above all, we do what we do because to remain silent at such a time as this would be to abdicate our moral responsibility to the church. In short, we do it because it is right for us to do so. The light may well be dying, but we will rage, rage against it; and be assured, we will never go gentle into that good night.