

Who Defines "Reformed"?

Peter J. Leithart, *February 21, 2007*

In a couple of posts over the last several weeks, I've tried to analyze the "Federal Vision" from a variety of angles - as an "identity crisis" provoked by the FV tendency to reach outside the Reformed tradition for inspiration, and as a conflict not so much of doctrinal systems as of theological sub-systems. I don't pretend to neutrality in this discussion, nor do I expect everyone even on my own side of things to agree with what I say. But I hope that these posts will help both sides in this conflict to clarify the character and stakes involved.

We can get another perspective on the debate by examining the religio-social location of the participants. It appears, roughly, that the pro-FV side is made up of people who are marginal to central institutions of the Reformed world; the anti-FV side, again roughly, consists of people in more established institutions.

On the anti-FV side, one could list off a dozen or more seminary professors, former GA moderators, movers-and-shakers in various Reformed denominations. None of the anti-FV crowd (to my knowledge) has the kind of non-pedigree that Wilson boasts. In some ways, the anti-FV group is diverse; but they share a religio-social location near the center of the tiny work of American Reformed church life.

Some FV proponents have seminary degrees, but none have teaching positions in mainstream Reformed seminaries or colleges. None have held important posts in any mainstream Reformed denomination. My colleague and friend, Doug Wilson, has the classic FV pedigree, which is to say, a non-pedigree. A late-comer to Reformed convictions, he never attended seminary at all, much less an established Reformed seminary. Theologically, he is self-taught, and yet he has become the recognized leader of what his local detractors like to call (not without some justification) a small Reformed "empire" - a large local church, a nationally distributed magazine, a publishing house, a pastor's training program, a college that, Lord willing, will soon produce a graduate program. That's not even to mention his influence in the Classical Christian School movement. Doug was instrumental in founding the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches, which is now growing at a rapid clip. Doug would be the first to admit that a lot of other people have contributed to all of these achievements, and that's true. But without Doug, few of these institutions and outlets would exist.

This contrast (which is rough, but I think accurate) points to one dimension of the conflict. Wilson and his cronies (co-horts, co-cretins, co-misceants, what have you) aren't coming from within the mainstream of the Reformed world, and yet here they are making bold to write books, distribute magazines, organize conferences and tell all the folks in the places that define "Reformed" what it means to be "Reformed." Wilson and the rest of us even have the audacity to say that we might consider re-framing some Reformed teaching and re-vising some Reformed practices. And the obvious question is: What gives *these* guys the right to define what Reformed means? Who do they think they are?

As a test case, one might examine the reception of Daryl Hart's sympathetic treatment of Nevin and the FV's (qualified) sympathy for Nevin. Hart is treated with great respect, as he should be. When some of the very same points are made by FV-types, the arguments are rejected out of hand.

The debate is not just about what's being said. It's also about *who's* saying it.

If this is an accurate sketch of the situation, two possible outcomes suggest themselves. On the one hand, the FV might be a passing fad that vanishes within a generation. It starts on the margins, and it remains on the margins forever. On the other hand, its challenge may dislodge the center of the Reformed world and create a new center. It's happened before that today's margins become tomorrow's mainstream.

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