The term “postmodern” has been used in some evangelical theological circles to describe nothing short of heresy. The truth is, however, that we need to interact with postmodernity and be humble enough to realize that postmodernity has something to say to us. This was our initial discussion at the Spring 2011 African American Imagination & Theology (AIT) Project.

What then does postmodernity have to tell us? At the very least, it tells us to take our fallen-ness and depravity seriously. As Reformed Evangelicals, we stand upon a theological framework that consists of a rock solid foundation of absolute truths and yet we are called to be always reforming—semper reformanda. Our current postmodern culture does not accept the idea of foundations or absolutes, and postmodern Christians (yes, there is such a person) look at human depravity and realize that not only are our hearts fallen, but so are our minds. Our absolutes are just that—our absolutes. Every time we read Scripture, finding absolutes, we are always on a quest of fallible interpretation. This shakes our rock solid foundation, but it does not mean that we are without certainty. Certainty comes from a continual renewing and reforming of the mind through Scripture, the presence and witness of the Holy Spirit, and community.

Community, in essence, was our next topic of discussion at the AIT: not church small group community, but theological community. The reality of the American evangelical seminary is that many of us will spend several semesters (and for some several years) learning theology primarily from one perspective, and that perspective is primarily European and male. But such uniformity is not necessarily true community, theologically speaking. Dr. John Frame wrote, “we need to move from one perspective to another in order to get a full understanding of God’s world” (Doctrine of the Christian Life, 35). I believe that “world” and “word” are interchangeable in his quote. As students and ministers of the Gospel, we need to see different perspectives in order to fully understand God, His Word, and His world.

The topic of our discussion then shifted: So instead of reading texts solely through a grid that is male and European, what would happen if we listened to the wisdom of those who historically have been most oppressed in society? Take for instance, the perspective of African American women. What would it mean for Reformed and evangelical students to go to the Scriptures with this unique perspective? How would they encounter Jesus and what would His work mean in such a different context? How would we read His sacred Words?

By engaging these types of questions and truly listening to all the voices of the Christian community, we see God. But if we continue to ignore their proclamations, it will be as if we were stroking the elephant’s trunk because we like the length, or grasping its leg because we like its strength, but we will not see the whole elephant. If we do not engage in true theological community, we will never see God in all His magnificence, nor will we be truly reformed. Selah.

Jared Smith
MDiv Student, RTS Orlando