

REFORMED WORLD

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Reformed Identity

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**REFORMED
WORLD**

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Editorial

The newspaper I read in France, *Le Monde*, had two pages of articles on the death of Patriarch Alexy II. When Pope Benedict XVI visited France this year, there was even more coverage. I was surprised to see so much on religion in a leading newspaper of a country, which to my opinion was as secularised as The Netherlands, my home country. But I doubt whether ever something happening in the Reformed world will have that extensive coverage in the media. Most interest may come up in this Calvin anniversary year 2009. That however is often more interest in the history of the Reformed world than for what is happening today.

In a certain way one can understand the lack of interest in the media for what goes on in the Reformed world. Worldwide *Reformed* means a patchwork of churches. These churches do not even share the common name *Reformed*. Some call themselves indeed *Reformed* but others call themselves *Presbyterian*. Some, in united churches call themselves *protestant* or *Evangelical*. Most of the Reformed denominations in the Reformed world are national, regional or local. Many belong to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches but definitely not all of them. Some churches in the Reformed world do consider many other Reformed churches not to belong to the true Church of Christ, let alone that there would be sharing of pulpit and table. That is not even the case within the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

For many Reformed churches it would be very difficult to give up anything of their own independence. In the process of formation of the new body the World Communion of Reformed Churches the word ‘communion’ is still being regarded with a critical eye. And the idea that the Reformed world would have one leader who can act as a spokesperson will most likely never come into reality.

Not only for the media it is difficult to know what is *Reformed*, also in the global ecumenical world the understanding of what is *Reformed* is very diffuse. In ecumenical engagement the Reformed can hardly play the role they should have according to their size within the Christian world communions. In fact the Reformed are even too modest themselves to play a leading role because they see much of their ecumenical engagement happening within the World Council of Churches.

However, the Reformed world may have a loose and open structure, many reformed Christians realise what is of importance to them. The covenanting for justice process the World Alliance of Reformed Churches is so deeply committed to has many typical reformed characteristics and the same could be said for the criticism within the Reformed world on the way this covenanting for justice process is being done. Many within the Reformed world do also share that they see the need of doing theology and it could still be said that the academic level of theology within the Reformed world reaches the highest level. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches always has seen, and will continue to see, the importance of being engaged in theological reflection through its theological secretariat. If not so then there will be within the Reformed world complaints about a theological deficit and these complaints cannot be ignored.

There is much more to be said about what is *Reformed*. To define Reformed identity can however not lead to a fixed set of definitions and this defining process hardly has an aspect of Reformed unity. This edition of Reformed World is no more than a contribution in this process of defining Reformed identity. There will be a number of articles wherein authors write about Reformed identity from a general and introductory perspective. But there is also in this issue a range of articles wherein Reformed identity is explained from a contextual aspect. It will be easy to see the variety of Reformed thinking about Reformed identity. Since the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council are on the way to unity, this edition of Reformed World will also reflect a broader variety of Reformed opinions than maybe could be found within the World Alliance of Reformed Churches on its own. And also this edition of Reformed World has a variety in academic level of the articles. We should be aware that not only the academy is the place where Reformed theology is developed.

I hope that this edition on Reformed identity, which is only a step in the process of thinking about this, may contribute to the ongoing response to the question: "What is Reformed?"

Douwe Visser

On Being 'Reformed'¹

Hendrik M. Vroom

Introduction

In this contribution I will analyse the perennial question 'What is Reformed?', i.e. the question of Reformed identity and how the Reformed tradition differs from other Christian traditions. For many of us this is an awkward question, for not all of us like to define ourselves against others. Whether we see ourselves as similar to or different from other Christian traditions is to a very large extent circumstantial. The Waldensians, refugees in their small villages in remote parts of the French Alps who were killed in 1488, became victims of the Catholic majority who did not accept their separate identity. The Hindu woman who talks with a great deal of sympathy of the Christmas service in which she has taken part but complains of Christians who stress the differences between Hindu and Christian beliefs sees more shared elements than many of her Christian compatriots. Both the negation and the accentuation of differences and controversies between traditions is, as far as I see, unrealistic. While some basic tenets of the Reformed tradition have been discussed in other contributions to this volume, in this final contribution we will reflect on the question of Reformed identity itself. What are we doing when we attempt to determine what it is that singles the 'Reformed' family out from other Christian families?

First I will clarify the nature of the question of Reformed identity, and then describe some insights into the nature of religious traditions and the nature of religious insights. On this basis we can demonstrate the differences and overlappings between Christian families of churches; I will compare some basic insights that come to light in a Lutheran and a Reformed document. The last section will deal with the growing plurality within the various Christian families because of the inevitable contextuality of the understanding of the gospel.

'Reformed identity' as a second order question

The question of Reformed identity is basic for the very existence of an organisation like the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Thus we can understand that the question of Reformed

¹ This contribution has been published earlier in a volume, prepared by the Theological Subcommittee of the European Area Committee WARC: 'On Being "Reformed"', Chr. Lienemann-Perrin, H.M. Vroom, M. Weinrich (eds.), *Reformed and Ecumenical: On Being Reformed in Ecumenical Encounters* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi 2000), p. 153-169.

identity arises time and again. However, it is an annoying question. Unless one wants to affirm that the Westminster Confession, the Canons of Dordt and some other classical Reformed confessions are the best expression of the understanding of the bible to which the church has been brought by the Holy Spirit, formulating a statement that is truly shared all over the world about what constitutes *Reformed* is problematic. Moreover, in discussing this question, many of us feel that the real issue is not being addressed, i.e. what is truly *Christian*.

We can easily understand why the question of Reformed identity is not very important in Reformed eyes. It follows from the Reformed view of revelation. It is typically Reformed to state that humans are dependent upon revelation for their knowledge of God. As Paul states, God's eternal divinity and power can be seen in his works; all other knowledge about God is known from his revelatory work in history. Scepticism about natural theology as a rational undertaking and criticism of knowledge of the divine nature without any relation to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are in the background of the affirmation that Christians are fully dependent on scripture for their knowledge of God and his gospel.² Therefore, to know what Christian faith today is, Reformed theologians will first study the bible and relate what they read to contextual issues and insights. If this is correct, one can understand why the question of Reformed identity is felt to be awkward. The truly important question is what *Christian* identity is today: 'What are we called to be?'

However, there is more than one answer to that question. 'Christian identity' is comprehensive. It comprises attitudes, thoughts, hopes and fears, ideals, ideas about the world, life, morality, belief in God, in Christ and the coming kingdom, spiritual practices and ways of organising the church. It is clear that there are several ways to be Christian in the world, and that there are a variety of Christian traditions, such as the Pentecostal, the Orthodox, the Roman Catholic, the Baptist, the Lutheran, the Methodist, and the Anglican churches. Even within these Christian families there are many varieties, such as the various Catholic monastic orders, the different Orthodox churches, like the Coptic, Greek, Armenian, Rumanian, Russian, each with its own offspring in Western Europe and North America. In our answer to the question of Christian identity we are, willingly or unwillingly, more or less in sympathy with one or perhaps some of the main Christian traditions. Reformed people seldom admire ecclesial hierarchy or are fond of the Vatican, because they feel that before the face of God,

² This scepticism about knowledge of God outside of his revelation (or, better, based on His revelation in creation only), has led many Reformed theologians to accentuate the view that our knowledge of God, and therefore of ourselves, is dependent on revelation.

coram deo, every human being is equal, Greek or Jewish, female or male, slave or free. It is impossible to consider a bishop as the real priest and confess the priesthood of all believers at the same time, not only because these beliefs are logically incompatible but mostly because the emotions brought into play are different. In answering the question of Christian identity, all sorts of differences between the various Christian families are at stake. Reformed identity does not say that people stick stubbornly to some traditional Reformed confessions but that they have learned to understand the gospel, their lives and the world in a certain way. Being Reformed is a way of being Christian. To say what it is to be Reformed is to say what it is to be Christian (as understood in the Reformed family of churches).

Therefore, the first order question is 'What are we called to be as Christians?', i.e. the question of Christian identity. The question of Reformed identity is a second order question. It is asking how the first order question 'what is truly Christian?' can be answered in 'the' Reformed tradition. This question can only be answered by comparing 'the' Reformed answer with the self-understanding of the other families in the Christian tradition. Because in ecumenical circles many prefer to look for unity and avoid concentrating on the differences between the major Christian traditions, the question of Reformed identity is not a very stimulating issue. It reminds one of colleagues who are apt to consider their own work better than one's own. Have we not been told to regard, in humility, others better than ourselves?

On this basis we can understand why people feel that the question of Reformed identity is not the real issue. That feeling is correct, insofar as the first order question concerns the understanding of the gospel and not Reformed identity. The question of Reformed identity does not arise explicitly in relation with the central question (what is truly Christian?) but only in comparison with other confessional traditions. It is not only a question of stating differences but also of trying to understand them and to evaluate our different ways of answering our calling. It is a kind of methodological question: what are the differences between the ways in which traditions A and B *interpret* scripture and see Christian identity in all their aspects of faith, beliefs, living and ways of organising the church? If we call such a way of interpreting scripture a *scheme of interpretation* (cf. Vroom, 1992/93), the question can be formulated as follows: how does the Reformed scheme of interpretation differ from the Lutheran, Orthodox, Baptist, Roman Catholic, etc. schemes? This requires a comparison between a tradition (which changes) and other traditions (which are also changing). As long as there are confessional traditions, questions about their various identities, their commonalities and differences will be asked. However, one should be aware of the nature of the question of Reformed identity (etc.) as a secondary question: what is characteristic for the specifically Reformed (etc.) way of understanding Christian faith and life? In such a way

the question may be helpful, because it forces us to spell out what we think is worthwhile in our tradition and how the tradition helps to see the truth. If these questions are discussed in interconfessional dialogue, people from various traditions may learn from one another, see their own shortcomings and so improve their understanding of the gospel.

A question discussed many times in Reformed circles is that Reformed identity is rather vague compared to Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Lutheran identity. To substantiate such a view people tend to point out certain typical Roman Catholic ideas and institutions as papacy and ecclesiastical structures which, however, for many Catholics are not very central for their being Christians. Lutherans have the Augsburg Confession, refer to Luther in a way that even the strictest Calvinist will not cite the *Institutes*, employ a rather sharp distinction between law and gospel, between two kingdoms, etc. The Anglicans and the Orthodox have their own defining characteristics.

Although it is easy enough to overlook varieties in other traditions and stick to stereotypes, there seems to be something strange in Reformed tradition, because it seems impossible to come up with characteristics clearly shared by everybody in the Reformed world. Reformed tradition as a whole is not very strict regarding doctrine and liturgy, we are told, and not so self-conscious as the other older Christian families. Doctrines special to the Reformed faith do not seem to be very important any more. Nearly all the items mentioned as central to Reformed understanding are shared with several other traditions: Christ, scripture, grace, a synodical ecclesiology, etc. A truly central Reformed *extra calvinisticum* seems to be lacking. As far as I can see, this characteristic of the Reformed family can be expressed as follows. It has been the intention of the Reformed tradition, as we understand it, to bind the believer to God and his Word which can be heard in scripture. The personal prayer and reading of scripture and the sanctification of life are very much at the heart of Reformed identity, because everybody stands before God without the mediation of bishops or priests. Everybody has to make sure that he or she can pray in good conscience. Although faith is personal, it is not privatised, because every believer is called to be a living member of the local church community, the body of Christ. Traditionally, scripture has been the whole of scripture, both Old and New Testaments. Calvinists understood themselves as a new Israel, living in a new covenant, its roots going back to the calling of Abraham and the giving of the law on Sinai.³ Christ is central in scripture but also viewed within the whole of salvation history. Because

³ The Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann was notorious for his depreciation of the Old Testament. The prophetic protest against injustice could not possibly be applied by the kings; they provided utopian ideals, as in Deuteronomy (Bultmann, 1948, 47). Cf. p. 51: The idea of the kingdom of God proves to be unrealisable in this world. The failure

Reformed tradition has had much affinity with the Old Testament, people have also been concerned with society and life in this world and Christ has been seen as prophet, priest and king. In scripture Christ is the good shepherd as well as the first-born of the coming kingdom and the lamb of God who reconciles the world with God.

In the understanding of the gospel in differing contexts various aspects may be accentuated; as a result there seems to be a lack of uniformity in the Reformed tradition. However, it is precisely this binding to the whole of scripture that is typically Reformed. Reformed hermeneutics binds the churches to scripture alone, and finds the message of Christ and its grace in scripture. Thus, if the question as to what is typically *Reformed* is posed, the answer will refer to *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, the personal responsibility of believers, the synodical system and church order. But if the question concerns what is truly *Christian*, the Reformed answer will refer to Christ and the kingdom of God. Because the reading of scripture is so central, the Reformed characteristics are not so clearly identifiable as the characteristics of other confessional traditions are (or have been for a long time). Perhaps it is typically Reformed that the question of Reformed identity is not viewed as very interesting.⁴ To the extent that this is a consequence of the accentuation of the need to live a Christian life, this is a strength, but insofar there is no attempt to reach a shared contemporary understanding of faith it opens the door to superficiality.

If the true nature of the question of Reformed identity is not seen clearly, it is a truly awkward and non-ecumenical question. It is like studying one's own navel and losing contact with the rest of life. It seems to direct attention to disagreements between confessional traditions instead of establishing common ground, whereas it is actually the very question of the way in which being Christian is understood in the Reformed and other traditions. Amidst disagreements and differences it is useful to stand back for a moment and ask: why do we differ? How did you come to your understanding of scripture and we to ours? What is central to you and what to us? Or better: what has been central to the older generations in your tradition and in mine? Which insights have they discovered from which we may learn? In this way the question as to Reformed identity is a real issue in the ecumenical debate and in the common search for the true understanding of the gospel. Identity is not static but dynamic.

proves the impossibility and therefore the failure is the promise. Although the kingdom of God differs profoundly from the kingdoms of this world, the ideal of shaping culture according to the rules of both the Old and the New Testaments has been very much at the heart of large parts of the Reformed tradition not least in the thought of Abraham Kuyper. See e.g his Stone Lectures at Princeton on *Calvinism*. Cf. also the involvement in the process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation in the 1990s.

⁴ Many Christians in other church traditions will share this feeling.

What is a tradition?

In order to clarify what a tradition is and how we can understand the relations between various traditions, we will delve somewhat deeper into the nature of traditions. First I will describe what tradition means, then introduce the notion of 'basic ideas'.⁵

What is a tradition? What does it mean to be Reformed? Does it matter whether 'we' are Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, or perhaps Muslim, Buddhist, etc.? People are Indonesian, English, French or Polish; we do belong to a nation, whether we like it or not, and only a small number of people change their national identity. Being Reformed is in several respects like being German or Italian, for most of us belong to the traditions in which we are born and baptised on the initiative of our parents. Thus, traditions are milieus in which people live. Also, being Reformed or Catholic, etc. is first an atmosphere and environment, although part of a tradition that is organised as a church. And just as in the case of nationalities, people may feel themselves very much at home in the heart of a tradition or on its margins and, as nations can have a variety of subcultures, religious traditions are also variegated wholes. In France one may speak the *langue d'Oïl* or the *langue d'Oc*. In the Reformed tradition one may feel at home in a sober church service with psalms, prayer, readings and a sermon, in a service in which some members of the congregation take part or in a high liturgical service with read prayers and sung responses. It is not easy to define what 'tradition' means; it is a way of life with many insights, customs, preferences and rules, prohibitions, and some rituals and an organisation that supports the lives of the members of the tradition as a kind of 'community', although in our individualistic society the communal life has split up and many take part in a local church as long as they wish and as far as they wish. In this way traditions are historical and cultural phenomena. They are part of human lives, made by humans and at the same time making human life as well. The same is true of culture, which has been defined as the way in which we live. Traditions are ways of life. We are formed by traditions and through our lives we modify our traditions, we adapt them to new situations and change them to the point that some other members of the tradition may not recognise it any more. In this way especially Reformed churches have split up.

'Tradition' has another meaning as well: that which is handed over to the next generation, i.e. the *traditum*. This suggests a thing which parents hand over to their children or ministers who have studied the tradition do teach their congregation. The *traditum* is precisely the whole package of insights, doctrines, morality and customs which one generation teaches

⁵ I would like to employ some insights from the theory of religion. Philosophy of religion is not neutral and is therefore related to tradition. In distinction from dogmatics in this field a Christian (or for their part a Muslim) tries to find insights which can be also held by people who do not belong to the Christian tradition.

the next. In the church the *traditum* is essentially the Gospel, not one of the four gospels but 'the' Gospel, implied in all we do and tell in education, rituals, stories and practices. If somebody asks what we mean by the Gospel and tells us to define it, to write it down so that he can judge whether it is true or not, we discover that it is impossible to define 'the Gospel'. If we try to indicate what it is, and say perhaps 'Jesus Christ, and Him crucified', we may be asked what this means and what its implications are for what we think and do. In order to explain our beliefs we have to tell stories and to evoke a feeling for the meaning and the value of Christian faith.

In trying to understand and summarize their faith and to defend it against misunderstandings, people have formulated the *traditum*. The Magisterium of the Catholic tradition has the authority to declare beliefs to be true, which makes them obligatory for all Christians. However, at the same time it is evident that an agnostic who reads only the church doctrines will not really learn what the gospel means because faith is also a way of life, and you have to know what it means in spiritual and practical life in order to learn the meaning of the words and so appropriate the basic insights which are given voice in religious narratives, catechisms and confessions.

The most essential element in worldviews are basic insights (see Vroom, 1989, 257-63; 1996). Because the understanding of basic insights helps to clarify the relation between traditions, we will look somewhat closer into the relation between reality, experience, insight and formulations.

Let me start with an analogy. If we see an eagle in the mountains, waiting for its prey on the other side of the valley, we try to explain its position to our friend. In such a case we say what we think we see and refer to the environment in which the bird sits: a rift, a stream, a small tree, and then, somewhat beside a white rock, the upright form of the short-toed eagle. We see something that we identify as a bird of prey; we look carefully and after a while some characteristics make us conclude that it is a short-toed eagle. Now we want to tell our friend. We cannot give our experience to another person. So we have to point it out with help of our finger and words. We may shout 'There's an eagle', but that does not help if our friend does not know what an eagle is. Perhaps we have to explain a great deal. Just pointing will not help either. If we ask our friend: 'Do you understand what you are seeing?' (s)he might ask, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' In that case we need to explain in detail, showing what is the case.

The point of this is that there is a difference between the experience of reality and insight into reality on the one hand and verbal explanations on the other. Explanations depend on experience, expertise, a context and the meaning of words. The use of words is dependent

upon a community in which possible meanings are known. Such meanings have developed through time. In the case of worldviews as well the meanings of words are dependent on community and tradition. Because we cannot point to God directly, we have to describe experiences in which God is revealed and evoke their meaning. The kingdom of God, incarnation, forgiveness etc. are told in parables and realised in liturgies.

To communicate insights we need words. The truth of lived experience is not in the words. We can see that from the fact that we are used to communicate the same insight, the same truth in different ways to different people. In such a case we say: if you do not get the point in this way, let me say it differently. True formulations are those which indicate how things really are. As Augustine has said: the truth is that by which being is made manifest (*De Vera Religione*, 66; see Vroom, 1989, 238, 357). The words which we use to communicate our faith and our understanding of the gospel are not discursive concepts, which could be defined univocally, clearly and distinctly. The Christian tradition has words which look like concepts, like creation, justification, incarnation etc. However, they differ in nature from discursive concepts like circle, planet or molecule. They are, to use Kadushin's apt term, 'value-concepts'. In his description of the nature of rabbinical thought he rejects the traditional Western understanding of doctrine in which doctrine is understood as consisting of straightforward propositions. Instead, he stresses that the insights of the tradition are more complex, less straightforward and embedded in the biblical stories. They cannot be understood without reference to the experiences which underlie faith. From a Christian point of view Hendrik Hart has spoken of concept-lookalikes. Terms like mercy, righteousness, kingdom of God, truth, the two-natures doctrine, and the trinity derive their meaning from the texts and cannot be understood outside the context of faith.

Because Christian ideas are not defined and always in need of further explanation and modification, I prefer the term *basic insights*. These are basic, because they lie at the foundation of human existence and the world as the 'place' in which we live. An example is the belief - I would prefer to say insight into reality - that all human life is valuable: every human being is valuable in him- or herself. Because we can only see human beings in an empirical way and their value is not only a matter of sense perception and, for that matter, not shared by all human beings, the value of human beings is an idea, a value that has been formed by a tradition and has become basic to our experience of human beings, independent of what they look like and their role in society, colour or sex. From this insight we derive the idea of human equality. However, nobody can see equality but only resemblance. In reality we see and experience inequality between humans, differences in size, expressions, societal roles, power, wealth and poverty, and we have learned, for better or for worse, to appreciate the equality of human beings amid their differences. Equality is also an insight, and it is

basic in the sense that it is formative for what we see consciously in practical life. Basic insights are ideas that are interwoven with our experience; they are the ground of our worldviews. Such ideas as value and equality are not generic, they are related to culture and religion. The ideas of worthiness and equality have grown in the course of history, especially Western and Arabic history. Such ideas as the value of human beings have their origin in the biblical belief that God has created human beings in 'his' image and likeness. Equality is a value-concept, a basic insight into human nature, which influences our experience of other people and ourselves quite strongly. It is not just an idea or a belief but a basic insight into life. With such a basic insight we stand eye to eye with reality itself. We say 'eagle' and we see an eagle. We say equality and we see (but not only via our senses) people who have been created equally by God. That is part of a worldview. Actually, this equality goes back to the biblical message of creation.

In some eastern religious traditions such an accentuation of the uniqueness of human beings is felt to be anthropocentric: all beings are interrelated and people and animals need to go through a long series of lives as animals, plants and humans. Basic ideas vary from culture to culture and from religion to religion. Nevertheless, people claim that they are true. If we have to explain them to people who do not share our insights, we have to find words and point out a web of related experiences which support them. In order to explain such experiences and the basic insights implied therein, we usually tell stories, e.g. on slavery and how people came to feel that it is contrary to equality, and therefore unjust. In fact, we say to the other: if you look in such and such a way (cf. see that rift, that stream, that rock), you will see what we see.

Religious traditions and also the secular world view traditions are built on such basic insights. Let me give some more examples. Christians and many other believers believe that God created the world. Although we cannot point it out with our finger, we see all things bright and beautiful which the Creator has made, and we know that it is true or, better, we experience things as made, as they were meant to be and not just as having originated through chance. Formulations of belief are secondary compared to experience; Christians do experience that Christ is not simply a human being who tried a little bit harder than others. They see and know for certain that God has something to do with Jesus Christ or, better, is working in and through Jesus Himself. The doctrine of the two natures has tried to explain such a basic insight, but we are free to find other words for this insight: Jesus is truly human and truly 'God with us'. The earth is not meaningless but is meant to become the kingdom or realm of God; the earth is not simply what we want to make of it but is entrusted to us to preserve it as a place to build a just and merciful society. In this way basic ideas are fundamental to our experiences and to both our feeling at home in the world and our

unease with what happens in life. Together, these basic insights form the foundation of our experience of God, the world and ourselves. They are also basic in this sense that they are below or behind our words. They are the foundations of our experience of life.

Traditions deal with these insights. They do so by rituals, education at home, at schools and in churches, especially by telling stories and explaining beliefs. Catechisms are a summary. What is characteristic about a good catechism is that it not only gives words for insights but also points out how one can learn and feel reality in a right way: what is your only comfort in both life and death?

That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over in me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal and makes me whole-heartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. and A. 1).

Stories have a very special role to play. They demonstrate the meaning of basic insights in practical life, relate various insights and weigh their relative value. The stories of David tell of a king who also is a father, and has to combine both responsibilities. The story of Jonah tells of the need of conversion and the rule of justice, and also about the relative weight of punishment and forgiveness. Upon conversion mercy goes before punishment; the book 'defines' the relation between the basic insights as the need for a just society, the sovereignty of God, forgiveness and, under certain circumstances, punishment.

Traditions are not static but lively and dynamic. They may accentuate some beliefs and neglect others, for better and for worse. An example of change is the insight in the right relationship between women and men. For centuries differences between women and men have been seen as a token of greater male social responsibilities, with the acknowledgement of equality of females and males as human beings. We will come back to this example at a later stage. In many countries the hierarchy of these insights has changed. Equality moved up and the differences with their supposed implications for societal inequality moved down. In this way religious traditions are ways of life, consisting in insights which are imbedded in songs, stories, confessions, practices and organisational structures as local churches, national church organisations and church-bound institutions.

The basic insights of a tradition form a web, a dynamic configuration, in which the relative weight of insights changes somewhat all the time, depending on the context.

Socio-economic factors, competing worldview traditions and historical events have a deep impact on the reinterpretation of a tradition.

Plurality within Christianity

Within Christianity the various Christian traditions rest for the most part on the same basic ideas but give them different weight. What is central in one tradition, may be on the periphery of another. In such a way we can understand the origin and nature of differences between traditions. Such divergences are not primarily doctrinal controversies because they lie on a deeper level than confessional formulations. The *sola gratia* rests on a basic experience, which is expressed in prayer and psalms and a spirituality first, and their expression in catechisms and confessions is only a brief way of communicating, summarising and introducing in confessions and catechisms. Confessional differences depend on a variety of spiritualities with their basic experiences and insights. The differences are differences in accents in the first place and only on some points contradictory.

All Christian traditions speak of Christ, the Creator, the Spirit, scripture, grace, works, reconciliation, sacraments, the ministry, etc. but relate them in different configurations. Traditions share these beliefs, but give them different weight and do not relate them in the same way. In this way we can understand why there are not a great many doctrines which are held exclusively by one tradition only. The characteristics of traditions are found in the stress they lay on certain beliefs. Traditions are like searchlights: they expose some parts of scripture as being more central than other parts and in this way form the religious experience of their members. It is not the isolated doctrines in themselves that are typical for a confessional family but their configuration, their order and 'hierarchy'. This implies that the question of Reformed identity cannot possibly be answered by enumerating some beliefs that are specific for Reformed theology (and Reformed theology only) but by spelling out the priorities of Reformed theology and the consequences for christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, life in this world, etc.

Concepts such as revelation, scripture, the *eschaton* and church and doctrines as the two-natures doctrine and justification are results of reflection on more basic insights, which are fully interwoven with experience, and therefore with spirituality. The traditions of the Reformation have accentuated (some say rightly, some say wrongly) the need of reconciliation of humans with God through grace. They have done so in the order of liturgy, the kinds of prayers and the selection of psalms and hymns. Catechism has been a tool for introducing children to the formulation of this spirituality and the attitude which is appropriate *coram deo*. The doctrine of justification by grace can be understood as a reflection that tries to

describe the believer as someone who must live in piety, trust and sincerity before the face of God, confessing his or her dependence on his grace and forgiveness and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Doctrinal reflection has its truth not in itself, because it stands, in a way, between the biblical texts and the worship of the concrete believing community. The very moment we think that we know the truth by believing a doctrine and knowing a concept without 'its' spirituality, we deceive ourselves: *lex credendi, lex orandi*.⁶

Differences between traditions are primarily variations on spirituality and attitude. Although entering a church of a quite different denomination may look like entering a different world, a great many shared notions will be present in all kinds of liturgical, emotional and doctrinal differences, because all churches share the 'same' bible, even if they explain it in divergent ways. We could show this from a comparison of liturgical texts or materials which are used for the religious education of children, but let us restrict ourselves to the levels of doctrinal reflection, and compare a Lutheran and a Reformed statement on the identity of these traditions. The comparison shows how nearly the 'same' basic ideas are shared (so that one need not be amazed that in some countries Lutherans and Reformed have found each other in united churches), although the accentuation differs. What has been said about the process of upgrading and downgrading of beliefs, depending on history and context, can be seen in the places in which certain aspects of faith have been listed in both accounts. Both lists have a European background, and we cannot be sure that churches in other parts of the world will stress the same insights. It is quite certain that within ecumenical dialogue different accents will be made. Nevertheless, these two short lists of confessional priorities with their underlying spiritualities may clarify the ways in which confessional families differ, overlap and relate to each other. The *Lutherische Identität* (1977) mentions some basic insights (*Grundüberzeugungen*). Summarized, they are: 1) God's condescendence as the only means to salvation, 2) justification as a summary of the gospel, 3) the difference between law and gospel, 4) proclamation of the gospel and sacraments, 5) all baptised believers are priests, 6) the world as God's good creation, 7) Christian responsibility in the world, 8) scripture as norm (with a distinction between gospel and scripture) and 9) accentuation of the importance of theological studies in relation to the truth of the gospel. One cannot say of any of these beliefs that they are not Reformed, but the Reformed order will be different.⁷ By putting *sola scriptura* higher on the list (relating it to God's

⁶ This could be described more fully with references not only to the work of Karl Barth and Gerrit Berkouwer but also to the thought of Derrida; see Derrida, 1996.

⁷ In this context we do not refer to the *Leuenberger Konkordie*. We are not looking at the content of belief (and so to agreements and disagreements), but to the *structure* of disagreements between confessional traditions.

condescendence) the Old Testament will have a more important place. Responsibility in the world will be interpreted in terms of the (pilgrim) people of God. This can be seen in a paper, 'Reflections on How the Reformed Churches See Themselves', which lists the following characteristic 'focal points' of Reformed teaching: 1) one scripture, 2) the differences between God and humankind (*Anders-sein*⁸), 3) covenant of grace, 4) the distinction between the law and gospel, 5) God's Holy Spirit, 6) the witnessing community, 7) Christian freedom, 8) political and social responsibility, 9) strangers and pilgrims (in: *Who Are We Called To Be?*). These two lists of characteristic fundamental beliefs of Lutherans (*Grundüberzeugungen*) and Reformed 'focal points of Reformed teaching' clearly are not in full opposition; on the contrary, they are in agreement on many points. At the same time these lists show differences in accentuations and priorities of basic insights. They are not unimportant for discussion: study and dialogue can help one understand the gospel more fully. Differences between these two traditions are not complete contradictions but varying priorities and different accentuations and so different configurations of the same beliefs. These differences render a slightly different spirituality and liturgy and church order also.

The relation between various Christian traditions was often formerly understood in terms of strong opposition. One reason therefore has been political, the European rule *cuius regio, eius religio*. On the basis of this policy the government did not grant equal rights for dissidents, which led not infrequently to their persecution. The acceptance of freedom of religion has pluralism as an inevitable consequence.

Another factor has been philosophical, the Western idea that clear and distinct ideas have truth in themselves. This philosophy, which is now called rationalist and modernist, has deep roots in Greek thought, especially in the understanding of rationality in Plato and Aristotle. Although our theology will inevitably be contextual and as such be influenced by all kinds of philosophies in global culture, we have to take care that our idea of the nature of beliefs, confessions and reflection on faith, corresponds to central biblical notions of faith, witness and knowledge. The acknowledgement that doctrinal formulations are secondary compared to the bible and the faith of the worshipping congregations does not imply relativism. If we accept that all our formulations are secondary compared to true insights which they are meant to communicate, and that our insights will also not be the full truth, we have to engage continuously in a renewed study of scripture and dialogue with each other in order to tell and explain, to criticise and be criticised, to learn and to grow into the truth. This is not to say that we should not try to formulate the gospel in our own words

⁸ A more traditional term would be 'sovereignty'.

as clearly as possible. Theologians and philosophers must analyse the meaning of the concepts used and try to find better ways to communicate the underlying insights. Even the best confessions are human formulations which should not be taken out of the context of faith and worship. The truth of Christian faith is that we experience reality in the right way, and stay into the truth. *Credo in unum deo* means *cor do in deo*, i.e. I give my heart to God (Smith, 41). Ultimately the truth of faith is not a doctrine but a person.

Contextuality and the reinterpretation of the Word of God

If these considerations are correct, one of the most promising approaches for the further study of Reformed and other identities will be to take on the issue of hermeneutics in the broad sense of the term more explicitly: the reading and application of scripture in differing contexts, the identity of Christian belief in different contexts, the renewal of the church in new circumstances (*ecclesia reformata est semper reformanda*), and the distinction between an easy adaptation of the gospel to culture and obedient, timely proclamation of the gospel.

If we learn to see the tradition like a river going through different landscapes and trying to find its way through hills and fields, we have to accept that the tradition allows for some differences. The Reformation had several sources and also now shows different streams going in different directions. At present more members of WARC member churches live in a non-Western than in a Western context and the Reformed tradition is in a process of exchange with other cultures as well. The Reformed tradition originated in sixteenth-century Europe and has been influenced by Augustinian thought, by the Renaissance and, later on, Enlightenment. It has rather close ties with democratic ideals. In our time the churches in other parts of the world have to find their own interpretation of the gospel and of the Reformed way of interpreting the gospel. Inevitably, such a process will lead to a reinterpretation of the Reformed heritage and to some changes in the classical configuration of Reformed basic insights. It is unknown what will happen to the unity of the Reformed churches worldwide. It is many times easier to reach an agreement on Reformed identity in a European meeting than in a meeting with representatives from all continents. If we realise that many of the European churches also consider the classical Reformed confessions as their heritage but not as a prescription for what members of the churches must believe now, it can easily be understood that the old French, Swiss, Dutch, and English confessions cannot be the last word for explaining Christian beliefs in the context of Islam, the Advaita Vedanta, the veneration of Krishna, Theravada Buddhism, Confucianism, Zen and Shinto. *Ecclesia semper reformanda!* The tradition may develop the power to relate to many cultural contexts, to adapt itself to what is worthwhile in other cultures in which God has 'not

left himself without a witness in doing good' and criticising all that is wrong and leads astray.

The centrality of *sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide*, which expresses the *solus Christus*, is to be understood as the centrality of the preaching of the gospel. As Calvin has said, wisdom consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of human beings. Every word about God has implications for our understanding of our lives. Therefore, in the preaching of the gospel the human condition is revealed in its true dimensions, *coram deo*, in its ambiguities of love and hate, altruism and failure. Scripture is rich in the description of the human condition; it is a large reservoir of many histories and similes which show how human beings are, how life is, and who God is. In various situations different parts of the bible become actual. In times of resistance other stories are told than in times in which the churches are respected. The richness of the traditions renders many possibilities for the actualisation and application of the gospel. In all these situations we read the Word of God. In the prayer for enlightenment through the Holy Spirit the minister asks that God may bless all human words and thoughts which mediate between the text and the hearts of the members of the congregation so that what people understand is basic to their lives (and not simply that they understand the propositions which the minister states). Therefore, basic for the handing over of focal insights in their dynamic configurations is the acknowledgement that all understanding of the gospel has to be renewed time and again, so that it may relate critically to the contexts in which we live and we be open to the challenges we face. The Word of God is always, as Karl Barth has said, concrete (1932, 141).

In this dynamic process of the understanding and reinterpretation of the gospel in different historical, social and cultural circumstances, the expressions of the Reformed heritage will vary. Differences will sometimes cause conflicts, and changes often require struggle. In order to remind ourselves of the struggles and conflicts over different opinions and the injustice done so frequently, in this case by the conservative wing, we may give some quotes from a traditional and a more modern view of the relation between women and men. A recent WARC consultation states⁹: "Gender. God created women and men equally, therefore their role in life should be equal" ('Who are we...', 1994). However, traditionally women have been understood as the helpers of men. The so-called second creation story relates that, in distinction from the animals which live in pairs, Adam is alone. God notices and says: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Genesis 2:18). With reference to this text and many other biblical regulations women have lived in subservience to men for centuries. This patriarchalism has been part of church tradition. To

⁹ I also used this example in Vroom, 1996, p. 102-104.

quote one view, the Dutch theologian and later Prime Minister, Abraham Kuyper (d. 1920) in his explanation of the Heidelberg catechism speaks of the 'divine decree that the man should be the head of the woman. Who stands on the basis of the Word of God *must* acknowledge the priority of the man above the woman, not in spiritual value but in natural gifts and position and reciprocal relation' (1905, 165).

He was certainly not the last one to defend such a view. In this view many biblical passages resound. It should be noted that Kuyper does not have any doubts about the spiritual equality of men and women; he wants to distinguish between the tasks and responsibilities that women and men must accept in social life according to their nature and their respective biological and psychological constitutions. In this explanation of scripture a great many ideas from various cultural movements in the nineteenth century play their part, such as a Romantic accentuation of differences and plurality and a characterisation (rooted in Aristotle) of women as passive and men as active. However, in the interpretation of scripture the text quoted from Genesis has been central: women as helpers of men.

Modern interpretations of the bible take equality between women and men for granted, and defend it on a biblical basis. The balance in the configuration of beliefs shifts from hierarchical thought to equality. Now the first creation story comes to the fore: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). This text has now moved to the centre of the scheme of interpretation (and the other one has been reinterpreted as secondary), and patriarchal texts in which women are seen as lower than men are explained as outdated and no longer as the standard for human life.¹⁰ Such texts are the remains of a patriarchal society; as such they do not reveal the central message of the gospel of liberation and acceptance of all human beings by God. By the change in the scheme of interpretation these texts are stripped of their authority in the churches. This interpretation of scripture has been supported by the basic insight of Paul that in Christ the differences between human beings have been overcome: "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This modern interpretation of scripture stands in a context: emancipation movements, the democratisation process of the sixties, liberation theology and many material circumstances lie in the background.

¹⁰ Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, 1984, p. 14ff. on 'prototype' and freedom of reinterpretation.

In this reinterpretation we have an example of the negation of an old idea and by consequence a considerable shift in the network of basic insights. Most women and men no longer perceive women as just helpers of men nor do they think that a patriarchal ordering is evident. This basic insight is no longer self-evident and many will say that the change has come much too late. Another insight has come to the fore: equality. For many Christians in the world that insight has become central in the appropriation of scripture.

We could add many examples of shifts in the traditional understanding of scripture through the centuries. Instead, we will deal with a last question which is suggested already by what has been said so far: are our interpretations and reinterpretations arbitrary? In their 'modernisation' of their interpretation of the gospel are the churches just adapting uncritically the last stage in social developments? Are churches in other parts of the world just adapting to their context in finding other liturgies and making new confessions? Are *sola Scriptura*, *solus Christus*, justification by faith alone and the presbyterial or congregational church system (church order) all merely contextual, Western, sixteenth- to twentieth-century European views and nothing more? Is it all just a question of historical circumstances?

If it is true that grace, justification by faith and not by works, reconciliation between God and humans and between humans, equality of female and male persons and of races, social responsibility, and priesthood of all believers are truly central to scripture - and if Reformed tradition is right in saying so - then we can trust that churches on all continents will see it - although they most surely will explain and apply these basic insights under the conditions of their culture, facing their own challenges. The differences between the various Christian families prove that not everybody understands the gospel in the same way. Apparently, one has to learn to see the priority of grace, the scepticism about natural theology, etc. but once one has seen it, it is present. People do not choose to see scripture the one way or the other but see it as they think it is: the meaningfulness of life and grace as its basis. The acknowledgement of the influence of culture and time on the development of our understanding of the Word of God is no argument for relativism because dialogue and study can help us to learn and to be corrected. Therefore, the way in which Reformed tradition has learned to understand both the truth about God and about humankind, is not arbitrary. The 'Reformed' insights described in this volume, which in our understanding are central for Christian faith, are offered for consideration within the Reformed circle and within the wider Christian fellowship.

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Reformed Identity

Eberhard Busch

Reformed churches often have a problem to say what is typically Reformed. This embarrassment is the starting point of this article. But against this background Eberhard Busch wants to find an answer to the question what is Reformed identity.

1. Reformed embarrassment

Since a couple of years the question of “Reformed Identity” has gained more importance for the Reformed churches. Nowadays this is especially the result of bilateral talks or discussions with representatives of other denominations. In those meetings they were asked: “You know who we are - but what is typical for you, the *Reformed*?” They felt really embarrassed... Some answered, for instance, that Reformed identity is not characterised by any specific concept, but rather by its openness to ecumenical issues. Others answered that the different Reformed churches in the world are influenced by the different contexts in which they exist. But why are they *Reformed*? What is characteristic for them compared to Roman Catholics and Lutherans? They too are influenced in different places of the world by their different contexts, but at the same time, it is clear that they are Roman Catholics or Lutherans! In this situation I would hope that it is not the context that determines what it means to be *Reformed*, but that they belong - in their different contexts - to one of the Reformed churches.

Mostly the matter of identity becomes a topic when people are unsure about their identity. It seems that this matter is typical especially for the members of Reformed churches. There is no real problem for the Roman Catholic brothers and sisters who listen to the voice of the Vatican. And our Lutheran siblings look in their Book of Confessions of 1581 to know who they are. But for the Reformed there is a problem here, and maybe they are not longer Reformed, if the question of their Reformed identity is not an embarrassment for them. It is clear, however, that the Reformed Christians do not have such a visible head of the church as do the Roman Catholics, nor such a dominating Church Father as do the Lutherans, who have really received their name from him. Perhaps some Reformed churches in the different regions use old confessions like the Heidelberg Catechism or the Westminster Confession, but there is no Reformed confession with global validity nor such a collection of confessions which defines for all Reformed churches in the world what it means to be “Reformed”, nor does the 16th century have for them the same decisive importance as it has

for the Lutherans. In the Reformed world more new confessions were formulated in the last fifty years than in the 16th century.

This does not mean a weakness in confessing. On the contrary, as it is shown by the many new confessions in the worldwide Reformed family. But it means a denominational weakness of the Reformed churches. It signals that you do not necessarily have to be a Reformed Christian to be a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. Therefore it was possible that in some places Reformed churches had no problem in joining with other churches, without fear of losing their traditional profile. And often Reformed people who move into a Lutheran region quickly become active members of the other church. Certainly, in our times other reasons exist why Christians lose their denominational origins. But this does not change the impression one gets: there is a specific Reformed opinion about the relativity of their own denomination.

In Germany, a strong movement emerged in the first decades of the 20th century among the Reformed churches which rediscovered enthusiastically its own tradition. It regretfully acknowledged the weakness of the Reformed church and valiantly tried to resist this weakness. I quote from articles in the Reformed Journal: The leaders are alarmed by the question: "Where can we still find Reformed churches and congregations?" Then the question is discussed: "Why is there a need for a Reformed presence in Germany?" But these great concerns are connected to a self-satisfied comfort: "A new Reformed spirit awakens in our country." In an odd parallel to the Luther Renaissance some Reformed people wanted to restore "Calvin". In 1926 their magazine wanted to ensure, "that the Reformed heritage of our fathers especially in Protestant Germany does not simply disappear, but shows its value beneath the great Lutheran heritage." What does it mean that "the heritage of our fathers" should not "*simply*" disappear? And the effort is strange to be the Lutheran "brothers" equal in how they relate to their heritage. So it seems that they wanted to fight for their tradition, too. But at the same time they always complained about the 'Lutheranisation' as being one of the main dangers for the Reformed, so that they found it necessary to fight against it. Their motto was "the Reformed interests" (reformierte Belange), which should be safeguarded. The movement was supported by noteworthy heads of the Reformed Church. But it needs to be noted that there were a lot of nice Reformed letters, but only a little Reformed spirit. This became visible in the time of Hitler. Then representatives of that movement were still fighting for the "Reformed interests", but together with many adherents of Hitler in the Protestant Church. This happened at a time, when it was necessary to counter the *Christian* confession with the brown-shirt ideology, which forced it's power also on Christian heads. In this way they would have shown Reformed *spirit*. They fought for the rebirth of the Heidelberg

Catechism, but they did not take seriously the tenet that the church does not gather, defend, and preserve itself, because this all is done by Christ (question 54). It was a mistake that they did not put the question of the ecclesial survival in the hands of God, but took it into their own hands, and so the word of Jesus Christ was forgotten (Matthew 6:25): “Take no thought for your life.” It was a mistake that they dedicated their Christian life to care of their heritage, instead of being Reformed witnesses of the gospel.

It seems that denominational weakness belongs to the characteristics of the Reformed denomination. This weakness does not mean that there is a deficiency, nor that its members are weary of it when they become aware of this matter. On the other hand, when they feel ashamed of it and when they want a religious system in which they only have to look into a book from the 16th century to know what to do today, then their concern becomes a very rigid matter, and then they themselves are not happy with their Reformed theology. It is my thesis that freedom belongs indispensably to Reformed Christianity, also in relation to its own form of Christianity. So they like to live in it, but only for the time being. Of course, there is also the danger of falling or of sliding off onto one or another side. But this danger does not necessarily belong to the Reformed character. That freedom is rather a well-considered form of an ecclesial denomination, and the members of the Reformed churches may be a little proud of it as a hopeful light amidst the other denominations. I will try to explain this further.

2. About the freedom of the Reformed denomination

It is true that a kind of religious stubbornness sometimes existed in Reformed churches, resulting in thoughts and acts being measured by yardsticks not only according to holy scripture, but more in accordance with the holy traditions of the church. These churches tried to exist in the present time by preserving the memory of a nice past. They thought of themselves as superior to others, while in fact they only knew themselves, and the others only in a caricatured way. A variant of having such a high opinion of itself is the unnecessary pursuit of a profile, in which the Reformed as a minority try to outdo the majority with radical positions. But after all, such an exaggerated opinion of their own denomination was not so much the problem of the Reformed churches. From the beginning the Reformed theologians were too well trained in humanistic thought, and the Reformed churches were so international and decentralised, that the external conditions for the development of a monolithic church were not given. In this we see already a little bit of that special Reformed liberty in relation to its own denomination. I think that this liberty has three *theological* reasons.

First: The unconditional subordination of the own tradition and doctrine to the holy scripture

Often the Reformed confessions are criticised because they like to substantiate their message with verses from the bible. But why criticise this? The confession does not want to put a new truth on the candelabra. It wants to help us reading the scripture again, often in times when important passages are forgotten or even disputed. Thus it does so by opening the scripture for us to learn from it. Besides, it is characteristic of the Reformed confessions to frequently add the “reservation of a better instruction [by the holy scripture] in the future”. This was already written in the first Reformed Confession of 1523, written by Huldrych Zwingli.¹ In the so-called “Synod of Berne” of 1532 we read in a fine formulation that: “If a pastor or someone else would propose something to us which leads us nearer to Christ, or which according to the Word of God is more conducive to general friendship and Christian love than the opinion written here, then we will like to accept it and do not want to stop the movement of the Holy Spirit.”²

Certainly the confession is subordinated to the scripture for the Lutherans, too. But it is valid for them in a different way: the confession is normative, already and forever, by and through the norm of the scripture, because it includes the decision taken about its own compatibility with the bible. Compared to this, the Reformed confession lays claim to more liability to the scripture, and to the confession only *as long* as it agrees with the scripture. It wishes itself to be proved - basically by every mature Christian. Therefore, references to the bible are written in the margin. This is giving an advice to people to go and check. This means that the bible is understood as the only judge in case a confession is criticised or corrected. The holy scripture has such an importance because it is fundamentally ahead of all ecclesial texts. For it is the decisive testimony of the speaking and acting of the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ.

From the beginning the Reformed style of discourse is characterised by aloofness which reflects the desire not to monopolise the rule decreed by the Word of God by the church. One form of such monopolising is the identification of the biblical witness with some pithy saying, maybe printed *in large letters*. There is the danger that the horizon of faith will be reduced and that other sayings of the bible are neglected or disregarded. It is a maxim of Reformed theology that we cannot separate the witness of *the* Word of God from the fullness of the very different testimonies in scripture. Reducing the biblical texts to some series of pericopes for the sermons is another form of such a monopolising method. In the Reformed

¹H. Zwingli, *Schriften*, Vol. 2, Zürich 1995, p. 498.

²*Der Berner Synodus von 1532*, Vol. 1, edited by G.W. Locher, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1984, p. 26.

view it is a good use to have sermons along entire biblical books. It is a sign indicating that the church does not walk in a circle, but on a path that leads from the first beginnings of the people of Israel to the last destination in the Kingdom of God.

Second: The assignment of their own denomination to the one, ecumenical church

Already we find this idea in Calvin's thoughts, and this has remained typical of Reformed thinking. On the one hand Calvin stressed what he wrote to Cardinal Sadolet: "The only true bond of ecclesial unity would exist if Christ the Lord, who has reconciled us to God the Father, were to gather us out of our present dispersion into the fellowship of his body, that so, through his one Word and Spirit, we might join together with one heart and one soul."³ On the other hand, Calvin wrote in 1552 these words to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, that laid out the future way for the Reformed churches: "the chief evils of our time, viz., that the churches are so divided... thus it is that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding... could I be of any service, I should with pleasure cross ten seas, if necessary to accomplish that object..."⁴ In a similar sense the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 declares already in its preface that it is published "to search and to find peace and concord in mutual love with the German and other foreign churches."

This is the speech of a church which does not confess itself to its special denominational form, but does confess itself at its place and with its knowledge to the one Church of Jesus Christ. It counts itself to the Church, but feels free to agree that other churches may also belong to the Church of Jesus Christ. This understanding is accepted and even strengthened in the modern confessions of Reformed churches throughout the world. A typical phrase is the sentence that we believe "the one holy, worldwide Christian church", gathered out of all peoples in the world.⁵ This is underlined in a North-Indian Church Order, where it is written: "The Church of North India is a part of the body of Christ, which is the one, holy, general, and apostolic church, and it is built by Him out of all human generations and races."⁶

We can see a helpful commentary on this point in a little known fact: In the time of the Reformation the dean of the Reformed Church in East-Frisia (Northern part of Germany),

³ German translation in Calvin, *Um Gottes Ehre*, Vier kleinere Schriften, übers. u. hrsg. von M. Simon, München 1924, p. 92.

⁴ German translation in *Calvins Lebenswerk in seinen Briefen*, übers. von R. Schwarz, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1962, p. 596.

⁵ So Confessions in Southafrica, Indonesia, Canada, USA, cf. ed. by Lukas Vischer, *Reformiertes Zeugnis heute*. Eine Sammlung neuerer Bekenntnistexte aus der reformierten Tradition, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1988 (transl. from the German Version), p. 7, 18, 143; ed. by Lukas Vischer, *Reformed Witness Today*. A Collection of Confessions and Statements of Faith. Issues by the Reformed Churches, Bern 1982, p. 210.

⁶ In Vischer, *Reformiertes Zeugnis heute*, p. 252.

Johannes a Lasco, brought Reformed and Lutheran churches together in one Protestant Church. This was based on the Articles of Marburg of 1529. Those articles are mostly known for giving the reason for the separation of Luther and Zwingli, though they disagreed only in their understanding of the Eucharist. But a Lasco understood this the other way round - in *this* sense: "In most other articles we are in agreement, and this is reason enough to remain together. Let us understand the agreement as the grounds for further discussions about our disagreement!" This was really an idea which points to the future of an ecumenical method.

Third: The arrangement of their own denomination in the travel of God's people

It is important to be aware that the Church, and this applies even more to a denomination, is not the goal of the ways of God. In every shape the Church is only on its way, - following the aim which is determined and brought about by Him alone. Therefore the life of the congregations and their members is essentially a pilgrimage, not fleeting life on earth, and not being obsessed by it. It is like the way of Israel through the desert. It is being on the way, in restlessness, in uneasiness, in fights, in sighs, and in thirst, but always with the motto: let's go! Calvin indicated this direction: "After we have accepted the testimony of the gospel about the free-gracious love of God, we are waiting, till God will show that, what is still hidden below the hope."⁷ For the *Confessio Belgica* (1561) or the *Confessio Scotica* (1560) this goal is clearer in the visible appearance of the rule and the realm of *Christ*, which had already begun when He rose to heaven.⁸ And the Heidelberg Catechism formulates that the coming judge is no one else than the already appeared redeemer. Therefore, we walk towards him "in all [our] sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head"⁹.

The same is stressed in the new Reformed confessions. Let us look now especially at texts which Reformed churches in the USA have accepted in the last decades. In 1974 there was a new confession published with the title: "Our Song of Hope" which starts with the words: "We are a people of hope, and we are waiting for the return of our Lord." The waiting happens while His community is sent "to preach good news to the poor, and righteousness to the nations, and peace among mankind."¹⁰ And in the Declaration of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in 1976 we hear that Christ calls us to the pilgrimage with the aim of

⁷ Calvin, *Institutio III* 2,43.

⁸ Art. 11. resp. Art. 37.

⁹ Question and answer 52.

¹⁰ Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, 222.226.

his realm: “We believe Christ gives us and demands of us lives in pilgrimage toward God’s kingdom.” In waiting for it we are called “to serve as He has served us.”¹¹

In this context it becomes clear that the Reformed are not so much interested in the possession of a confession, but more in the determination to confess. The Reformed acknowledge - in line with the ancestors - that we do not always have to say and do the same as they said and did. It is possible that we will be asked new questions, to which we will have to give new answers. It is possible that other insights become the focus of attention, inviting us to decide whether we confess or deny Jesus Christ. Certain biblical sentences speak particularly at different times. In 1942 the long forgotten words “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22) began to be heard in the Swiss churches in favour of the Jews. Monopolisation of biblical words is beyond such an experience. The Reformed denomination reminds us that we have to reckon with the Holy Spirit who wants to lead us in all truths. We have to be open to His concrete, new instructions. It is the Spirit, who allows us to think, say and do what is necessary now. The same Spirit urges us to get on the way from our own denomination to what is more than our and all other denominations. - So far concerning the subject of Reformed freedom in and over against the own denomination. But this view is to be completed by another consideration.

3. About the gratitude of the Reformed Church

When such freedom does not exist in a denomination, then it becomes inflexible. But this danger is no longer an issue for the Reformed churches today. There is another danger which is far more of a menace. That is the threat of a certain kind of liberalism: the danger that they gamble away the talent of a church, Reformed according to the Word of God, which has been handed over to them for safekeeping and for passing on to their neighbours. It is the danger of selling this talent for a small profit. Maybe they seem to be “Reformed”, but they have the title without the “Word of God”. That is the danger of wrongly interpreting the formula “The Reformed Church is always to be reformed”, so that they think they are Reformed because they are doing their work in a different way than the Reformers. They do not understand the true sense of that formula that we have to turn again and again to the fountain of faith, love, and hope. It is dangerous for the Reformed to store their legacy in a museum, which is visited occasionally, but not used in the daily life. In short, there is the danger that present-day Reformed Christians live in the church, as if it were not true that God is not the God of the dead but of the living. Therefore, our ancestors can not really join in our conversation today and are not allowed to have a say in our decisions. There is no

¹¹ Ibid. p. 262.

space for their questioning whether we still really are Reformed Christians. When we think in this way, an unspiritual arbitrariness will appear in the church.

In contrast to this attitude we have to stress a clear gratitude in the relation to their own denomination. In this context the word “gratitude” is understood in an analogy to its use in the Heidelberg Catechism. This does not mean the gratitude which we have to show indeed in relation to God. This means the gratitude to humans, especially to those who were called to be witnesses, teachers and preachers of God and His good deeds. Certainly, this gratitude is something we can only do with *pleasure*. But at the same time it is a task which we must *do*. It is a task of obedience to our spiritual parents. For the explanation of this gratitude, which is expected from us, it is useful, also for the parents themselves, to bear in mind article 104 of the Heidelberg Catechism about the fifth commandment: To everyone who precedes us, I have to “submit myself with due obedience”, and I have even to “patiently bear with their weaknesses”.

In spite of such “weaknesses” the Reformed Christians may regard themselves quite positively. They are allowed to learn a certain practical knowledge from their ancestors. And they have to want this knowledge to be a light that never fades away. Alexander Schweizer, a Reformed theologian in Zurich in the 19th century said: The Lutheran denomination is formed more “anti-judaistic”, and the Reformed is formed more “anti-paganistic”.¹² This means that for the Lutherans the centre of their theology is salvation by faith alone in the grace of God, in contrast to justification by good works. And the Reformed theologians stress more the reign of Christ the Lord, and therefore, they are concerned more about the demarcation with paganism. These catchwords seem like a caricature. The Reformed certainly also praise God in His pure grace as opposed to justification by human works. But as they understand the holy scripture, as did Paul, *good* works, done in honour of God, are not excluded. And therefore, they do not like anti-Judaism. They take the abuse of Calvin as a “judaistic theologian” by a Lutheran theologian in the 16th century¹³ as an honorary title. Indeed, we should accept the idea that we have gone from paganism to living under the head of Jesus Christ in the service of God. This sentence will be underlined by three assertions.

First: The continuing importance of the first commandment

In this commandment the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ, says to us that we should have no other gods before Him – Jesus has sharpened this with the sentence: “You *cannot*

¹² A. Schweizer, *Die Christliche Glaubenslehre nach protestantischen Grundsätzen*, Bd. 1, Leipzig 1863, p. 8.

¹³ Aegidius Hunnius, *Calvinus Judaizans*, 1595.

serve God *and* mammon” (Matthew 6:24). According to the Heidelberg Catechism this means to “trust in God alone, with humility and patience submit to Him, expect all good things from Him only; love, fear, and glorify Him with my whole heart.”¹⁴ God has the unceasing priority over all others. At first anti-paganism has to prove itself. The pagan in the Christian has to convert *himself*, and this is especially the gentiles’ duty, according to the Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig.¹⁵ Surely the gentiles do not appreciate this, especially today. Maybe they prefer to be gentiles, or they are against ‘absolutism’. But does the first commandment mean that Israel has made its accidental tribal deity into an absolute one? We can make relative only such authorities which we have made absolute ones beforehand. Such figures, if absolute or relative, are always *other* gods, which we should not have before *God*. We are not those who distinguish the God of the first commandment from the other deities. It is *God* who distinguishes Himself from them. He does it by the fact that the people have not made Him to be their God, but it is an absolute miracle that He made Himself their God and made them His people. This God is not an idolised creature of a creative human, but the creator of those who are His creatures. “What is idolatry? ...instead of, or besides that one God, who has manifested himself in his word, to contrive, or have any other object, in which men place their trust.”¹⁶

We hear the same in the old and in the new Reformed confessions that this God, who has spoken and speaks according to the holy scripture, is at all costs to be worshipped according to the first commandment. Many of those confessions say first of all about God that He is one, before they explain that this one is the triune God. The confession of the oneness of God is understood here in the sense of Deuteronomy 6:4 and Mark 12:29. This means the fundamental difference between God and the idols. Therefore, the creed of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (1985) starts with the sentence: “We believe in God, the only, true God”.¹⁷ What is said here, is unfolded in the Declaration of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (1976): “We believe in one true and living God... We acknowledge one God alone, whose demands on us are absolute, whose help for us is sufficient. That One is the Lord, whom we worship, serve and love... We acknowledge no other God. We must not set our ultimate reliance on any other help. We must not yield obedience unconditional to any other power. We must not love anyone or anything more than God.”¹⁸ It is clear, and it must be clear that the concern here is not for an abstract difference between a finite and infinite

¹⁴ Heidelberg Catechism, Question 95.

¹⁵ F. Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Frankfurt/Main 1993, p. 317.

¹⁶ Heidelberg Catechism, Question 95.

¹⁷ Vischer, *Reformiertes Zeugnis*, p. 61, cf. p. 132.

¹⁸ Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, p. 232sq.

being. It is the matter of the biblical God who reveals Himself for the connection with His humans. It is this God about whom Calvin said: “Where God is honoured, there also is care for humanity.”¹⁹

Second: The powerful claim of God to our whole life

This is a further aspect of the Reformed anti-paganism. Calvin was so bold that he stressed the doctrine of sanctification by treating it in the “Institutes” before he dealt with the doctrine of justification. But he did not want this to be interpreted as a form of legalistic justice through human works. Rather he dealt with it under the title of the comforting and also imperative principle: “We belong not to ourselves, rather we belong to God.”²⁰ The Heidelberg Catechism seems to go in another direction, as its first question inquires about the comfort in life and dying. But in its reply it agrees with Calvin’s answer that we belong with our body and soul, in life and dying not to ourselves, but to the Lord. It is (according to question 37) this Lord who as the saviour gave Himself with His body and soul for us. Certainly, God wants to give humans all the help that they need. But He gives them this help, while at the same time removing egoists from their position of thinking they are the centre of the world; and the Lord puts Himself in the hub of the universe. Therefore “I” do not belong to “myself”, but to someone else; and this other is not a master of arbitrariness, but He is the saviour who gave Himself as much for “me” as for others. This has the consequence for us to live as His followers. To say it with a biblical model: they see the difference between the laws under which Israel suffered in Egypt and the laws given to this people on Mount Sinai, to “honour its liberator in happy readiness obediently”.²¹

The new Reformed confessions are coined by a similar thinking as the old. The Reformed kind of theological thinking differs in two points from the Lutheran tradition with regard to the understanding of the law. First, though it is also clear in Reformed theology that no one can save himself by fulfilling the law, this theology does not do away with the law. The Declaration of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the USA (1976) says: “We declare Christ has freed us from trying to save ourselves by obeying the law. He restores to us God’s law as a gift and delight. The law describes concretely the shape of our freedom.”²² Second, we see already in that quotation that Reformed theology distinguishes between *God’s* law and *human* laws. Although Christians normally have to observe human laws, in certain extreme

¹⁹ J. Calvin, CO 38,388.

²⁰ J. Calvin, *Institutio* III 7,1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, II, 8,15.

²² Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, p. 260.

situations, Christians have to obey God more than humans, in the sense that in obeying God, they may be disobedient to human laws. The use of the word in the plural form shows that the Reformed are more interested in the (good) *content* of the law than the Lutherans who understood “the” law more as a category of contradiction against the sinners.

There exists in the Lutheran tradition the inclination to connect divine and human law. Thus the external use of *divine* law means obedience to *civil* law. This leads to a division between gospel and law. The Christian religion takes place in the heart, and the external life has to be organised according to the orders of the State, or of a general custom, or of the professional occupation. On the contrary, the Reformed differentiation between the law of God and human law leads to resistance against the separation between the inner and the external life. This does not mean that Christians have to throw the civil laws overboard. But it means that we are ruled by the same Lord and master in both domains of our life.

Third: The common character of the Christian life under the one Head

We may know that any ‘private’ form of Christianity is something like a wooden iron. But this becomes a very expensive truth in a time of individualism, specialisation, and of religious self-determination in the ‘department store of competing supplies’. Our Reformed ancestors had already pointed out a central idea: to be a Christian means to be a member of the body of Christ. And a Christian life means a *common* life. This has an anti-pagan accent, too. According to the Heidelberg Catechism²³, Christian life means being a member of the community which the Son of God has elected out of the whole human race. He did this by transplanting them out of their former surroundings into this new connection. *He* does this, and not a natural human quality of being sociable. He is the head of His community and makes them His sisters and brothers; and He needs no substitutes to do this. He gathers, defends, and preserves His congregation. Therefore, for example, the holy Sunday services should not become a playing field for arbitrary acts, because the service does not belong to the office-bearers nor to the other members of the congregation, but the service is subject to the rule and work of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, everything that happens during the service should happen in a strong responsibility towards the Lord.

We read similar sentences in the new Reformed confessions. The Statement about the Christian Faith of the Presbyterian Church in England (1956) reads: “The Church is one, because Christ lives in her through the Holy Spirit, and in consequence of the union with Christ her members are one among each other.”²⁴ This is even more strongly emphasised in

²³ Question 54.

²⁴ Vischer, *Reformiertes Zeugnis*, p. 69.

the Statement of Christian Belief of the Presbyterian Church of Canada (1984): “The church is Christ together with his people called both to worship and serve him in all of life”. “To live in Christ takes shape in the community of faith.”²⁵ In the Confession of the Torajan Church in Indonesia (1981) we read that “God has called and chosen one People.” It is called “to come out from not being His People and to become the holy People of God”, as “a new fellowship, the possession of Jesus Christ.”²⁶

Today this is stressed even more in the new Reformed confessions than in the old. What does it mean to become a member of the people of God? It means to give a faithful “answer” to God’s grace, and “to enter the federation with God and with others expressly” - so the Confession of Faith of the two Cumberland-Presbyterian Churches (1984).²⁷ We hear far more in the new confessions the idea that the congregation is gathered with the intention of sending them to the others. The New Confession of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (1972) declares that “mission is the command of Christ to the church”²⁸, and according to the Statement of the Presbyterian Church of England (1956) “each member is called to a service, according to his or her gifts of Christ, given to them.”²⁹ The Confession of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (1967) speaks radically first about the mission of the church as its true sense, and then about its gatherings as the equipment for the mission.³⁰ - In short, anti-paganism does not mean that faith, hope, and love have to stop at the frontiers of the Christian congregation. Not at all! Mature and responsible Christians are needed to bear witness to the gospel and to the law of God in our endangered world.

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²⁵ Ibid., p. 143, 148.

²⁶ Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, p. 53.

²⁷ Vischer, *Reformiertes Zeugnis*, p. 213.

²⁸ Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, p. 83.

²⁹ Vischer, *Reformiertes Zeugnis*, p. 71.

³⁰ Vischer, *Reformed Witness*, p. 210, 215.

Reformed Catholicity and Distinctiveness

Ronald J. Feenstra

Reformed Identity is embedded in Reformed catholicity. Ronald Feenstra explains in this article, that only against this Reformed Catholicity one can speak of a Reformed distinctive identity.

What makes Reformed theology distinctive? Do Reformed Christians hold to a specifically Reformed theology and form of life that distinguishes them from other Christians? What does it mean when the proposed constitution for the World Communion of Reformed Churches says that this organization “embodies Reformed identity articulated in historic Reformed confessions and continued in the life and witness of the Reformed community”? What shapes the identity of Reformed Christians and distinguishes Reformed churches? This article will focus on the question of the distinctiveness of Reformed *theology*, while recognizing that Reformed Christianity includes many elements besides theology, such as worship practices, patterns of piety, and organizational structures. This essay will argue that Reformed Christians are catholic Christians who accept the central teachings of the Christian faith, and also that Reformed Christianity has a distinctive set of beliefs and a unique perspective on the Christian faith.

Reformed catholicity

Reformed theology's distinctiveness must be seen against the background of its catholicity. Reformed theology is catholic Christianity. More specifically, it is Augustinian Christianity. During the sixteenth century, Reformers and Roman Catholics argued over which side was faithful to the theology of the early church. They were particularly concerned to find support in Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430), whose thought had been taken as authoritative throughout the Middle Ages. Both Lutheran and Reformed theologians worked hard to defend their own positions by showing that their views were based not just in scripture, but also in the theology of the early church, and especially Augustine's theology. They argued that they were not introducing theological innovations, but rather returning to long-forgotten biblical truths. As a result, the central teachings of Reformed Christianity appear in other Christian traditions (and particularly in traditions, such as Lutheranism, that borrow heavily from Augustine). So Reformed theology is deliberately biblical and Augustinian, and therefore catholic rather than sectarian.

Two recent studies that address the distinctiveness of Reformed theology clearly affirm its catholicity. In *Christian and Reformed Today*, John Bolt argues that “a Reformed person is *trinitarian* in theology and *catholic* in vision.”¹ After citing Abraham Kuyper’s view that Calvinism is rooted in the thought of Augustine, the apostle Paul, the prophets, and the Old Testament patriarchs, Bolt says, “The Reformed tradition... is orthodox trinitarian Christianity at its best.”² Similarly, in *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings*, I. John Hesselink argues that Reformed Christians are part of the one, holy, catholic church and thus make no special claims regarding the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.³ Each time they recite the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed, Reformed Christians affirm the truth identified by both Bolt and Hesselink. Reformed Christians believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Far from being sectarians who think that their “brand” of Christianity is the only true one, Reformed Christians are ecumenical.

Of course, Reformed Christians have not always acted in ways that acknowledge the breadth of God’s work and the importance of Jesus’ prayer for unity among all of his followers. Too often, those of us who are Reformed have appeared to others as if we thought that the only beneficiaries of the new heaven and new earth would be Reformed Christians, or perhaps only those who are part of our own denomination (and its denominational near neighbors). To the extent that our behavior has denied the creedal affirmation of one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, we must repent of our rending asunder of what God has joined together and resolve to live in a manner that glorifies Christ and contributes to the unity of the Christian witness.

Much that one finds in Reformed theology, and certainly everything fundamental to the Christian faith, appears not only in the Reformed tradition but also in other Christian traditions. Reformed Christians join with all who heed God’s Word in affirming the sovereignty and love of God, the goodness of the creation and God’s providential care over it, human culpability and solidarity in sin, Jesus Christ’s substitutionary death for sinful humanity, his victorious resurrection that crushed the power of Satan, his lordship over all creation, his promised return in glory, and the Holy Spirit’s work in moving and inspiring the authors of scripture and breathing life into those who were dead in sin.

Even on theological issues over which various Christian groups disagree, Reformed Christians rarely, if ever, stand alone. In many areas, Reformed Christians join with others as heirs to

¹ John Bolt, *Christian and Reformed Today* (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia, 1984), p. 20.

² Bolt, *Christian and Reformed Today*, p. 21-22.

³ I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1983), p. 93.

the broad tradition of Christian orthodoxy - on issues such as the authority of scripture in relation to the Christian tradition, the baptism of infant children of believers, the unity of the covenant of grace in the Old and New Testaments, and the importance of combining doctrinal training with deep piety. In other areas, Reformed Christians have developed or modified Christian doctrines that others have subsequently borrowed. This can be seen in such teachings as the unity between the Word of God and the work of the Spirit, the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, the proper form of church government, and the concern for civil government and transformation of culture that comes from seeing the lordship of Christ in every area of life.

Another way in which Reformed theology parallels other Christian traditions is that it is *confessional*. Unlike some groups (Unitarians and some Baptists come to mind) that unite around a principle such as the freedom to interpret scripture without ecclesiastical interference, most Christians since the time of the apostles have found it helpful and even necessary to express in creeds or confessions their common understanding of what scripture teaches. When they affirm the Apostles' and Nicene creeds and unite around communal statements such as the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, and the Westminster Confession of Faith, Reformed Christians follow a pattern etched deeply in the annals of the Christian church. In sum, Reformed Christians are *catholic* Christians who share the essentials of the Christian faith with all members of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and share many beliefs and practices with Christians of other traditions.

Reformed distinctiveness

Yet Reformed Christians know that there is *something* distinctive about Reformed theology (just as Roman Catholics and Lutherans know that there is something distinctive about their theological traditions). Like other Christian traditions, Reformed Christianity contains both a distinctive set of beliefs and a unique perspective on the Christian faith. First, Reformed theology contains a unique or distinctive constellation of views and practices - a unique *set* of beliefs. Although no single doctrine distinguishes Reformed theology from that of other orthodox Christian traditions, there is a set of beliefs that jointly distinguishes Reformed theology from other forms of Christian theology.

Reformed Christians adhere not only to beliefs accepted by all orthodox Christians, but also to beliefs about which various Christian traditions disagree. Although Reformed Christians share many beliefs and practices with one Christian tradition or another, they also disagree with other Christian traditions on various points of doctrine. Only Reformed theology contains the full set of beliefs that constitute the Reformed tradition. Thus, in addition to believing

what can be found in the Apostles' and Nicene creeds, Reformed Christians believe that there is one covenant of grace that stretches from the Old Testament to the New, that God's covenant extends to the children of believers and should be signified by infant baptism, that although all have sinned God has in Jesus Christ mercifully chosen people for salvation without regard to their faith or works, that the Holy Spirit leads the church and moves people to faith by means of the Word of God and never contrary to it, and that Jesus Christ's lordship over all creation implies that God's people should be involved in politics, business, arts, sciences, education, and every other dimension of created reality. And when Reformed Christians disagree among themselves over which beliefs belong in the Reformed set, the best way to resolve such disputes is to consult both the Reformed confessions and scripture, on which the confessions are based.

The second reason for Reformed theology's distinctiveness is its unique *perspective* on the Christian faith, which leads to distinctive doctrinal emphases. Although Reformed Christianity recognizes and affirms all that is central to the Christian faith, it also highlights or emphasizes certain aspects of Christian teaching - aspects that some other traditions leave in the background or minimize. For example, all orthodox Christians affirm - but Reformed Christians stress - the sovereignty of God and salvation by grace. Countering the human tendency to treat God as a bookkeeper who rewards good people and punishes sinners, Reformed theology emphasizes that salvation comes by grace alone and not because of our own efforts. Again, Reformed theology underscores, more than other traditions do, the pervasiveness and persistence of sin in the human race. Finally, Reformed theology highlights the authority of scripture as confirmed by the witness of the Holy Spirit. In short, Reformed Christianity provides a perspective on the Christian faith that highlights God's sovereignty and grace and emphasizes humanity's dependence and need for forgiveness.

Why do Reformed Christians hold to the set of beliefs they do? Why do they, in addition, place certain doctrines in bold relief? First, and most importantly, Reformed theology contains the teachings and emphases that it does because it patterns itself after scripture. In fact, the only good reason to adhere to the Reformed faith is that it is faithful to scripture. Of course, Christians of every stripe learn from scripture and therefore it should not be surprising that Reformed believers agree with other Christians on many Christian teachings. Still, Reformed Christians hold to their particular set of beliefs and emphasize certain doctrines because they consider these beliefs and emphases to be more faithful to scripture than any other understanding of Christian teaching. A second reason for the teachings and emphases of Reformed theology arises from historical circumstances. For example, in the sixteenth century, the Roman church's failure to teach salvation by grace and the assurance it provides prompted the Reformers to emphasize these points. Similarly, the enslavement and oppression of

people of African descent in North America and South Africa has led Reformed Christians to see clearly and emphasize the equality of members of all races before God and in society. Historical circumstances can lead the church to see what it had previously missed in scripture or to emphasize teachings that were otherwise obscure. In sum, Reformed Christianity speaks with a distinctive voice that is rooted in scripture and in the historical circumstances in which it arose and subsequently developed. Reformed Christianity attempts to articulate, as far as it can discern it, the whole teaching of scripture for our time.

What makes Reformed theology distinctive? Reformed theology offers a distinctive perspective on the Christian faith that allows it both to affirm those doctrines central to Christianity and to highlight important biblical teachings that are easily obscured or ignored. In doing so, Reformed theology faithfully interprets and hands on the teaching of scripture, leading its adherents into a fulfilling and challenging walk with God.

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The Reformed Faith in Nigeria

Tersur Aben

Tersur Aben starts from the history of Christian missionaries coming to Nigeria. He is grateful for what they brought. Reformed identity today in Nigeria is being regarded in this article from this historical perspective.

Reformed missionaries coming to Nigeria

In the middle of the 19th Century God, the sovereign maker and keeper of Africans, who freely gave Africans the right to worship Him in religions that they had developed fitting their fancy, disposition, and reasoning power, made Himself known to Africans in Jesus Christ through the work of Reformed missionaries from Europe and America.

Those religions that Africans developed were characterised by fear of evil spirits, ancestors, and even God. Thus Africans never related with God in love but in fearful servitude. To save Africans from their unnecessary fear of God and to bring them into loving relation with God, God sent Reformed missionaries to preach the good news of God's love and salvation by grace to Africans. The gospel of divine love and salvation by grace, thus, replaced the message of fear that Africans had been accustomed to hearing in their traditional religions. So, Africans stopped fearing God and started loving God. And instead of making incessant animal sacrifices to appease an angry God, Africans reverentially approach God's throne of grace to offer sacrifice of praise in spirit and in truth.

They evangelised Africans, moving Africans from their fear of God to loving and trusting God. Africans stopped worshipping God through idols and ancestors, but started worshipping God through Jesus Christ. Removing fear from Africans helped reduce intertribal wars. Instead of warfare, they built intertribal Christian alliances among themselves and learnt to love one another as God has shown them. Also Reformed missionaries helped Africans set up civil governments to examine civil cases and settle disputes. In accordance with God's justice, they instil in Africans the principle of unconditional forgiveness of one another just as God too unconditionally forgave our sins in Christ Jesus.

For a people whose religions had been characterised by fear of God, these two Reformed doctrines were a great source of relief. Instead of their incessant offering of animal

sacrifices to appease the gods or God, Africans were relieved to know that God does not need their animal sacrifices, that indeed it is God who sacrificed his Son on calvary for them. Such a generous sacrificial offering of God's son pricked African religious consciousness to the core so they embraced Christianity and its gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Because Reformed missionaries tailored the gospel to meet African religious and physical needs, Africans easily gave up idolatry and witchcraft and embraced Christianity. African Reformed Christians turned away from idolatry and witchcraft and instead began worshipping the living God.

To let the gospel impact the physical needs of Africans, Reformed missionaries established Christian schools, Christian hospitals, and Christian agricultural corporations. It is in these institutions and in response to the physical needs of Africans that, it seems to me, the Reformed faith showed great ingenuity in wooing and winning Africans over to the Reformed faith. The reformers taught that the realm of God's kingdom covered every sphere of life, so they urged Africans to apply the Christian message of salvation by grace and love of God to every sphere of life. This kingdom of God concept resonated with African religious consciousness, which sees God in everything, so they readily applied it to their lives. Thus, for instance, they readily gave up witchcraft and native medicine and they sought healing at Christian hospitals.

Reformed identity today

Even though many African Reformed Christians cannot cogently explain or defend the other three tenets of Reformed faith: total depravity, unconditional election, and perseverance of the saints, they never confound justification by faith and irresistible grace. These two doctrines are the hallmark of African Reformed identity.

Other African Christians, however, do boldly approach God in prayer demanding for God to hear and answer them. They speak to God in ways that, to African ears, amounts to commanding God. They take authority from God to cast Satan out of people, but sometimes (rudely) turn that language around to address God by reminding God of his promises to them and asking God to keep these promises.

The doctrine of grace is central to African Reformed Christian expression of faith. In prayer, for instance, African Reformed Christians would readily appeal to God's grace as the ground for their asking God to do anything for them. African Reformed Christians approach God with great reverence and, in they beseeching God to hear and grant their requests by God's grace. They know that, in themselves, they are not worthy to approach God (Some may interpret this attitude as symptom of their lingering original fear of God.); it is only by the

grace of God that they can petition God. So they thread reverentially before God in beseeching Him to graciously hear and answer their prayers favourably.

I once met a Nigerian Reformed Christian at the US Consulate in Abuja, and after exchanging pleasantries, I inquired after the purpose of his intended trip to the US. He said that he was attending an interview at the World Bank head-office in Washington, DC. Naturally, I congratulated him on his achievement, noting that it was a great accomplishment, and I wished him well at the interview. To which he replied modestly that it is only by God's grace that he had been invited. I said: "I take it you are a Reformed Christian." "Yes, indeed," he said, "I am a member of the Christian Reformed Church in Nigeria."

I knew that he was a Reformed Christian from his emphasis on the grace of God. The motif of God's grace is common among individuals and church congregations as well. Take, for instance, the case of Miss Jane who was a member of the Christian Reformed Church in Nigeria. When Jane went to university, she joined a Pentecostal group. She continued with the Pentecostal group even after graduating from university. But along the way, she contracted HIV/AIDS. When the leaders of the Pentecostal group knew this, they swiftly ostracised Jane. She returned to her village and to the Reformed Church. The church supported her throughout her battle with AIDS in the Christian Hospital. When, at last, the disease won the battle for her life, the Reformed Church buried her as a beloved child of the living God, saved by grace.

No member of the Pentecostal group visited with Jane in the time she battled AIDS. I suspect they judged Jane to be a sinner, not worthy to be called God's child. The Reformed Christians identified with Jane because of its teaching on God's grace. Members of the Reformed Church knew that God's grace is still sufficient for Jane's salvation, so they loved her and buried her as a fellow child of God.

Kingdom of God

Let me say a few words on how Reformed missionaries imbibed in Africans the awareness that they were citizens in God's kingdom, and that being citizens of God's kingdom should impact their spiritual and physical outlook. Reformed missionaries insisted that God is not just interested in the spiritual welfare of Africans; He is equally interested in their physical welfare. So, Reformed missionaries carried out activities among Africans that covered education, health, and agriculture. Reformed missionaries established Christian schools where they taught Africans how to read and write, and several other skills necessary for their good living in the world.

Reformed missionaries introduced western medicine to Africans at Christian hospitals. They urged African Christians to go to Christian hospitals, rather than go to native doctors who also practiced witchcraft, for treatment of their diseases. Since it was customary of native doctors to ask for animal sacrifices, it could easily lure African Christians back to idolatry and the fear of gods. Christian doctors would never return them to idolatry or fear of the gods. Rather at Christian hospitals, they would be treated as God's beloved children who are physically sick and need treatment.

To insure that Africans have good health and cut down on their visits to the doctors the Reformed missionaries made changes to African lifestyles. They taught hygienic habits to boost African health. Africans learnt that God wants them to be both spiritual and physically hygienic. So, African Reformed Christians made and used latrines, washed hands before and after meals, and boiled water before drinking. Reformed missionaries informed Africans of the dangers of smoking and consequences of (excessive) drinking, and asked them to stop both vices. Even, today, many African Reformed Christians are convinced that Christianity bans smoking and drinking. They are often shocked to encounter Christians who smoke or drink alcohol.

Conclusion

I want to acknowledge, in conclusion, that African Reformed Christians are not perfect. They are still struggling to live godly lives here on earth and there is still much work to be done. God's kingdom is not yet fully manifested in Africa. Still, African Reformed Christians deserve recognition for striving to maintain a distinctively Reformed identity in Africa. African Reformed Christians do so by their insistence to bring all spheres of life under the Lordship of God. The Lordship of God is universal. It covers schools, civil government, medical hospitals, and agriculture. God rules over homes and farms. God is ruling over water and food - indeed, all heavenly and earthly creatures look admiringly to God's majesty, submit to his gracious rule, and listen and obey His nod (John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.14). The emphasis on God's rule and control over all of life suits African spirituality just fine. The Reformed faith does not upset African spirituality and for this reason the Reformed faith is thriving in Africa, by the grace of God.

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Reformed Identity in Nigeria Today

B. F. Fubara-Manuel

Christian witness among any people cannot be realised effectively without recognition of who we are as Christians and who the people are among whom we live. It is only when members of a church know what a church stands for that they can invite others to share in its life and witness. Similarly, it is only when we realise the meaning of who we are and the implications belonging to who we are that we can effectively persuade others to join and be part of what I am experiencing. This underscores the importance of this article.

We shall begin this article by seeking to understand Reformed identity in the Nigerian context and then asking what challenges to our Christian witness in Nigeria today that such challenges call for.

Understanding Reformed identity

To speak of Reformed identity in any context today cannot be a simple matter at all because there are no universally accepted and undisputed or uncontested marks by which the Reformed may be distinguished from others. Nevertheless, many believe that the Reformed do possess some distinctive marks. Even if it is argued that some of these marks may be found in other Christian families that are not Reformed by self-understanding, the combination of these marks in a specific fashion does define who the Reformed are, or at least how some within the Reformed tradition have understood themselves. If we absolutely maintain that there are no distinctive marks by which we may be defined, we risk losing who we are and leave to our children no passion to pursue. It is this practical reality that has led many in the Reformed tradition to maintain a distinct self-understanding through the years and to continue to attempt to explain this self-understanding to their world and nurture their own participation in God's agenda for the world as people with a defined self-understanding. This need to know oneself in order to know what one's God is doing is crucial for any meaningful engagement with one's world in the name of one's God.

But anyone who attempts a discussion of Reformed identity would immediately notice a plethora of issues that have engaged the Reformed over the years but in varying degrees. Each generation, based on the contextual realities it faces, adapts some from the plethora of concerns to define its self-understanding. This would make absurd any notion of a

monolithic Reformed identity. We must speak, then, of Reformed identity through multiple doors that would enable us paint our picture more holistically to present our distinctive witness today in whatever context we find ourselves. It is my opinion that we cannot speak sufficiently about who the Reformed are without speaking from the point of view of our history, of our generally preferred polity, of our distinctive beliefs and of our ethos. These are the doors through which our thoughts would be developed in this article.

A. Reformed identity contemplated as history

Reformed identity cannot be appreciated without a clear understanding of Reformed history. This is especially so in Nigeria. And a detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, we must point out that to speak of a church or people as Reformed is to admit in some form that their history can be linked to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. In 1517, when Martin Luther, a Catholic Monk, nailed his 95 Theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany, he protested his perceived understanding of the deviations from faith of the Catholic Church and expressed a need for the church to return to the faith bequeathed by scripture. He was very concerned to enthrone the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone as taught in scripture over against what he perceived to be the doctrine of works righteousness pervading several aspects of the church's life. With this unique courage emerged what has been generally described as the Protestant Reformation.¹ This Reformation which began in Germany spread to different parts of the world and noticed a simultaneous spread very quickly in different cities without any direct link to the work in Germany. While Luther's thought pervaded all of Europe, it was in Germany alone that he was the directing leader of the Reformation. Huldrych Zwingli (1504-1575) led the Reformation in Zurich, Switzerland. George Wishart (1513?-1546), and more decisively, John Knox led the Reformation in Scotland. It was, however, Andrew Melville who developed a fuller understanding of the Presbyterian polity in Scotland, even though from the very beginnings, both Session and General Assembly had existed. William Farel

¹ Some of the very helpful works (quite a few of them very old) on the history of the Reformation and the Reformed tradition include: John T. McNeill, *The History and the Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954); John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1977, 1981); Alston, Jr., *Guides to the Reformed Tradition*; M. Eugene Osterhaven, *The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971); Harold J. Grimm, *The Reformation Era, 1500-1650* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1954); R. Newton Flew and Rupert E. Davies, eds., *The Catholicity of Protestantism* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1950); G. R. Elton, ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History*, esp. Vol. II - *The Reformation* (Cambridge: The University of Press, 1958); R. C. Reeds, *History of the Presbyterian Churches of the World* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1905).

(1489-1565), and later, John Calvin (1509-1564) led the Reformation in Geneva. Martin Bucer (1491-1551) led the Reformation in Strasbourg. Other names that are important in the Reformation include Oecolampadius (1482-1531), the Reformer of Basel, Philip Melancthon, who took over from Luther, and Theodore Beza (1519-1605), who succeeded Calvin and Berthold Haller who participated in the Reform at Bern. While these all had their common elements, they uniquely affected their times and were different in their thoughts. Several others before them shaped each of these figures.² Farel, for example, was influenced by Jacques Lefèvre (1450-1536) and many Reformers of Zurich, especially the German-speaking ones. This is an addition to the complexly developing humanism of the fifteenth-century and the various intellectual trends of the Middle Ages that affected the entire Reformation tradition.³

Some of Luther's distinctive thoughts became later formulated into Lutheranism. Those who followed Calvin's distinctive contributions are sometimes called Calvinists (especially by others).⁴ Zwingli has placed a mark, especially in his understanding of the how Christ is present in the Lord's Supper, upon many of those whose view may today be called Baptist. Although all in the Reformation tradition were at a time called Reformed, the term *Reformed* later became used strictly for the reform in the Swiss cities of Zurich (1519), Basel (1528) and Geneva (1535/36) and to the churches and groups that have been influenced by the reform in these cities or set up in the spirit and ethos of this reform, particularly the ethos of having all of life reformed by the Holy Spirit according to scripture because scripture is the Word of the sovereign God. The Church of Scotland is therefore a Reformed church because the influence of Geneva on Scottish Christianity at the close of the sixteenth century through John Knox, who fled from Scotland to Geneva under persecution. In this sense,

² Perhaps one general way the distinction may be made between the Reformed and the other figures of the Reformation tradition is that the Reformed were stricter in their view about changes which ought to take place in the church and others, like Martin Luther, were more conservative in their approach. Cf. Wallace M. Alston, Jr., *Guides to the Reformed Tradition: The Church*, series ed., John H. Leith and John W. Kuykendall (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1984), p. 5-6.

³ H. A. Oberman, Erika Rummel, David C. Steinmetz and Richard A. Muller are four strong voices among many others in this call for discerning the wholeness of the Reformation figures with respect to their backgrounds. See H. A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1963, 1983); Erika Rummel, "The Conflict between Humanism and Scholasticism Revisited", *Sixteenth Century Journal* 23 (1992): p. 713-726; David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); idem., *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); R. A. Muller, "Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: The View from the Middle Ages" in Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, eds. *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁴ Allister McGrath suggests that the term "Calvinist" may be "an attempt to stigmatize Reformed theology as a foreign influence in Germany." *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 6.

then, the Reformed were more radical than the Lutherans in the application of scripture to the life of the church. For instance (with a clear knowledge that this is an over-generalization), whereas Luther could be comfortable with practices of the Roman Catholic Church that are not explicitly condemned by scripture (though not directly commanded by scripture), Zwingli and Calvin tended to reject any practice that lacks Scriptural warrant, even when it may be seen as not contradictory to scripture. It is this desire to have all of life reformed by scripture that led to the designation *Reformed*. The Reformed were, therefore, indeed part of the Reformation stirrings of the sixteenth-century but did not constitute the entire block of the Reformation tradition.

The Reformed churches in Nigeria, especially those that are part of the Reformed Ecumenical Council of Nigeria, are linked directly or indirectly to churches that have their roots in the Reformation movement of the sixteenth century or to the churches that they gave birth to in Europe, America and South Africa.⁵ Reformed churches may be found in both the South and the North of Nigeria. In the South, the Reformed churches include the following:

- The **Presbyterian Church of Nigeria (PCN)**, which was founded in 1846 through the work of freed slaves from Jamaica and Scottish missionaries.
- The **Qua Iboe Church**, which was founded by Rev. Samuel Bill, who came from a Presbyterian community in Northern Ireland and arrived in Calabar on October 6, 1887 and, early in 1888, took a small steamer from Calabar to the fishing village of Ibeno where he started the Qua Iboe Church.
- The **Nigerian Reformed Church (NRC)**, which was established among the Izi people in 1974 by the Netherlands Reformed Congregations.

The work of the Reformed churches in Northern Nigeria is connected with the Sudan Pioneer Mission begun in 1901 by Karl Kumm and which in 1904, became the Sudan United Mission (SUM). In 1906, the South African branch of this mission was formed and it worked among the Tiv people and in the Mada Hills. Johanna Veenstra, a Christian Reformed missionary worked with the British branch in Takum and died in 1933. In 1940, the Christian Reformed branch was formed. The Reformed churches in the northern part of Nigeria include:

⁵ For the planting of Christianity in Nigeria see: John B. Grimley, *Church Growth in Central and Southern Nigeria* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); C. P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, 2 vols. (London: Lutherworth Press, 1964); Edgar H. Smith, *Nigerian Harvest* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1972); Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), esp. chap. 6, p. 153-182; E. A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914* (London: Longman, 1966).

- The **Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN)**. The establishment of this church has roots in the Sudan United Mission work in Nigeria in the first half of the twentieth century and particularly the association of Johanna Veenstra with this work between 1920 and her death on Palm Sunday, April 9, 1933 made the Christian Reformed Church Synod of 1939 agree to take over the SUM work in Nigeria. This occurred in 1940. The original name of the church as agreed in 1951 was Ekklesiyar Kristi a Sudan Lardin Benue (Church of Christ in the Sudan, Classis Benue) or EKAS Benue, but this was changed to Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN).

- The **Reformed Church of Christ in Nigeria (RCCN)**. This church, made up originally of people from the Kuteb tribe, was part of CRCN until 1973 when they broke out due primarily to tribal differences. They originally called themselves Ekklesiyar Kristi a Nigeria, Lardin Takum (Church of Christ in Nigeria, Classis Takum) or EKAN Takum but changed to the RCCN in 1993.

- **Nongo u Kristu u ken Sudan hen Tiv (NKST)**. This church was started by the inspiration of Dr. Karl Kumm, who was invited to South Africa by the South African branch of the SUM in 1907 to speak about the needs of the Nigerian people. Mr. George Botha (of the Dutch Reformed Church) and Mr. Vincent H. Hosking (a Wesleyan) accepted the call, were briefly trained for this task and came to Nigeria in 1908. They (in addition to Carl Zimmerman) began work in 1909 among the Mbula people but later had an understanding with the American branch of the SUM that was already working among the Tiv people to work among the Tiv people in 1911. The NKST church was born on January 9, 1957.

- **Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ (ERCC)**. The South African mission that came to Nigeria had Afrikaans-speaking Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM) workers and non-DRCM English-speaking workers. The DRC felt it would be better to separate. From 1915 upwards, the English speaking missionaries (Mr. Judd and Mr. Hosking) moved to the North of the Benue River and began work effectively in 1917 among the Kenea people. Mr. and Mrs. Judd began translation of the gospel of Mark into the Alago language. The church they established was originally registered in 1956 as Ekklesiyar Krista a Sudan, Lardin Dutsen Mada or EKAS, Mada Hills. This name was later changed to Church of Christ in Central Nigeria (CCCN) and further changed around 1990 to Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ when it became Reformed. This is a Reformed Baptist church since it practices only adult baptism.

In identifying this unique history of each of these Reformed churches in Nigeria, we move in a positive direction in spelling out their identity. To forget this history cannot but lead to misrepresentation of the identity of each of these churches in Nigeria.

B. Reformed identity contemplated as a form of polity

Lukas Vischer⁶ has pointed out that we may distinguish broadly between four kinds of Reformed churches.

1. The **Reformed churches of continental Europe**. These are the churches in Switzerland, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary and Romania. Also included here may be the pre-Reformation movements - the Waldensians (in Italy), who identified themselves officially with the Reformation at the Synod of Chanforan in 1532 and the Bohemian Brethren Czechoslovakia. The most significant confessions for these churches are the Second Helvetic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism.

2. The **Presbyterian churches**. These are churches that clearly and specifically endorse the Presbyterian polity. They arose from the Anglo-Saxon world through the influences of Andrew Melville and John Knox, who were themselves influenced by John Calvin, with whom they spent some time in Geneva before returning to Scotland.

3. The **Congregational churches**. These are also a particular polity manifestation and arose from the Anglo-Saxon world in conflict with the established church. Many Congregationalists moved to America from England and, by means of the missionary thrust of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, spread to other parts of the world. Though generally not in support of confessions, for some in this group the Savoy Confession of 1658, which was itself a slightly modified form of the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647, would be an acceptable confession.

4. The **United and Uniting churches**. These are a twentieth-century ecumenical manifestation of Reformed churches. They are churches of the Reformed heritage which have united or are being united with some other Reformed denomination(s) or some other non-Reformed churches. Examples include the Reformed churches in Czechoslovakia (1918), Canada (1925), Thailand (1934), Philippines (1948), Zambia (1965), North India (1970), Australia (1977), England (1981) and more recently, The Netherlands.

Although the overwhelming majority of churches within the Reformed tradition adopt a Presbyterian polity, many Reformed churches have lived well with Episcopalian or congregational polities⁷ without detracting from the well-known anti-clericalism of the Reformation movement.⁸ In Nigeria, however, all the Reformed churches adopt some form

⁶ Lukas Vischer, "The Reformed Church and its Witness Today", in *Confessing Christ in Dialogue: Course for Students and Pastors. March 10-15, 1986* (Geneva: Centre International Réformé John Knox, 1986), p. 13-34, esp. 21-24.

⁷ Cf. Alston, Jr., *Guides to the Reformed Tradition*, p. 96ff.

⁸ Cf. G. D. Henderson, *Presbyterianism* (Aberdeen: University Press, 1954), p. 54f.

of a Presbyterian polity and there are no Uniting or United Reformed churches as such in Nigeria although the Reformed Ecumenical Council of Nigeria has been invited by the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria to work towards a more visible unity, asking whether or not it is important and helpful to Reformed witness in Nigeria that there are so many Reformed churches in Nigeria.⁹ Where this will lead is yet unknown.

Perhaps the most crucial thing about the Reformed approach to polity is that power must be in the hands of the people and that no one person may be in office perpetually. The people, in order to avoid anarchy, may elect leaders into whose hands they delegate this power, but on no condition is this power allowed to be possessed by an individual. Part of the reason for this polity is the sovereignty of God, which challenges the sovereignty of any and every individual person and partly the tendency towards idolatry that may exist if power is rested upon a person. Power is always God's and given to the people to be expressed collegially. For the Presbyterian system, the *Practice and Procedure*¹⁰ of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, Section G-01.0400, following the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (USA), spells its basic principles thus:

1. That the several different congregations of believers, taken collectively, constitute one Church of Christ, called emphatically the Church;
2. That a larger part of the church, or a representation of it, should govern a smaller, or determine matters of controversy which arise therein;
3. That in like manner, a representation of the whole should govern and determine in regard to every part, and to all the parts united: that is, that a majority shall govern;
4. That consequently, appeals may be carried from lower to higher governing bodies, till they be finally decided by the collective wisdom and united voice of the whole church;
5. For these principles and this procedure, the example of the apostles and the practice of the primitive church are considered as an authority.

A question which the Reformed churches in Nigeria must constantly seek to address is whether or not this Presbyterian polity with which their self-identity is expressed assists in their witness in Nigeria. This, of course, is a continuing discussion in at least the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria. The eighteenth General Assembly ratified the Prof. E. N. Onwu's committee,

⁹ This call was made by the 16th General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church of Nigeria that met in Enugu in 2004 in approval of a recommendation made by me in my report to the Assembly as the then Principal Clerk. It was later followed by a letter to RECON and discussions on it are yet to be concluded.

¹⁰ *The Practice and Procedure, Part G*, (published by the Board of Faith and Order of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, 1989), p. 6-7.

which has the task of looking into the polity of the church with the view to advising the church about the relevant or otherwise of its Presbyterian polity for its witness in Nigeria today. Whereas a Presbyterian polity may have been reasonable and may still be reasonable in the western nations from which the Reformed churches in Nigeria came, it is entirely a different question whether or not a Presbyterian polity assists in effective witness to the Reformed faith in Nigeria today. The one thing which global Reformed churches have made obvious is that it is possible to be Reformed with a polity that is not Presbyterian. Every church must seek to discover whether or not this polity is essential to its witness within its context. This is a crucial dimension in every re-evaluation of self-identity.

C. Reformed identity contemplated as faith commitment

Perhaps the most historically relevant aspect of Reformed identity has been in the content of its faith commitment. What is it that is unique in a Reformed church with respect to faith that distinguishes it from, say, the Lutheran or Anglican or Pentecostal church? *Proprium* is the term generally descriptive of what is distinctive about a group or people. Henry Lederle has helpfully pointed out that the concept of *proprium* may be understood in at least three senses: in terms of *caricatures* often associated with a group; in terms of the core or *essence* of the faith as expounded by a group; and in terms of the distinguishing elements or *distinctives* of a group.¹¹ It is in the last two senses that we speak of the *proprium* of the Reformed tradition. But it would be important, first of all, to point out in what ways the Reformed faith shares elements with the general Reformation tradition before focusing on what we may discern as its *proprium*.

a. Shared doctrinal heritage

The general Reformation tradition with which the Reformed have things in common include the Lutherans and the Anabaptists. While with the undivided church, that is, the church in the first few centuries of the Christian history, the Reformed affirm the faith as summarized in the Nicene and the Apostles' creeds¹², the Reformed affirm some specific beliefs with the Reformation tradition. Some of the shared heritage of the Reformed with the Reformation tradition include the Priesthood of all believers, the right to private conscience in the interpretation of scripture, the centrality of the Holy Spirit for faith, justification by grace

¹¹ Henry I. Lederle, "An Ecumenical Investigation into the Proprium or Distinctive Elements of Pentecostal Theology", in Mathew S. Clark, Henry I. Lederle, et al., *What is Distinctive About Pentecostal Theology?* (Pretoria, South Africa: University of South Africa, 1989), p. 161-163.

¹² The Apostle Creed is not given the same general acceptance in the Eastern Church as they are in the Western churches.

alone, justification through faith alone, *sola scriptura* and confessionality. Whereas these teachings may not be understood as completely absent from the Roman Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church, at the time of the Reformation they were not believed by the Reformers to be receiving the desired emphasis. But this comment has to be taken along with the impressive works that have been done on the issue of continuity/discontinuity of the Reformation with the medieval church and earlier and later times.¹³ But that notwithstanding, it seems clear that the intention of the Reformers was the reformation or rather renewal of the existing church to which they were part; they had no intention to found new denominations. It was the inability of the hierarchy of the church at the time to contain the nature and vigour of their concerns that led to the Reformation churches.¹⁴ Some notes on the common themes of the Reformed with the broader Reformation tradition may be helpful.

1. The priesthood of all believers. The Reformation tradition, especially in teachings of Martin Luther¹⁵, insisted that all believers are priests before God and do not need someone else to lead them to God, apart from or in addition to the already completed work of Christ for and on behalf of the whole church. While believers are priests, it is Christ who is uniquely the Priest. The priesthood of all believers does not mean that Luther and the Reformers supported individualism but a concept of mutuality of priesthood among all believers and among the lay and the ordained. Paul D. L. Avis, therefore, rightly notes that the priesthood of believers is “nothing less than a paraphrase of the Reformation concept of the Church.”¹⁶ We are priests of ourselves and of our neighbours. The priesthood of all believers is “no rugged individualism” but “a description of the role and place of the individual that emphatically declares that apart from the communion of the saints the Christian life has little content or meaning.”¹⁷

¹³ E.g. Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, idem., *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992); idem., *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); Richard Muller, “Calvin and the Calvinists: Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between Reformation and Orthodoxy”, parts 1 and 2, *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 345-375; 35 (1996): p. 125-160; cf. Martin I. Klauber, “Continuity and Discontinuity in Post-Reformation Reformed Theology: An Evaluation of the Muller Thesis”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, p. 33-34 (1990): 467-475. For a number of essays related to the issue of continuity and discontinuity of the Reformation with earlier and later views see, Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker, eds. *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹⁴ Cf. Vischer, “The Reformed Church and its Witness Today”, 24f. Vischer cites Calvin’s *Reply to Sadolet* of 1935 in which Calvin claims that he has always protested his zeal for the unity of the church, the unity which should begin and end in God.

¹⁵ For a short exposition of Luther’s view in this regard see Alston, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition*, p. 43-48.

¹⁶ Paul D. L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 95.

¹⁷ Alston, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition*, p. 47.

2. The right to private conscience in the interpretation of scripture. The Reformation tradition insisted that although humans are to be mutually dependent, it is only to Christ and His Word written in scripture that each human being is to be subject. That is, each and every believer has the right to interpret the scripture for themselves in trust that the Holy Spirit would guide and lead them into all truth. This position was, in one sense, a reflection of belief in the priesthood of all believers but, in another sense, a demonstration of the personal emphasis that characterized the Reformation. The rules of the church, no matter how pious they may be, are not supposed to bind individual consciences. Thus, although the Reformers took the established church very seriously and believed in its teaching gifts and teaching offices, these are not supposed to take the place of Christ as Lord of individual consciences.¹⁸ Calvin noted that “the whole fellowship of believers, supplied with a manifold diversity of gifts” is endowed with a “far fuller and richer treasure of heavenly wisdom than each one separately.”¹⁹ But this is in the understanding that the teaching offices of the church would not be autocratic but would rather subject every claim to authority and judgement of the entire body of Christ. The offices of the church would arise from among the people to whom the leaders are responsible under Christ. The basic conviction that fuelled this point is that scripture is perspicuous²⁰, that is, that what scripture teaches, especially concerning the salvation of humankind, is open and evident to all who approach it by the leading of the Spirit. When this is done, the Reformers supposed, everyone would believe alike the things of faith.

3. The centrality of the Holy Spirit for faith and life. The Reformers believed that it is the Holy Spirit who engenders faith in us and who is the principle of understanding scripture. No one can believe in God based upon reasoning the person’s way up to God. Like Thomas Aquinas, who clearly held that the Spirit is crucial for faith and that not even miracles can lead anyone to believe in God on their own apart from the Spirit’s enabling, Calvin also insisted that the Spirit of God is important for faith. Calvin argued that “they who strive to build up firm faith in scripture through disputation are doing things backwards” because “the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason” and it is only by this Spirit’s inner witness that faith is engendered.²¹ Reformed belief in the Holy Spirit informs the understanding of the church as a living community. This means that the church considers

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.1.3-5.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.8.11.

²⁰ No one reads the *Institutes* of Calvin without this underlying assumption impressing itself upon the person. See, e.g. *Institutes* I. 4. 1-4.

²¹ *Institutes* I. 7. 4.

itself as a community constantly under the correction and supervision of the Spirit. The Reformation of the church did not happen once and for all in the past of the church but is a constant action of the Spirit, always calling the church to new prophetic and priestly challenges and new ways of being the church in the world. Thus, *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* - the church reformed, always reforming. This means, according to Vischer, that the Church must always be open for fresh departures.²² Not to be so renewed constantly by the Spirit is to deny the living nature of the church. But the church's *semper reformanda* must proceed from its *ecclesia reformata*. The renewal of the church must always keep in view the church's core beliefs as they are perceived by the church in every age.

4. Justification by grace alone. By this affirmation, the Reformation tradition rejected any possibility of salvation through anything that humans are or are able to be and become. This doctrine completely rejected any attempt to locate human salvation in human possibilities. It is God and God alone who saves. Unless one is touched by the free grace of God, one cannot find salvation. The opposite view as confronted in the church's history was called "Pelagianism" (coined from the controversy in the fifth century between St. Augustine and Pelagius). While in the Middle Ages almost all schools of thought sought to be closer to the Augustinian position and farther away from the Pelagian position, not all may be actually considered to have succeeded in this attempt.²³ Nevertheless, it was through the call of Martin Luther that the element of grace became again highlighted among the Reformers. In The Netherlands in the seventeenth century, the position of Jacobus Arminius was rejected by the Council of Dordt, having been seen as a departure from the doctrine of God's sovereign grace.

5. Justification through faith alone. By this teaching the Reformation tradition meant that it is only by means of faith alone (and not any good works of humankind) that the believer is justified. God declares the sinner righteous only by means of the faith in Jesus Christ, which faith God alone grants to the sinner. The point of this affirmation is not that believers are not called to do good works, but rather that the good works of believers are never, and can never be, the ground of the believer's salvation but only the reflection of their having been saved freely and entirely by God.

6. Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*). Scripture alone is the basis of authority on all matters of faith and conduct. This viewpoint was held over against the suggestion that to scripture, the Holy Tradition²⁴ or the traditions of the church may be added. The Reformed do not

²² Vischer, "The Reformed Church and Its Witness Today", p. 25.

²³ See, e.g., Heiko Oberman's argument in this regard in his *Forerunners of the Reformation*.

²⁴ Holy Tradition is an expression that the Orthodox are known to be more closely associated with. It refers not only to the scripture as delivered down to the church from the earliest times, but also to "the whole system of doctrine,

believe that any other source of authority should be added to scripture, although many Reformed today recognize the intricate relationship between tradition (be it the oral role of the church, or the creeds or confessions) and scripture. For Calvin, scripture adorns the one true God with unmistakable marks. It is the only place for right or heavenly doctrine. It contains what God pleases to witness to humans about Godself. In scripture God is truly and vividly described by God's works and appeased by the rule of eternal truth.

If we turn aside from the Word..., though we may strive with strenuous haste, yet, since we have got off the track, we shall never reach the goal. For we should so reason that the splendor of the divine countenance, which even the apostle calls "unapproachable" is for us like an inexplicable labyrinth unless we are conducted into it by the thread of the Word; so that it is better to limp along this path than to dash with all speed outside it.²⁵

7. Confessionality. The Reformed, like most in the Reformation tradition, are generally a confessing community, constantly confessing their faith through various stated confessions. One confession Lutherans accept is the "Augsburg Confession". The Dutch and other continental Reformed churches accept the Confessio Belgica, Second Helvetic Confession and the Canons of Dordt. The Presbyterians accept the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Congregationalists are usually not very keen on confessions but some of them accept the Savoy Declaration. Confessionality means that the Reformation tradition understands that one's view of scripture is often bequeathed to one within a specific tradition and generally embedded in one's confessional history. This view of confessionality should also be held as a check to the Reformed understanding of the right to private interpretation of scripture. For all in the Reformation tradition, the confessions are subordinate standards to scripture. In the course of the years, Reformed churches have had reasons to revise their confessions or to formulate new ones to face the modern challenges. As Vischer observes, "affirmations which once seemed important recede to the background in these new confessions", and "questions which were formerly not the focus of attention now come to the forefront". He cites as an example of the former the theme of predestination and the rejection of apartheid as an example of the latter.²⁶

Church government, worship, spirituality and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages." This includes the Creed, decrees of the Ecumenical Councils and, to some degree, the writings of the Fathers, in addition to the Canons, Service Books and Holy Icons. On how crucial the Holy Tradition is for the Orthodox Church, see, e.g., Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New Edition (London, EN: Penguin Books, 1963, 1964, 1993, 1997), p. 195-207; citation on page 196.

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, I. 4. 2-4.

²⁶ Vischer, "The Reformed Church and Its Witness Today", p. 26f. He points out also that some of these issues have

b. A distinctive faith commitment

When we speak of the Reformed, we are not describing generally the persons associated with the Protestant Reformation but persons with a more specific history. The emphasis of the “Reformed faith” are, therefore, not the general emphases of the Reformation tradition in issues like justification by grace through faith alone, by which Martin Luther was distinctive, or the freedom of the Spirit by which the Anabaptists were distinctive, but the particular articulation(s) of the faith with which the continental Reformers of the sixteenth century in the Swiss cities of Zurich, Basel and Geneva were associated. It is this which we speak of as the *proprium* by which the Reformed may be distinguished from others in the Reformation tradition. While it is often debated among Reformed theologians as to whether or not such a *proprium* exists, there appears to be no doubt that the early Reformers in Zurich, Basel and Geneva had a strong and distinctive view of the Lordship and sovereignty of God over all of life.²⁷ Perhaps it is in John Calvin, the Reformer in Geneva that this thought is most clearly expounded. Although the term “sovereignty” is rarely, if ever, used by Calvin himself with reference to God, the related idea of the “omnipotence” of God occupies his attention in several places²⁸, without prejudice to whether or not Calvin’s doctrine of divine omnipotence is the same as that of the sovereignty of God in Medieval and post-Reformation dogmatics. Again, although it has probably been conclusively shown that no one idea was the *principium* or the principle from which all other doctrines of Reformed Orthodoxy and Reformed thought were formulated²⁹, the Lordship of God in Christ is definitely prominent in Reformed thought, especially Calvin’s. The Reformed hold to a radical understanding of God’s others and difference from humankind and also to the view of a God who is always acting in priority and absolute freedom, not only in redemption but also in the totality of human experience and creation.³⁰ The sovereignty of God over redemption will be the focus in this section and the contemplation of God’s sovereignty over all of life would be expounded as the Reformed ethos.

become matters of *status confessionis*, that is, issues over which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardizing the integrity of the common confession of the Reformed. Cf. WARC 1982 General Council at Ottawa.

²⁷ This view is shared also by H. I. Lederle. See his “An Ecumenical Investigation”, p. 163ff. But to claim this is not to make their view exclusive to them; it is a view with many antecedents in the church’s history. What was unique, however, was the emphasis they placed on this and how this influenced their total attitude, without necessarily being a *principium* upon which their total thoughts were developed.

²⁸ See the editor’s note in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 121.

²⁹ Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1986); idem., “The Myth of ‘Decretal Theology’”, *Calvin Theological Journal* 30/1 (April 1995): 159-167; Jill Raitt, “Beza, Guide for the Faithful Life”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39/1 (1986): p. 83-107.

³⁰ See, e.g. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, eds., trans. T. H. L. Parker, etc. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), II. I. 28.

That God is sovereign in redemption is indisputably engrained in almost every confession of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But perhaps, in no other place this view is presented in its most sharpened form as in the Dutch Calvinistic debate at Dordt in the seventeenth-century in the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace remembered fondly in the acronym TULIP and representing five distinctive teachings, namely, Total depravity of the human race, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints. Although some argue as to whether or not the so-called five points of Calvinism are truly representative of Calvin's position, the substance of the debate was undeniably the primacy and rule of God especially in salvation, which view was clearly well affirmed by Calvin.

With differing emphases here and there, the so-called Five Points of Calvinism have been historically used to express the substance of the Reformed belief in the sovereignty of God in the salvation of humankind. We summarize these points hereunder:

- 1. T = Total Depravity of the Human Race:** that all humans have been affected by the Fall of Adam and Eve in such a way that no faculty of their being escapes this Fall and that the totality of the human person was involved. This does not mean that we are as bad as we can possibly become but that there is no aspect of our being in which we are what we should be. In the will, Total Depravity manifests itself as 'total inability' to respond to God in spiritual matters. Total Depravity does not mean that there is no goodness at all in humans or no positive and healing possibilities in human endeavors, but that there is no spiritual good that humans can render to God on their own. The image of God in humans is not destroyed by the Fall; it is only dented. So, even unbelievers have possibilities for social, aesthetic, moral, and intellectual good but not spiritual good. These possibilities are reflections of God's "Common Grace" as different from God's "Special Grace" which redeems the sinner.
- 2. U = Unconditional Election:** that all those who are saved have been chosen by God from before the foundation of the world to be saved only and solely on account of God's eternal purpose and love and not at all as a result of any good thing or deeds foreseen in them and that this election is unto the service of God's kingdom; we are saved to serve.
- 3. L = Limited Atonement:** that the atonement of Christ for the sin of humankind is limited only to the elect. That is, that although it is sufficient for all, it is only effective in the life of the elect, although it has implications for the cosmos. Limited Atonement holds that there is a sense in which Christ did not die for each and every believer but for his "sheep", for the "church", for his "people", for the "elect", and other such descriptions which express the limit intended by God.

4.1 = Irresistible Grace: that all those God elected to be saved from before the foundation of the world, and for whom God sent Christ to die on the cross of Calvary, shall be brought “irresistibly” or “effectually” to the experience of this salvation, which is not only that of the redemption of the individual soul but the participation of everyone and all creation in God’s designed destiny for creation. That at God’s appointed time God would save each and every one of them, and they shall ultimately and irresistibly be led to the knowledge of God in Christ solely by the grace of God. This thesis is sometimes called “effectual calling”.

5. P = Perseverance of the Saints: that all those that God brings to the experience of salvation shall not completely or totally fall away from the faith, but that they shall persevere in the faith to the end because they are guarded and kept by the power and Spirit of God. This means “once saved, saved for ever,” but not “no matter what you do” because you can no longer do just anything, but because “you are guarded and kept by the power of God” (1 Pet. 1:5). Because of this power of God, worked within the believer through the sealing of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:11-13, 4:30), the believer is enabled not to completely fall away but to persevere to the end in the salvation that Christ has already bought for her or him.

These concerns have not been given the same emphasis or interpretation by all within the Reformed tradition but their intention to give sovereign power in the salvation of the sinner to God is a common emphasis of the Reformed. Other themes of the early Reformed tradition have also been generally kept but there are many who are developing ingenious ways of keeping these themes within current discussions without the burdens of the old language.³¹ To claim that one is Reformed would call for some kind of identification with this sovereignty of God in the salvation of the sinner. To hold otherwise, is to be essentially un-Reformed.

A. Reformed identity as an ethos

The sovereignty of God was not only emphasized in Reformed thought in the salvation of the sinner. It was also, and even more so, emphasized over all of life. This makes being Reformed not merely a faith but also a way of life or an ethos.³² The thoughts of Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch neo-Calvinist of the nineteenth and early twentieth century have often been seen to capture this doctrine succinctly: ‘there is no square inch of life in which Jesus Christ does not say it is mine, I am Lord’. Some of the implications of accepting God as sovereign manifest in a lifestyle characterized by distinct elements, some of which are captured below:

³¹ See e.g. my *The Greater Purpose* and *In the Missio Dei*, in which the sovereignty of God has been discussed under the subject of “*missio Dei*”.

³² John Leith has written a simple but helpful chapter on the ethos of the Reformed tradition. See *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, p. 93-109.

1. A God-Glorifying Living in the Totality of Life. The glory of God is the chief end of humankind, even though this includes the enjoyment of God forever.³³ Because God is the Lord of history, every action of humankind in history is to be geared towards the glory of God. Nothing is to be done in such a way that humanity becomes an end in itself.³⁴ To do that would be to be anthropocentric and that would shift from the sovereignty of God over all of life. But for the Reformed, even human comfort has to be considered from the perspective of God's glory. It is God who is the ruler of all reality and not any human being, hence it is that which pleases God which should be the concern of every human life.

2. Taking History Seriously. If God is sovereign over all of life, history must therefore be taken seriously because it is the sphere of God's action of Lordship. This means that the Christian cannot afford to treat history as if God is absent from it, or as if it belongs to the devil, or as if it is not a realm in which God works, or as if we have to bring God into history to make it be to God's glory; no, the Christian must see history as a realm in which God chooses to manifest God's holy and loving self and purpose. History, therefore, cannot be meaningless or purposeless; it has a purpose and an indescribable link to the kingdom of God.³⁵ Present human history is connected to the dawning of eternity, though this connection remains and will ever remain a mystery to the human mind. For this reason, the Reformed believe that every action of daily life is important in God's working out of the meaning of history and God's dawning of God's kingdom. Although humans cannot bring about the kingdom of God, every human action in the present life is "somehow" part of God's mysterious shaping of the kingdom. Eternity dawns in the perfecting, correcting, punishing and rewarding of the actions of creation in history. It is integral to the Reformed way of life, therefore, to take politics, culture, education, medicine, and all the possibilities of human history seriously because they are realms of God's reign and, in God's mysterious plans, they have a connection to God's eternal purposes for the earth. According to John Leith, "John Calvin stands out in the history of the church as one who was more vividly aware than almost any other of the mighty working of God in human history and of God's call to his people for service in the world."³⁶

3. Regarding Vocation and Work as Honorable. A further implication of God's sovereignty is that work is honorable, that work is not the result of the Fall of humanity into sin but the

³³ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Answer to Question 1.

³⁴ I have discussed this extensively in my book, *In the Missio Dei: Reflections on the Being and the Calling of the Church in the Sovereign Mission of God* (Calabar, Nigeria: Presby Press, 2007), p. 22-31.

³⁵ Cf. B. F. Fubara-Manuel, *The Greater Purpose: The Sovereignty of God in the Context of Mission* (Lagos, Nigeria: Aidie Publishers, 2004) for general reflections on God's greater purpose for creation.

³⁶ Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, p. 72.

gracious gift of God to humanity. For this reason, the Reformed emphasize the concept of calling, that is, that every believer should seek her or his calling and vocation in life, and by means of it, fulfil her or his humanity. The assumption upon which this belief is based is that each and every one in the church has a vocation given to the person by God. The most important thing about work is not that it brings salaries or it is a means of profit but that it fulfils the purposes of God for human creation and demonstrates the Reformed belief in God's sovereignty over all of life. It has been argued severally that it is the Reformed ethos of work and calling among the early American settlers that led to the almost all-round progress in American life.³⁷

4. The Dynamic Nature of History. The Reformed believe that because God is at work in history in God's sovereignty, history cannot but be dynamic. History can only be moving forward towards the desired purposes of God for it. This means that nothing in history should be taken as absolute since time and temporality always call for succession and change. Thus the dictum, "*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*", as a way of describing the life of the church as it marches towards the kingdom. The church cannot afford to be stagnant, but must, from within its Reformed convictions, seek the fresh and new reformations that God calls it to experience. The dynamic nature of history means that change has to be part of the life of both the church and humanity and that this should not be feared but welcome. It is therefore a refutation of Reformed ethos to desire to be stagnant in one's ways or one's learning or to seek no opening to the mysteries to which the Spirit may be beckoning and pulling history from tomorrow. Because of the sovereignty of God, history has meaning and this meaning is only found in God.

5. The Necessity for Holistic or Balanced Living. As there is no aspect of life in which Christ would not exercise his Lordship, the Reformed take seriously the importance of holistic living. Thus for the Reformed, taking of medicine is not inferior to the prayer of faith, for in both spheres, Christ is reigning as Lord and Christ is ruling all reality. Holistic or balanced living takes work and play as both aspects of our given humanity and as both blessed by the one God who reigns supremely over them both. Holistic or balanced living means eating of food is not unspiritual, when eaten at the right time and in the right quantity, and that neither is fasting necessarily more spiritual, but that both eating and fasting belong together under God's sovereignty as gifts to humanity. Holistic or balanced living means that no capacity given by God to humanity is under-utilized and no aspect of life is neglected. Calvin was one of those who pointed out clearly that the wisdom behind science and technology is the wisdom of God.

³⁷ Perhaps Max Weber's mistaken but revealing book is the best known work with this thesis. *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

6. The Validity of All Life. The sovereignty of God over all of life and all of reality declares the validity of all life. Not only is human life important, but animal and plant lives as well are important. This means that the Reformed belief in the sovereignty of God calls for affirmation of the rights of animals and other forms of life and respect for the balance of the one God who is sovereign over them all. God's sovereignty is the basis of a positive ecological ethics and culture, which respects nature in its own right as an entity in God's creation. Whereas this was not part of the early emphasis of the Reformed, it has begun to be increasingly clearer to Reformed Christians to accent this aspect of the church's mission and make it integral to their witness in the world today.

7. Faith as a Necessary Via-Media. As God is sovereign over all of life and as God is far removed from humanity and all of creation, the one way in which God and the things which come from God may be appropriated is through faith inspired by the Holy Spirit. But as life is meaningless unless in constant contact with God, faith therefore becomes a necessity for every aspect of living. Thus, for the Reformed, especially in the view of Calvin, faith inspired by the Holy Spirit is the *via media* between God and creation. Faith is not the work of humankind but the work of God's grace in human life. Faith connects the earthly and the spiritual and makes humanity relate in their limitedness with the unlimited God. It is faith that connects the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper with the body and blood of Christ, which spiritual reality they represent. Faith then is the means by which we salute the greatness and transcendence of God.³⁸

Contextualizing our Reformed identity in Nigeria today

If to be Reformed is a history, and in some places a polity; if it is a faith commitment and a way of life, what are the implications of an understanding of Reformed identity for the witness of Reformed Christians in Nigeria today? This would be the direction of this section of this work. But as space would not allow for any elaborate description, we can only, like in the section above, go through in broad strokes.

³⁸ One place in which Calvin illustrates this via-media approach is in his view on how Christ is present in the Lord's Supper. The Catholics had taught that this was by means of "transubstantiation." This means that the elements of bread and wine are truly changed into the real body and blood of Christ after the priest prays the prayer of consecration or "epiclesis" over the elements. The view of Luther was that Christ is present, but only over, around and under the elements, that the elements are not changed from bread and wine but that there occurs a consubstantiation, or that the body and blood of Christ are present with, over, around and under the elements. For Zwingli, Christ is present symbolically, since the elements of bread and wine only symbolize the body and blood of Christ. But for Calvin, and most of the Reformed, Christ is present in the elements by the power of the Holy Spirit when they are received by faith. In this way, Calvin uses faith as a via-media, as the one way of linking the accidents of the elements with the substance and of linking the bread and wine with Christ's body and blood, thus linking the God who is beyond relation to humanity, thereby transcending the limitations of our human possibilities.

1. Reformed identity in Nigeria today must confront the doctrine of self that is dominant in much of Nigerian Christianity. The Pythagorean view that humankind is the measure of creation has crept into the beliefs of many through the so-called prosperity doctrine and other forms of consumerist teachings. But the Reformed faith must see it as part of the implications of its self-identity to seek to return Nigerian Christianity to the priority of God, without denying the vital place of humankind in God's agenda. It must remind us that true religion consists in the giving of glory to God. If any work claims to serve humanity but fails to give glory to God, then it must be seen as essentially un-Reformed and un-Christian.³⁹ Reformed identity must, therefore, pose a challenge to the kind of self-centered Christianity in much of the world today. People are encouraged to come to faith in order to find some relief, comfort, blessing, etc. Salvation is not necessitated by the greatness of God over all of life and the necessity of all creation worshipping and serving this God, but God is to be approached because of the goodies that God could dish out. This is not only a view in the understanding of salvation, but also one in the understanding of Christian giving and Christian service. People do religious things in order to have God bless them or in order to avoid the punishment of God. The bottom line of all such faith expressions is the human person; it is humanity that is being served and God is merely a tool to realize this end. In view of such an anomaly, Reformed identity in Nigeria must challenge Nigerian Christianity on the need to bear a relevant witness in this regard.

2. Reformed identity must challenge the commercialization of the faith and of the holy ministry. Although a global phenomenon to a large extent, the commercialization of the faith and of the ministry is something that Nigerian Christianity experiences very acutely. This commercialization does not only reflect in the number of newly founded churches that exist, but also in the way in which ministry has shifted from a calling to a mere means of livelihood. Here Reformed self-identity in Nigeria should lead to a redirection of Christianity towards the sovereignty of the God who calls us to our respective vocations. As God is Lord over all of life, the Reformed witness could assist in making people remember that it is only as people enter into God's calling for their lives that they truly serve God. This witness could sanitize not only the holy ministry but also the different engagements in life.

3. Our Reformed identity should enable us to challenge the over-concentration on Satan and the demonic. There is no need for demonstration of the awareness of the demonic in African Christian thought. Nevertheless, this awareness has shifted in many

³⁹ On the vital place of humanity in God's agenda and the call upon humanity to glorify God, see my *In the Missio Dei*, p. 21-31.

quarters to an over-concentration on the demonic. Much of the activities in our prayer meetings and gatherings in many of our churches leave us with the painful question as to what has happened to the biblical understanding of prayer.⁴⁰ Our prayer meetings seem to be losing the original consciousness of the awesomeness of God. This manifests often in the carelessness of heart with which many prayer activities are done or with the lack of preparation with which many prayer fellowships are conducted. And in some prayer meetings, God is unconsciously moved to the margins and Satan and the demonic are highlighted. The sovereignty of God over every aspect of life is minimized, if not denied, in order to hold up a theology of the power of the demonic that has become common. The casting out of demons, which many African Reformed Christians would readily admit as having a place in African Christian spirituality, is becoming much more emphasized than the praise of God. Many Christians see Satan in many more aspects of their daily lives than they notice the presence, providence and support of God. This calls for the Reformed corrective of the sovereignty of God in Christ over every realm of life and a corrective in invitation to a fresh call of God.

4. Our Reformed identity should challenge the trivializing of the 'holy'. If Christians realize the infinite qualitative distinction between God and humankind, it should lead to the fear of God and respect for the "holy". But very often we find the contrary in many a Christian. Many Christians are not afraid to say "God said" when God has not really said. Sometimes we notice that people fake spiritual gifts and manifestations without any guilt. The gift of prophesy or what many erroneously call "the word of knowledge" does not seem any longer to be what God tells the believers through God's human oracle, but an intelligent guess that people make "in the name of the Lord". Oftentimes, it is the preacher who tells the people to prophesy to their problems and difficulties. Members of the congregation are asked to prophesy to their ill-health, or to themselves to prosper, to speak down their jobs (name and claim their jobs), prophesy good health to themselves, and so on. One wonders if this cheapening of the holy is not the result of over-familiarization with God in a Christianity which does not seem to know the gravity of sin or the holiness of God, a Christianity which lacks the Reformed consciousness of God's awesome greatness. Reformed identity in the midst of such aberrations must redirect our hearts and minds to the wrath and judgement of the holy and mighty God.

5. Our Reformed identity should challenge the general imbalance in our lives and ministry. Nigerian Christianity is doubtless a very zealous expression of passion and love

⁴⁰ For a discussion of right and wrong approaches to prayer from an African perspective, read my *The Greater Purpose*, chapters five and six.

for God but it appears to nurture mediocrity in many respects. Spirituality is often placed over against training and many churches ordain people who have received no formal training for the ministry and who lack the relevant broadness that ministry requires. Many of these untrained ministers are founders and presidents of self-opened churches and go ahead to train others, while having not been properly trained themselves. There is hardly thorough bible courses or trained teachers or normal curricula for most the minister-training schools. Reformed identity, in its call for balance between the spiritual and the secular, and in its commitment to educated ministry, can serve as a corrective to this lack in Nigerian Christianity. Lack of balance also reflects in the bifurcation of the individual and the universal.⁴¹ There is in many quarters of Nigerian Christianity a belief that Jesus came for the salvation of the individual - be it individual soul or individual in the four-fold sense of savior, healer, baptizer with the Holy Spirit and soon coming king. But this approach often bifurcates the secular and the spiritual, the place of Christian service from the salvation of the soul, the issues of social justice and those of individual consciousness of God's saving mercies. But Reformed identity should challenge this bifurcation by calling to reality the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all spheres of life. Reformed identity should call for a more holistic faith and a more complete acknowledgement of the sphere of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. There should be no question that the keeping of our neighborhood clean is part of God's calling upon the church.

6. Our Reformed identity should challenge the loss of the simple and the craze for the flamboyant. The bottom line of prosperity teaching is that one is blessed if one has much. Thus, there is a craze for flashy cars, flashy-looking churches, flashy ways of talking, and so on. The Reformed ethos of simplicity is the corrective here for this trend in Nigerian Christianity. The introduction of the bizarre - holy oil, falling under the anointing, blessed handkerchiefs, holy water, strenuous fasting as the pre-requisite for spiritual power, wealth transfer (the teaching that God is transferring the wealth of non-Christians to Christians), sprinkling of the blood of Jesus on streets, cars, books, etc. are all efforts to shift away from the simplicity of the faith to these additional burdens. That the Christian's life and worship, including dressing, decoration of the church, ministers' garb, etc. has to be simple is an abiding emphasis of the Reformed. Today's Christianity in Nigeria is one that has lost this sense of simplicity. Many in the churches carry olive oil in their bags to sprinkle on themselves, on their wounds and on documents, on houses or one. Similarly, they sprinkle the blood of

⁴¹ Lesslie Newbigin has developed the relationship between the particular and the universal most excellently. See his *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 73-101.

Jesus over their houses, cars, television, and so on. All these acts of spirituality are, to say the least, strange to Reformed understanding of scripture.

7. Reformed identity should assist in reducing inter-religious conflicts between Christians and Muslims. Recognition of Christ's Lordship over all realms of life would not only make Christians take seriously their witness to Jesus Christ in the world, but make them humble about it. This humility will emanate from a realization that it is God alone who draws to faith in Christ. But it would at the same time propel Christians into more community-building and faith-understanding dialogue with Muslims, thus reducing such conflicts that arise as a result of lack of Christian tolerance. If God is at work in the totality of history, then Christians would see to it that they participate in what God is doing with respect to those who, under God's sovereignty, would not be part of the Christian religion. And one of such calling upon Christians is dialogue with non-Christians.⁴²

Whereas all these aspects and more are areas in which the Reformed faith and an understanding of its implication may assist Reformed witness in Nigeria today, their pursuit calls for patience and skill. The task of bearing a credible witness to the Lordship of Christ as people of the Reformed family is not one which may be accomplished by human efforts but it is the work of God, a work which God longs to carry out among us. But it is a work that calls for at least four important considerations among people of the Reformed family.

The first is internal unity among the Reformed. We cannot bear any credible witness to our faith when we remain as a divided body. We must learn to speak with one voice as a people of one Spirit moved by one goal, namely, to see that Jesus Christ is recognized as Lord in every heart and every sphere. Where ever we find ourselves, we as Reformed Christians must learn to pursue unity with all our might. We must develop the so-called "Lund Principle", namely, to try not to do alone what we can do together. We must ask ourselves the radical question whether we must truly remain as different churches with the same commitment to Reformed ethos. The question of our visible unity would be part of our witness since the question of unity is truly the question of mission.

Secondly, recognizing our Reformed identity for a credible and effective witness must call for our being properly nurtured in our most holy faith. This was a truth that Jude declared to his audience in the midst of wrong teachings (Jude 20). Any group that is to counter wrong teachings must nurture itself in its most holy faith. We must try to teach our tradition to our churches, to our leaders, to our children, and then to the world around us. It would surprise us how many within our churches truly know what we stand for. It would surprise

⁴² See my discussion of this in *In the Missio Dei*, 17-19, p. 232-240.

us how many of our ministers can truly defend what is the essence or *proprium* of the Reformed faith. It would surprise us how many of our ministries within our churches are geared towards projecting what we are and what we stand for. In Nigeria, a proper knowledge of what it means to be Reformed would make a great difference to the quality of Reformed witness.

Thirdly, we can only bear a credible and relevant witness when we attempt to transcend the limitations and failures of our history. Each of the Reformed denominations in Nigeria has inherited quite some baggage that may be good or bad from its history. While we must be nurtured in the good, we would need to adequately recognize the deficiencies and limitations of our tradition and make efforts in our present context to transcend them. We must remember that no one tradition is perfect; every tradition has its strengths and weaknesses. We must attempt to locate the weakness of our tradition, which may arise from the cultural heritage of those who brought the gospel to us or the tribal and local weaknesses of where we are located. We must attempt to transcend these weaknesses and exploit our strengths for relevant contemporary witness.

Finally, there can be no meaningful witness if our perception of our Reformed identity is not empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Word of the Lord unto Zerubbabel was “not by power, nor by might, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts” (Zech. 4:6). To succeed in Nigeria, or any other part of the world for that matter, people of the Reformed faith must, like John Calvin, be people and theologians of the Holy Spirit.⁴³ If we are not freshly nurtured by the Spirit, we shall only succeed to attempt to impose the past upon our present. But the Holy Spirit calls from tomorrow and, as such, would lead us into ever fresh waters. We need as churches and as a religious tradition in our contexts and globally to seek the face of the Spirit, to understand not only our past but also our present and to enter into the “tomorrow” into which the Holy Spirit calls us.

Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to explore what it means to be Reformed from the Nigerian perspective. We noted that to say we are Reformed is to invoke a history, point to a general polity, or at least, the spirit of a polity, stand by a faith commitment both generally and particularly and commit to an ethos or way of life. We noted that it is in our particular appropriation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ that we stand unique as Reformed churches. In this emphasis, we pointed out that Christ is Lord over all of life, over all of history, over

⁴³ It was B. B. Warfield who spoke of Calvin as the theologian of the Holy Spirit.

time and over eternity. Because Christ, the king of glory, reigns supreme in our world, our present human labors have a bearing with the kingdom of God, although the kingdom would not be ushered in by any human work. But this understanding drives us to take history, politics, culture, and other such matters seriously. It is only in the light of this full understanding that the Reformed churches in Nigeria can bear a relevant witness within their context - a witness that challenges every doctrine that exalts humanity above God, that commercializes the faith and the holy ministry, that keeps an over-emphasis on Satan and the demonic, that trivializes the 'holy', that is out of balance, that bifurcates the particular and the universal and that does not encourage a meaningful inter-religious relation. Finally, we suggested that Reformed churches in Nigeria can only make their identity meaningful in the midst of unity, with a serious effort to be nurtured in the implications of their faith, when they make efforts to transcend the limitations of their history, but when they depend on the Holy Spirit in this attempt. Reformed identity makes for a meaningful Reformed witness only in the light of these considerations.

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Reformed Identity in Japan

Koichi Mino

The Reformed Church in Japan is a member of the Reformed Ecumenical Council. Koichi Mino writes in this article about the history of this church. It is important to understand why the Reformed Church in Japan sees Reformed identity especially in a faithful adherence to the Reformed confession.

History of the Reformed Church in Japan

We cannot explain the Reformed identity of our Reformed Church in Japan (RCJ) without mentioning the historical process why the RCJ was established just after the Second World War.

The roots of the RCJ trace back over 150 years. In 2009 the protestant evangelism in Japan will celebrate its 150th anniversary. It started because Western powers forced Japan to open the country, which had been closed to the outside world for more than 200 years, a policy that had been installed to protect the country against colonialism and the Catholic influence of those times.

The first protestant missionaries sent to Japan were the Americans Rev. James Hamilton Ballagh of the Dutch Reformed Church and Dr James Curtis Hepburn of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The protestant missionaries founded Christian schools, and through education based on European civilisation, exerted an influence on society and culture, producing leaders in various areas.

These missionaries worked together and then the United Church of Scotland, which also later sent missionaries, joined them to start the United Church of Christ in Japan in 1877. They recognised the need for a sound confession of faith and church order to found a Christian church, so they adopted the Canons of Dordt, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Westminster Confession of Faith, with its Shorter Catechism.

However, 5 years later, in 1890 Japanese believers felt uncomfortable with these confessions that were forced by foreign missionaries. One of the reasons why they did not accept it, was that it had not been translated into Japanese. Another reason is that the Japanese had a strong independent will, and did not want to be controlled by foreign missionaries. Many of those who became Christians were from the samurai class, who considered loyalty to the

sovereign the highest priority. They adapted the Apostles' Creed with a short preamble, which declares the protestant faith as their confession, and changed the name of the church to the Church of Christ in Japan. At the time the Japanese church leaders were proud that it had become a non-denominational church. One of the Japanese church leaders said the adaptation of the four confessions of faith resembles David putting on Saul's heavy suit of armour. That church had a puritan character, but they could not form the church as institute, and they did not know how to structure the Christian church. This caused various influences on the following history of the Japanese protestant church. They could not provide training in the protestant faith nor could they form a steadfast church only based on the Apostles' Creed with short preamble, which declares the protestant faith.

Situation Second World War

This weakness of the church became particularly clear when the Japanese government, as it readied itself for war against the Western powers, required the solidarity of the Japanese people. In the trend of the age the government forced all Christian church denominations that existed at that stage into one organisation, the Nippon Kirisuto Kyodan Union Church in Japan. Due to this policy of the government, the presbyterian church system could not be applied within that organisation. This happened in 1941.

At that time, some pastors within the former Church of Christ in Japan, who stood mainly on a strong presbyterian background, opposed this policy, holding fast to the three principles of the normative authority of scripture, salvation by grace, and the autonomy of the church. Later, when the Japanese authorities forced them to worship the emperor and Shinto shrines, they did not bow their knees before the Shrine worship enforced under the system of national Shinto. However, many pastors and members of the Church of Christ in Japan could not stand up for their beliefs. As part of the Union Church of Christ in Japan enforced by the Religious Bodies Law they partook in idolatry, failing to resist to the uttermost the ceremonies of national Shinto which worshipped the Emperor as god in human form. They submitted to a church union carried out under the pressure of national state power and co-operating in the war, wrongfully violating neighbouring countries and their sister churches in them.

Birth of RCJ and its confession

Just after the Second World War, some pastors and believers who regretted that they could not have prevented the sins that had been committed, wished to withdraw from Nippon Kirisuto Kyodan Union Church in Japan and start a new church with a strong Reformed

character. They confessed their great sins and weakness before the Almighty Triune God. In order not to repeat the mistakes of the past, and to preserve the purity of doctrine and deeds, our forefathers started the Reformed Church in Japan.

The RCJ zealously intended to stand on the orthodox tradition of the Christian faith and adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith with the “Preamble” including the following standpoints:

1. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, i.e. the Word of God which God gave to His own Church, is the sole and infallible canon of the Church. The Word of God, revealed in the Scriptures, becomes through the confession of the Church the Standard of Faith in the Church: this is the Creed of the Church.

The Church of old commonly possessed the Apostolic, Nicene and Chalcedonian as the fundamental and ecumenical Creeds of the Church. During the Reformation, the Reformed Church, standing on the tradition of the orthodox faith of these Creeds, but not being confined to them, were led to formulate confessions of faith which were more evangelical, nay, purer even in the whole of its doctrine and more systematised.

It is our firm conviction that, among the more than thirty Confessions thus formulated, the Westminster Standard of Faith is the most perfect formulation of the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures. We, the Reformed Church in Japan, pray for one that is better formulated with our own words, but in the meanwhile are firmly convinced that, for the present, this Standard of Faith is the most suitable to be our own Standard of Faith, and we adopt it as such with praise and gratitude to God.

Thus, we RCJ are a confessional church, so that we are formulating one or two articles of doctrine that we declare every ten years, namely, the 30th anniversary declaration of faith concerning church and state (1976), the 40th anniversary declaration of faith concerning the bible and gospel and the Holy Spirit (1986), the 50th anniversary declaration on evangelism and the declaration regarding predestination (1996), and the 60th anniversary declaration concerning eschatology (2006). This is part of the process of eventually formulating our confession with our own words.

2. With regard to Church Government, we, the Reformed Church in Japan, desire to practice Presbyterianism in its purity, because we believe that this is the form of government which is biblical. Though the episcopal, the congregational, as well as the papal system each has some distinctive merit of its own, when considered from the human point of view, they are inferior to the Presbyterian system for the purpose of preserving the purity of doctrine and the purity of the church. We are not adopting it merely because of tradition. But from the judgement of sound reason, it must be said that this is the best form of church government.

We take the position that the Presbyterian system is not an absolutely essential element of the Christian faith, but consider that this system is necessary to form the order in the church.

3. What is the One Good Life? We are neither legalists nor antinomies. Sanctification is the work of God's grace, wrought within us by the Holy Spirit, on the basis of the atonement made by Christ, and is to be sought earnestly with much prayer by every child of God. Though perfect sanctification is not possible upon earth and we must daily ask for forgiveness of our sins and must forgive those who sin against us, it is the obligation of those who are in Christ to admonish the brethren of their sins mutually in the Holy Ghost. It is a well known fact that the Church of Geneva which Calvin served, who was certainly the greatest leader of the Reformed Church which comprised the main current of the Reformation movement, showed exemplary success with regard to the training of the believer's life.

4. Thus, we desire to actualise the One Invisible Church as the "one visible church" by the way of the One Confession of Faith, One Church Government and One Good Life, and in this way to be assured that we are a branch of the One Holy Catholic Church and thus prove the certainty of our salvation. Unity among the individual Churches which lie scattered in various places must necessarily be based upon the unity with regard to these three items, and these three points stand in the closest inter-relationship of a logical system. Doctrine, government and life are one. There are some who think that the union movement which aimed at a complete union of the various Protestant denominations in Japan achieved this end by the establishment of the Nippon Kirisuto Kyodan Union Church in Japan. However, it cannot be the one Church in the above-mentioned sense even to the present day. It must further be pointed out that its failure is due to the illegality of the way in which the union was sought.

One thing made clear by the above explanations is that our Reformed Church in Japan did not at all originate in the so-called schismatic spirit. For we attach the greatest importance to the idea of catholicity or unity of the Church established in the proper way, holding this to be the kernel of our conception of the Church.

The RCJ requires office bearers to accept our church constitution, but not ordinary members. We join the ecumenical body, so we have an ecclesiastical relationship with other Reformed and Presbyterian churches, both local and overseas, and work together on the mission field, but it must be realised only based on the same Reformed faith and doctrine.

5. The name Reformed Church (Kaikakuha Kyokai) too must not be misunderstood as if it were a newly coined word. Church history clearly points out that the name of the

Reformed Church was given to a group of churches organised within the Protestant Church, which was born of the Reformation. The Church called by this name has a history of over four hundred years, and comprises the largest proportion of Protestant Christianity covering three-fourths of the continent of Europe. Moreover, it is not a denomination limited to just one age or one locality. The Reformed Church is not only true evangelicalism which maintains consistently the principle of the Reformation, but also manifests the marks of true Catholicity and Orthodoxy, thus assuring the restoration of the biblical and Apostolic Church. All churches which are called "Presbyterian" in England and America belong also to this group.

6. The Christianity of the Reformation was the revival of primitive Christianity. And the Reformed Church of today is the spiritual successor of the Reformation. The mission which primitive Christianity performed for the Middle Ages, and which the Reformation performed for the Modern Age, must now be performed for the coming age of the Reformed Church. We say this, not out of self-conceit, but because of the consciousness of our grave responsibility.

We believe that the birth of our church is an epoch-making page in the history of the Christian church of this country, and undaunted we move forward maintaining steadfastly the form of doctrine which has its source in the pure fountain of Apostolic teaching which has kept its historically correct development.

We, RCJ, stand on the historical Reformed faith which developed in European countries, but we came to read the Word of God in the result of biblical studies of more than 100 years, and in the Asian context. We slowly realise that we need to read the bible with fresh eyes, and feel the need for a new reformation in Christianity. It now seems to us that the attitude of the church to the government in Europe in the past was ambiguous, and their handling in the Reformed theology concerning the various problems in society and government, was quite fundamental. Specifically, we have to reconsider what the kingship of Christ means in the multi-religious society, and what the church should require of the existing governments. We now face a storm of false individualism, secularism, humanism, materialism, and globalisation, which seems to benefit the rich, and we should review these from a biblical and theological perspective.

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'The Sand Around Lake Geneva': Reformed Legacy in Another Land, Another Time

J. Jayakiran Sebastian

Using the metaphor of the 'sand around Lake Geneva' Jayakiran Sebastian starts in this article with so many echoes and memories carried away from Geneva to so many distant places around the world. But this Reformed legacy should be a legacy in dialogue with its context. In this article the Indian context in Bangalore.

Sand and Water

'The sand around Lake Geneva' has been used as a negative metaphor in a footnote of a recent important article on the legacy of the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document after twenty-five years.¹ However, the sand around the lake which witnessed many dramatic moments in the life of the church, not just during the tumultuous years of the reformation in the sixteenth century, but also in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, has dissipated in various ways and in a variety of forms and settled down, only to be stirred up again in countries far from the land of their origin. While the transformation and transference of water has been used as a metaphor in many pieces of theological writing, I have not seen too many instances of the use of sand. The great Indian Nobel-Prize winning writer, Rabindranath Tagore, in his poem "Where the Mind is Without Fear" spoke of the "dreary desert sand of dead habit". He was hoping that reason would not flounder there, but in recent years the rediscovery of silica, or to give it its chemical name silicon dioxide, in the high-tech hardware computer industry has brought back renewed attention to sand as something that is so abundant and readily available, and is in fact the most abundant mineral on the surface of the earth and this has raised its "profile" immensely! Sand, although inert, carries with it echoes and memories, and the sand around Lake Geneva has carried more than its fair share of such echoes and memories to distant places around the world.

¹ See note 44 on p. 23 of the article by Geoffrey Wainwright, *Any Advance on 'BEM'? The Lima Text at Twenty-Five* in *Studia Liturgica*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2007), p. 1-29, where he talks about how the study on the apostolic faith, following the publication of *Confessing the One Faith* (1991), "unfortunately ran into the sand around Lake Geneva."

Memories of the sand offer us an occasion to recall and recollect those who in the midst of the sixteenth century were prepared to stand up for the power of their convictions, and in this process, set in motion the ongoing reformation of the church, reminding us that we cannot take anything for granted, but must constantly return to the springs of the water of life, emerging from the sand, returning to the scriptures and the message of Jesus, recollecting that our faith is not something sterile, but something living, not something arid, but something active, not something dull, but something dynamic, not something to be taken lightly, but something that continues to enliven and revive the church today. Among such people are Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, and Jean Calvin whose lives, writings, witness and testimony, continue to illumine the life of our churches in ways that they never dreamt of, and in countries that they had never heard of, today.

Values of the Reformation

As we reflect on these great forebears of our faith-journey, we need to remember and recollect that they based their convictions on the power of the biblical testimony, and constantly returned to the refreshing sources of life to be found in the bible. For them, the reading, listening, hearing, and interpretation of the bible, under the power of the Spirit, was the font of renewing and rekindling the faith. They tried to embody in their lives the commitment to the ideal that “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matthew 23: 12).

The 16th century Protestant Reformation and our commemoration of the values of the Reformation remind us of several ideals that we have to continue to inculcate in the life of the church, wherever we live, work, or worship, today:

- at time when more and more people are moving away from reading and rediscovering the world of faith testified to in the bible, and depending on self-proclaimed prophets and interpreters of the bible, most of whom are interested in promoting themselves, their families, or their organisations, the reformation principle regarding the centrality of the bible in the life of every person, and the affirmation that the bible is there to be read and understood, and is not a cult object to be idolised, has to be underlined. As Calvin noted in his Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms: “It is by perusing these inspired compositions that [we] will be most effectively awakened to a sense of [our] maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure.”²

² Translated in John Calvin, *Steward of God's Covenant: Selected Writings*, ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 165.

- the affirmation that we are simultaneously both saints and sinners has to be understood in the present-day context, where “blessing ideology” has trivialised the understanding of sin, where corruption is condoned, where the cult of the powerful is fostered, where hero-worship of those in positions of power and authority is growing. We have to recognise ourselves for what we are - those who “however unworthy we may be to experience His help, nevertheless for love of His name He holds out His hand to us, He calls us to Himself”³ - those who to whom God offers the gift of forgiveness, through the self-offering of Jesus; the gift of unconditional love and the promise of unmerited grace through the life and death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.
- the reminder of the centrality of God in a world of consumerism has to be underscored. Especially at a time when economic uncertainty and fear regarding our long term economic future are at a peak, concern for the poor which was never a major priority is in danger of being ignored altogether under the excuse that the present economic scenario leaves all of us vulnerable to market forces which we lauded when times were good, but leave us bewildered and looking for easy ways of pinning the blame when times are difficult. How can the church continue to offer to all kinds of people, especially those facing the downside of a capitalistic ideology gone crazy, signs of hope, peace and reconciliation?⁴

One example and several questions

For four years I served in an honorary capacity as the Associate Presbyterian of St. Andrew’s Church of the Karnataka Central Diocese of the Church of South India.⁵ This venerable old church, which became part of the united church was originally founded almost 150 years ago as the St. Andrew’s Kirk serving the Scottish expatriate community, especially those in various military regiments and working for organisations like the Indian Railways during the colonial period, and later, after the independence of India, those who had stayed on in various capacities.

I was a classmate of the son of the last Scottish Presbyterian of this church, Rev. Robert W. Rentoul, and remember playing in the compound and in the parsonage, still called the ‘Manse,’ in the early 60’s. For some time my father was the organist of this church, and I

³ Calvin’s sermon-exposition on Psalm 115: 1 - 3, translated in the section “Weekday Worship in Calvin’s Geneva” in John Calvin, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. and trans. Elsie Anne McKee, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), p. 171.

⁴ See my *Having and Sharing: Theological Perspectives from India on Consumerism and Exclusion*, *International Journal of Public Theology*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2007), p. 112-126.

⁵ For an overview of the Diocese, see the book by its former bishop, Kenneth Gill, *Roots to Fruits: Karnataka Central Diocese - Record of the First Thirty Years* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2001).

recall him practising on the pipe organ with an organ blower manfully pumping away at the bellows in the days before the electric motor to run the organ was installed. I remember the plain long altar table in front of the stained glass window, with the grave of an important member of the congregation just behind it, and the words of the commandments engraved on the wall admonishing me. I remember a wall plaque in memory of a member who was “eaten by a tiger,” and also recollect drawing aside a curtain behind the side altar to reveal a beautifully carved white marble statue of a reclining woman. More than forty years after these vivid memories, the church continues to be maintained very well with major renovation projects just completed on the pipe organ and in propping up the weakened foundations of the bell tower. The busy traffic of Bangalore continues to whiz by on the roads in front and behind, and frenzied construction activity is visible all around, but the church continues to be home to a lively and growing congregation, served by a series of fine pastors, including one who went on to become the present Bishop of the Diocese, Rt. Rev. S. Vasanthakumar.

Legacies have value when they are not forgotten and continue to endure, but at the same time, do not become reified to such an extent that they become idealised. India has now been independent for more than sixty years, and the sleepy city of Bangalore has become a huge metropolis, the hub of the world’s software industry, whose seams have already burst with the influx of people not only from all over India, but from different corners of the world. St. Andrew’s Church has not been immune to these changes and this is reflected in the changing character of the congregation. There are certainly those who long for an imagined past and are nostalgic for times gone by, but others want to look ahead and seek ways and means of continuing to be a church in tune with the times and catering to the needs and expectations of people living in a city in transition.

It’s interesting that the plain wooden altar displays signs of what I have referred to in a sermon as “creeping Anglicanisation” in terms of becoming more elaborately “decorated” with the silk tablecloth, vases of flowers, the cross in the middle and lamps around. It’s interesting that the step separating the choir from the nave is now used as the place where people gather and kneel in rows to receive the Eucharist. It’s interesting that people wonder about the lack of altar railings, and seem to be unaware of a pattern of worship in an old Scottish kirk, where the method of the distribution of elements happened in a way that would now seem rather unusual to them. It’s interesting that while there is so much pride taken in maintaining the building and even at one stage “restoring” the old dark reddish-brown colour to the building, and joy in preserving the heritage of the past, when it comes to the line of sombre-looking Scottish clergymen displayed in fading photographs in the vestry, there is not much interest in who they were, their names, and no real interest in filling the “gaps” in this record.

In another land, at another time, such observations raise important questions when it comes to understanding the Reformed legacy. The example of St. Andrew's Church reveals that the vitality of this tradition within the united Church of South India has undergone a significant transformation and is revived under rubrics and categories which display a sense of continuity with the past, but under the practicalities of having brought a variety of confessional standpoints together under one umbrella, allowed for the blossoming of an enriched understanding of what it means to be a living church in a minority situation.

Reflecting on the legacy of the Basel Mission in India, on the occasion of the celebration marking 150 years of the arrival of this mission in India, Stanley Samartha asked the following pointed questions:

...the question is much more than just a matter of names, or labels or ethnic identity. It is indeed a matter of spiritual legacy which is important. The question then would be this: How can those components in our legacy which we hold to be precious be preserved in order that they might make a contribution to the larger stream of life in the Church of Christ in India? Conversely, the Church of Christ in India should also ask itself how the legacies of different streams that have joined it... be made to feel that their identities are not being submerged and that their legacies not swallowed up, but recognised as contributing to the spiritual growth and maturity of the Church of Christ in India?⁶

The legacy of a particular tradition endures in a variety of forms and values including the ongoing importance given to an active worship life, not confined to the church but spilling over to a commitment to the transformation of life in society; the deep desire to uphold the rich traditions of biblically based preaching and teaching and discern insights from the biblical witness in the vastly changed terrain of the country, where in spite of modernisation, the incredible growth of the entrepreneurial class, and the persistence of degrading poverty, modern India continues to have "a way of confounding you and still making you laugh about it."⁷

The legacy continues to be interrogated in other ways. Writing from the perspective of the "tribal" communities of North-East India, specifically from the state of Mizoram and from

⁶ Stanley J. Samartha, "Digging Up Old Wells: Reflections on the Legacy of the Basel Mission in India", in Godwin Shiri, ed., *Wholeness in Christ: The Legacy of the Basel Mission in India* (Mangalore: The Karnataka Theological Research Institute, 1985), p. 85-95, here on p. 91.

⁷ Part of the conclusion of Edward Luce, *In Spite of the Gods: The Rise of Modern India* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), p. 356. Also see Tarun Khanna, *Billions of Entrepreneurs: How India and China are Reshaping their Futures and Yours* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2007). For a more sober assessment of the reality of life in India, see Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (Delhi: Picador, 2007/ New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

within the tradition of the Welsh Presbyterian Church, Rosiamliana Tochhawng interrogated the “Ten Articles of Faith” of the Presbyterian Church of India, and notes that

*[a] critical and constructive study of a theological tradition held on by the church also aims to make a significant contribution to the construction of a relevant contextual theology. Explication of a theology in its historical context would indicate its historical limitation and consequently allow new voices in the context to speak through the official theological standards of the church.*⁸

Conclusion

Thus, the Reformed legacy is a legacy in dialogue with the context, something that contributes to the vigour of church life in India. In this sense, as was pointed out regarding a different context, where the ideological standpoints of the Reformation seemed to clash and even contradict one another, “[i]n their differently formulated but common rejections of the twin ethical errors of casuistic legalism and situational license, Luther and Calvin, along with Melanchthon and Martin Bucer, do all finally unite together in endorsing a biblical ethic of norms based on a theology of grace.”⁹

Living out life in church and society, a life welcoming the renewal of life brought about by the bubbling springs of water that emerge from the sand, whether the sand around Lake Geneva, or the sand surrounding St. Andrew’s Church in Bangalore, the Reformed legacy within the animated life of the church in India has proved to have enduring worth, even though the sands have been shifted and displaced, inhabiting other territories, only to be stimulated again, offering the ongoing possibility of new ways of faithfulness emerging out of the sand, to invigorate the inheritance of the reformation even in this our 21st century.

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⁸ Rosiamliana Tochhawng, *A Study of the Ten Articles of Faith of the Presbyterian Church of India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007), p. 5.

⁹ Part of the conclusion of William H. Lazareth, *Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible, and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) p. 244-245.

What does it mean to live in South Africa and to be Reformed?

Dirkie Smit

The article argues that the Reformed experience in South Africa has been so ambiguous and often controversial that its story can only be told in the form of many different and even conflicting stories. Many of the characteristic convictions of the Reformed community and tradition have become “sites of struggle” in South Africa – as they have indeed been in the Reformed world at large, over centuries, until today. This article therefore tells one version of this story – the version of the churches who struggled against the ideology and system of apartheid on the basis of their Reformed faith, and therefore a version in which it has been and remains an empowering, liberating and challenging experience to belong to the Reformed community and faith. In the light of this version of the story, the article therefore concludes with a brief indication why four crucial aspects of the vision of the new World Communion of Reformed Churches remain contested notions from a South African perspective.

“In 2010 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council hope to come together during a uniting General Council in Grand Rapids USA to form a new body, the World Communion of Reformed Churches. In the (proposed) Constitution, the basis of this new WCRC is described with the words: ‘The World Communion of Reformed Churches embodies Reformed identity articulated in historic Reformed confessions and continued in the life and witness of the Reformed community.’ In the light of such a vision, and concrete in your situation: What does it mean to live in South Africa and to be Reformed?”

This is the intriguing and challenging question in the letter from the editor. What does it mean to live in South Africa and to be Reformed?

A story of many stories?

Being Reformed in South Africa is regularly described as a story of many stories. It is a complex tale, and often widely divergent, depending on who is telling the story and answering the question.¹

¹ See for example already the account in Dirkie Smit, “Reformed Theology in South Africa: A Story of Many Stories”, *Acta Theologica* Vol 12/1, July 1992, p. 88-110, with extended literature. The focus is on Reformed theology, and the stories of the presence and impact of Reformed theology in the public sphere, of theological developments and

That is true of the story going back to the early beginnings in the seventeenth century - richly documented in a volume of essays commemorating 350 years of Reformed presence on South African soil in 2002, edited by Pieter Coertzen.²

This is particularly true of the story during the late 19th and almost the whole of the 20th century - a story involving the gradual development and then the full scale biblical justification of the church and later the public and political policy of apartheid, as well as the initial forms of resistance and later the full scale church and public and political struggle against apartheid, with the Reformed faith deeply involved in both versions of this story.³

This is also true of the story of being Reformed in South Africa after the fall of the apartheid edifice and during the radical social, political and economic transformation processes - still a complex and in many ways confused story, difficult to narrate as a single narrative and to interpret as a coherent answer to the initial question. What does it mean - today - to live in South Africa and to be Reformed?⁴

debates within the different Reformed churches, and of the Reformed contribution to academic theology are distinguished, in order to provide as rich and complex an account as possible. For some of the major studies reflecting on these ambiguous stories, see for example Johannes C. Adonis, *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1982); Allan A. Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence* (Kampen: Kok, 1976) and especially *Black and Reformed. Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984); H. Russel Botman, *Discipleship as Transformation? Towards a Theology of Transformation* (Bellville: University of the Western Cape, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1994), as well as many articles, like "Black' and Reformed and 'Dutch' and Reformed in South Africa", in Ron Wells (ed.), *Keeping Faith. Embracing the Tensions in Christian Higher Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 85-105; Johann Kinghorn (ed.), *Die Ned. Geref. Kerk en Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1986); Christiaan J.A. Loff, *Bevryding tot eenwording. Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika 1881-1994* (Kampen: Theologische Universiteit, 1997); Takatso A. Mofokeng, *The Crucified among the crossbearers* (Kampen: Kok, 1983); L.R. Lekula Ntoane, *A cry for life: An Interpretation of 'Calvinism' and Calvin* (Kampen: Kok, 1983).

² The volume, Pieter Coertzen (ed.), *350 Jaar Gereformerd/350 Years Reformed 1652-2002* (Boemfontein: CLF Publishers, 2002), was the product of a large conference at Stellenbosch University during which the development of the Reformed community and tradition, particularly over the last half of the 20th century, was discussed by representatives of 14 denominations all belonging to this tradition. The volume includes 46 contributions from widely different perspectives. One of the overall impressions created by the work is certainly the awareness how radically diverse and even conflicting the Reformed presence in South Africa has become. Many of the accounts are accounts of divisions and splits and the formation of new denominations because of internal differences, sometimes already in the countries of colonial origin, but often also on South African soil - and most of these divided churches confidently describe themselves as being "Reformed".

³ See for example the paper published as Dirkie Smit, "The struggle against apartheid and its significance for Reformed faith today", *Reformed World* Vol 55/4 (Dec 2005), p. 355-368. It was read during an international consultation in Geneva in November 2004, celebrating the publication in English of André Biéler's *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought* (Geneva: WARC, 2004). For the statement published at the time, see *Reformed World* March 2005. In this essay, a concise overview is provided of the emergence of the apartheid system in South Africa and of the role played by the Reformed tradition in its growth and fall. It is argued that in the process, "the heart of the Reformed faith and tradition itself was at stake", and this claim is illustrated by five of the central debates at the time, in which in each case a fundamental aspect of the Reformed faith became "a site of struggle", namely a struggle for the bible, a struggle for the church, a struggle for truth, a struggle for embodiment, and a struggle for Calvin's own legacy on God's caring, liberating justice.

⁴ See Dirkie Smit, "On Adventures and Misfortunes: More Stories about Reformed theology in South Africa", *Vicissitudes of Reformed Theology in the Twentieth Century*, George Harinck & Dirk van Keulen (eds.), *Studies in Reformed*

It is not without very good reason that John de Gruchy wrote deliberately ambiguously about *Liberating Reformed Theology* - arguing both that Reformed theology is a theology with liberating potential as well as that Reformed theology in South Africa needs to be liberated from alien influences.

In the first chapter, “A ferment nourished by the gospel,” he attempts to redefine what *Reformed* really means, in the process “debunking a variety of mythologies,” and using Ntoane’s words “a cry for life” as a kind of Reformed motto. From chapters two to six he then successively treats the doctrine of scripture and liberation from the tyranny of tradition, custom and philosophy; the doctrine of God and liberation from idolatry, which is “the tyranny of human power acting as though it is divine”; the doctrine of soteriology and liberation by grace alone from the tyranny and terror of bad religion; the doctrine of the church and liberation from the tyranny of human tradition and falsehood; and the role of the church in society, the political task of the church and liberation from tyranny and anarchy.

In other words, living in South Africa and being Reformed means, for De Gruchy, as for so many other South African Reformed believers, to be faced with these internal controversies, between the powerful potential to liberate (in almost every Reformed conviction) and the urgent need to be liberated (from so many contemporary temptations and powers).⁵

It is also not without reason that these internal differences and tensions have sometimes been attributed to the diverse influences on South African Reformed churches from the history of reception of well known twentieth century Reformed figures and their followers, in particular Abraham Kuyper and Karl Barth, respectively. Well known and respected Reformed theologians like Russel Botman - a former President of the South African Council of Churches and the present vice-chancellor of the University of Stellenbosch - and Piet Naudé - a systematic theologian and ethicist from Port Elizabeth, influential in theological,

Theology 9 (Zoetermeer: Meinama, 2004), p. 208-235. This essay formed a sequence to the 1992-essay (“Reformed Theology in South Africa”, see note 1), continuing the story since then, and therefore since the radical social and political transformations in democratic South Africa. It again considers the question what it (now) means to do Reformed theology in the three different publics of society, the church and the academy, and provides information on what has been happening in South Africa in this regard.

⁵ Originally given as the 1990 Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary, but published as John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991). He argues that Reformed theology is best understood as a liberating theology that is catholic in substance, evangelical in principle and social and prophetic in witness. This makes the Reformed tradition “liberating” in a variety of ways and from a whole range of forms of oppression. In order to demonstrate his thesis, he systematically treats the most typical Reformed convictions, especially by paying detailed attention to Calvin’s own position.

educational and business circles - have both underlined the importance of these opposing influences in South African Reformed circles.⁶

The story is however perhaps even more complicated, because it can in fact also be construed as a story of Kuyper against Kuyper, as the legacy of different traditions of reception of Abraham Kuyper's work.

The role of certain forms of appeal to Kuyper in the tradition of apartheid is well known and has often been documented, for example by Irving Hexham in his study *The Irony of Apartheid: The Struggle for National Independence of Afrikaner Calvinism against British Imperialism* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1981). Equally well known, however, is the appeal to Kuyper in the circles of the Reformed struggle against apartheid and against the theological justification of apartheid, for example by influential theologians and church leaders like Allan Boesak and Russel Botman.⁷

In precisely the same way, the ambiguous story of South African Reformed history can also be told as a story of Barth against Barth, as the legacy of different forms of Barth reception.

To be sure, Barth was never used to justify apartheid ecclesiology and apartheid theology, but his reception in South African circles was very complex, and many supporters of apartheid

⁶ See for example H. Russel Botman, "Belhar and the white DRC: Changes in the DRC: 1974-1990", in Wolfram Weisse & Christine Anthonissen (eds.), *Maintaining apartheid or promoting change?* (Münster: Waxmann, 2004), p. 123-134, (also *Scriptura* 2001/1: 33-42), for a much discussed, challenging and influential analysis. Botman argues that the Dutch Reformed Church lacks a comprehensive theological framework, that Kuyper is no longer helpful in providing orientation and that Barth has not been received properly in the Dutch Reformed Church. Piet J. Naudé, "Constructing a coherent theological discourse: The main challenge facing the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa today", *Scriptura* 83 Vol. 2 (2003), 192-211 agrees with this analysis, and develops the implications further from within the Dutch Reformed Church itself.

⁷ The role of neo-Calvinism in the ideology of apartheid, and later also the theology of apartheid, is clear. The emphasis on pluriformity in creation, stressed by Abraham Kuyper, played a major role. Each race had a God-given responsibility to maintain its identity. Each 'people' was 'chosen' for a specific 'calling'. Each people accordingly also has a natural right to survival and self-determination. Young Afrikaner academics returning from Holland and Germany played major roles in propagating these ideological notions and in cooperating to organize Afrikaner political and economic power. A series of ecumenical, and missionary conferences and 'people's congresses' emphasized the importance of these challenges and formulated influential solutions and policies. Representatives of the white Afrikaner churches increasingly appealed to government for laws to protect these rights to cultural, ethnic and national survival and self-determination. They exerted pressure on the government to prohibit racially mixed marriages and demanded separate schools and residential areas. Increasingly, 'scriptural proofs' were provided to legitimate the ideology. There was a clear development from pragmatic support for segregation and separate churches for missiological purposes to a full-scale theological framework giving biblical sanction to a total ideology. Gradually, 'nation' was used as hermeneutical tool. The church was seen in terms of the nation. The unity of believers was a spiritual reality only. The controversial question of interpretation has always been how much of this South African appropriation of Kuyperian ideas could actually be attributed to Kuyper's own convictions and how much was local aberrations, against his own vision and thought. For this, see for example the Dutch perspective of George Harinck, written for the North American public, in his "Abraham Kuyper, South Africa, and Apartheid", *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* Vol. XXIII/2 (2002), p. 184-187.

thought separated Barth's views on doctrine from their ethical implications in ways that made it possible for them to study his theology without being challenged by what is nowadays often described as its "moral ontology".⁸

Perhaps even more importantly, the South African Reformed story of conflict can also be told as a story of Calvin against Calvin, as the legacy of diverse and conflicting ways of receiving Calvin and appealing to Calvin.

The doctoral study by Lekula Ntoane, *A Cry for Life*, still serves as powerful illustration of these conflicting traditions of interpretation, and there is little doubt that this will form a major theme during the 500-year celebrations of Calvin's legacy next year in South African circles.⁹

However, the ambiguities were not only caused by different appropriations of traditions within the Reformed faith itself, but also by the impact of outside forces and competing traditions and influences from elsewhere.

⁸ To be sure, the tradition of the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, of the Confessing Church in Germany, of Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and their contemporaries, has deeply inspired the resistance against apartheid in South Africa church and theological circles and particularly also within the Reformed community. Leading local Reformed theologians and church leaders like Beyers Naudé, Willie Jonker, David Bosch, Jaap Durand, Allan Boesak, Takatso Mofokeng, John de Gruchy, Douglas Bax, Russel Botman, Nico Smith and many others most certainly found their role models and inspiration as well as their theological convictions in this broad tradition. At the same time, the reception of Barth was far more complex than these names may suggest. The radical opposition against Barth came primarily from neo-Calvinist circles in South Africa, themselves deeply influenced by similar positions, viewpoints and theological figures at the time in The Netherlands. The Stellenbosch theologian F. J. M. Potgieter was one important example. In 1963 he gave a public lecture during the opening of the Stellenbosch Faculty radically rejecting Barth's view of scripture. It was later published in the local theological journal NGTT ("Die teopneustie van die Heilige Skrif met besondere verwysing na Karl Barth", 1963, Vol. 4/3, 131-149) and under the same title also as a separate booklet (Kaapstad: NGKerk-Uitgewers, 1963), in which form it was prescribed material for successive generations of Stellenbosch theological students, warning them not to read Barth at all. In practice the warning did not have the necessary effect, and many future theologians, like Jaap Durand, remember how they read Barth privately and eagerly waited for the publication of each new volume of the *Church Dogmatics*. Many influential South African Reformed theologians have been inspired by Barth, including Willie Jonker, Jaap Durand, David Bosch, Takatso Mofokeng, Allan Boesak, Russel Botman, and John de Gruchy. See Charles Villa-Vicencio (ed.), *On reading Karl Barth in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988); also Ramathate T. H. Dolamo, *The relevance of Karl Barth's theology of church and state for South Africa* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1993, unpublished dissertation); also my unpublished paper "On reading Karl Barth in South Africa - today?", during a Conference on "International Karl Barth-Research", International Science Forum, Heidelberg, Germany, October 2005, to be published by Michael Welker & Günther Thomas, as well as popular comments "Reading Scripture theologically with Barth - in South Africa? Anecdotes for after dinner," North American Barth Society and Princeton Center for Barth Studies Conference June 2006, <http://libweb.ptsem.edu/collections/barth/articles/barthsouthafrica.aspx?menu=296&subText=468>.

⁹ See for example Robert Vosloo, "Calvin and Anti-Apartheid Memory in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches in South Africa", in Johan de Niet, Herman Paul & Bart Wallet (eds.), *Sober, Strict, and Scriptural: Collective Memories of John Calvin, 1800-2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 217-244 (with literature); also Dirkie Smit, "Views on Calvin's ethics: Reading Calvin in the South African context", *Reformed World* Vol. 57, No. 4 (Dec. 2007), p. 306-344 (with literature).

In his last published essay, Willie Jonker, retired Reformed systematic theologian from Stellenbosch, was asked to reflect on the *kragvelde* (the fields-of-force) determining the way of the (white) Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). He argued that three such forces historically characterized the DRC, namely its close association with the Afrikaner people, its Reformed doctrinal heritage, and a pietistic form of spirituality, mainly resulting from the influence of Scottish ministers in the 19th century.

He argued that friction between precisely these three forces already disrupted the unity of the church during the 19th century. The DRC attempted to retain all three these forces, which also included attempts to uphold the doctrinal heritage, but in fact combined it very strongly with support for the Afrikaner people and eventually its policy of apartheid. Although Reformed in name, the DRC for a major part of its history was determined more by these other forces from without than by the Reformed faith. Since the fall of apartheid, according to Jonker, the DRC largely withdrew from public life and a new type of other-worldly pietistic or even charismatic spirituality emerged, creating the impression of a flight from reality, which means that the DRC still does not really live from its Reformed roots and convictions.¹⁰

Perhaps, finally, a further important key to these conflicting stories of being Reformed lies not so much in different versions of being Reformed within the tradition, or in diverse other forces and influences from the Christian tradition, but in the divisive impact of different experiences of “living in South Africa”.

Perhaps such so-called non-doctrinal factors - in themselves regarded as very important by the Reformed faith and tradition! - played a more determinative role than many people may care to acknowledge. It is common knowledge that South Africans under apartheid lived “in separate worlds”, experiencing the same everyday reality in totally different ways. Perhaps what we call *Reformed* says more about our own social locations, our human interests, power struggles, privileged positions, political persuasions and cultural practices than about being Reformed.

The Reformed community in South Africa has been very exposed to such influences. When the WARC during 1982 invited member churches to discuss their Reformed identity in response to the study document called *Called to Witness to the Gospel Today* (Geneva: WARC, 1982), the Dutch Reformed Mission Church took the request very seriously.¹¹ After

¹⁰ Willie Jonker, “Kragvelde binne die kerk”, *Aambeeld*, Jaargang 26, No. 1, Junie 1988, p. 11-14.

¹¹ *Called to Witness to the Gospel Today. An Invitation from the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 1 (Geneva: WARC, 1982). The document focused on four issues regarding Reformed identity, namely “The Central Affirmation that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior”, and then the three challenges of “Rethinking the Reformed Heritage” (including confessions, scripture, worship, preaching and the Lord’s Supper, freedom for discipleship, and the order of the church and the ordained ministry),

a series of conversations, a volume of essays was published with the title *Question Marks over being Reformed* (in original Afrikaans: *Vraagtekens oor Gereformeerdeheid?*). The essays witness both to the commitment of the Mission Church to the Reformed faith and to the difficult questions raised by this commitment within the political, social and cultural realities of the African context.¹²

Still, when the two largest black Reformed churches in the DRC-family reunited to form the Uniting Reformed Church (URCSA) in 1994, the new Church enthusiastically affirmed its Reformed identity and committed itself very deliberately and strongly to the Reformed faith, tradition and piety in its foundational Charter - in spite of all these well known question marks.¹³ There can hardly be any doubt about the gratitude and the confidence in the URCSA about being Reformed today and about standing in this liberating tradition.

So, what does it mean? Any serious response will inevitably be the story of many stories, an ambiguous story of liberating potential yet need for being liberated, a story of internally conflicting traditions and histories of reception, a story of externally competing forces and influences, a story of ambiguities and “sites of struggle,” a story full of enthusiasm and question marks at the same time.

One particular story

What does living in South Africa and being Reformed mean? Perhaps briefly retelling one particular version of the story could be helpful to distinguish at least *four fundamental convictions* that have always been central to Reformed faith and ecclesiology and that remain central, albeit controversial and contested, in contemporary South Africa.

the nature of “Communion in Christ” (including the catholicity of the church, racism, the community of men and women, and issues of family and marriage), and finally “Witness in a Threatened and Divided World” (including the diversity of cultures, challenges to peace, issues of wealth and power, and the theological basis and political consequences of human rights). The same broad fourfold structure - of central affirmation, rethinking the heritage, forms of communion and witness in the face of threat and division - appears again and again in similar attempts to describe being Reformed, also within (South) African contexts.

¹² Willem A. Boesak & Pieter J. A. Fourie, (eds.), *Vraagtekens oor Gereformeerdeheid?* (Belhar: LUS, 1988). The term “question marks” indicates that these essays represent a (self-)critical engagement with many of the well-known questions put to the Reformed faith from an African and particularly from a South African perspective and experience. Together, they address the question what being Reformed could mean in (Southern) Africa, and whether that tradition (still) offers meaningful, responsible orientation to contextual and contemporary challenges. For a recent discussion of these complexities, see Nico Koopman, “Reformed Theology in South Africa: Black? Liberating? Public?,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* Vol 1/3 (2007), p. 294-306.

¹³ See *Handelinge van die Stigting- en Eerste Algemene Sinode van die Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suider-Afrika. 14 tot 17 April 1994*, p. 290-291.

It is the story of the birth of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) in the struggle against apartheid in society and church, including some of the ways in which this story continued on African soil further north. This account makes it possible to recognize these four characteristic Reformed convictions again in the form of this recent and ongoing narrative.

It would in fact have been possible to tell largely similar stories of other Presbyterian and Congregational churches in South and Southern Africa as well. These stories share many of the same experiences and challenges. Broadly speaking, the URCSA story is therefore just one specific illustration of a far more widely shared recent experience. In fact, it will become clear how these separate but similar stories actually become woven together as one shared African story.

It would even have been possible to use four strategic moments in this story, linked to the name of four places in Africa - Belhar, Braamfontein, Kitwe, and Elmina - to reflect briefly on these four characteristics of Reformed faith that are again experienced as challenges for Reformed communion in Africa, today. These moments deal, respectively, with the challenge to be a confessing church, to embody the confession, to face the contemporary challenges of injustice and destruction, and to faithfully practice these convictions in the social form and everyday life of the church.¹⁴

Being a confessing church

Belhar is the name of the township close to Cape Town where the Dutch Reformed Mission Church declared (1982) that a moment had arrived in which the truth of the gospel itself was at stake, and drafted the *Belhar Confession*, confessing God as the God calling the church to living unity, real reconciliation and compassionate justice.

It made three confessional claims about living unity, real reconciliation and compassionate justice, because - according to their discernment - these were the three major challenges to the message of the gospel implicit in the powerful claims of the apartheid ideology and reality.

Apartheid was about separateness, about dividing people, keeping them apart, through legal, social, economic and political measures, thereby denying and destroying any form of *unity* between them, attempting to resist any form of belonging, solidarity, sharing, mutuality and caring.

¹⁴ For a longer and more detailed treatment of the different moments discussed in this section, see Dirkie Smit, "Challenges for Reformed Churches in Africa: A Contemporary Narrative", *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* Vol. 8, No. 4 (Nov. 2008), p. 319-336.

Apartheid therefore led to separation, to estrangement, to alienation, to a deep lack of mutual understanding and acceptance, resulting in mistrust and suspicion, fear and hurt, even bitterness and hatred, in short, an urgent need for *reconciliation*, for acceptance and forgiveness, for building bridges over the deep divides separating people.

In this process, apartheid increased forms of social, systemic and structural *injustice* - all kinds of unfair treatment, of dramatic lack of facilities and opportunities for some, whether educational, medical, social or political, all kinds of violations of human dignity and human rights, the unjust denial of all kinds of personal and political freedom, eventually resulting in violent resistance and armed struggles, repressed by violent security and military power.

In short, apartheid built on and contributed to the fundamental absence of unity, reconciliation and justice in society - and over against these claims and practices, facing these challenges, the DRMC confessed in characteristic Reformed style the life-giving power of the gospel for that particular moment in time and place. It praised God for giving unity, reconciliation and justice and for calling the church to practice visible unity, real reconciliation and compassionate justice.

The crucially important claim for the church was the fact that these three belong together, that living unity, real reconciliation and compassionate justice should not be separated. Keeping these three together, brought the believers and congregations of the church truly together and helped them to overcome their own internal differences and tensions and to confess together, with one voice. For Reformed life in South Africa, this was a moment of liberating and lasting truth.¹⁵

Embodying the confession

Braamfontein refers to the suburb of Johannesburg where the two large ethnic (or racial) churches born from this apartheid theology and ecclesiology decided to reunite, and committed themselves to become a church based on the confessional convictions of *Belhar*.

¹⁵ For the text of *Belhar*, see Dutch Reformed Mission Church, *Belhar Confession*, 1986, available at http://www.vgksa.org.za/confessions/belhar_confession.htm. For background and discussion, see for example, Gerhard (Daan) Cloete & Dirkie Smit (eds.), *A Moment of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984); Johan G. Botha & Piet J. Naudé, *Op pad met Belhar. Goeie nuus vir gister, vandag en môre* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1998). When the Synod adopted the *status confessionis* and decided to draft a new confessional document, these decisions were taken with a direct appeal to Barth's Reformed understanding of moments of confession. For more detail on this role of Barth, see Dirkie Smit, "Das Bekenntnis von Belhar: Entstehung, Inhalt, Rezeption, Relevanz", *Das Bekenntnis von Belhar und seine Bedeutung für die reformierten Kirchen in Deutschland* (Detmold: Lippische Landeskirche, 1998), p. 17-33.

Again, this conviction is fundamental to the Reformed faith and tradition. Confession calls for embodiment, including both the order and form as well as the fullness of life of the church.¹⁶ When Calvin found in Geneva ‘only preaching, no reformation’, he immediately wrote both a confession and an order embodying that confession for the congregation in Geneva, a practice that would continue in the Reformed tradition. Time and again, confessions would be followed by church orders, so that the witness of the community, through words, deeds and life, could indeed correspond to the confession, which meant, to the gospel as heard in their historical context.

For this reason, the acceptance of a new *Church Order* for the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa based on the *Belhar Confession* was such a significant moment. This *Order* represents the attempt to embody the truth of the gospel, as understood in the historical moment, in the life of the church that belongs to Jesus Christ. For the new Church born from the struggle against apartheid and based on the convictions of *Belhar*, this meant asking how from now on concretely to practice what they confess before the world?

The *Church Order* was a first and important attempt to organize the life of the church itself, the worship services, the life of the local congregations and the life of the denomination in society and together with others in such a way that it could contribute to the embodiment of the commitment to unity, reconciliation and justice. Precisely since these claims were made not only with a view to apartheid, but also with a view to other moments and places where similar challenges would arise, the URCSA was called to continuous awareness and discernment.

For living in South Africa and being Reformed this became a second moment of major importance - Reformed faith and order belong inseparably together. Very soon, however, this narrative would already take another turn.¹⁷

Facing contemporary challenges

Kitwe is a mining town in the farthest north of Zambia. It houses an ecumenical center and library named after Dag Hammarskjöld, who lost his life close by in a plane crash. It was the

¹⁶ In South African Reformed circles, Willie Jonker made extremely important contributions in this regard, reminding churches that their structure and order can witness to or contradict and deny their faith and confession. Over many years, Jonker published several controversial but influential contributions arguing for this fundamental characteristic of Reformed faith and ecclesiology, including *Die Sendingbepalings van die NGKerk van Transvaal* (Bloemfontein: Sendingboekhandel, 1962); *Om die regering van Christus in sy kerk* (Pretoria: Unisa, 1965); *Aandag vir die kerk* (Potchefstroom: Die Evangelis, 1965); still in *Selfs die kerk kan verander* (Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 1998).

¹⁷ For the Church Order, see Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. *Church Order and Regulations of the General Synod of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa as accepted and changed by the General Synod of Uppington 2001* (Bellville: LUS Bookshop, 2002).

location where, in 1995, the Southern African Alliance of Reformed Churches - quoting directly from the *Belhar Confession* - appealed to the world community of Reformed believers, congregations and churches to see the economic injustices in our world and the careless destruction of creation, to discern the challenge for their faith, and to respond by concrete action.

The story would later continue further, and again on the African continent, but several important implications for the Reformed faith already became clear in Kitwe. The three themes that had been at stake in the apartheid struggle now took on new faces and forms - on a global scale. Questions concerning living unity, real reconciliation and compassionate justice were again challenging Reformed believers and churches, but now on a much larger scale. Again, it became important to discern, to confess and to be willing to critique, resist and confront, in the words of Kitwe, to see, to judge and to act, in order to help bring hope to the hopeless.

But could Reformed churches from the whole world together see in the same way, recognize the same challenges and opportunities, as indeed *one* community? Could Reformed churches from North and South take hands, and in real reconciliation, solidarity and *belonging together* overcome the divisions, divides and histories of alienation and exclusion between them? Could Reformed churches and believers together with other actors confront and resist the powers of injustice and destruction in the world today, the exclusion caused by the global economy, the ecological threat aggravated by careless consumption and self-interest, and work together for *justice* and life? Was such a visible form of communion possible?

Together with many other voices from all over the world, the voice crying from Kitwe, using language from *Belhar*, now lamented a whole continent, indeed suffering humanity and creation itself. This became a third moment of lasting importance in this story of Reformed life in South Africa - the Reformed faith opens our eyes to the suffering and the injustices of our world.

In Debrecen this cry would indeed become the voice of the ecumenical Reformed community, asking whether its own faith is not indeed at stake in these challenges, today. In the north of Africa, the ecumenical church would soon answer this question.¹⁸

¹⁸ For Kitwe, see Southern African Alliance of Reformed Churches. Kitwe Declaration, 1997, available at <http://warc.ch/pc/kitwe.html>, and for some background and discussion, see Dirkie Smit, "Theologische Ansätze für kirchliches Engagement in Fragen der Globalisierung. Reformierte Perspektiven aus dem Südlichen Afrika", *Ökumenische Rundschau* 2, (2004), p. 160-175.

Faithful practice in life and witness

Elmina is the name of the infamous slave castle on the coast in Ghana, far to the north from Kitwe, in West Africa, where the delegates to the 24th Accra General Council of the WARC (2004) visited during their meeting - to return, deeply moved and transformed by what they saw.

The Council later adopted the well-known document 'Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth,' already studied and discussed by many. The introduction of the document begins with a brief historical reminder, linking the Accra document with the story of Kitwe.

In Accra, the General Council is very much under the impression of their visits to the slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast, and of the cries of "never again," and therefore, they say, "today," we make a new "faith commitment."

In their "Letter from Accra," the official message of the 2004 General Council, sent as pastoral letter to all member churches, they further explained and motivated this commitment. They saw the presence of the Reformed tradition in these castles, and they were deeply challenged by the radical contradictions between the faith and the actions of their Reformed forebears. They began to discern that similar contradictions may still today be present in their own churches, in their own lives. They became aware of their ecumenical unity yet at the same time of the deep need for reconciliation amongst them - both with their past and with one another.

"Some of us are descended from those slave traders and slave owners, and others of us are descendants of those who were enslaved. We shared responses of tears, silence, anger, and lamentation." They painfully realised how "today's world is divided between those who worship in comfortable contentment and those enslaved by the world's economic injustice and ecological destruction who still suffer and die." They acknowledged that "millions of others in our congregations live lives as inattentive to this suffering as those who worshipped God on the floor above slave dungeons."

They discerned that this was not just another 'issue' to be 'addressed,' in this challenge their own faith was at stake, their confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. "That is why we find in the bible a constant criticism of idolatry, emphasized in our Reformed tradition."

They reflected at length how this will affect the ways in which Reformed churches see their own mission today. "Such a confession also sends us forth with new eyes of faith into the world. Mission, it can be said, is embodied in the life of the church in the world. In Accra we recognized that living according to what we say we believe changes our understanding of mission today. How can we share the message and liberating love of Christ's life in those places where suffering and death seem to reign?"

It became clear that this mission calls them into “new and fuller forms of unity” - “This much we discovered for certain in Accra: more than ever, faithful mission today requires our connection - really it demands bonds of belonging - between one another as churches.”

Because of their deep internal divisions, these new and fuller forms of unity call for real reconciliation within and between these divided Reformed churches, reconciliation dealing with the alienations and lack of trust of the present but also the wounds and pain of the past.

They realise that practicing such real reconciliation is difficult and challenging. This resistance against injustice and destruction, this new and living unity and this real and healing reconciliation together call for new depths of spirituality.¹⁹

This became a fourth and final moment in the story of being Reformed - self-critical questions are raised about the credibility of our life and witness, about the integrity of who we are and what we do, about the realization that our deliberate actions but also our inadvertent omissions may contradict our words and our confessions, however Reformed they may sound.

Living in South Africa and being Reformed?

These four insights, arising from this particular South African story, are not new, on the contrary. They represent very traditional convictions at the heart of the Reformed faith through the centuries. They do cast some light, however, on some of the key phrases in the proposed Constitution of the new World Communion of Reformed Churches, namely that it “*embodies (2) Reformed identity (1) articulated in historic Reformed confessions and continued in the life and witness (4) of the Reformed community (3)*”.

To the extent that Alasdair MacIntyre is indeed correct in his well-known depiction of a living tradition as a historically extended, socially embodied argument precisely about the goods that constitute that particular tradition, then this one, specific version of being Reformed in South Africa points to the fact that at least four of the goods included in the WCRC

¹⁹ For the Pastoral Letter, see ‘Letter from Accra’. Official Message of the 24th Accra General Council, 2004, published in *Reformed World*, issue dedicated to papers and decisions from the Accra Meeting, vol. 54, nos. 3-4, September - December, 2004: p. 181-184. For the full documentation of the General Council, see World Alliance of Reformed Churches. *Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth*. Document of the 24th Accra General Council, 2004. Available at http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news_file/doc-159-1.pdf. For additional documentation on African perspectives on the meeting at Accra, see World Alliance of Reformed Churches. *Africa Consultation on the Accra Confession calls for stand against world disorder*. Available at http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side.jsp?news_id=1462&part_id=0&navi=6.

description are both liberating and life-giving as well as deeply contested. These four are the notions of Reformed identity, of ways of embodiment, of the nature of community, and of forms of life and witness.

From the perspective of the URCSA, these are life-giving and liberating notions that sustained and inspired the church in many ways. At the same time, these are controversial notions that still cause division and conflict within and between churches. Living in South Africa and being Reformed means being very much aware of this ambiguous nature of the Reformed faith and heritage.

Identity?

There have been and still are serious conflicts in and between South African Reformed churches about the nature of our Reformed identity. Whether construed as “sites of struggle,” as “ambiguities”, as *vraagtekens* (question marks) or *kragvelde* (fields-of-force), living as Reformed believers in South Africa involves being very much aware of the deep controversies within the Reformed faith itself about “the goods that constitute our own tradition.”

Any easy claims about “the” Reformed identity or “the” Reformed faith have become difficult if not impossible, given our own history. Our claims are much more modest, since we know that we speak about “our” Reformed faith and identity, from “our” Reformed perspective, telling “our” Reformed story.

These controversies about “identity” particularly involve different positions regarding scripture, regarding confessions, regarding the Reformed tradition and traditions in which we stand, regarding many important Reformed doctrines and convictions, and regarding Reformed spirituality.

It is possible to illustrate these deep-seated differences about Reformed identity by referring to any of these controversies.

Debates about the bible and biblical interpretation, about the authority of the bible and the message of the bible, about the legitimate use of the bible and responsible biblical hermeneutics have been rampant in South Africa for many years - in church circles, in scholarly circles, in public circles. Debates about “what the bible says” still fill the letter columns in popular newspapers. Being Reformed, many people care about “what the bible says,” and being South African, they deeply disagree about these claims.²⁰

²⁰ For a brief discussion of hermeneutics in South Africa, against the background of Calvin’s hermeneutics, see Dirkie Smit, “Rhetoric and Ethic? A Reformed Perspective on the Politics of Reading the Bible”, Wallace Alston &

The same is true of debates about confessional documents - conflicts about their nature, necessity, authority and interpretation are alive in Reformed church circles in South Africa.²¹ These issues interest people, excite them, frustrate them, move them, and inspire them. Opinions for or against the *Confession of Belhar* are published almost daily in the major Afrikaans newspapers, across the country - and the debates are emotional and heated and serious.

Again, the same is true about so-called Reformed worship and spirituality. In church circles but also in the public domain, in both the published media and the electronic media, many South Africans passionately argue and debate these questions - which are clearly questions of Reformed identity.

What does it mean to live in South Africa and to be Reformed? It obviously means to be involved in passionate debate about the goods that constitute the tradition, about Reformed identity itself.²² In different ways, this story in itself is positive and encouraging.

It is positive in the sense that it may be regarded as typical of the Reformed faith that believers are passionate, that they care and become involved. It is however also encouraging and in fact very liberating to be reminded that precisely the plurality and the ambiguity, the conversation and the debate, the openness of the discussions and the possibilities to disagree, the lack of a central authority, the absence of any central control, the refusal to have an authoritative and final interpretation, the rejection of a single opinion, the wide variety of confessional documents and church orders, from the very beginning, the historical and contextual nature of all confessions, the fact that confessions are subject to the Word and can in principle be revised or complemented - that all of this together, and therefore also the controversies we experience in South Africa, may be part and parcel of Reformed identity itself, may in fact be integral to the Reformed identity. As long as people care enough to be eager to converse and disagree, they may already be seen as Reformed.

Michael Welker (eds.), *Reformed theology. Identity and Ecumenicity II. Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), p. 385-418.

²¹ See the important study on Reformed confessions by Willie Jonker, *Bevrydende Waarheid. Die Karakter van die Gereformeerde Belydenis* (Wellington: Hugenote-uitgewers, 1994).

²² The debate about the tradition or the past in South Africa can for obvious reasons not take place without taking the human rights abuses and the violence, the alienation and the pain, of the last decades of oppression and resistance very seriously, and therefore the question for Reformed churches and believers involves the issues that were raised in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; see for Reformed voices Piet Meiring, *Chronicle of the Truth Commission* (Vanderbijlpark: Carpe Diem Books, 1999); H. Russel Botman & Robin M. Petersen (eds.), *To Remember and to Heal* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1996); Elna Mouton & Dirkie Smit, "Shared Stories for the Future? Theological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa", *Journal of Reformed Theology* Vol. 2/1 (2008), p. 40-62.

Embodiment?

As Reformed churches in South Africa, we have been reminded by our own painful history that the order of Reformed churches, the visible structure and the way we organize ourselves, all belongs integrally to our calling. Faith and Order belong together.

In this regard, the tradition of *Barmen* has again opened our eyes for what we in fact should have known, standing in the tradition of Calvin. “Reformation” includes the reformation of the church itself. The form and life of the church should also witness to its confession, to the truth of the gospel and the good news it proclaims.

The gospel should not only be preached, according to Calvin, but “also heard”. According to the famous description of Article VII of the *Augsburg Confession*, the church is there - *satis est*, it is sufficient - where the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments are correctly administered. When Calvin uses almost the exact description at the beginning of Book IV of the *Institutes*, he adds the words “and heard,” *atque audiri*. “The form of the church appears and stands forth conspicuous to our view, wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached *and heard*, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ” (*Inst IV/1.9*). The idea is probably also present in the formulation of *Augsburg*, but perhaps Calvin wants to underline something that is crucially important for him, right through his life.

What does this mean? When is the gospel also heard? When and how does the church show that it actually heeds the proclamation of the Word? Being Reformed in South Africa makes this an urgent question.

It is not without good reason and intent that Calvin also adds that the sacraments should be administered correctly. What does this mean? When does this happen? His own expositions of baptism and the Lord’s Supper that would follow in the *Institutes* are extremely powerful and moving, and have often challenged and inspired South African churches in the past decades. How can those who have together been baptised in Christ through the one Spirit live without mutual love and unity? How can we harm our brothers and sisters without harming and injuring Christ Himself, if we share in the same table yet do not care for one another’s well-being? How can we rush forward (like swine, says Calvin) to receive the bread and wine, yet not receive one another, not long for reconciliation, for compassion, and for justice?²³

²³ John de Gruchy was one of the Reformed theologians who over many years combined worship and spirituality with ethics and public life in instructive and inspiring ways, see the contribution in his *Festschrift*, Dirkie Smit, “Seeing Things Differently: On Prayer and Politics”, in Lyn Holness & Ralf K. Wüstenberg (eds.), *Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 271-284.

In light of the fact that the divisions of the Dutch Reformed churches - irrespective whether seen as based on class, status, free or slave, race, ethnicity, culture, language, since the historical interpretations are complex and diverse - had their beginnings in separation during the celebration of the Lord's Supper²⁴, these deeply Reformed convictions concerning the embodiment of the gospel, of baptism and of the Lord Supper challenged South African Reformed churches to the point of a *status confessionis*, a moment of truth, in which some judged that the integrity of the proclamation of the gospel and the identity of the church as church of Jesus Christ was at stake, and these convictions continue to challenge these churches.

It is impossible to live in South Africa and be Reformed and not be continuously under the impression of the historical importance of these questions of embodiment, for us.

Community?

It is obvious why one particular form of embodying the identity of the church became of cardinal importance in this racially divided society and church family. The nature of our belonging to one another as community was at stake. The content of our confession was at stake, whenever we say together during the Sunday liturgy, with the church of the centuries in the words of the creeds of the early church, that we believe the unity of the church. The catholicity of the church was at stake, the critical question whether the fullness of the one church could truly be present in local congregations when they are in reality divided and separated by descent and culture.²⁵

In short, the question that South African Reformed churches faced and still face is the question about the visibility of the unity of the church, the question about visible forms of our community, in present day terminology, the question what *communio* actually means, how it becomes visible, how it is practiced. It was the same question that Calvin and his contemporaries faced in very concrete ways²⁶, and it is still the same question to which the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council together are

²⁴ For a historical account of the decision in 1857 and its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, see Hermann Giliomee, "The Weakness of Some: The Dutch Reformed Church and White Supremacy", *Scriptura* Vol 83/2 (2003), 212-244. In 2007, the Western Cape Synod of the DRC officially withdrew this decision after almost 150 years, in a moving and reconciliatory public action.

²⁵ See the important essay by Willie Jonker, "Catholicity, Unity and Truth", in Paul G. Scrotenboer (ed.), *Catholicity and Secession. A Dilemma?* (Kampen: Kok, 1992), p. 16-27.

²⁶ For a historical study, see Gottfried Wilhelm Locher, *Sign of the Advent. A Study in Protestant Ecclesiology* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2004).

responding in 2010. What kind of *communio* is needed, which forms of visible *communio* are necessary in order to be trustworthy and credible?

For Reformed Christians, these have always been difficult and challenging questions. Living in South Africa simply means that we are very much aware of the crucial importance and the extreme difficulties of the challenges, particularly for churches built on Reformed convictions - because they lack many of the ways that other confessional traditions and families have of attaining and demonstrating visible *communio*.

Over many years, Reformed theologians have published insightful studies on the unity of the church²⁷, yet in the Dutch Reformed church family we still have not achieved visible unity. During local consultations, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has underlined that achieving some form of visible unity will be the “acid test” - the real, credible proof - that South African Reformed churches have really moved away from the apartheid system, ideology and theology, yet we still struggle to find such visible unity.

Of course, the practice of visible unity is not merely about church structures and about being organized into one denomination. The structural unity only provides the space for the believers to practice and experience the real and living unity.²⁸ For that reason the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa - like the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa and the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, and all other united and uniting churches - is continuously challenged by the questions how we embody and practice the real and living unity that we confess amongst ourselves, now that we have been structurally united.

²⁷ See for example J.J.F. (Jaap) Durand, *Una Sancta Catholica in Sendingperspektief* (Amsterdam: ten Have, 1961); C.J.A. Loff, *Bevryding tot eenwording. Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika 1881-1994* (Kampen: Theologische Universiteit, 1997); and P. F. Theron, *Die Kerk as Kosmies-Eskatologiese Teken. Die Eenheid van die Kerk as Profesie van die Eskatologiese Vrede* (Pretoria: NGKB, 1978).

²⁸ The *Belhar Confession*, for example, describes this living unity as follows: (We confess) that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ; that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against everything that may threaten or hinder this unity; that this unity can take form only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the diversity of languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God; for discussion of the importance of both structural unity and living unity, see Dirkie Smit, “Church Unity in Freedom”, in Miroslav Volf & Michael Welker (eds.), *God's life in Trinity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), p. 73-92.

Again, these are very real and difficult questions in South Africa, and not only with regard to race, ethnicity, culture and background, but also with regard to gender, status, morality and hospitality.

Although the official position of women in the URCSA is one of equality and full communion, the real experiences of many women in the church are different and often painful.²⁹ The position of so many South Africans - often women and children³⁰ - who suffer from HIV/Aids is in practice often still one of marginalisation and stigmatisation, in spite of the fact that the URCSA, like so many other South African churches, officially acknowledge that “we have AIDS”. In general, there still is an unofficial taboo even in Reformed churches on issues like rape and family abuse - while the South African society has the highest incidence of these in the world.³¹ During the most recent General Synod of the URCSA, it became painfully obvious how unresolved the position of homosexual members of the church still is, when a report, arguing for their full inclusion on the basis of *Belhar* was referred, but caused a public controversy.³² During the last few months, the whole world was probably shocked to see scenes of xenophobia and spontaneous outbursts of widespread violence against foreigners in South African cities and towns - scenes that also challenged local churches to act, based on their understanding of the gospel’s message of unity and human dignity, in the spirit of Calvin.

²⁹ Several women already occupy key positions of leadership in the DRC and in the URCSA, including Elna Mouton, Dean of the Theology Faculty of Stellenbosch University, Christina Landman, professor at UNISA and Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel on both the national and Western Cape synods of the URCSA, but they continue to deal in their writings with the challenges still facing these churches with regard to the silence and exclusion of women; see for example Elna Mouton, “Remembering Forward and Hoping Backward?” Some thoughts on women and the Dutch Reformed Church”, in Wolfram Weisse & Carel Anthonissen (eds.), *Maintaining Apartheid or Promoting Change?* (Münster: Waxmann, 2004), p. 283-292; Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel, “About the Empowerment of Women in the Church in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Post-Structural Approach”, in *From Our Side: Emerging Perspectives on Development and Ethics* (Amsterdam: Rozenberg, 2008), eds. Steve de Gruchy, Nico Koopman & Syste Strijbos, p. 87-100.

³⁰ See for example Denise M. Ackermann, “Tamar’s Cry: Re-reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/AIDS Pandemic”, Wallace Alston & Michael Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology, Identity and Ecumenicity II. Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 1-33; also Rachel Sophia Baard, “Responding to the Kairos of HIV/AIDS”, *Theology Today* Vol 65/3 (Oct 2008), p. 368-381.

³¹ Denise Ackermann has often published on the silence in the churches about these crises, including the silence in the preaching and worship of churches. See also Ernst Conradie & Lindsay Clowes (eds.), *Rape. Rethinking Male Responsibility* (Stellenbosch: EFSA, 2003); also Zolile Rashe, *Family violence in African communities in the Western Cape. A theological-ethical assessment* (Stellenbosch University, unpublished dissertation, 2008).

³² The report was actually not discussed. It was received too late so that congregations did not have the necessary opportunity to discuss it, as was originally intended, and many of the delegates did not even have time to study it beforehand. It was therefore referred to be discussed in the congregations before the next synod. It is therefore not accurate to say that the report was rejected in any way, and it may in fact still be accepted in future. The fact is, however, that a heated debate took place in synod, that unfortunate things were said, that the news media reported very negatively, and that the chairperson of the commission that drafted the report, Allan Boesak, felt personally compelled to resign from all positions of leadership in the URCSA, since he is of the opinion that the synod was too reluctant to commit itself to the cause of homosexual members, on the basis of the church’s own confessional identity.

Living in South Africa and being Reformed - even within the churches that are already united or uniting - means being continuously faced with issues of difference and inclusion, of marginalisation and acceptance, or put in Reformed terms, issues of the visible forms of our unity and *communio*.

Life and witness?

There is no doubt that much has changed in South Africa with the fall of apartheid and the dramatic social and political transformation processes over the last fifteen years, most of them still ongoing. The position of Reformed churches has also radically changed, and with that their self-understanding. It has become much more complicated - under conditions of radical modernity, a pluralist democracy, a very liberal constitution, a very secular public life, and in many respects an atmosphere of public accusation, shame and serious self-criticism for Reformed Christianity - to be Reformed in life and witness.

Not without reason, the question has been asked whether it is actually still possible to be Reformed in South Africa, today?³³

Several South African Reformed theologians have written helpful analyses of modern societies and of secular tendencies, and their potential impact on the Reformed faith and vision, for example Willie Jonker in *Die Relevansie van die Kerk*³⁴, Jaap Durand in his *Ontluisterde Wêreld*³⁵ and John de Gruchy in his *Being Human. Confessions of a Christian Humanist*.³⁶ The crucial point is that, being Reformed theologians, they are all very much aware how changing conditions in public life also change the challenges to the life and the opportunities to witness of Reformed churches, deeply concerned as they are about human beings and the world. In this regard, the work - including several publications - of the Beyers Naudé Center for Public Theology is another characteristic illustration about the nature of being Reformed, in this society. The Center is consciously

³³ Dirkie Smit, "Can We Still Be Reformed? Questions from a South African Perspective", Wallace Alston & Michael Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 233-253.

³⁴ Willie Jonker, *Die relevansie van die Kerk. Teologiese Reaksies op die Betekenis van die Kerk in die Wêreld* (Wellington: Bybel-Media, 2008). Jonker already wrote the manuscript more than twenty years ago, but at the time the publishers decided not to publish, which in itself is a major indication how conditions have changed, including the perceptions of what is relevant and what should be published.

³⁵ J.J.F. (Jaap) Durand, *Ontluisterde wêreld* (Wellington: Lux Verbi.BM, 2002).

³⁶ John W. de Gruchy, *Being Human. Confessions of a Christian humanist* (London; SCM Press, 2006).

doing its work in the spirit of Beyers Naudé, one of the best known figures representing a Reformed life and witness over the last half century in South Africa.³⁷

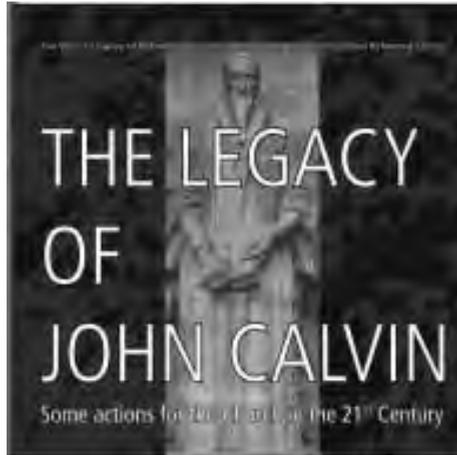
Perhaps the most deliberately Reformed public witness in South Africa is found in Allan Boesak's *The Tenderness of Conscience. African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics*, very consciously drawing on the resources of the Reformed tradition and faith. This includes the title, which he borrows from Abraham Kuyper's *Stone Lectures*: "Calvinism understood that the world was to be saved... only by the restoration of the tenderness of conscience". In his typically passionate way, Boesak argues - clearly very critical of and outspoken about the litany of failures in present day South African politics and public life as well as in many other societies on the continent of Africa - for a vision of compassion and justice, for a new spirituality, in which "piety and politics" belong together.³⁸

Living in South Africa and being Reformed also means still being inspired by such a spiritual vision - in spite of the radically new world in which we all live.

Dirkie Smit is a member of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and teaches systematic theology at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. He has been involved in many activities of the ecumenical church, including the WARC and WCC and earlier also the REC and the SACC. Many of his former postgraduate students teach at universities and colleges in many countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Namibia and the United States of America as well as at several South African universities.
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³⁷ See for example Len Hansen (ed.), *The Legacy of Beyers Naudé. Beyers Naudé Center Series on Public Theology Volume 1* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2005); Len Hansen & Robert Vosloo (eds.), *oom Bey for the Future. Engaging the Witness of Beyers Naudé. Beyers Naudé Center Series on Public Theology Volume II* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2006); Len Hansen (ed.), *Christian in Public. Aims, Methodologies and Issues in Public Theology. Beyers Naudé Center Series on Public Theology Volume III* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007). At the University of Pretoria, another Center for Public Theology has recently been established, with Etienne de Villiers as Director.

³⁸ Allan A. Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience. African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Conscience* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2005).



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World Communion
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The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council will unite to form a new body: the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). The Uniting General Council will take place in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, in June 2010. The theme of this historic event will be: "Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace". The ground of the uniting assembly will be prepared by a series of theological consultations sponsored by the Geneva *Fondation pour l'Aide au Protestantisme réformé* on "Communion and Justice"; these will take place in 2009 in Switzerland (Europe), Lebanon (Middle East), Brazil (Latin America), Indonesia (South East Asia), Ghana (Africa), Pittsburgh, USA (North America and Caribbean), New Zealand (Pacific) and Korea (North East Asia).

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