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Being Reformed today?

ABSTRACT

The article addresses the question of what it means to be Reformed today by discussing the different terms in the theme – “Reformed,” “Today,” “Being” – as well as the importance of the question mark itself. It engages with important historical figures and documents (Calvin, Barth, Barmen) as well as more contemporary works and statements (Wolterstorff, Niebuhr, Leith, Gerrish, Plasger, Welker, Nimmo and Fergusson, Boesak, Botman, Belhar, Kitwe, Debrecen, Accra) on being Reformed. It concludes by raising three challenges to being Reformed today, namely whether it can find the necessary normativity to self-critically engage its own tradition, whether the deepest convictions and passions of the Reformed faith still make sense in the world today, and whether there is the will within the Reformed community to practise this kind of being in the world today.

1. BEING REFORMED TODAY?

To President Barnes and the Princeton Seminary community, thank you so much for this wonderful opportunity and for your hospitality. My wife and I truly appreciate the invitation and the friendly reception. It is great to meet up with some old friends, and to make many new ones, including students.¹



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- 1 This paper was delivered on invitation as a public lecture to the Princeton Theological Seminary community, including students, academic and administrative staff, and visitors, during the time when the Seminary initiated discussions with the author, after his retirement from Stellenbosch University, with a view to the vacant Ruth and Rimmer de Vries Chair for Reformed Theology and Public Life. It took place in the Daniel J. Theron Assembly Room in the Princeton Theological Seminary Library, on 12 December 2016, and it was followed by a question and answer session. The original format was retained unchanged and the lecture was only annotated with a list of references.

Speaking at Princeton Seminary about “Being Reformed Today?” is far worse than carrying coals to Newcastle. Since its founding, the Seminary’s contribution to the Reformed faith has been so important worldwide that it may seem the very last place to talk about this theme.

Still, without any pretension of offering anything new, I share a few comments on the different notions – Being Reformed Today? – from a different context within our globalising world and ecumenical church.

2. REFORMED

In their collection of essays, *The Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology*, Paul Nimmo and David Fergusson remind readers – like many others before – that Reformed theology “has always been a diverse affair”. In fact, they say, “it may be questioned whether the Reformed tradition has any coherence at all” or whether it “is simply too diverse to have any center of gravity at all”.

The Reformed faith indeed provides an example of the living tradition once described by Alasdair MacIntyre as an ongoing argument, historically extended and socially embodied, about the very goods that constitute the tradition.

The problem seems that we lack any way of adjudicating this ongoing argument. For ecumenical partners in the dialogues of the past decades, this has often been a perplexing characteristic of the Reformed contributions.

Whether in the Reformed-Catholic or Reformed-Lutheran commissions of the past decades, or in the *Harvesting the Fruit* meeting called by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity to take stock of fifty years of bilateral dialogues with mainline Protestantism since the Second Vatican Council, the question has often been addressed to Reformed participants regarding how binding authority and loyalty, *Verbindlichkeit*, actually works within the Reformed community.

For obvious reasons all attempts at answers were received with some surprise and even disbelief. The Reformed tradition simply does not know any kind of authority that could solve the ongoing argument about the goods that constitute our tradition.

Of course, we respond to such questions with the claim that *Verbindlichkeit* lies in God’s Word, since we want to be Reformed “according to the Word of God,” but again that only shifts the question.

Some years ago, in a volume of essays from this Seminary, *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*, edited by David Willis and Michael Welker, Welker described what he called “the travail” of Reformed theology by pointing to the bewildering misunderstandings and contested claims regarding “the Word of God” within Reformed circles. It is “hardly astonishing,” he argued, that Reformed theology finds itself in “ongoing crisis,” since we fail to “attain any clarity in our understanding of the Word of God.”

Painful controversies about same-sex relationships in South African Reformed churches and about the ways the Word of God is claimed continue to demonstrate the presence of this “ongoing crisis.”

Of course, when asked about our understanding of the *Verbindlichkeit* of the Word of God, we may claim that our confessional tradition provides us with hermeneutical keys to help us in understanding God’s Word, but this only surprises our dialogue partners even more, since we lack the shared confessional basis of, for example, the worldwide Lutheran community.

Different Reformed traditions even hold different views of the authority of their own confessional documents. For some, their own confessional documents are indeed the sole and timeless propositional expressions of true Christian faith. Many others, however, share the understanding that Karl Barth so famously expressed when the World Alliance invited him in 1925 to speak on whether one common confession for the worldwide Reformed community was possible and desirable. On receiving the invitation, he already wrote on the envelope that the answer was emphatically no, and he submitted a speech that lasted several hours to argue his point.

For Barth, not having a universal Reformed confession was not our weakness but our strength. It is no shame in ecumenical company, but rather our witness and contribution. In the same way that the Word of God remains the living voice of the living God and therefore always to be heard again, our confessional tradition provides orientation but no final answers, only to be repeated in exactly the same ways for ever.

The Reformed theologian Georg Plasger described Barth’s views in his *Die relative Autorität des Bekenntnisses bei Karl Barth*. Under normal circumstances the existing confessional documents provide sufficient orientation, yet under abnormal circumstances the church may hear God’s Word anew and therefore confess anew – simultaneously saying no, saying yes, saying we are also involved, implicated.

One finds – to my mind – the same spirit in documents on the confessional nature of the church in the PCUSA and in the *Book of Order*.

It is also the same understanding which, during the struggle against apartheid, made the *Confession of Belhar* possible, which is why the *Accompanying Letter* to Belhar began with the words “We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the Church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation.”

3. TODAY

Such an understanding makes the notion “today” so important. The Reformed faith is deeply historical, contextual, particular, “*Wir, hier, jetzt, dies*,” said Barth – we, here, now, this.

Again, however, the seeming strength may also be seen as fatal weakness. After all, understanding the signs of the times, discerning the moment for saying no, saying yes, and saying sorry, may be even more contested and may lead to more confusion and lack of any centre of gravity.

In his address to the World Alliance, Barth warned that the Reformed churches were probably not ready or able to speak God’s Word to the urgent issues of their time, and any attempt would only be to tempt God.

In his analysis of the travail of Reformed theology, Welker argued that it is precisely the Reformed openness for contemporary cultural developments that causes the problem. Other faith traditions at least have doctrinal or liturgical “brakes”, but Reformed theology very easily seems to be “at the mercy of the stifling *Zeitgeist*,” so that the Reformed “profile” easily seems “to disintegrate into a plethora of attempts to engage contemporary trends,” he said.

This indeed happened in the development of apartheid ecclesiology, but perhaps this was not the only example of this danger facing the Reformed faith.

Still, our weakness may also be our strength – as many stories show, for example the story of Russel Botman, the late rector of Stellenbosch University.

As student and young minister, Botman found his inspiration in Bonhoeffer’s work on discipleship and concrete responsibility. Concrete responsibility means, said Bonhoeffer, that we do not ask how we can get out of difficult situations without losing face, but that we rather ask what we should do now – today, in the concrete moment – in order that the children of tomorrow will be able to live. Even if this means playing roles that are humbling to ourselves, this is what discipleship requires. Botman wrote his dissertation on discipleship in this spirit.

Then, during the demise of apartheid and with the radical social transformation taking place in society, he became increasingly aware that

the challenges were changing. For him, discipleship now meant citizenship, serving the common good in a secular and pluralistic society by upholding the new Constitution with its values of human dignity and human rights. Applying for a research sabbatical at the Center of Theological Inquiry, he now formulated his theme as “Discipleship and Citizenship.”

When he received the Kuyper Prize from Princeton Seminary in 2013, he told the story in his acceptance speech – published in the *Kuyper Center Review* – of how his mind was radically changed for a third time, working here in the library, when it became clear to him that his theme was too limited to address the fundamental challenges of the day. We no longer live in nation-states, he realised, but in one globalising world in which the global economy and its exclusions, together with its destruction of the environment, lead to questions which we can only face together, as global citizens.

He therefore played a key role when the Southern African Alliance of Reformed Churches met in Kitwe in Zambia, issuing a call to the World Alliance to ask member churches to consider whether our faith is not challenged today by economic injustices and ecological devastation.

This call from Africa joined voices from other places such as Debrecen, and eventually became the Declaration of Accra. Particularly moving was the Pastoral Letter which the Meeting sent to member churches, explaining how their eyes were opened to see the challenges of today. Together, on an excursion, the delegates visited the infamous slave castles of Elmina, where they saw the dungeons where the captives were held, before they were shipped away to unknown destinations, for ever separated from their families, perhaps to die somewhere at sea. Right above was the hall where the ship-owners ate and worshipped, while they would hear the anguished moans and cries from below. They could still see on the door Dutch inscriptions from the Book of Psalms. How could our forebears have done this? they asked, until they began to realise that perhaps we are still involved in similar practices also without seeing and understanding, without discerning the nature of our relationships and power structures today.

After Accra, the German Evangelical-Reformed Church approached our Uniting Reformed Church to join them in a research project considering the implications of Accra, since North and South seemed to experience these claims in different and even tension-filled ways.

The black Reformed theologian Allan Boesak led this process, which eventually submitted a report to the World Communion called *Dreaming a Different World Together*.

In these words, much of the Reformed vision of Russel Botman is also captured. He was always motivated by Paul's words in 1 Cor 7:29-31, that we are called to live as if we had not, as if the realities we see do not have the final word, but as if something different is drawing us and moving us. He often spoke of hope and of imagination – as rector he even inspired the whole community of Stellenbosch University to support a so-called Hope Project, putting research and teaching at the service of achieving the Millennium Goals on the African continent. He dedicated his own dissertation to the children of South Africa who would know apartheid only by hearsay, he said – at a time when few could believe that such a time would ever dawn. In this, he was inspired by the work of Rubem Alves, once a student at Princeton Seminary, called *Tomorrow's Child. Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture*.

Recently, at the meeting in Stellenbosch of the Global Network for Public Theology, William Storrar announced the next phase of research projects at the CTI and explained that these were in line with Russel Botman's vision of "global citizenship". The focus will be on migration, inequality, violence, and the environment. These global foci, Storrar said, also agree with the ecumenical and global quest of President James McCord and of Wallace Alston and Max Stackhouse, with their "God and Globalisation" project.

In fact, the story of Max Stackhouse would be a similar reminder of this global understanding of our "today". The growing interest in public theology, to which he contributed in ground-breaking ways, is characterised by the acknowledgement that we can no longer only be concerned with the common good in our separate pluralist societies (in the plural), but rather we should be concerned with our common life in our globalising world. It was apt that the collection of essays honouring him was called *Public Theology for a Global Society*, in the singular.

4. BEING

With these, the third notion, namely "being," has also been introduced. If anything, the Reformed tradition is about a way of life. In the words John Leith long ago in his *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, it is "a way of being the Christian community in the world." It certainly includes theology, worship, spirituality and church-polity, but above all it is a way of being.

This Reformed ethos is often illustrated by Calvin's death-bed comment, that when he came to Geneva there had been "only preaching, but no Reformation."

It is perhaps even clearer from the way in which Calvin took the well-known words of Article VII of the *Augsburg Confession*, that the true church

is wherever the gospel is proclaimed purely and the sacraments administered correctly, but deliberately added the words *atque audiri*, “and heard” (*Inst.* IV/1.9).

What did he mean? It is hard to know, except that it implies that being Reformed is about being, not only about preaching purely and worshipping properly. The effects can of course be seen throughout his life and work.

This conviction has implications for the Christian life, for the life of the church, and for the Reformed presence and witness in public life.

Firstly, for the Christian life, this means that our actions matter and that our witness to the gospel can indeed be contradicted by our life, in spite of our orthodox beliefs, sophisticated theology, faithful worship and personal piety. Anyone who thinks that the erstwhile supporters of apartheid – including many Reformed believers – were immoral and evil people has not at all understood the danger of what really happened, and what could be happening again, also elsewhere.

For the Christian church, secondly, this means that the form and order of the church also matter and should reflect our convictions and claims about the gospel. Reformed believers in the struggle were inspired by Bonhoeffer on the correlation between *Wahrheit* and *Existenzform*, between the truth we confess about the church and the visible form and life of the real church – the latter should not contradict the former, since the real church is all that the world can see.

In this regard, an instructive difference became clear between Lutheran and Reformed understandings. The Lutheran World Federation was the first body to declare a *status confessionis* regarding the situation in apartheid South Africa, in Dar es Salaam in 1977, saying that the truth of the gospel itself was at stake. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches followed their example in 1982. However, with the demise of political apartheid, the Lutheran World Federation withdrew the *status confessionis*, although nothing had changed in the respective Lutheran Churches, and nothing further was expected to change, while the World Alliance said that the *status confessionis* could only be withdrawn once the respective member churches acknowledged their involvement, demonstrated their remorse and committed themselves to visible church reunification – as the acid test.

Behind this difference lies the Reformed conviction that the gospel should also be heard, that the life of the church should somehow embody our claims about the gospel.

It is therefore of utmost importance when Darrell Guder, in his essay on Reformed theology and the missional church, in the volume by Nimmo

and Fergusson, emphasises the crucial role of the unity of the church in the commitment of many Reformed theologians to the missional nature of the church.

In our experience, South African Reformed believers became convinced that living unity cannot be separated from reconciliation and justice. These three – for us – belong together. Living unity, that could overcome our separation and alienation, also calls for real reconciliation, facing the brokenness and bitterness of our past as well as for compassionate justice, facing the continuing legacy of histories of inequality. The credibility of our witness and the integrity of our missional presence depend on our being this kind of church in the world, keeping unity, reconciliation and justice together.

Thirdly, this means that the gospel has implications for our public life. According to Jaroslav Pelikan, the most characteristic mark distinguishing the Reformed faith was their conviction that the Word of God was to be obeyed in the political and social order too. According to him, this conviction “was to be of far-reaching historical significance.”

This was the conviction described by Richard Niebuhr as a relation of transformation between Christ and culture. This was the conviction described by Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his Kuyper Lectures at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam called *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* as “world-transformative Christianity.” This was probably also the conviction that led Lesslie Newbigin – and his followers – to describe the Trinity as “public truth.” This was at least partly the conviction that inspired David Bosch to call his inspiring ecumenical study *Transforming Mission*.

In South Africa, many were inspired by the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*'s thesis that Jesus Christ is God's claim upon our whole life and by its rejection of the false doctrine that there would be areas of our life where we belong not to Jesus Christ but to other lords. Others were inspired by Abraham Kuyper. As black theologian Allan Boesak often appealed to Kuyper's claim that every square inch of the world belongs to Jesus Christ and he defended the political spirituality on the streets and critiqued the present government by appealing to Kuyper's “tenderness of conscience.”

This deep-seated conviction probably explains why so many Reformed theologians in South Africa are attracted to public theology, including Russel Botman, John de Gruchy, and Nico Koopman. Public theology means different things to different people, but if reduced to the two basic claims that public life matters for the faith and that faith matters for public life, then it is obvious why anyone with this Reformed intuition may be attracted.

Welker himself often argues that the church is a truth- and justice-seeking community. For him this is also the heart of public theology. Nicholas Wolterstorff too, as neo-Calvinist thinker, has over many years developed a passion for justice. In his autobiographical *Journey Toward Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South* he tells the story how this interest – in a theory of rights and wrongs – developed after disturbing encounters in apartheid South Africa with Reformed theologians. One of his earliest contributions was a moving essay on Calvin's social ethics called "The Wounds of God" and in fact, for anyone standing in Calvin's tradition, it is hard not to be inspired by Calvin's view of the Christian life as one rooted in the love of justice, the *amor iustitiae*.

It is therefore not surprising that the World Communion, since its formation (albeit with different names) was committed to serve justice in many places in our common world. Even now, busy with a process to associate itself with the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* with a view to next year's ecumenical commemoration of the Reformation, it wants to particularly underline the integral link between justification and justice, as its own contribution.

If anything, this longing for justice probably best describes the Reformed way of being in the world.

5. THE QUESTION MARK

When I was invited, President Barnes said that I could choose any theme that would reveal something of my own passion. These broad strokes are therefore such an attempt, although the part of the topic that best expresses my own passion is probably the question mark.

I love footnotes and question marks. Since this is a talk, I sadly could not find a way to include footnotes. Footnotes, for me, offer the opportunity to show that we do theology in communion, with and for others, with and for friends – with mothers and fathers long before us, with colleagues all over the world, and with our students. Footnotes offer the opportunity to acknowledge influences, introduce friends to one another, consider other interesting avenues, remind oneself of further reading, acknowledge the shoulders one stands on and the company one keeps, to imagine readers and to respond to their anticipated questions in advance.

Together with footnotes, I also love question marks. They help us to acknowledge that we do not provide answers, but are only searching for more insight and better understanding. The title of my dissertation had a question

mark and if I had my way I would have preferred many of my doctoral students to do the same.

In the Willis and Welker volume, Brian Gerrish argued that the Reformed centre of gravity is perhaps found in what he called “Reformed habits of the mind.” The first two that he described were deferential and critical. Perhaps footnotes show the deferential habit of the Reformed mind and question marks the critical habit of the Reformed mind.

I conclude with three *kinds* of questions that being Reformed is faced with today.

Firstly, there is the kind of question about the goods that constitute the Reformed tradition. If Welker is correct, then the travail of being Reformed lies in the fact that this ongoing argument is not as harmless and innocent as many may think.

If the slogan that a Reformed church is always being Reformed means anything, then it surely implies some normativity, some ongoing self-critical evaluation. It suggests that not everything that carries the name Reformed is truly Reformed, and that this ongoing argument makes a difference.

In the struggle many therefore appealed to the Reformed tradition against the Reformed tradition, many appealed to Calvin, to the confessional documents of the 16th century, the *Confessio Belgica* and *Heidelberg Catechism*, to Reformed theologians like Kuyper and Barth, to *Barmen*, all against this tradition. It was in many ways a struggle about the history of reception of this tradition. All appealed to the Word against what they regarded as abuse of the Word so that the Bible was often called a site of struggle.

Is being Reformed today not facing similar temptations and in need of similar struggles for the tradition, if necessary against ways of claiming and representing the tradition?

Secondly, it may be a real question whether we *could* indeed still be Reformed, today. Some years ago I raised this question during a consultation hosted by the CTI. To the extent that it is possible to agree on some Reformed profile, is being Reformed today according to such self-understanding indeed still possible?

After all, a century ago, when Troeltsch described the major contribution of the Reformed faith to the formation of the modern world in his *Protestantism and Progress*, he already raised the question whether “the terrible expansion” of the modern world with its “calculating coldness and soullessness, its unscrupulous greed and pitilessness, its turning to gain for gain’s sake, to fierce and ruthless competition, its agonising lust for victory, its blatant

satisfaction in ... tyrannical power" has not loosened itself to such an extent from its ethical foundation in "genuine Calvinism and Protestantism" that the spirit of Calvinism was no longer able to hold in check this world it has helped to create.

Is being Reformed indeed possible in the kind of world we helped to create? In *The Mighty and the Almighty*, Nicholas Wolterstorff asks whether it is still possible to be a Polycarp in contemporary America. Do central Reformed claims about the lordship of Christ and the prophetic role of the church still make sense in our world, today? His fascinating argument also applies in many other ways to classic Reformed concerns. For example, what are the challenges for the Reformed tradition with its characteristic emphasis on truth in a world where post-truth has become the word of the year?

Finally, even if being Reformed is still possible, the question remains whether we really still *want* to be Reformed, whether we are indeed still committed to the goods that constitute our tradition? The answer does not speak for itself at all.

When Barth spoke to Lukas Vischer in Geneva after the Second Vatican Council and his own visit to the Vatican, he published his thoughts in *Ad Limina Apostolorum*. He wondered whether the world's Reformed Churches were still committed to their own profiles and convictions. How sad would it be, he asked, if we were one day to find that our discussion partners were more seriously engaged in what we have always claimed to be our contribution than we are ourselves?

This may still apply in the ecumenical movement too, but in South Africa we have certainly learnt that such a self-critical attitude is needed. In his Warfield Lectures on the *Barmen Declaration*, Eberhard Busch once warned that even our confessions should not become museum artefacts in which to pride ourselves, but banners under which we continue to witness to the gospel. Perhaps this is the ultimate self-critical question implied in the slogan *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*.

Of course, the question mark and all these questions are not meant to sound sad and sombre; on the contrary, they are exciting and invigorating. They make theology such an interesting and joyful activity.

When the 76-year-old Karl Barth gave his Warfield Lectures here in 1962, later published as his *Evangelical Theology*, he reminded the audience, approvingly, of Schleiermacher who, Barth said, "even in his old age" prefixed his signature on occasion with *studiosus theologiae*, student of theology.

Doing Reformed theology is not about protecting the past or claiming authority, but about being passionate students, about searching and

questioning, listening and hearing, together with others, for the living Word, calling us into our common world today. For me, this describes the spirit of being Reformed.

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