

Reformed theological education and formation

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Abstract

This article will hold up a mirror to the Reformed tradition's theological education past and present, specifically in the context of the DRC. This paper will also make proposals for the future, peering through the window towards possibilities for theological education and formation and the reformation of Reformed spirituality. The Reformed tradition has always maintained a high academic standard when it comes to theological education and the formation of its clergy. The curriculum used by the DRC, modelled on the European system, still to a great extent reflects the needs of the church decades ago and is challenged by the DRC's current ecclesiological understanding. A missional church, as portrayed by the DRC's policy document, requires missional clergy, or missional leadership, and thus theological education that supports this type of formation. This article proposes a more holistic spiritual formation programme that cultivates a sound Reformed spirituality and enables the formation of these missional leaders.

Keywords

theological education; formation; reformed spirituality; missional

Introduction

Tradition binds us to our past and helps us to understand who we are now, but what about our future? Can tradition bind us so tightly to what was that we are unable to move forward? If that is the case, we don't really grasp the meaning of our Reformed tradition. It is not meant to hold us back, but to give us identity and to remind us to change, transform and be renewed by God. Smit (2009:32) postulates:

... is all this not precisely the intention behind the motto *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*? Is a community that calls itself "Reformed" not always to be reformed again, by God? Should such

a Reformed church not always be engaged in historically extended, socially embodied argument about the goods that constitute that tradition? Should that not be central to the communal ethos of such a community?

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) has joined the worldwide missional movement and is now being reformed. McNeal (2009:xiii) declares that the rise of the missional church is the single biggest development in Christianity since the Reformation. Burger (2021:389) notes that that the missional church is a contested concept and merely argues that at its core it is “deeply rooted in the history of the church and, even more, in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and in the life and counsel of the Trinity. The missional church is not meant to be the newest theological trend – it is about rediscovering the nature and calling of the church and to be reformed. And the onset of DRC’s new reformation is evident in her missional ecclesiology”.

An important milestone was when a new policy document, *Framework Document on the Missional Nature and Calling of the DRC* (2013), was unanimously adopted. This policy document reflects the notions of the missional movement: the Triune God is missional by nature (*missio Dei*); the mission of the church (*missio ecclesiae*) is embedded in the mission of God; the focus is on the kingdom of God (sent to the world around us); and an incarnational lifestyle (for the sake of others). This document can be seen as a comprehensive framework of new insights regarding the DRC’s ecclesiology. The policy document also shows that the DRC attaches great importance to her Reformed identity. “Becoming more missional does not in any way indicate a departure from the church’s professed theological roots” (Burger 2017:22). On the contrary, it is because of the Reformed identity that the DRC is compelled to reform again.

However, embracing a missional ecclesiology and the process of transformation (or reformation) requires deep change and the DRC’s leadership is not equipped for this challenge. A new ecclesiological understanding and theological discourse amongst academics and church leaders is only the first step in a prolonged process. This article proposes that theological education and formation is a significant follow up step and that theological education needs to be reformed as a means to cultivate and equip missional leaders for the DRC’s transformation.

Missional leadership is about the transformation of people and institutions and equipping of people and communities to be able to join God's mission to the world (DRC, 2013:16). Theological education and formation are key in developing this type of missional leadership. The word 'formation' is used intentionally, as education can be construed as focused on gaining knowledge and insights, and formation suggests a more holistic approach. And one of the important, and neglected, aspects of theological education is precisely that – the formation of spirituality. A missional ecclesiology infers that "(t)he purpose of theological education is to equip for God's mission" (Niemandt 2020:189). Theological education and formation should therefore focus on knowledge, skills and spirituality. Harrison (2017:347) describes these core components as pass-on-able habits, skills, a minimum knowledge base, and attitudes and beliefs.

Theological education has always been considered of utmost importance in the Reformed tradition, but now it seems that the DRC's reformed ecclesiological understanding and her formation of congregational leaders has lost touch. Dreyer (2014:12) states that the current theological education is preparing students for a church and society that doesn't exist anymore and congregational leaders don't feel equipped for these new forms of being church.

This article will address the need for the reformation of theological education. What follows is an overview of Reformed theological education in the DRC, past and present; future possibilities of the DRC's theological education focused on the formation of spirituality; and the reformation of Reformed spirituality.

Reformed theological education in the DRC – past and present

Holding up a mirror to the Reformed traditions past, it is clear that theological education has always been characterised by high academic standards. Taking the written Word of God seriously with a high premium on exegesis and hermeneutics. The theological education of the DRC, and her sister churches, are still modelled on this classic European approach. The approach is focused on knowledge of classical languages and exegesis and implies that the main role of a congregational leader revolves around

preaching (Dreyer 2014:123). Dreyer (2014:123) also states that the dedicated focus on critical and intellectual exegesis is excessive and does not contribute to formation of congregational leaders. It is important to note that although formation is about more than acquiring information, the DRC's theological education is still mainly focused on knowledge. This is evident in the DRC Church Order and the university and seminary programme.

Regulation 11 of the DRC Church Order (2019) gives a comprehensive description of all the different aspects regarding the theological education and preparation of congregational leaders for ministry. The high academic standards are evident with the rigorous prerequisites to obtain a degree and be ordained. Goheen (2016:299–300) points out that one of the crises of theological education is the professionalisation of ministry – inexperienced young people become leaders of congregations because of their academic qualifications. The missional church does not need more theologians: it needs congregational leaders with mature spiritualities. Training congregational leaders that are equipped for missional transformation calls for theological education with a different focus.

Studying theology at a university provides a diverse environment with students and lectures from different denominations, languages, cultures, and even different faiths and holds the opportunity to learn about the world and ministry outside of homogeneous church environments. This is especially important in a diverse country like South Africa. However, a university environment also strengthens the focus on academic outcomes over and above holistic and spiritual formation. A university's main priority is research output. Buitendag (2016:5) states: "It is not essentially ecclesiastical, perhaps not even ecumenical, but scientific in nature." Goheen (2016:299–300) points out the following problems regarding theological education: Subjects that are taught are highly theoretical, causing detached theological reflection that can alienate students from ministry; studying at an academic institution means there is often little connection to local congregations they serve; students are also separated from their churches and required to be residents in academic institutions for many years; faculties are chosen based on their academic record and professors thus have little or no ministry experience; the primary pedagogical mode is still lectures and transfer of information and a final

exam or research paper the primary way of assessing whether the students have mastered the information presented in the course. Students are equipped to be academics – theologians – not equipped for ministry and missional transformation.

The seminary part of the DRC's theological education claims to be focused on spiritual formation and the acquiring of practical skills for ministry, but the content and design does not show intentionality or have enough scope when it comes to a missional spirituality or practical skills for missional transformation. Church specific education at the University of Pretoria culminates in the sixth and final year and is said to pay attention to the missional formation of congregations. However, the design of the programme and the assessment criteria is focused primarily on knowledge and practical skills for traditional congregational work. Goheen (2016:299) underlines that “seminaries by their very nature are primarily interested in the cognitive side of training, the intellectual mastery of information, and so are unable to nurture, oversee or even assess the spiritual growth of students”. Church specific education seems to also have neglected this significant task it has undertaken. The seminary programme at the University of the Free State is also focused on preparing students for ministry – according to the DRC's requirements – and the faculty is said to be responsible for the academic formation of students. The question is, is this programme also focused on intentional spiritual formation? The seminary programme at Stellenbosch University is intentional about formation being holistic and missional, thus also focused on spiritual formation. Students are formed by creating and utilising the appropriate contexts, a local congregation (training congregation) and a community of students (faith formation group), and relationships within this context (especially mentorship). However, while student mentors are DRC congregational leaders, it should be noted that these mentors are most likely mainly focused on ministry within congregations and if they are not formed as missional leaders and do not serve in missional congregations, their own experience might be limited. Mentors model and share their spiritual life – teach knowledge and skills and shapes character and values (DRC Seminary Mentoring, n.d.:4-5). The question is, will these mentors be able to model a missional spirituality? And is the scope of this seminary programme big enough compared to the university's curriculum?

Although a dedicated focus on knowledge is an important part of theological education, the formation of congregational leaders requires a holistic approach with an intentional focus on the formation of spirituality. Spiritual growth and spiritual formation are essential for the missional formation and transformation of congregational leaders. The current theological education of the DRC to a great extent still reflects the needs of the church decades ago and thus a church that does not exist anymore – and needs to be reformed. Re-imagining theological education that is missional formation is about more than simply making a few adjustments and renewing the current curriculum and education programme. The DRC's missional ecclesiology demands an alternative theological education model focused on the formation of mature spiritualities.

Reformed theological education in the DRC – the future

Identifying the church as missional and realising the church should take on this form, has profound implications for how the church is giving structure to a missional ministry. When there is a change in our understanding of what the church *is*, it changes what the church *does* and how the church *organises* what it does and thus how *leadership* is understood (Niemandt 2013:47). This calls for the DRC to peer through the window towards her future possibilities. The DRC already took a first step in the process of missional transformation by accepting the above-mentioned guiding policy document, but the DRC now needs to transform theological education for the future of the church.

The policy document describes new insights into theological training (DRC 2013:16):

Missional leadership is all about the transformation of people and institutions who have been called by God to join His mission to the world. It is the church's responsibility and task to create an environment where the people of God can flourish. Missional leadership has also been charged with equipping the whole of the faith community to live all facets of life according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, reaching out to one another AND to the whole world. (DRC 2013:16)

The question then being asked is: “In what way is the church’s theological training assisting the development and nourishment of this type of missional leadership?” (DRC 2013:16). The policy document states that theological training has to pay attention to the following aspects of missional leadership (DRC 2013:16):

- **Discernment:** A theological understanding of discernment and assisting of students in their spiritual development. This includes training regarding processes surrounding listening. Discernment is at the very heart of Christian leadership, as leadership has everything to do with a communal discernment of the future that the Spirit is inviting the faith community into. This also implies teaching students to understand the Scriptures from within a consistent/logical missional hermeneutic.
- **Cultivating culture:** The development of knowledge and skills that have to do with cultivating culture – especially the cultivation of a culture where God’s work in the congregation and in the context of the congregation is discerned. Knowledge and skills regarding the nature of cultural change is also a necessity.
- **Communal discernment:** Discernment takes place within the context of the faith community. It is for this reason that things like insight into the functioning of networks and the process of communal discernment need to receive special attention. Seeing as this also affects things such as teamwork, insight into the dynamics and synergy of teams, and synergogy (where knowledge is attained in a group through working together in teams).
- **Leading transformation:** Leadership development implies that leaders are being equipped with skills with which to both understand and lead the process of transformation.
- **Discerning God’s preferred future:** Missional leadership is all about understanding and describing God’s preferred future. A missional leader accompanies and encourages the congregation in their active striving towards becoming a dedicated part of God’s mission in the world, on the way to His future. Leadership development will thus need to give special attention to eschatology.

- Missional spirituality: One of the most important aspects is the formation of missional spirituality.
- Innovation: Leadership development for missional churches emphasises innovation – i.e. training that encourages creativity and imagination. This also has to do with the power of metaphors, narratives, and the ability to ask open-ended, creative questions.

According to the DRC, these are significant aspects of theological training for missional leadership. Suffice to say, although the DRC intends to reshape theological education, the current theological education of the DRC does not yet reflect the changes in the DRC's ecclesiology and is not assisting the development and nourishment of this type of missional leadership.

How, then, will theological education be reformed? This article suggests that there should be an intentional focus on the formation of a missional spirituality. Buys (2020:2) also notes that there have been a worldwide discussions on the need for the transformation of theological education and that the missional vision should be restored in theological education, there is a “dire need for comprehensive transformative pastoral training”. Regulation 11 of the DRC Church Order (2019:59) states that the theological education of the church is primarily focused on education and formation of congregational leaders for the ministry of the church. It should be noted, not for ministry *in* the church, but the ministry *of* the church. Being a congregational leader thus means to be equipped and to equip for God's mission. As much as the congregation brings the gospel and *is* the gospel, a congregational leader represents the gospel and brings the gospel. To participate in God's mission is not primarily about knowing or even doing, but about being. Being equipped thus means holistic formation and the formation of a missional spirituality. Spirituality and mission are the same, with spirituality preceding mission, without life-giving spirituality, the missional church would not be sustainable (Pretorius & Niemandt 2018:2).

A missional spirituality can be described as personal transformation for the sake of others. And since being a missional congregational leader is not a new skill set, but rather about the person's nature and calling, there should be a shift in focus. The DRC's missional transformation calls for transformation, reformation – it requires a missional *metanoia*.

Bosch (1991:413) states that *metanoia* involves the total transformation of our attitudes and lifestyle, an ongoing, life-long process. Niemandt (2019:45) states that a missional life is a life of continuous conversion and transformation. And according to Guder (2015:117), missional conversion is not a model: it is a process of continuing conversion that begins when members understand who they are and what they are for:

... this faith is neither a thing nor a status nor a possession. It is a new way of walking. It is a living hope. It is the capacity to join a pilgrimage going in a new direction. This gift of faith initiates our continuous conversion, that transformation by the renewing of our minds spoken of in Romans 12:2 ... This faith, which God's Spirit enables, is more than an assent; it is more than merely saying "yes" to creedal propositions; it is more than a confessional tradition or a particular theological position. This faith that God gives us becomes expressive and active. It becomes a transforming knowledge that results in action. (Guder 2015:117)

Newbigin (1989:239) asserts that Jesus' call to conversion is a radical conversion of the mind, leading to an entirely new view and way of life. Sweet (2009:128) describes it as not viewing God from a distance, but entering into a relationship, "conversion is more than a change in direction; it is a change in connection". According to Wright (2008:221) a new life in the Spirit and in following Jesus "should produce radical transformation of behaviour in the present life". *Metanoia* thus refers to a continuing process of being transformed, 'missional' *metanoia* emphasises being transformed for the sake of others. This continuous transformation can be considered as the formation of a missional spirituality.

A programme for spiritual transformation, and ultimately a missional *metanoia*, is not a replacement for current theological education. It is also not the sole area for forming a missional spirituality. Rather, it is an attempt to be intentional about missional formation.

The reformation of reformed spirituality

Dreyer (1998:297) states that the ecumenical symbols and confessions serves as a framework for Reformed spirituality. The Heidelberg Catechism

(1563), one of the Three Forms of Unity, is a confessional document that articulates the fundamentals of Christian faith and can be seen as a basis for Reformed spirituality. Dreyer and Van Rensburg (2016:5) note that the faith teachings, as understood by the Reformation, are “woven seamlessly into the three-part structure of the Heidelberg Catechism”. And Rice (1991:11–12) also considers the Heidelberg Catechism as one of the most influential documents on the Reformed faith.

Reformed spirituality today can thus be deliberated by holding up a mirror to the Heidelberg Catechism. Dreyer (2014:74) argues that the core of Reformed spirituality can be found on Sunday 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Sunday 1

1. Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. That I am not my own,¹ but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death,² to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.³ He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,⁴ and has set me free from all the power of the devil.⁵ He also preserves me in such a way⁶ that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head;⁷ indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.⁸ Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life⁹ and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.¹⁰

2. Q. What do you need to know in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort?

1 1 Cor 6:19, 20

2 Rom 14:7-9

3 1 Cor 3:23; Tit 2:14

4 1 Pet 1:18, 19; 1 Jn 1:7; 2:2

5 Jn 8:34-36; Heb 2:14, 15; 1 Jn 3:8.

6 Jn 6:39, 40; 10:27-30; 2 Thess 3:3; 1 Pet 1:5.

7 Mt 10:29-31; Lk 21:16-18.

8 Rom 8:28.

9 Rom 8:15, 16; 2 Cor 1:21, 22; 5:5; Eph 1:13, 14.

10 Rom 8:14.

A. First, how great my sins and misery are;¹¹ second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery;¹² third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.¹³

Reformed spirituality is centred on the knowledge and awareness of (1) your sin, (2) how you can be freed from it, and (3) how you can thank God for it. The third awareness is an important focus of Reformed spirituality and sets it apart from its Roman Catholic influence. Salvation by faith is not a passive rest in grace, but active participation (Dreyer 1998:298). Reformed spirituality is not about participation to be saved, but about thankful participation because you are saved. This is evident in the first question and answer of the third part of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Sunday 32

86. Q. Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace alone through Christ, without any merit of our own, why must we yet do good works?

A. Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, also renews us by his Holy Spirit to be his image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for his benefits,¹⁴ and he may be praised by us.¹⁵ Further, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits,¹⁶ and that by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbours for Christ.¹⁷

What then is the core of Reformed spirituality? Smit (2014:65) notes, in good Reformed fashion, that the question about the message of the Heidelberg Catechism must be answered again and again by new readers, new listeners, new believers in new situations. What does it mean for us today?

This confessional document binds us to our past, gives us identity here and now, and paves the way for the future. The reformation of reformed

11 Rom 3:9, 10; 1 Jn 1:10.

12 Jn 17:3; Acts 4:12; 10:43.

13 Mt 5:16; Rom 6:13; Eph 5:8-10; 1 Pet 2:9, 10.

14 Rom 6:13; 12:1, 2; 1 Pet 2:5-10

15 Mt 5:16; 1 Cor 6:19, 20.

16 Mt 7:17, 18; Gal 5:22-24; 2 Pet 1:10, 11.

17 Mt 5:14 -16; Rom 14:17-19; 1 Pet 2:12; 3:1, 2.

spirituality, peering through the window towards the future, can thus be described as missional spirituality. A new understanding of the third part of this confessional document, thankful participation because you are saved – focused on personal transformation for the sake of others.

A missio Dei vision based on the covenant of redemption will on the one hand grasp and hold onto the valuable aspects of Reformed inheritance of previous centuries and on the other hand ensure the equipping of ministers of churches with a passion to preserve and multiply the church with a sincere heartfelt prayer (Heidelberg Catechism Sunday 48):

Preserve and increase your church. Destroy the works of the devil, every power that raises itself against You, and every conspiracy against your holy Word. Do all this until the fulness of your kingdom comes, wherein You will be all in all. (n.p.) (Buys 2020:8)

Conclusion

With three powerful words, Martin Luther sparked the Reformation and the modern era and everything changed: *Here I stand!* However profound these words were, Leonard Sweet notes that they are the wrong words for the 21st century. And they are the wrong words for the missional church. “It is no longer ‘Here’ but ‘There’. It is no longer ‘I’ but ‘we’. It is no longer ‘stand’ but ‘go’. It is less of a time to ‘take a stand’ than to ‘take a hike’ and walk together into the future” (Sweet 2019:252). God’s preferred future. Discerning together what God is up to in this world and *there we go!* These are three powerful words for the future of theological education, congregational leaders, and the church. And we are reminded to reform.

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