

Contemporary worship vs. ‘*sola gratia*’: A theological analysis of “*litadulu li a shumelwa halala*”

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The interaction of Reformed theology with African Christian worship creates substantial theological conflicts, especially when local worship manifestations contradict core Reformed beliefs. The Venda chorus “*litadulu li a shumelwa halala*” demonstrates this contradiction by proposing a performance-based soteriology that contradicts the Reformed principle of salvation by grace alone. This article examines the theological implications of merit-based language in African worship contexts, specifically analysing how this Venda chorus contradicts Reformed soteriology and proposing theological reformation frameworks that respect both doctrinal integrity and cultural authenticity. The study focuses on contemporary Reformed African church contexts, particularly Venda-speaking congregations where traditional African worship forms intersect with Reformed theological concepts. This junction provides unique opportunities to investigate how theological concepts are interpreted, translated, and articulated within indigenous cultural frameworks. The research demonstrates that “*litadulu li a shumelwa halala*” poses fundamental theological challenges from a Reformed perspective across multiple doctrinal dimensions: it contradicts *sola gratia* by implying causal relationships between human service and divine acceptance; conflicts with Reformed anthropology by suggesting humans possess inherent capacity for spiritual contribution; and undermines divine sovereignty by implying human action influences salvation. These theological contradictions manifest pastorally as spiritual anxiety, legalism, compromised assurance of salvation, and performance-based spirituality. However, Reformed theology can engage constructively with indigenous expressions while maintaining theological distinctives. Following Bavinck’s principle that ‘grace perfects nature’, African cultural expressions can be incorporated into Reformed worship when consistent with biblical truth as understood through Reformed theological doctrines, requiring careful theological assessment rather than wholesale cultural rejection.

Contribution: This article contributes to Reformed theological engagement with African Christianity by: (1) providing a framework for evaluating worship expressions through Reformed soteriological principles; (2) developing contextually appropriate worship language that maintains theological integrity; (3) addressing potential theological syncretism in African Reformed churches; and (4) improving pastoral care by mitigating the spiritual anxiety caused by merit-based worship language.

Keywords: *sola gratia*; Reformed theology; African worship; venda chorus; contextual theology; soteriology; protestant reformation; inculturation.

Introduction

The connection of Reformed theology with African Christian worship raises significant theological concerns that require further scholarly investigation. This work explores theological tensions at the junction, focusing on the Venda hymn *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* [heaven is earned]. Indigenous worship is culturally significant, yet it lacks complexity and undermines the Reformed tenet of *sola gratia*, which emphasises grace alone. The phrase’s language draws attention but also underlines the challenge of integrating Reformed theology into African Christian practice.

This soteriological premise creates QR friction between traditional African worship forms and Reformed theology systems. The term *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* challenges the essential doctrines of Reformed theology, which emphasise God’s sovereignty and salvation by grace alone. The tension between indigenous African theological perspectives and traditional

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Reformed doctrines creates dissonance within African churches, resulting in confusion in theological education and inconsistencies in pastoral practice.

The Reformed tradition holds that salvation is solely God's responsibility. Hence, any suggestion of humanity's role in salvation may conflict with this belief. Worship services, hymns, chorus, prayers and congregational life reflect this tension. Calvin's statement in the Institutes (3.14.5) contradicts worship vocabulary that says human service earns divine favour. According to McGrath (1990:168), reintroducing merit in worship language threatens the Reformation's transition from synergistic to monergistic understandings of salvation.

This study has significant theological and practical implications. Firstly, it builds on Reformed involvement with African Christianity by providing analytical techniques for measuring local forms. Secondly, it encourages contextually relevant worship expressions that maintain theological purity while acknowledging cultural differences. Thirdly, distinguishing between cultural adaptation and theological compromise prevents theological syncretism in African Reformed churches. Fourthly, it offers theological and pastoral care to address spiritual conflicts caused by meritocratic worship language. Conclusively, it contributes to Reformed liturgical studies in African contexts by providing principles for effective inculturation.

The study's breadth is deliberate. The focus is on Venda worship expressions rather than addressing other societal concerns in Africa. The article focuses on how Reformed theological principles of grace and salvation influence worship language and experience. This study focuses on worship language rather than other aspects of liturgical practice. Although it acknowledges the variety of worship traditions in African Christianity, it does not aim to address all aspects of this practice.

This study explores the theological relevance of a single clause in common language using many doctrinal lenses, including soteriological, anthropological, theological and Christological perspectives. The purpose is to blend reformed evangelical doctrine with true African cultural identity rather than eradicating it. According to Bediako (1995:117), African Christianity often highlights contradictions between local religious beliefs and Christian theology. This study aims to address tensions and promote worship that is both authentically African and honestly Reformed.

Reformed theological analysis of the phrase 'litadulu li a shumelwa halala' [heaven is earned]

The Venda chorus, the *litadulu li a shumelwa halala*, presents profound theological challenges when analysed through Reformed theological principles. For Reformed soteriology, this phrase needs to be explored with multi-points of

doctrinal contrast to demonstrate its inconsistency with Reformed soteriology.

Soteriological incompatibility with *sola gratia*

The term *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* has rich soteriological overtones that contrast sharply with the Reformation dogma of *sola gratia*. Linguistically, the Venda verb *shumelwa* [to be served] denotes a human agency of action performed for heavenly recompense. This semantics establishes a causal link between human activity and divine acceptance, fundamentally incompatible with Reformed soteriology. This semantic structure establishes a cause-and-effect relationship between human service and divine reception that is incompatible with Reformed soteriology.

Calvin (2018) on *sola gratia* (Institutes 3.14.5) denies the existence of such causality, stating simply, 'We must entirely reject the concept that by our worthiness we receive anything from God. Giving freely does not imply merit.' Calvin emphasises that 'righteousness is not a half-concern, but the keeping of the commandment in its entirety'. According to Institutes 3.14.10, breaking one point is equivalent to breaking all of them. The term *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* implies that heaven can be served, which contradicts this premise.

Berkhof (2019:246) explains that the conflict between God and man does not affect their compatibility. He explains that God freely offers sinners life and salvation through Jesus Christ, requiring faith in Him, all without their merit. The term *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* essentially means that Berkhof's position on merit in salvation is accurate, which Berkhof denies.

Anthropological contradictions with total depravity

Furthermore, the expression goes against Reformed anthropology, the notion of utter depravity. What can we, as fallen people, do about this? According to the Canons of Dort (Third and Fourth Heads, Article 3), man is born in sin and has a nature of anger, making him ineligible for salvation, prone to wickedness, dead in sin and a servant of sin.

To 'serve' heaven, one must believe that people can join in the spiritual realm fully. According to Bavinck, Bolt and Vriend (2003:122), every human being owes service to God just by being a creature and does not receive a reward. The expression *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* contradicts Reformed anthropology, which holds that humans have a natural potential to serve God.

Theological distortion of divine sovereignty

For the Reformed, God is completely sovereign in salvation. The Westminster Confession (Chapter III) affirms that God 'freely and unchangeably ordained everything came to pass', including salvation. This demand for a divine response, best

expressed in the Venda phrase *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* subtly but profoundly undermines that sovereignty by implying that human action determines whether or not God should act.

Turretin's debate in the Institutes of Elenctic Theology, volume 2, Topic 14, Question 14, applies to this topic. God's grace is not granted for the sake of works but rather as a result of it. Works are the means to salvation, not the cause. The concept of heaven as something to be 'served' reverses the connection and prioritises actions over salvation.

When discussing worship, Kuyper (2016:150) offers this insight to the complicated issue; 'True worship pays honour to God's sovereign freedom in salvation, whereas false worship strives to attach heavenly favour to human performance'. The term *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* threatens to foster the opposite type of worship.

Christological implications

The Reformed tradition strongly believes that Christ's work of salvation is complete. According to the Heidelberg Catechism (Question and Answer 60), God grants me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and purity of Christ, as if I had never committed any sin and had fulfilled all of Christ's obedience on my behalf.

The expression *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* undermines Christ's act of redemption by suggesting that human service is required to receive the reward of heaven. It contradicts the Reformed view of Christ's perfect atonement. According to Horton (2011:95), claiming that our service is necessary for salvation implies that Christ's labour was insufficient.

Historical theological context

Understanding this theological difficulty requires understanding the historical conditions surrounding the Reformation. Luther's initial criticism of the Roman Catholic Church stemmed from his belief that personal efforts could lead to salvation. His emphasis on faith-based justification challenged the mediaeval system of merits and indulgences.

Calvin enlarged on this view by emphasising divine sovereignty and unconditional election. The Reformation marked a change from synergism to monergism (McGrath 1990:168). The liturgy *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* represents a return to the theological paradigm that the Reformers rejected.

Cultural theological tensions

Reformed theology views all cultural manifestations through the prism of scripture while acknowledging the significance of indigenous traditions. Kuyper's (2019) sphere sovereignty recognises cultural diversity while maintaining Christ's authority over all cultures.

The phrase *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* is a common theme in Reformed theology and African traditional religions, highlighting the enduring value of Christian expression. According to Bediako (1995:117), African Christianity often highlights unresolved contradictions between African religious beliefs and Christian theology. The tension is particularly noticeable in worship language, which emphasises reward-based themes.

Theological resolution

The term requires significant theological renovation from a Reformed standpoint. According to Reformed theology, believers serve God out of gratitude for their redemption by Christ's work, rather than 'serving' heaven. According to the Heidelberg Catechism (Question and Answer 86), good actions are not done to earn heaven but to express gratitude to God for His favours and glorify Him through them.

In response to theological corrections, the article proposes changing the question to '*ri shumela Mudzimu nga uri o ri fha litadulu*' [we serve God because He has given us heaven]. This approach preserves cultural expression while still aligning with Reformed soteriology.

To summarise, the phrase *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* creates major theological problems from a Reformed perspective. This contradicts Reformed beliefs on soteriology, anthropology and Christology. Respect cultural expressions but ensure they correspond with biblical truth and Reformed theological principles. What is needed is theological transformation, not only linguistic adaptation.

Reformed theological analysis of *sola gratia* [grace alone]

The Protestant doctrine of *sola gratia* [grace alone] is a fundamental belief in Reformed theology in the Reformed tradition. The book of Ephesians 2:8-9 teaches this doctrine by saying that salvation is God's free gift, not on account of, or in response to, human merit. According to Titus 3:5, grace alone means that salvation is the work of God's sovereign grace from beginning to end. This realisation drastically shapes Reformed soteriology and thus its view on worship, sanctification and the Christian life.

Sola gratia has a lot of complexity, which Berkhof explains in his monergism exposition (Kirkpatrick 2018:164). This is about teaching regeneration about the act of God. He says that even faith is a grace. It is not an act of man that saves. This fits in with the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter X, no. 1, which teaches that effectual calling is accomplished only by God's free and special grace, not from anything foreseen in man (Westminster Assembly 1647). Reformed theology differs from Roman Catholic and Arminian views in emphasising God's initiative in salvation.

Beach (2020:280) emphasises grace as the sole ground of salvation, rather than God helping human effort. This is

consistent with Kuyper's (2019) asserts that the common Grace assertion, namely that grace is not universal and merely potential, is rather particular and effective. The two theologians emphasise that *sola gratia* signifies that redemption is wholly God's effort, without human participation in its underlying cause.

Recent reformers, such as Sproul (2005) and Horton (2011), continue defending it. They argue that Grace alone does not eliminate human responsibility but empowers it. Grace is what produces grateful obedience rather than obedience being conditioned on it. This helps to tackle our contemporary confusion about the relationship between grace and human activity in salvation.

Sola gratia has implications beyond individual salvation; it also plays a role in Reformed worship, ethics and mission. The Plan of Salvation demonstrates how this doctrine impacts every area of Christian belief and behaviour (Acodesin 2018:71). It leads to humility in worship, gratitude in service and confidence in evangelism, all because of the overwhelming realisation that salvation is all of grace. This doctrine, that we cannot do anything to contribute to our salvation, is at the heart of Reformed theology.

Reformed theological analysis of the implications of 'served' in African worship contexts

In African worship contexts, 'served' poses some theological challenges when understood within the Reformed theological framework. Calvin declared that any proposal that our service earns or merits salvation contradicts grace (Emmert 2021:36). (Bavinck et al. 2003) further explain that our service to God is in response to grace, not to earn it. In African worship, the language of 'serving' should be well thought-out theologically lest it inadvertently encourages works-righteousness.

The Reformed view, as articulated by Turretin Institutes of Elenctic Theology, that while service wants to reflect thankfulness, it does not constitute a work that merits in any way (Cumming 2023:60). It is very important when studying African manifestations of worship that could connect the idea of ritual service with worship. Wagenman (2019) maintains that Abraham Kuyper wrote about how worship as a cultural expression must be reformed. The end goal of this reformation is to maintain artistic authenticity while still being biblical.

The Plan of Salvation emphasises that all worship practices must be evaluated through the lens of sovereign grace (Eugenio 2022:34). When African worship employs the language of 'serving', it must be clear that such service flows from salvation already secured rather than attempting to secure it. This requires careful attention to both theological content and linguistic nuance in worship expressions.

Duck (2021:1) provides grids for understanding how service language can be correctly oriented to gratitude rather than merit in worship. Service language in worship must be oriented rightly towards gratitude and not merit. This is especially important in African contexts. How does the church honour African culture without denying the gospel?

From a Reformed perspective, the solution is not necessarily eliminating service language from African worship but reframing it within proper theological understanding. As Filson (2020:47) argues, all cultural expressions must be brought under the authority of Scripture. Therefore, 'served' in African worship contexts must be clearly understood and expressed as a grateful response to God's prior grace rather than an attempt to earn divine favour. This requires intentional theological education and careful attention to how worship language shapes theological understanding.

Major theological issues are wrapped up in the relationship between Indigenous expression and Reformed doctrine. Bavinck offers a significant principle for engaging Indigenous expression, followed by a one-liner: grace restores nature Parker (2022:40). Hence, Reformed theology can transform Indigenous expression without violating the original culture. Pahman (2018:414) develops this further and shows that while every sphere of life lies under the lordship of Christ, cultural distinctiveness may remain and be subsequently sanctified within a Reformed framework.

The conflict is mostly caused in places where local expressions have religious or spiritual meanings contradicting Reformed doctrinal positions. Because of John Calvin's regulative principle of worship (Institutes 4.10.23), worship practices must have express warrant from Scripture. It does present some challenges in assessing Indigenous expressions that may come from religious ones. Beach (2020), in Francis Turretin Institutes of Elenctic Theology, spoke of the importance of preserving the purity of doctrine while allowing variety in culture in the expression of the church.

One vital area of interaction is soteriology and the means of grace. The Westminster Confession (1647) of Faith affirms that salvation is found alone through faith alone in Christ alone, by grace alone. Some Indigenous expressions include other mechanisms of blessing (or grace) that are alternative to Christ's. Chiong (2024) in Geerhardus Vos can be very helpful for thinking through how redemptive history helps critique cultural practices as these practices are evaluated in light of the Reformed understanding of salvation history.

The way forward involves what Kevin Vanhoozer calls reformed Catholicity, retaining the distinctive, reformed doctrinal while willingly embracing proper diversity in expression. This requires careful theological discernment, as Warfield (2000) emphasises the distinction between what is possible to 'baptise' and what will be rejected for not being truly Reformed. The aim is not to eliminate culture but to reform culture per Biblical truth so that we may have an

authentic cultural expression that aligns with Reformational teaching.

Reformed theological foundations

Worship in Reformed theology is profoundly anchored in biblical ideas and confessional standards. The following key theological underpinnings shape the approach to worship in the Reformed tradition.

Calvin's regulative principle of worship (Institutes 4.10)

Calvin (2018) maintains that the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW) found in Institutes of the Christian Religion (Book 4, Chapter 10) argues that we should only do what God expressly authorises in the Bible in worship. This principle protects worship from the trinkets of man and keeps it separate from man's teaching. As God alone determines how He is to be worshipped, any unauthorised practices cannot but lead to idolatry and corruption.

Bavinck's principle: Grace perfects nature

Bavinck (2025), a Dutch Reformed theologian, argued that grace perfects nature rather than eliminating it. This idea promotes cultural diversity in worship while maintaining theological purity. Unlike dogmatic uniformity, Bavinck's viewpoint emphasises that worship can embrace cultural manifestations such as language, music genres and liturgical structures as long as they do not jeopardise biblical faithfulness. This allows for local and contextual adjustments within Reformed worship.

Confessional standards as boundaries

The Reformed confessions (the Westminster Standards, Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms and the Three Forms of Unity, Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and Canons of Dort) are like theological fences. The purpose of these confessions is to provide an orderly and doctrinal sound framework for worship that deters heretical drifts.

Implications of merit-based language in African worship

Theological concerns

Contradicts *sola gratia*

Abakpa (2025:68) strongly asserts that salvation is by grace alone *sola gratia*, meaning that no human merit contributes to salvation by using merit-based language in worship can distort the principle that God's grace is unmerited and not earned by human acts, sacrifices and obedience (Box 1).

BOX 1: An example of merit-based language in African worship.

Example of improper language: 'Bless us, Lord, because we have served You'.
Biblical correction: 'We love because He first loved us' (1 Jn 4:19).
Key texts: Ephesians 2:8–9.

Suggests works-righteousness

Merit-based worship expressions may reflect a theology that believes benefits or salvation are earned through human effort rather than gained through faith. This is similar to Pelagian or semi-Pelagian beliefs, which Reformed theology has traditionally condemned. In African religious cultures, where traditional spirituality frequently incorporates transactional ties with the divine (giving sacrifices in exchange for favours), such discourse can readily be combined with worship, resulting in a syncretistic notion of grace (Box 2).

BOX 2: An example of work-righteousness language in African worship.

Example of problematic language: 'God, we have fasted and made offerings; therefore, hear our petitions'.
Biblical correction: 'Not by our works of righteousness, but through His mercy, He saved us' (Tit 3:5).
Key Texts: Galatians 2:16.

May undermine understanding of divine sovereignty

God is sovereign over salvation, worship and bestowal, according to the reformed theology. Using merit-based language suggests that something humans do forces God to act instead of redirecting focus back to God. It is contrary to the doctrine of salvation by God alone and is leaning towards synergism (the doctrine that human cooperation contributes) (Box 3).

BOX 3: An example of language that leans towards synergism.

Problematic language: 'Because we prayed long and hard, God must bless us'.
Biblical correction: 'The Lord gives and takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (Job 1:21).
Key texts: Isaiah 46:9–10.

Creates confusion about salvation's basis

Worshipping what is good may sometimes mask an essential Bible teaching, that salvation is by grace through faith alone, not by works. When believers focus on merit-based worship, it can lead to a legalistic mentality where attentiveness to worship becomes just a task, not a response. Church leaders in African Christian communities that respect spiritual authority must not encourage salvation by merit through their liturgical language (Box 4).

BOX 4: An example of language that portrays worship as a task and not response.

Example of inappropriate language: 'Only the righteous shall get God's rewards'.
Biblical correction: 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8).
Key verses: 2 Timothy 1:9.

Doctrinal impact

Merit-based language in worship refers to expressions that imply human effort, righteousness or worthiness as a basis for divine favour (Brummond 2018:214). In many African church contexts, worship language often reflects

communal, experiential and deeply reverent expressions of faith. However, if such language leans towards works righteousness, it raises significant theological concerns within the Reformed tradition.

Weakens understanding of total depravity

The doctrine of total depravity, a key tenet of Reformed theology, teaches that all human beings are spiritually dead in sin and unable to contribute to their salvation (Kumar 2019:23). Merit-based worship language, however, can subtly suggest that humans have some inherent righteousness or ability to earn divine. This weakens the biblical understanding that salvation is entirely unmerited and dependent on God's sovereign grace (Box 5).

BOX 5: An example of merit-based worship language that weakens the understanding that salvation is unmerited.

Example of improper language: 'Hear our prayers, Lord, because we have lived righteously'.

The Bible correction: 'There is no one righteous, not even one' (Rm 3:10).

Key texts: Jeremiah 17:9.

Confuses sanctification with Justification

Reformed theology separates justification and sanctification quite evidently:

- Justification is God's declaration that a sinner is righteous based on Christ's righteousness alone (Dunnington 2018:527).
- Sanctification is the believer's ongoing growth in holiness, empowered by the Holy Spirit (Fikelepi 2023:6).

When a language of merit is used, it tends to confuse imputed righteousness with inherent righteousness, making it seem like our righteousness is achievable. It can cause legalism and undermine Christ's atoning work sufficiency (Box 6).

BOX 6: An example of merit-based language that could cause legalism.

'Example of Problematic Language: Now justify us, Lord, for we have served you faithfully'.

Biblical correction: 'For we believe that one is justified by faith apart from deeds of the law' (Rm 3:28).

Important passages: Philippians 3:8–9.

It may promote synergism rather than monergism

Reformed theology teaches monergism that salvation is entirely God's work, without human cooperation. Merit-based worship language, however, can introduce synergism, the idea that humans and God work together in salvation. This contradicts the Reformed emphasis on grace alone as the basis for salvation (Box 7).

BOX 7: An example of merit-based worship language that introduce synergism.

Example of improper language: 'If we worship hard enough, God will undoubtedly bless us'.

Biblical correction: 'It depends not on human effort or exertion, but on God, who is merciful' (Rm 9:16).

Key verses: John 6:44.

Pastoral implications

Apart from theological and doctrinal issues, the use of merit language in worship has pastoral implications that impact the spiritual life and relationship with God of believers. If worship promotes the idea that God's love or salvation comes because of people's efforts, then believers could experience damage to their spirituality. Below are key pastoral implications.

Can lead to spiritual anxiety

When people think their relationship with God depends on their moral performance, their prayers, fasting or giving, they may develop spiritual anxiety, a constant fear of not being good enough to receive God's blessing or salvation. When they fail, they feel guilty, scared, tired and believe they failed to meet the standards (Box 8).

BOX 8: An example of merit-based worship language that can lead to spiritual anxiety.

Example of a problematic belief: 'If I don't pray hard enough, God might not bless me'.

Biblical correction: "Don't worry about anything ..." But in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God' (Phlp 4:6).

Key texts: Romans 8:1.

May foster legalism

Using merit-based worship language can foster an environment of legalism where people will feel obliged to follow rituals or rules. Some Christians in Africa tend towards legalism, where dress codes, fasting or acts of worship can precede faith in Christ. The shift of emphasis from grace to works results in a faith more about being externally compliant than internally transformed (Box 9).

BOX 9: An example of merit-based worship language that may foster legalism.

An example of a problematic belief is that: 'God only listens to those who precisely follow all of His laws'.

Biblical correction: 'A person is justified not by deeds of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ' (Gl 2:16).

Key Scriptures: Colossians 2:20–23.

Undermines assurance of salvation

If believers believe they must earn or retain their salvation through their actions, they may struggle with certainty. This causes uncertainty, uneasiness and worry, as they constantly question whether they have done enough to remain in God's grace. Assurance in Reformed theology is based on God's promise, Christ's finished work and the Holy Spirit's witness, rather than own merit (Box 10).

BOX 10: Merit-based language that causes a struggle with salvation certainty.

An example of a problematic belief: 'If I sin too much, I risk losing my salvation'.

Biblical correction: 'I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will take them from my hand' (Jn 10:28).

Key verses: Romans 8:38–39.

Creates performance-based spirituality

A performance-based spirituality occurs when believers must achieve spiritual success through personal effort rather than resting in Christ's finished work. This can lead to pride in personal achievements or despair in failure rather than a faith centred on grace, humility and dependence on God (Box 11).

BOX 11: A depiction of worship language that focuses on the achieving of spiritual success as a personal effort.

Example of a problematic belief: 'If I pray longer and worship more fervently, God would love me better'.

Biblical correction: Ephesians 2:8–9, salvation is a gift from God, not earned through works.

Key verses: Isaiah 64:6.

Towards the remedy of the effects of the contemporary worship language on *sola gratia* reformation doctrine

Interweaving Reformed theology with indigenous worship manifestations creates theological difficulties that require careful resolution, especially when they violate fundamental soteriological principles. The phrase *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* [heaven is earned] exemplifies this tension, necessitating a comprehensive theological explanation. The following remedial framework addresses these difficulties while maintaining cultural integrity.

Theological education and formation

A key solution is a strong theological education combining Reformed soteriology with worship language. The education should:

Establish clear doctrinal foundations. Reforming the liturgy requires thorough training in Reformed soteriology, emphasising *sola gratia*. Horton (2011:127) argues that Reformed worship stems from Reformed theology. Never forget that Reformed worship is the result of Reformed theology. It is not a stylistic choice; it is a religious requirement.

Providing historical context for Reformed worship principles helps congregations understand why specific manifestations are problematic. According to Vanhoozer (2016:89), theological retrieval involves the church using its resources to address current concerns rather than being antiquarian in nature.

Collaborate with indigenous language experts to create indigenous theological vocabularies that express the Reformed faith in culturally relevant ways rather than relying solely on Western terminologies. This aligns with 'translation' rather than 'transplantation' (Walls 2002:67).

Liturgical reformation

Reforming the worship language requires intentional liturgical labour.

Theological investigation of problematic worship expressions is crucial to addressing soteriological difficulties. Kanyoro (2002:78) emphasises that African liturgical expressions should be evaluated based on theological appropriateness, not just cultural authenticity.

In addition, collaboration with church leaders, theologians and members is vital to address challenging issues in the church. For instance, *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* can be rephrased as *litadulu li a tlanganedzwa nga tshilidzi* [heaven is received by grace].

Create a new indigenous worship language that creatively expresses Reformed doctrine in cultural forms rather than just judging expressions within a culture. This aligns with Bavinck's adage that 'grace perfects nature' (Bavinck et al. 2003:274).

Pastoral implementation

Pastoral awareness is essential when using these therapies.

The gradual introduction may be necessary to overcome opposition to new worship practices. Avoid accommodating schisms, as allegiances are forged by blood. Calvin (2018:897) counselled that Church change requires kindness and caution.

In addition, different generations require different approaches because of varying learning styles. According to Mbiti (1990:132), African Christianity is simultaneously developing on multiple theological levels.

Create frequent theological reflection forums to help people process and integrate Reformed values into their worship experiences. According to Bosch (2011), faithful contextualisation is always prophetic and challenges the context itself.

Cultural theological integration

The eventual goal is not the suppression of cultural expression but its theological reformation.

The importance of culture finds common ground in cultural concepts for redemption and integration. While many indigenous cultures contradict Reformed theology, some of their conceptions are compatible. The Venda concept of *u n̄etshedza nga mahala* [giving freely] can be used to express heavenly grace.

In addition, it is possible to reinterpret cultural symbols and activities per theology. Christ, the Sovereign, declares 'Mine!' over every aspect of our existence (Kuyper 2019:86).

Furthermore, the solution is to build Indigenous Reformed theology that addresses cultural difficulties while maintaining doctrinal faithfulness. This aligns with Bediako's (1995:174) conception of Christianity as a non-Western religion.

Conclusion

A Reformed theological investigation of *litadulu li a shumelwa halala* [heaven is earned] helps highlight the contradiction between indigenous African worship expression and Reformed soteriology. This study draws several significant conclusions.

Firstly, the phrase 'Heaven is earned' fundamentally conflicts with the Reformed doctrine of *sola gratia*. As demonstrated through Reformed theologians from Calvin to contemporary scholars, any suggestion that salvation can be earned or merited through human effort contradicts the biblical teaching of salvation by grace alone.

Secondly, the use of merit in African worship is pastorally complex. This kind of language can create spiritual anxiety, encourage legalism, undermine assurance of salvation and create performance-based spirituality. This result starkly contrasts Reformed theology, which affirms the sufficiency of Christ's work and the security of believers in God's sovereign grace.

Thirdly, Reformed theology can shun the local presentation while still maintaining a doctrine of faithfulness and unity. Following Bavinck's maxim 'grace perfects nature', African cultural expressions may be used in Reformed worship, provided they are not contrary to biblical truth and Reformed doctrine. Therefore, the way forward involves:

- Careful theological education emphasising grace centred worship.
- Reformation of worship language to reflect Reformed soteriology.
- Development of indigenous expressions that maintain Reformed integrity.
- Pastoral sensitivity in implementing necessary changes.
- Ongoing theological reflection and cultural engagement.

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