

WRF Theological Commission

Statement of Reformed Theological Identity

Introduction

At the inaugural meeting of the World Reformed Fellowship in October 2000 in Florida, a Theological Commission was appointed and instructed to prepare a new Statement of Faith for the 21st century. A group of scholars from around the world started to work on this but it was only when Bob den Dulk agreed to fund the project that regular meetings were held and the project advanced. At the General Assembly of the WRF in Edinburgh in 2010, the Theological Commission of WRF presented its Statement of Faith, which was approved by the GA. That Statement of Faith stands in continuity with the Reformed confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries but speaks to the issues and problems of the 21st century. It is now available in ten languages. The World Reformed Fellowship accepts as members those who affirm one of the Reformed confessions, together with an affirmation of the authority of Scripture and a commitment to the aims and objectives of the WRF. The WRF Statement of Faith has been added to the list of approved confessional statements for membership.

At a meeting of the WRF Board in Fourth Presbyterian Church, Bethesda, MD, in March 2011, the WRF Theological Commission was given a second project: ‘It was moved and approved: the Board appoints a new Theological Commission to address the meaning and use of the word “Reformed” and the scope and meaning of the term “Reformed Theology”’.

The Theological Commission offers this ‘Statement of Reformed Theological Identity’ in fulfilment of our remit and will present it to the General Assembly of the WRF in Jakarta, in August 2019, for approval.

This ‘Statement of Reformed Theological Identity’ stands alongside the ‘Statement of Faith’. It does not seek to define again the doctrinal content of Reformed theology, as expressed in the Statement of Faith. Rather, it aims to offer a wider answer to the question ‘What does it mean to be Reformed?’ It looks at why and how Reformed Christians should approach thinking about their faith and relating it to their theological heritage.

The Reformed tradition values creedal, catechetical and confessional statements for several reasons. First, to declare what we believe; second, to teach the church; third, to act as a

safeguard against error and heresy; and fourth, for disciplinary purposes. At the same time, Reformed Christians recognise that doctrinal convictions must be accompanied by a spiritual relationship with God, through our union with Christ, expressed in a life of faith, obedience and holiness, centred on loving God and loving our neighbours. Intellectual commitment to certain Reformed doctrines, no matter how biblical, is insufficient. In other words, the ‘practice’ of the Reformed faith is as important as the ‘content’ of Reformed faith.

A great deal of work has been carried out by the Theological Commission in order to reach the conclusions in this ‘Statement of Reformed Theological Identity’. A paper was presented to the WRF Board in 2012, outlining something of the rationale for the project and charting the way forward. Then, between 2012 and 2016, the Theological Commission met several times to discuss the remit and to begin to formulate a response. The work was significantly advanced by a three-day meeting in Bethesda in October 2016. In August 2017, the WRF Theological Commission co-sponsored, with Rutherford House, the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, at which a number of relevant papers were delivered, both by members of the Theological Commission and by other significant scholars. A further meeting was held in Bethesda in 2018, at which an attempt was made to draw together the various threads of the work done between 2011 and 2018. The members of the Theological Commission then worked individually on various sections of the draft Statement. The resulting Statement was edited by the Theological Commission and then sent out to various scholars, not on the Theological Commission, for comment. Finally, the Theological Commission approved this final version of the Statement of Reformed Theological Identity, which we respectfully offer to the General Assembly of the WRF. Just as we were grateful to Bob den Dulk for financial support to complete the Statement of Faith, so we would like to record our thanks to Phil Petronis for financial support to enable the completion of the Statement of Reformed Theological Identity.

The Origins of Reformed Theology

As with all theological traditions, Reformed theology has a history. An account of Reformed theological identity has to situate it within this history.

Reformed theology is one expression of the theology of the catholic church and claims to summarise the Gospel and the teaching of the Apostles. In continuity with the history of the church, Reformed theology recognises the importance of the early ecumenical councils of the

church and affirms the creeds and statements produced thereby. These include the Apostles' Creed, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Athanasian Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition. The magisterial Reformers affirmed the creeds for use in worship, always maintaining the right to review these documents and creeds on the basis of Scripture.

While standing in the tradition of the ancient church, Reformed theology believes that tradition alone, however important, is insufficient and insists that 'the Word of God' is the only ultimate source of appeal in matters of faith and belief. It asserts the final authority of Scripture, as affirmed by John Knox and the other authors of the *Scots Confession* in 1560, when they said, 'if any man will note in this our confession any article or sentence repugning to God's holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness, and for Christian charity's sake, to admonish us of the same in writing; and we, of our honour and fidelity, do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God (that is, from his holy Scriptures), or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss'.

This commitment to Scripture was understood to be in line with the core theology of the church through the centuries. To that end, the Reformers had no intention initially of starting a new church but rather sought the 'reformation' of the church according to Scripture. While highly critical of many of the distortions of the medieval church, they believed themselves to be in continuity with the historic church.

The Reformation was one of a series of movements of reform which existed in the medieval church. The Humanist movement was a major stimulus for the Reformation. The study of the Greek New Testament prepared by Erasmus led the Reformers to see errors in the church's theology and practice. As these men began to read the Bible in its original languages, they realised the inadequacy of the Latin version of the Bible (the Vulgate). They came to realise that some of the teachings of the church were wrong, partly because they were based on this inadequate translation. They thus adopted certain results of Humanism, without adopting all of its philosophical commitments.

Historically, the Reformation had two specific origins. Most famously, it grew from the incident in November 1517 (All Saints' Day) when Martin Luther published his 'Ninety Five Theses' against the practice of indulgences. This was followed by his rediscovery of justification by faith as the heart of the New Testament Gospel. In 1520, Luther was

condemned by the papal bull, *Exurge Domine* and he was thus forced into the position of leading a reformation movement, having been excluded by Rome. Around the same time, Zwingli led a reform movement in Zurich. By 1524, the town council of Zurich had eliminated the Roman mass and the veneration of images.

The Reformation grew from these two (Lutheran and Zwinglian) roots and spread into various parts of Europe. The Reformation experienced a significant division between the Lutheran and Zwinglian movements after the Marburg Colloquy in 1529. This had been called with the hope of resolving questions of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, but could not come to an agreement. From this point on, the main Reformation movement divided into two main camps, the 'Lutherans' on the one side and those who came to be known as the 'Reformed' on the other side. Lutheranism was dominant in Germany and Scandinavia, whereas the Reformed movement, was primarily found in Switzerland, north-western Germany, France, the Netherlands, England, Scotland and Hungary. It was led by men such as Martin Bucer, John Calvin, and John Knox.

The theology developed in this Reformed strand had much in common with the Lutheran strand but also had its own distinctive emphases. The Lutherans produced the Augsburg Confession (1530) as a statement of their theology. Over the next hundred and fifty years, the Reformed strand of Protestantism produced many confessions and catechisms, expressing their understanding of Reformed theology. Alongside the Reformed and Lutheran movements, a third strand also developed in the 16th century, which contemporaries called 'Anabaptism'. This 'radical Reformation', tended to cut ties with the historic church more decisively and saw itself as recommencing the church as a holy society. The Reformed movement differentiated itself from this stream.

While the history of the Reformed church is clearly the outgrowth of the sixteenth-century revolt against the teaching and practice of the Roman church, it is equally clear that the term 'Reformed' ultimately gained a theological history, such that Reformed theology came to designate the theology which arose out of the Zwinglian (later Calvinist) strand of the 16th century Protestant Reformation and which was neither Lutheran nor Anabaptist.

The developing Reformed movement can be clearly identified in the 16th century, though the term was not applied to the movement in distinction from Lutheranism till the very end of the

century, when Ursinus' commentary on the *Heidelberg Catechism* was published under the title *Corpus doctrinae Christianae ecclesiarum a papatu reformatarum* (1598). Thereafter, it became a common term for this stream of Christian theology and church life into the 17th century and beyond.

The Reformed theology which developed in the 16th and 17th centuries had much in common with medieval scholasticism and used similar vocabulary, logic and methods, not least in its use of Aristotelian forms and concepts. Although the break between the Roman church and the Protestant churches in the sixteenth century was decisive, there are many areas of thought and Christian doctrine where there was unbroken continuity with the earlier medieval theology.

In the following centuries, Reformed churches were planted in the colonies of the European nations which had Reformed churches. There was a significant Reformed presence in many parts of the American colonies, Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia. The missionary movements of the 19th and 20th centuries saw Reformed Christianity grow in Indonesia, Korea, South India and South America.

Sadly, the churches which have developed within the Reformed tradition have not always been faithful to the original commitments of the tradition. Over the last two hundred years theological liberalism has meant that many churches which stem from that tradition and are historically 'Reformed', no longer accept the full authority of Scripture and question many of the doctrines of the Reformed confessions. There are, of course, many who stand in line with the Reformed theology of the 16th century and have remained in continuity with its classic confessional expressions. We recognise that the complex history and international character of Reformed theology means that there is significant variety among its adherents, making it challenging to define 'Reformed theology' in a simple way. Nevertheless, the World Reformed Fellowship offers its Statement of Faith and this Statement of Reformed Theological Identity as one attempt to do so. The WRF also offers itself as a vehicle to draw together those within this stream of Reformed theology, for mutual support and benefit.

The School of Reformed Theology

Our understanding is that Reformed theology is a school of thought and not a strand of thought. For this reason, great care is required when stating that a particular doctrinal

assertion is ‘Reformed’, particularly where this involves criticism of others within the Reformed tradition who do not share that particular doctrinal assertion. None of us has a monopoly on what is ‘Reformed’ and variety of expression has been part of the movement since the beginning. That is to say, Reformed theology has always been a ‘school’ of thought with many ‘strands’. In the earliest days of the Reformation, scholars throughout Europe were developing Reformed ideas. For example, Martin Bucer in Strasburg, Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich, John Calvin and Theodore Beza in Geneva, Pierre Viret in Lausanne and in France, Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus in Heidelberg. This is to say nothing of Peter Martyr Vermigli who was everywhere! Add to this the theologians in Holland, Hungary, England and Scotland and you have a varied and fascinating ‘school’ of thought.

These various ‘strands’ of the ‘school’ of Reformed theology did not always agree. In the 17th century, the Reformed movement developed in various nations across Europe. There were strong ties between the various national movements, with much shared theology and practice but each national church also developed its own distinctives. They also produced confessional statements which differed from one another in structure and content (for example, compare the *Second Helvetic Confession* with the *Heidelberg Catechism* and then with the later *Westminster Confession of Faith*). Variants of the confessional documents were also written, to express different emphases between Reformed communities. In England, for example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* was completed in 1646 but versions of this confession, with different ecclesiologies, were produced by the Congregationalists (*The Savoy Declaration*, 1658) and the Baptists (*London Baptist Confession*, 1689). Despite this variety and these stated differences, all were ‘Reformed’ in character. There was a healthy debate between the ‘strands’ and their fellowship in Christ was evident.

This healthy, positive debate among brothers and sisters in the different ‘strands’ of Reformed theology, in the spirit of ‘iron sharpening iron’, has sometimes been lost today. Indeed, there have been many battles among Reformed theologians which have damaged the reputation of our movement. The tendency to condemn or ‘unchurch’ brothers and sisters with whom we disagree is not germane to the nature of Reformed theology as a school of thought. There must, of course, be some boundaries, such that if an individual or an ecclesial community has moved significantly away from the teaching of Scripture as expressed in the

core convictions of historic Reformed theology, then we must be permitted to question their self-designation as ‘Reformed’ and take appropriate ecclesial action. In doing so, however, we must act with love and compassion, remembering that the object of such discipline is to restore men and women to Christ.

Reformed theology has always experienced diversity. While united around the central authority of the Scriptures as being the very ‘Word of God’, Reformed theologians held diverse opinions on the understanding of what the Scriptures taught regarding both doctrine and practice. Nowhere is that diversity more clearly seen than in the debates regarding the nature of the Lord’s Supper, not least between Calvin and the Zwinglians regarding the exact nature of the presence of Christ within the sacrament.

The historical use of the term ‘Reformed’, then, was undoubtedly one of ‘breadth’. It encompassed all who held to the evangelical doctrines that had been rediscovered at the Reformation and had become manifest as a form of ecclesiastical life and thought. For this reason, there is no historically honest way to describe a monolithic Reformed theology. Instead, we should look to establish a set of common characteristics of Reformed theologies that themselves create the ‘Reformed tradition’. Some Reformed thinkers give the impression that to be Reformed means to embrace the historic confessions of the Reformed churches of the 16th and 17th centuries and to confine theological investigation to the issues already addressed by those confessions. This, of course, reduces Reformed theology and the Reformed tradition itself to being little more than recordings of the historic voices of the past and leaves it ill equipped to deal with the issues of the 21st century. Reformed theology must not be confined to restating in traditional terms the debates of the past. Nor must it assume that the decisions made in past debates are final, or provided all the answers, or even that they were correct in all that they asserted.

Within the Reformed tradition, there have been ongoing debates about Reformed identity, which explains the multiplicity of definitions. This introspective and self-absorbed mentality, focussing on ‘in-house’ debates, has frequently led to harmful isolation and a false sense of security. These attempts to tie down every single doctrinal assertion into one truly Reformed theology is futile. A wider vision is required, so it is more appropriate today to speak of strands of Reformed theology, rather than *the* Reformed theology.

The ethos of Reformed theology refers to what it means to ‘be’ Reformed. That is to say, we do not speak simply of what we ‘believe’ as Reformed Christians but also of what we ‘do’. The life and behaviour of the Reformed Christian ought to have a certain nature and quality, arising out of our core biblical convictions. There are perhaps four areas where we ought to see this ‘being’ Reformed in practice. First, our lives ought to evidence a holiness and piety which springs from the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Second, we ought to love both God and our neighbours in a way that witnesses to Christ. Third, we ought to live in the conviction of the sovereignty of God in all things, not least in our salvation. Fourth, we ought to act towards other Christians, not least other Reformed Christians, as Scripture directs. In other words, rather than merely listing a set of doctrinal convictions which are the *sine qua non* of Reformed theology (which we have already done in the WRF Statement of Faith), we are now seeking to define the ‘ethos’ of what it means to be Reformed. For example, we believe that the character and practice of Reformed theology is ‘embrasive’ rather than ‘exclusive’. There are sectors of the Reformed community which hold to a rather narrow definition of what it means to be Reformed, thereby excluding many people whose core theology and instincts are undoubtedly Reformed. Our intention is to promote a culture where there is a catholic spirit and a generous acceptance of others. The WRF, from its origins in 2000, has advocated and sought to model a generous and gracious orthodoxy.

In defining the ethos of Reformed theology we must also stress the need for humility and respect. We must be humble as we state what we believe and take care to avoid the arrogance which has characterised some in the Reformed tradition. We need to listen with respect to theologians from other traditions, perhaps especially those with whom we most disagree. Ecumenism has often been regarded negatively by those in the Reformed tradition but pursuing the unity of the church is an important element of our witness to Christ. Such ecumenical dialogue forces us to recognise that we do not have all of the truth. This requires humility, a willingness to learn and an openness to being corrected.

There are few theologians from whom we cannot learn something, even where we may disagree on major issues. In all of this, we must have an approach to theology which is courteous. The mantra of ‘defending the faith’ can easily be used as a cover for a mentality which enjoys the battle and relishes a fight. Some Reformed theologians and pastors have been quick to go to war but slow to obey the Scriptural injunctions about grace, kindness, gentleness, love and respect.

Reformed theologians are called to defend the truth as we understand it from Scripture, this needs to be done with a warm-hearted and open attitude and with the humility to admit our own mistakes and to discover our own blindspots. Defense of the truth does not require a negative, confrontational attitude. One important element here is to present the views of others fairly. If we present the views of theologians and others with a view to criticising them, we must ensure that the people in question would recognise our presentation of their views as fair.

The other important point to make is that Reformed theology involves a world and life view and is more than the famous ‘Five Points’. Reformed theology is much more comprehensive than simply soteriology. Our attitude to culture, including music and the arts, will arise out of the totality of our Reformed theology, not least our understanding of common grace, as in the work of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. The Dutch Calvinist view is that Christians are to engage at every level with the nation and with the culture. Kuyper himself was a minister, a theologian, the editor of a daily newspaper, the founder of a Christian university, the founder of a Christian political party and ultimately, Prime Minister of The Netherlands. He saw no conflict between these roles because he believed that every thought must be taken captive for Christ. In defining Reformed theology, we should take heed of this important Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition, which is much more biblical than the culture-denying escapism of some Anabaptist and Fundamentalist movements which have so influenced sections of the Reformed church. Reformed theology should be applied to the culture and so a credible Reformed theology will have something to say about creation and ecology, about science and technology, about medical ethics, about communications and social media, about politics and government and so on.

The Method of Reformed Theology

Reformed theology holds that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were ‘breathed out’ by God (2 Timothy 3:16). The means God used to accomplish this was that, ‘men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Peter 1:21). Given these two Scriptural truths, the way we handle and interpret Scripture is of first importance.

Hermeneutics is the study of the way in which we interpret and attempt to understand realities such as works of art, pieces of music, literary works, actions, and gestures. It

involves the study of principles of interpretation for all forms of communication, both verbal and nonverbal.

In relation to Reformed theology, hermeneutics deals with the principles and methodology of Biblical interpretation and exegesis. It is the science of interpretation of the Scriptures, which also takes into account the input of the church community and tradition. The method of Reformed theology, then, centres on Scripture and its interpretation. The Scriptures are to be examined using the grammatico-historical method and the study of the literary genres, as well as by comparing Scripture with Scripture (the analogy of faith). In using this language we are not advocating a 'modernist' approach to Scripture but rather the approach used by the 'theological interpretation of Scripture' movement.

Dealing with the question of the interpretation and explanation of the Scriptures implies mentioning the idea of revelation and, therefore, raising the question of one's presuppositions. This we have in common with other schools of evangelical theology. Reformed theology takes as its presupposition that there is an infinite and personal God, who is truly capable of communicating his thoughts and his will in the categories and words of human language and expression. God reveals himself to humanity primarily in and through the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Scriptures. He does this in such a way that human beings, being made in God's image, can understand this revelation, although not exhaustively. Such is the foundational presupposition from which we derive the basic principles of objective communication, inspiration and infallibility. Without this basis, the notion of revelation is but a shallow literary formula and tends to become meaningless. The usage and the evidence of the Scriptures themselves underline such a perspective.

We see this in the action of God in the 'breathing out' of Scripture. This divine means of communication has a subjective/empirical and personal aspect to it, namely, the work of the Holy Spirit acting upon the depths of human consciousness and creating thoughts that, in fact, proceed from God himself. Thus when the Lord reveals his word to Jeremiah, the prophet experienced a process including reception, appropriation and inscripturation. This is especially evident in the Psalms. It is, in fact, the usual pattern of divine revelation.

In the practice of Reformed theology, we are not engaged in religious studies, that is, giving an account of the beliefs and customs practiced by individuals or communities who lived in

the past. Nor are we engaged in historical theology, that is, giving an account of the theological reflections of individuals or communities on God's revelation, such as the religious thought of the people of Israel.

Since the object of biblical hermeneutics is the interpretation of divine thought that has been transmitted according to the categories of human language, the idea of inspiration becomes essential. By this means, God, by his authority, guarantees and confirms the truth of the object of our study. This does not preclude the use of reason and an intelligent appropriation of truth. It enables us to stress that God's own authority, by the means of inspiration, establishes the truth of the object of our study, the Scriptures. It is also important to remember that revelation encompasses both what is expressed in human language and historical facts and events described therein. Without a belief in inspiration, without the mark of the Lord's authority and competency, a full conviction with regards to divine truth cannot emerge and blossom, but rather doubt and uncertainty linger on relentlessly. That is why Reformed theologians affirm the objectivity, inspiration and infallibility of revelation.

Biblical Theology, understood as the history of revelation, constitutes one of the specific contributions of Reformed theology to the debate on hermeneutics. The emphasis is on the historical development and organic growth of revelation and thus on the progressive disclosure of God's counsel. The stages of revelation being both distinct and interdependent, it involves a continuous process leading to the full maturity of revelation as it is disclosed in the person and work of the Messiah, as announced and promised by the law and the prophets. As Christ Jesus is the incarnation of the divine word, the New Testament also emphasizes discontinuity insofar as the types (priest, prophet, king and sage) and realities (the sacrificial system) foreshadowed in the Old Testament are clearly manifested and fulfilled in Him.

God, the infinite and personal being has created all of reality, including human beings in his own image. Though the Creator is totally distinct from his creation, this means that both God and human beings are personal. They think and communicate, they love, act justly and deliberate and act. The object of knowledge is thus the revelation that God has given us in creation and history as well as in Scripture. In order to come to a true understanding of such a divine communication, we hold to a unified field of knowledge. We thus maintain that it is open to human reason and is the object of faith. As both the visible and invisible aspects of God's world are one, faith implies a proper understanding of truth. Nevertheless, because the

effects and marks of sin are so deep, human beings are in vital need of the illumination of the Holy Spirit. It follows that God is the foundation of the cognitive process of human beings, not only because of his work of creation, but also because of his kindness manifested in his work of redemption. When Scripture says that God ‘knows’ human beings, this means that he seeks them, he remembers them, he chooses them, he calls them and he blesses them. This divine initiative establishes the unique value and the *raison d’être* of human beings. The Lord, through the Holy Spirit, graciously gives to human beings the knowledge and wisdom that lead to life. In this way, the covenant relationship is established.

Clearly Jesus-Christ is at the very center of biblical hermeneutics. It is the light of the Word incarnate, combined with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, that enables us to grasp in truth the depth, beauty and relevance of God’s message within their times and settings. The authors of the New Testament quote and refer to the books of the Old Testament in different ways (citations, allusions, illustrations, allegories, etc), but the key of their understanding remains Christ Jesus who is the *exegete* par excellence (John 1:18).

The Characteristics of Reformed Theology

In describing the characteristics of Reformed theology it is important to acknowledge that Reformed Christians share certain aspects of life, faith and belief with all Christians. This includes the call to love the Lord our God with heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves. We are to worship, glorify and enjoy God, we are to fulfil the cultural mandate, we are to work for justice and we are to show concern for the poor and those in need.

Having said this, we can nevertheless, identify certain distinctive emphases which characterise Reformed theology:

Theological

Reformed theology is ‘theological’, it is not mystical nor merely practical but has always sought to ground the Christian life in an understandable confession of God. It is also theological in the sense that it strives to be theocentric and to keep God and his glory as the central theme of theology and practice. Even when Reformed theology moves away from the Confessions it usually retains this character to some extent.

Christological

Reformed theology stresses that Christ is the final revelation of God, and that in him is found all that is needed for salvation and the Christian life. For example, in very different ways, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and Barth's theology, both focus on Christ. The Confession's theology focusses around Christ who is divinely appointed and fully equipped as the mediator of the covenant of grace, and perfectly fulfils that role. Barth almost subsumes the doctrine of God, Scripture and election into Christology.

Scriptural

Reformed theology embraces the principle that Scripture is the authoritative norm for decisions regarding life, faith and doctrine and insists that Scripture must govern the appropriation of insights from tradition, reason and experience. The articulation of the doctrine of Scripture has been a distinctive of Reformed theology and, even in some more liberal Reformed approaches, the Bible has continued to have an important role.

Sovereignty

Reformed theology has always been conscious of the clear distinction between God, the Creator, and everything else, which is all his dependent creation. While God can and does relate to his creation, creatures can never assert a right to have a relationship with him. Along with this awareness of God's transcendence, Reformed thought has also stressed God's sovereignty over the whole of creation, as well as his sovereign grace in salvation.

Anthropology

Reformed theology provides a biblical anthropology, seeking to state and deepen its understanding of God's pattern for human life. Contemporary culture raises a host of questions for Christians about the nature of human life and how it is to be lived well. In order to deal well with issues concerning gender, sexuality, technology and social justice, we need a clear account of human living, grounded in God's created order and understood in the light of Christ and his redemption.

Creation and Providence

Since God is sovereign, creation is his realm. Reformed theology has not generally been dualistic or ascetic. It has allowed a place for general revelation understood in the light of Scripture. History too is seen as the realm of God's action and redemption is an historical

event established by Christ's death and resurrection. Reformed theology has usually been relatively optimistic about the course of history and human culture under God's hand.

Sin and Grace

Reformed theology has analysed the human condition by distinguishing between four states, each of which is determined by its relationship to God. These are: the state of innocence, the state of sin, the state of grace and the state of glory. This has enabled Reformed theology to integrate reflection on human concerns with its theocentric emphasis.

Reformed theology, while stressing that humanity cannot demand a relationship with God, also holds that we are made for just such a relationship. God has made us and calls us to know, love and serve him. This call comes to all human beings, and all are responsible for their response to God, since God's sovereignty does not negate human responsibility. Reformed thought has also had a clear grasp of the depth of human sinfulness. It has viewed all people as fallen in Adam, corrupted by sin and deserving God's judgment. The recognition of the depth of human sin is accompanied by an awareness of the need of God's grace in salvation, and the full sufficiency of his grace. Along with God's sovereignty, Reformed theology has usually had a clear grasp of human sinfulness and so an awareness of the need of God's grace in salvation. The finite cannot reach the infinite but God graciously accommodates himself to, redeems and glorifies his creatures, even sinful creatures. Finally, Reformed theology has looked forward to the day when, with the return of Christ, all of his people will be raised and glorified with him.

The work of the Spirit

The providential care of God and his sovereign grace are both the work of the Spirit. Reformed theology emphasises the life-giving work of the Spirit perfecting God's purposes in creation and redemption. The work of the Spirit in redemption is based upon the work of Christ and mediated through the reading and preaching of the Word.

The Church

The Holy Spirit unites believers with Christ and unites them to one another. The collective name for the body of believers is the church. In the earliest days of the church theologians described it as 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic'. At the Reformation, several 'marks' of the church were identified: the Word rightly preached; the sacraments (baptism and Lord's

Supper) rightly administered and discipline uprightly maintained. Jesus himself prayed for the unity of the church and noted that the mark of true believers was their love for one another. The primary duty of the church is worship, thereafter to fulfil the Great Commission of Jesus to ‘go and make disciples’. The church must always be reforming itself according to Scripture.

Justification by Faith

Springing from the Reformation, Reformed theology holds to a doctrine of justification by faith. This is the view that, while salvation is a gift of God’s grace, its reception by human beings comes through the instrumentality of faith in Jesus Christ. Following Calvin it is often considered the ‘hinge of religion’, though not as the controlling principle for all theology.

The Christian Life

Reformed theology places a major stress on the active Christian life, flowing from God’s grace in justification and his ongoing work of sanctification. The role of grace and the law in shaping the Christian life has been a consistent emphasis in most Reformed theology. Reformed thought has understood that theology is a source of practical wisdom - it teaches God’s people how they enter into his salvation and how they are to live for him.

Church and Society

Reformed theology, coming from the magisterial Reformation, holds that the church should be engaged with the society. This has been expressed in different ways, but the concern for society has been consistent. In Genesis 1:28, Adam and Eve were given what is often called the ‘Cultural Mandate’. This involves populating the earth and exercising stewardship and responsibility for it. This has significant implications for conservation and ecology.

Covenant

Covenant is a distinctive emphasis in Reformed theology, in expressing the relationship between God and humanity. The covenants made with Abraham and Moses and the new covenant made in Christ are central to our self-understanding as the one people of God in both old and new testaments. Some Reformed theologians, including the Westminster Divines, opted for a bi-covenantal federal theology, centred on a Covenant of Works in Adam and a Covenant of Grace in Christ. Others rejected the idea of a Covenant of Works but insisted nevertheless that the Adam/Christ parallel is key to understanding sin and salvation.

The Context of Reformed Theology

The Church

Reformed theology arises out of and is nurtured by the church. It has a clear commitment to the view that the church is established by God as his chosen people. This involves an awareness of the continuity of the church with Israel and with the early Church and the medieval Roman Catholic Church. Reformed churches are conscious that they stand in a heritage given by God with roots long before the Protestant Reformation. Theological reflection is grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament and builds on the thought of the early and medieval church.

Reformed churches stress the importance of the local congregations gathering for worship, serving one another in love and participating in God's mission by proclaiming his kingdom in Christ. Theology should enable churches to do this faithfully.

Reformed churches are also aware that they exist as part of God global church, expressed in their own denominations, other churches and through wider Christian organisations. They recognise the importance of theology serving the wider ministry of the Church.

Reformed theology recognises the mixed nature of the church and affirms the distinction between the visible and invisible church, while noting the importance of church discipline. Theological reflection should be tested by the Church, both in its local and wider forms.

Confessional

Reformed theology is confessional and to the extent that we want to claim to be 'Reformed', we should find the centre of Reformed theology in the classic Reformed confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries. Many confessions have been written within the Reformed tradition and no one single confession alone defines the Reformed tradition. Reformed theology also affirms the priority of Scripture over confessions, arguing that a confession is binding for the community only insofar as it corresponds to Scripture. It also affirms the reality that any confession can be amended but the Scriptures may not be. Another of the accrued benefits of the Reformed confessional tradition that continues to provide a dividend to the modern church, is the fact that it reminds us that no interpretation of the Scriptures is to be done in a vacuum. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. Our understanding in

the present will be in the light of the past, which offers a useful corrective to our postmodern and individualistic way of interpreting Scripture.

Two modern examples of the way in which the confessional tradition has aided the church, concerns the use of confessions in the modern period to address issues of social justice. One example is the *Barmen Declaration*, which was drawn up to challenge the German church's theological justification for Hitler's Third Reich. Another example is the *Belhar Confession*, which was drawn up to resist any theological justification for apartheid. Whatever may be their theological limitations, these modern confessional statements demonstrate the ability of the Reformed community to address immediate social concerns in a specific geographical community, in a confessional form.

The Relevance of Reformed Theology

In order to judge the continuing relevance of Reformed theology, one significant question which we must ask is whether or not a pre-modern theology has something to say to a postmodern society, or indeed to other non-western cultures and to other Christian traditions.

Some Reformed theologians dismiss postmodernity as denying the existence of truth in favour of total relativism. This misrepresents many postmodern thinkers, though of course some reject any claims to truth. More generally, postmoderns are wary of ideologies masked as truth and are sceptical about reaching truth merely by rational arguments, noting that people seem always able to find rational justification for their own interests. Instead they want to see commitments lived with integrity and beliefs that are held authentically. They want to believe in something that will make a difference to the world and inspire them to go beyond themselves. They will assess Christianity in those terms. In response, Reformed theology can offer a way of knowing God grounded in his actions, not fallible human efforts, which engages the whole person in all of life. It should be able to offer a holistic and satisfying vision of human life, while challenging the assumptions that life and truth are ungrounded. Thus, Reformed theology should be ready to address the despair regarding truth in postmodernism and be able to engage in dialogue and share the gospel with postmodern people and with post-Christian culture.

In reflecting on these different approaches, we believe that our task is to formulate the Christian faith in a way that is intellectually rigorous, yet appeals to postmodern people as

comprehensive, genuine and moving. In seeking to develop Reformed theology in this way, we need to counter-balance the emphasis on propositions in Reformed theology, with a renewed understanding of narrative.

At its best, Reformed scholasticism of the 17th century attended carefully to the text of Scripture and, on that basis, offered a tightly argued set of doctrinal affirmations in ways that connected with the logical thought forms of the day. In our era, we are called to the same task but in a very different intellectual and social context. It is here that a re-emphasis on narrative may serve Reformed theology well, as it connects with post-modern and non-Western cultures effectively. In a way, the call to focus more on narrative is a call to go back to the model of the Bible, which is itself a presentation of the grand narrative of God's work in the world and is filled with numerous smaller narratives. Narrative theology is not contrary to intellectual rigour; good theology can be expressed either in engaging narrative or in logical arguments. Narrative theology is not contrary to facticity since redemptive history itself is a story and a real story. The Reformed tradition should make the most of various modes of theology, especially the systematic and the narrative, to communicate well the riches of Scripture.

A number of Reformed theologians have sought to defend the Christian worldview, including Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Richard Mouw. These scholars are helpful in our postmodern age, in showing that truth involves an integrated picture of our lives. Nevertheless, these and other Reformed writers are not entirely satisfying to postmodern people and so we must do more to communicate with them.

Speaking generally, postmoderns are not seeking a grand logical vision of the world, an integrated metaphysical system. Rather, they are seeking narrative that fires the imagination, a vision that can inspire them, not a system that puts everything in neat categories. They are looking for a faith that can handle the complexities of life and give them a sense of the worthiness of living.

The biblical narrative gives us a meta-narrative of humanity, as well as providing a history of those who transit from death to life through Christ. This narrative is non-modern meta-narrative, in the sense it is not based on a logic immanent in the historical process, nor does it propagate the superiority of any particular political or economic system. The biblical

narrative is based on the creative actions of God throughout history. This narrative climaxed in our Lord, and thus this is the only true meta-narrative of reality. Van Til is correct that Christians should be self-conscious of their own presuppositions when they confront the world but focusing on logical consistency may not be the most helpful strategy. Maybe a creative retelling of the mighty acts of God and of his wisdom, in contrast to the false ideologies of today, is a more helpful and urgent task.

It may be that Reformed theology's over-emphasis on doctrinal correctness and accuracy makes it less able to communicate with postmodern people. The cost of trying to construct an ever purer Reformed faith diminishes its relevance to the postmodern world.

One way of opening up some of these issues would be to engage in a case study. For example, if we were trying to develop a Reformed theology which would be relevant to Asians, what would that look like? A Reformed theology for Asia must respond to the needs of Asian societies. This is neither to argue for compromise on the truth of the Gospel, nor to argue for a social Gospel. The Gospel is not a tool for solving social problems, it is the proclamation of the everlasting love and mighty acts of God. However, God, in his wisdom, does not intend merely to save individuals, he intends also to renew the whole world. This renewal includes redeeming our cultures and transforming our societies. This is an area in which Reformed theology can make significant contributions for the kingdom of God in Asia.

When we propose the need for a Reformed theology within an Asian setting, we do not mean that Asian cultures somehow contain superior wisdom than occidental cultures. All cultures are beautiful yet fallen cultures, as the Dutch Reformed tradition has emphasized. The meta-narrative of God's redemptive plan serves as a critique of Asian cultures as well as pointing to the true aspirations of Asian cultures. Theologians can utilize the Reformed worldview approach to help transform society to meet the yearnings of Asian people, as well as transform the yearning of the people to help them find their true destiny in God.

From Calvin to the *Canons of Dort* or the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, we have gained in systematic completeness and exactness of language but for most Asian churches, the road from Calvin to Dort is probably not the best direction. Calvin's writings represent a type of confident dance to the rhythm of the sovereign God before the evils of the world. A Reformed theology for Asia needs to recover this spiritual tradition. Sometimes, Reformed

people boast about their theological orthodoxy and put down other Christian traditions. To the minority churches in Asia, such partisan squabbles do a great disservice to the Gospel witness. The Asian churches need to learn to dance in joy despite their weakness in society.

Reformed theology has put off many individuals and churches, especially in the southern hemisphere, because it has appeared to them as cold, divisive, rationalistic and western. By describing and developing a biblically sustainable Reformed theology, which makes room for doctrinal issues which are critical to the life and mission of indigenous churches, rather than being controlled by the western European, anti-Roman Catholic origins of Reformed theology, we will do a great service to the Reformed community and perhaps win more people to a Reformed worldview.

Respecting the relevance of Reformed theology, as noted above, we should also be willing to engage with other traditions within Christianity in a Christian manner. Our vision for Reformed theology is an intentionally ecumenical future. Our confessions and catechisms have historically enabled a 'kinship' with other churches and believers who share the same, or a similar, confessional position. For example, those who hold to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* are a worldwide fraternity of Reformed believers. However, there has often been a failure to engage with other Christian traditions.

In this regard, we might well engage in another case study. For example, the way in which Reformed theology engages with classic Pentecostalism. If Reformed theology is to overcome the mutually negative views between Reformed and Pentecostal Christians, it will be necessary to promote and stimulate creative discussion between Reformed and Pentecostal Christians. Many Pentecostals have recently begun showing an interest in Reformed theology and this offers areas of possible dialogue, as well as areas where we could learn from one another. In doing so, we recognise that both Reformed and Pentecostal Christians hold to a common spiritual intention, namely to obey the great commandment to love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

One way to promote such dialogue would be to explore five of the key elements in classic Reformed spirituality, together with a preliminary investigation as to how each of these might resonate to a greater or lesser extent with facets of Pentecostal devotion in ways which might

mutually enhance dialogue between Reformed and Pentecostal Christians. These elements are: the glory of God, the humiliation of sinners, the activity of the Word, the indispensability of the Holy Spirit and the duty of self-examination. Despite significant differences, there is more common ground between Pentecostals and the Reformed in the case of the doctrines of God, Scripture and the Holy Spirit, while the commonality in relation to humiliation and self-examination lies in the fact that today they are largely neglected by both groups.

This is only one example, however, of the need for Reformed theology to be intentionally ecumenical in its approach to other traditions within Christianity. Historically, the Reformed faith has been at the forefront of authentic ecumenical involvement, having taken its lead from John Calvin, who was at the forefront of ecumenical undertakings. His time with Martin Bucer in Strasbourg (1538-1541) was a time of determined unionist dialogues between Lutherans and the Reformed. Although these talks were not ultimately successful, this did not end Calvin's interest in ecumenical activity. In 1541, at the Colloquy of Regensburg, he and Philip Melancthon came to an agreement on much of their Eucharistic thought, though ultimately this did not lead to the unity for which he worked. Calvin's efforts were born out of his understanding of the nature of the church and its unity. His repeated efforts led to the *Consensus Tigurinus*, a document widely approved by Reformed churches. This led to a uniting of the traditions of Zwingli and Calvin and was a significant theological achievement.

The Future of Reformed Theology

In looking to the future of Reformed theology, we must recognise its strengths which have enabled it to survive and grow thus far. Nevertheless, we want to advocate a confessional Reformed theology which is contextualised, so that it is not an antiquarian study but a living force for good, dealing with the issues which particular nations face and presenting a Reformed response to these issues.

One significant contribution which Reformed theology can make in the future, concerns the definition of the church. In the theologically diverse and divided present context, no issue captures the diversity of Christians more than attempting to find a common biblical understanding of the nature of the church. Reformed thought offers a way forward, following Calvin, who defined the church in this way: 'Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there

is not to be doubted a church of God exists'. It is a church which has both visible and invisible aspects and is defined by its proclamation of the Gospel.

As we seek to refine our Reformed theology to make it fit for the future, there are certain areas which require some work. In particular, we must recover some of Calvin's core themes. Reformed theology has become so overlaid with detail and elaboration that a return to Calvin's simplicity of structure and expression would help us enormously. These core themes have not exactly been lost in Reformed theology but often they have been overlaid with a thousand qualifications and explanations, in the process losing the simplicity, clarity, beauty and pastoral concern of Calvin's own expression of them.

In particular, we need to recover Calvin's strong emphasis on the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit. He was supremely a theologian of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, his commitment to a theology of common grace has been largely neglected, except in the Dutch tradition. Above all, his high Trinitarian theology has not always been understood and appropriated within our tradition. Many modern Reformed theologians have seen the Trinity simply as a doctrinal formulation to be included somewhere in our doctrine of God. The way in which Calvin opened up his whole theological system out of a centre in the Trinity is a masterful model which we ought to recover. Other neglected areas include Calvin's emphasis on the Fatherhood of God and on adoption, his conviction that faith leads to justification on the one hand and sanctification on the other hand and his emphasis on the importance of union with Christ.

We must also reaffirm the vital relationship between two of the fundamental elements of Reformed theology, namely, the sovereignty of God and the grace of God. When Reformed theology has placed too much emphasis on the sovereignty of God and neglected the love and grace of God, we have ended up with a cold, legalistic, deterministic theology which has denied the free offer of the Gospel. When Reformed theology has placed too much emphasis on the love and grace of God and neglected the sovereignty of God, we have ended up with a weak, liberal Christianity with no real sense of God's justice and judgement. Only when God's sovereignty and God's grace are held in proper balance will Reformed theology be true to the teaching of Scripture and true to its own best instincts.

A final point would be to argue that the development of a Reformed theology for the 21st Century requires a much closer relationship between the church and the academy. On the one hand, the church has often been suspicious of the academy, believing that so-called ivory tower theologians have little concern for the church and dismissing arguments about academic freedom as an excuse for departing from the confessional position of the church. On the other hand, the academy has often viewed the church as failing to take seriously the important work theologians do in the areas of biblical, historical, systematic and pastoral theology, accusing the church of seeing the academy simply as a machine to churn out candidates for the ministry. We need to recover a sense of unity of purpose between church and academy.

Reformed theology must also maintain its voice on public issues, particularly in the areas of ethics, morality, justice and peace. Too often, Christians have conformed to the prevailing views within their society instead of speaking prophetically from Scripture. The church must be willing to express righteous indignation in the face of evil, not least when human beings are oppressed or exploited. It must also equip the church to speak prophetically to society and culture and guide Christians in their lives as citizens.

Conclusion

What we envisage is a Reformed theology which will constantly re-examine its doctrinal formulations in the light of Scripture, the infallible Word of God. It will be a Reformed theology which will be firmly anchored in the life of the church, a Reformed theology which has its roots in the 16th Century but its top branches firmly in the 21st Century. It will be a Reformed theology which is recognised as a school of thought and not a single strand. It will develop a world and life view, will be open to the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit and will avoid overly rationalistic formulations. It will be respectful of those with whom it disagrees, will show humility and respect and always be willing to learn. It will be a Reformed theology which holds on to the fundamental tenets of our system while being willing to explore and to experiment and to take risks. Above all, it will be honouring to God and will be used to explain the truth of the Scriptures to a fallen world in order that more men and women and children may come to know our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.