

Reformation Theology and the Reformed Profile

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The inheritance of the Reformation in general, and the Reformed inheritance in particular, is amazingly rich. In a variety of ways, within and beyond Christian environments, they provide orientation for many churches and communities, cultures and educational systems today. They often do this in a hidden way. The treasures of the Reformation inheritance in general, and of the Reformed inheritance in particular, are deeply embedded in our culture. We have our Judeo-Christian inheritance to thank whenever we enjoy a moral system which praises and promotes justice, provides protection of the weak and enables the search for truth. This inheritance also enables us to reject moral systems which represents an 'Olympian ethos'—as Wolfgang Huber once called it—or a Machiavellian ethos, an ethos in which victory belongs to the stronger. When we bind religiosity with an ethos of human freedom, and, at the same time, want to distinguish between that freedom and subjective capriciousness and arbitrariness, then the impulses of the Reformation are decisive. When we approve of the separation of powers, and are not afraid of a correctly understood pluralism, then the Reformed inheritance is partially responsible.¹ The examples could go on and on. Our western cultures are full of both clear and hidden effects of the biblical, Reformation, and specifically Reformed inheritance.

Yet we can not be satisfied with simply repeating, at the beginning of the third millennium, that, "the inheritance of the Reformation and the Reformed inheritance are in fact orienting forces in a many various ways" as though it were an incantation. We have to admit that our Christian testimony, as well as the testimony of others, is in many ways weak, endangered and even self-righteous and hypocritical. We have to admit that our Christian existence and witness are in constant need of repentance and renewal. It is precisely as members of the Reformed Church that we recognise this recurring necessity to renew our faith and our witness in light of God's word and under the leading of the Holy Spirit: *Theologia reformata et semper reformanda!* The self-critical task of differentiating between God's word and our witness, between God's Holy Spirit and the spirits of our age and culture, challenges us constantly to scrutinise and renew our faith and our theology. But in what way must we ask for and seek such renewal today?

Reformed theology is, simply, the theology of the Reformation. Every renewal of Reformed theology will want to confirm, continue and renew the witness of the Reformation. The fundamental concerns and central witness of the Reformation can be articulated in a very concentrated way in the four-fold *sola* formula: *sola scriptura, solus Christus, sola fide, sola gratia*—**scripture alone, Christ alone, faith alone, and grace alone**. Yet when Reformed theology reinterprets these formulae for our time, it must also comprehend and address the difficulties which our contemporaries have with them. What are the orienting strengths of these *sola* formulae? To what degree have we ourselves displaced their orienting strengths by our own theologies and piety? Reformed theology must also realise that when it seeks a renewal of this four-fold orientation it performs a service which extends beyond Reformed theology and churches. Truly *reformativa* theology serves a theology which is worldwide and ecumenical. A theology which renews the voice of the Reformation contributes to the life of the entire ecumenical Christian church.² But how can this happen? How can we move beyond merely routine demands and assurances?

1. *Sola scriptura*

In his programmatic lectures on Reformed theology in the early 1920s, Karl Barth, the great Swiss Reformed theologian of the twentieth century, stressed that the so-called scripture principle could not be relinquished if Reformed theology were to return to health. Barth realised that we must "...find our way back again into the living cycle of scripture and Spirit."³ This demand has often been repeated by Reformed theologians the world over during the past decades. In April 2001 we held an international symposium in South Africa with 30 leading Reformed exegetes from around the world. We asked about the authority of scripture in the perspectives of the various confessional branches of the church. But how can we make the *sola scriptura* understandable to our contemporaries when they are surrounded by many important voices and options for orientation—options which assert themselves alongside the Bible and which even claim to have in hand possibilities for orientation that in essential ways are more important and more up to date?

The Reformers granted the Holy Scriptures a key position in all attempts to obtain a substantial understanding of God and a sound knowledge of self. "Scripture alone shall be queen," was the unabridged formula for the *sola scriptura*. Scripture alone shall be queen. However, scripture is not God. Scripture, though, *is* queen, in that it refers us to God. Why is the Bible so terribly important? Why is it the most important source for our knowledge both of God and of self? Why could the reformers hold this conviction so strongly? If we want to elucidate the *sola scriptura*, the so-called scripture principle, for people today, then we should speak of a four-fold or even seven-fold weight of scripture.

The first is the Scriptures' great *historical weight*. Although this historical weight does not occupy the highest rank in relation to the other aspects of scripture, we should deal with it first. The historical importance of scripture would hardly be contested, even by someone who was only passingly informed about the matter. The biblical testimonies extend for over at least a thousand years (and according to some exegetes, can even be traced back over 1500 years). They were prepared within oral traditions, gathered and compared with each other, related to one another, brought into harmony with and measured against each other. That is why we speak of biblical traditions 'growing' over centuries. The biblical texts bear witness to a search for the knowledge of God as well as a joy in this knowledge, extending over more than a millennium. Yet the texts also bear witness to a multitude of insights and experiences of faith. They contain and document an exceptionally impressive history of witness. The biblical traditions document more than a thousand years of insights and experiences of faith; but they also document more than a thousand years of great conflict. Their narratives relate manifold forms of oppression, but also manifold experiences of liberation and deliverance by God's hand. In the great library of biblical books, bound together into one volume, lie a thousand years of concentrated religious experience.

The Reformers also valued the great *cultural weight* of scripture. It is reported that Luther, on his deathbed, advised us to "bow in reverence before its traces. We are beggars. It is true." The reformers could look back upon an effective history of the Bible stretching over more than 1500 years. Today we are approaching almost two millennia after the establishment of the canon. Yet the cultural weight of the text is repeatedly called into question with the objections that, for example, the Bible has supported Christian imperialism, or that it has supported and promoted patriarchal, ethnocentric and other problematic cultural forms. These bad, indeed devastating effects cannot and should not by any means be denied. For better or worse, the biblical traditions have left a deep imprint upon so-called world history. Many persons today tend to emphasize the bad, or even the worst, aspects: the crusades, the witch-burnings, many forms of aggressive fundamentalism and bigoted biblicism. Many persons today also tend to stress the distance and the differences between the world-views, rationalities and morals of the Bible and the world-views, rationalities and morals of our own time. These forms of one-sidedness must be addressed and criticised as such.

In the biblical traditions, just as in our own age, we meet people with their experiences and questions of faith—people who stand before God. Now, as then, there are people who are deeply uncertain, who are troubled and despairing. Now, as then, we find people with uplifting experiences, with experiences of favour, of security and of liberation. Now, as then, people have similar bodily needs. Now, as then, people must live with love and hatred, with hope and disappointment, with sickness and death. Now, as then, they are exposed to the forces of nature and culture. Now, as then, people want to direct and improve the course of their individual and communal lives. And, now, as then, people constantly run up against their own limitations. The differences between the life-world of the Bible and our life-world must not be denied. In manifold shades and contours, the biblical contexts diverge from the shades and contours of our modern-day experiences. Yet in the midst of the distance and strangeness, again and again an astounding proximity appears with respect to particular persons, situations and relations. Time and again, the historical and cultural weight of scripture asserts itself with a great existential richness. We can further differentiate the cultural weight of the text by speaking of an *existential weight*, an *ethical weight* and an *importance of the symbolic forms* of the Bible.

Scripture, however, does not merely encounter us with a great historical and a great cultural weight, which we can further differentiate into existential, ethical and symbolic aspects. It also encounters us with what I like to call *canonical weight*. This canonical weight lies in scripture's inner consistency, in the internal relationships, in the inner rationalities of the biblical tradition in its manifold facets. The biblical traditions, which as emphasised above came to exist through a long process of development and maturation, relate to each other in various ways, even when in some respects they stand in conflict or tension with each other. The biblical traditions do not offer us—thank God—any simple system. They do not offer even a single principle or one individual idea that determines all the rest. With a tapestry of testimonies, the biblical traditions offer a great wealth of orientations. They speak of the acts of God in situations of chaos and in situations of tyranny. They speak about situations of individual and communal helplessness, and about individual and communal experiences of liberation. They speak about a multitude of human limit situations, and of God's acts under these conditions of life—often at the limits of all human possibility.

Time and again in its history, Reformed theology has strongly stressed the authority of the biblical texts. It has continually regarded the close relationship to the Bible and to the canonical memory molded by the Bible as a particular characteristic precisely of Reformed teaching. Reformed theology has continually accorded determinative status to the wealth of testimonies not only of the New but also of the Old Testament, and it has continually stressed the superiority of biblical authority over confessional writings, not to mention particular abstract theological principles. It is very important that Reformed theology introduce this matter of Reformed concern again and again with great vigour into the current ecumenical discussions. The teaching of the four-fold or even seven-fold weight of scripture could help our contemporaries really to understand and comprehend this message once again. In this it is important to see that the historical and cultural weight as

well as the canonical weight are grounded above all in the *theological weight of scripture*. The 'majesty of scripture' is due to the 'divine majesty,' which 'imposes' itself upon us through the Holy Spirit. The majesty of scripture is due to the experience, mediated by the Holy Spirit, that God speaks to us in and through scripture. This however is the experience that God speaks to us in many different ways.

Scripture alone *can be* queen and *is* queen among all human documents, texts and declarations because it testifies to God, God's actions and God's presence among human beings. In the Old Testament, it witnesses to God's work with Israel and in history with God's chosen people. It testifies to the activity of the God whom Christians also worship as creator of heaven and earth. In the New Testament, it witnesses to God's revelation in Jesus Christ, in which Christians perceive God to have come unsurpassably near to us. The recognition of scripture's theological weight brings us to the second *solus*-formula.

2. Solus Christus

That God revealed God's self in Jesus Christ was of the greatest importance for the Reformers and for Protestantism during its creative phase. The Reformers vigorously stressed again and again that in Jesus Christ, God has "poured himself out completely and did not hold back anything that he has not given us." Pre-Reformation theology had obscured this living relationship to Christ theology insofar as—to adopt Luther's striking formulation—it "slipped past the humanity of Christ into absolute speculations about the divine." At the beginning of the *Institutes*, Calvin subtly took up these attempts to slip past Christ into 'absolute speculation' and to perceive God with so-called 'natural presentiments', and just as subtly corrected them. This sensing and speculating presentiment does admittedly lead us to all sorts of powers and forces in which we think we recognise God, but we do not achieve any clarity by it. Some persons feel secure, while others feel oppressed. Some suffer under the diffuse power which encircles us, while others perceive this as an empowering force-field. Without the revelation of God in Christ we could never escape this religious ambivalence; without the revelation of God in Christ, we would never stop creating all manner of idols and idolatrous delusions in order to be done with these divided religious feelings.⁴

Yet it is not merely the speculations and feelings of metaphysics and natural religion which obscure and destroy the relationship to the living Christ. In the modern age, this relationship has been destroyed by an abstract belief in a transcendent 'other' residing in the self. Something completely 'other' within the self, an ultimate point of reference, a ground of being, a ground of existence—with such abstract and meager religious forms, the modern Protestant faith attempts in vain to preserve the great insights of the Reformation. This conglomerate, with "me and my God" on the one side, and an interest in the great personage of Jesus of Nazareth on the other side, quickly collapses. The *solus Christus* no longer makes sense in such a way. Against this modern Protestantism of religious subjectivity and inwardness we have to learn once again to discover the faith of the Reformers. This is the faith in which Jesus Christ is perceived, honoured and worshipped as the resurrected and exalted one. The resurrected and exalted Christ is the true liberator and lord of this world.

The resurrected Christ is not merely the resuscitated pre-Easter Jesus. Although some statements in Luke seem to support a confusion between resurrection and physical resuscitation, the message of the biblical tradition is clear. On the one hand, the resurrection exhibits features of a reality available to the senses. On the other hand, the resurrection experiences possess the character of an appearance. Divine revelation and people bowing down in worship—these are the reactions of the witnesses to the resurrection. The women and the disciples fall to the ground or fall to their knees. Yet scripture also says that some doubted. The Emmaus story is particularly informative in this regard. The eyes of the disciples are kept from recognising the resurrected one. On the basis of the breaking of the bread, the bread rite, their eyes are opened. But immediately with the next breath we find that "he vanished out of their sight" (Luke 24:31). Instead of complaining about an eerie apparition, the disciples remember a second experience, but one which had not yet become for them a revelation of the resurrected Christ: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). And now they bear witness to the resurrection of the crucified one.⁵

The witnesses to the resurrection recognise the risen one in his speech, in his breaking of bread, in his greetings of peace, in the interpretation of the scriptures, but also in the luminous appearances which by their very nature resist any confusion between resurrection and physical resuscitation. It is important to recognise that only a *multitude of different experiences* awaken the certainty that Jesus Christ is risen, that he is here among us. In contrast, the reports of the empty tomb show that a single, albeit spectacular revelation by heavenly messengers does not yet lead to belief in the resurrection. Fear and silence, according to Mark, were the reactions to the appearances at the empty tomb. The belief that the body had been stolen, or similar propagated rumours, became wide-spread (according to John and Matthew). In Luke, the reports of the event at the empty tomb are dismissed as mere nonsense. It is not only in the skeptical modern age that the appearances at the empty tomb—taken in themselves—fail to arouse faith in the resurrection; we see it even in the biblical testimonies themselves. Only in connection with the other appearance experiences do the appearances at the empty tomb become important for the belief in the

resurrection.

Yet how can we grasp the reality of the resurrection when we must first admit that the resurrected one is not present among the disciples and their fellow human beings in the same way as the pre-Easter Jesus—i.e. at a single place in space and time? What sense can we make of what the biblical testimonies mean when they speak of a 'spiritual body' or a 'glorified body', or that the risen one is present 'in the Spirit and in faith'? It is important to recognise that the fullness of the life and person of Jesus of Nazareth is present in the resurrected one. A naturalistic way of thinking, i.e. one formed by some scientism which is fixated upon nature, can hardly imagine such a presence of the resurrected one "in the Spirit and in faith". That is why we continually run into the false fixation on the debate: Was Jesus resuscitated? Is there physical resuscitation? Yes or no? Faith is reduced to a mere subjective opinion, and the Spirit to a numinous force. The result is that the presence of Christ in the Spirit and in faith is no longer properly understandable—indeed, is worthy of mistrust. In contrast, what the resurrection is about is the fullness of the person and life of Jesus Christ precisely in the Spirit and in faith. He becomes present in the canonical memory of the community of witnesses.

The canonical memory is a divided memory, but one which profoundly shapes our present lives, our experiences and our expectations. It is aroused and formed by the biblical testimonies with their theological, canonical, cultural and historical weights. The biblical testimonies allow us to express the presence of the resurrected one in a rich way. But they also require that we hold fast, along with the Reformers and with great theologians like the later Karl Barth, to the notion that the resurrected one is not present without his witnesses; he is not without his post-Easter body, his church.

In this post-Easter body, the powers of love, of healing, of turning toward children, the weak, the outcast and disadvantaged, the sick and the suffering—these powers continually take on new forms.⁶ Critical engagement with the principalities and powers, the political and religious powers, in the search for truth and true justice also takes on form in the post-Easter body of Christ. The person and life of Jesus Christ lead to diverse experiences of liberation and of renewal in the lives of individuals and communities. In often hidden ways, yet also in powerful ways, the lordship of Christ and the power of the coming Reign triumph among humanity and amid diverse resistance. Only when we take seriously the *solus Christus* and the *sola scriptura*, only when we see that faith is moulded through and through by the presence of Jesus Christ and the effects of his life, and only when we constantly hold before our eyes the presence of the resurrected Jesus and see him in this light can we properly understand the *sola fide* and the *sola gratia*. It is then that we recognise what all God grants to humanity through Jesus Christ, and how very much we live from divine goodness and grace. The poor attempts of modern Protestantism to explain the *sola fide* and *sola gratia* with an abstract relation of dependence pale into insignificance beside the wealth of the Reformers' understanding of the faith.

We have often praised Reformed theology and piety for its particular ability to express the sovereignty of God. Unfortunately, only too often in history has the sovereignty of God been understood as a metaphysical concept of God or as a concept of absolute power. Even Reformed theology tended to worship Aristotle's God and to celebrate the First Cause of a mechanistic universe. Reformed theology today should recognise and correct these mistaken developments in its own history, and follow the great insight of the Reformers that all Christian theology and all trinitarian theology should start from the dominion of the crucified and resurrected Christ, and direct us again and again towards it. Through Christ the revelation of the living trinitarian God is imparted to us. The teaching of the sovereignty and glory of God requires a solid anchoring in the *solus Christus*. We need this anchoring if we do not want to block access to the theological orientation on God's revelation by replacing that orientation with speculations of a natural-theological or philosophical nature.

3. *Sola fide*

For the reformers, the formula *sola fide*—by faith alone—did not mean that we only had to seek out and cultivate some abstract, immediate relationship to a transcendent 'wholly other', which at the same time is internally very near to me and anchored in my innermost self-consciousness. This modern, abstract and empty faith—this empty inner religious certainty—is miles away from the faith which not only knows that it owes itself to God's grace, but also knows that it is bound to Jesus Christ and the testimony of biblical tradition.

When the Reformers spoke of faith, they did not just have my individual relationship to God in mind, but also always the *whole Christian church*. When, in the interpretation of the third article of the creed, they speak of faith or of the work of the Holy Spirit, the Reformed and the Lutheran Confessions always speak of "the whole Christian church and also of me", of "me and the whole Christian church". In the Heidelberg Catechism (e.g. Questions 21 and 54), as well as in Luther's Large and Small Catechism, we find this formulation repeatedly. But the 'whole Christian church' encounters us in various forms of congregation and community. It develops different configurations and forms of faith, different confessions, different traditions and different

forms of devoutness in differing contexts of life. Sometimes these differences can be seen as a burden. However, they continually require that the question of truth be asked and that the search for the unity of faith remain open. They require us, in discussion and critical engagement, repeatedly to re-examine our differing certainties and to subordinate them to the cooperative search for truth. They require that we continually bring our differing moral certainties into conversation in order to seek out true justice and true compassion and to ask what really corresponds to the justice and compassion of God.

These differing expressions of faith were very clearly seen and described by Paul. Paul can write to individual communities and assure them that he is thankful before God for their faith, which “is proclaimed in all the world.” In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul describes faith as a complex spiritual exchange. In Romans 1:8, 11-12 he writes, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world....I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.” He writes something similar to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:8): “Your faith in God has gone forth everywhere.” He tells them that he wanted to send Timothy as a messenger in order to “establish you in your faith and ... that I might know your faith.” Finally he tells them that he is happy to hear “the good news of your faith” (1 Thess. 3:2-6, 7ff). In the letters to the Colossians, the Ephesians, and the Hebrews and in 2 Thessalonians we find similar formulations that point to the publicly recognised faith of a community (Col 1:4; Eph 1:15; Heb 13:1; 2 Thess 1:3). In the letter to Philemon and in the second letter to Timothy we find corresponding formulations with regard to the well-known faith of individuals (Phil 1:5; 2 Tim 1:5). It follows from this that faith is in no way merely a relationship that extends from me to my God. Rather it is a communally fashioned and fashioning form of life, a spiritually and culturally creative form of life which results in proclamation, spiritual communication and interpersonal love, which is perceptible both internally and externally in various forms of communal life.

It has been precisely Reformed theology which has concentrated time and again on these realistic and public aspects of faith. In contrast to modern religiosity, which has excluded or at least repressed this dimension of interactive, publicly shaped and publicly shaping faith, Reformed theology should bring these central themes into the current ecumenical discussion as well. As examples of these central themes I will name here simply:

- Reformed theology’s particular like for covenantal theology;
- Reformed theology’s stress that God’s law must not be caricatured; that we must differentiate between the law which “is holy, just and good”, and the law “under the power of sin”;
- Reformed theologians stress that justification and sanctification belong together.

Such genuinely Reformed themes and concerns oppose modernistic faith’s fatal reduction to an internal relationship with a ‘Wholly Other’—a reduction which actually leads to quenching the faith. These themes work against a general tendency of modernity to consign the tasks of faith to secular morality.

The Reformers saw clearly that a living faith necessitates a great commitment to education. They clearly said that we need both faith knowledge and faith formation, and that all people must have a part in this communication of faith. When they were confronted with the objection: “Why do we need a German translation of the Bible? The people can’t read anyway!”, their response was the demand for and support of a general school system. The reformation was also an education movement, and this great general education movement is not the least of the blessings of the Reformation. That is something that we today must rediscover and learn to imitate. We must regain from the Reformers the search for clear knowledge of God, the search for clear knowledge of self in light of the knowledge of God, and the search for clear knowledge of the world in light of the knowledge of God and self. Reformed theology and piety should once again provide an example in this area. The connections of faith and experience, faith and critical realism, faith and personal growth, and faith and the unfolding of community must become central themes once more. The embarrassment of not being able to speak about faith because it has been completely emptied and reduced to an internal immediate certainty must be seen as a destruction of faith, not as its highest intensification. Such a renewal must begin with the insight that the *sola fide* cannot and must not be cut off from the *solus Christus* and the *sola scriptura*. Faith does not come as an empty religious form, it comes with Christ, as he is attested by sacred scripture.

4. *Sola gratia*

Christ alone, scripture alone, by faith alone—on the basis of these programmatic formulae, the Reformation and the Reformed faith achieved their form and their powerful influence. On this basis, the Reformation began its immense work of enlightenment and education, with the establishment of schools, with catechisms, pamphlets, sermons and devotional texts, as well as with university reforms and changes in theological education. For centuries it was precisely Protestantism, precisely Reformed theology, that was a leading force in education, a force with great culturally creative influence.

But in many areas of the world today, we see that the content-based faith and the education-oriented influence of the Reformers and of Reformed theology is barely still recognisable in late-modern Protestantism, especially in the classical large confessions in the Western industrialised nations. Large parts of Protestantism appear to have grown accustomed to the decline of religious education to the point of religious speechlessness, to the point of religious illiteracy. What is worse is that they even contribute to this fateful development by systematically emptying the faith and rendering it banal.⁷ My colleague Ingolf Dalferth entitled his inaugural lecture at the University of Zurich “I Define What God Is! Theology in the Age of ‘Cafeteria-Religion.’”⁸ Once faith is separated from its content and from its objective ground, the internal ‘Wholly Other’ can be specified almost at will. All kinds of good feelings as well as all kinds of mixed-up and bizarre feelings become engaged for religious purposes. Every little flower, every drop of water, every veil dance and every sand dune can have religious meaning imposed upon it: What does ‘the Good Lord’ want to say to us through this?

This self-banalization even creeps into religious education. One entire religious education programme of a German province can be summed up in the formula ‘Be nice to each other’! A flat, dull and unrealistic effort at harmony takes the place of serious religious orientation.⁹ What is lost here is the critical engagement of religion and faith against the forces and powers which work precisely against harmony among human beings and the rest of creation. What is lost here is faith’s recognition that our morals alone will not protect us against ideological threats and other menaces to communal life. The way is blocked to the recognition that the faith experiences in the biblical texts and books, developed over centuries and millennia, give access to the living God, who is more than a mere idea or religious feeling. Religion becomes diffuse and confused. Religion becomes kitsch. Today in the classical, large churches of the Western industrialised nations and information societies, we suffer greatly from this diffused, muddled and kitschy religion. It practically drives educated people out of the churches and gives even those who are less educated the feeling that somewhere and somehow they have been cheated out of what is important and decisive.

This self-banalization of religion goes hand in hand with an affliction which particularly creeps into those societies which are increasingly dominated by electronic media. It goes hand in hand with the loss of cultural and canonical memory. Cultural memory is a particular form of communal, communicative memory. Whether they want to or not, all human communities form a communal memory. Great events, catastrophes, and radical changes determine and guide our communal remembrance and, on this foundation, our experience and expectation. This communicative, communal memory is alive: it is constantly being refashioned. Yet particular occurrences and experiences ‘stick’ in this communicative memory and form a ‘cultural memory’.

For example, when we think of Hitler’s seizure of power, we do not merely think of that event itself. Rather we recall simultaneously that millions of people were systematically robbed of their freedom and their lives, that oppression and unspeakable suffering fell upon them. We recall a rule of lies and violence both internally and externally. We learn from these events, or at least try to, by directing our memory toward certain central events that ought to become practically or indeed wholly impossible to lose from our activities of remembrance, experience and expectation.

The formation and cultivation of cultural memory presupposes an intensive, shared experience of history. And it is precisely this which becomes questionable in societies in which a dominant form of shared communication, namely mass-media communication, continually focuses human beings anew upon ‘today and tomorrow’. This often hectic, constantly renewed process of focusing and refocusing no longer allows the past to become a truly ‘communally inhabited’ area. Of course the media, in their ceaseless efforts constantly to attract more attention, also offer up a succession of past events. But from ancient Egypt to last week’s scandal, the entire past is placed on one level which assimilates all experience. The media cool the communal memory and corrode cultural memory. In doing so, they partly perform something good, insofar as they work against emotionalizing the remembrance of history. On the other hand, they erode and devastate important forms of communal life.

The classical churches of the Western industrialised nations have yet to find any good answer to this challenge of self-banalization through the erosion or sheer destruction of cultural memory. While leading politicians like former German president Roman Herzog recognised that—especially in this age of the media—education must become a ‘mega-theme’ for our whole society, the churches have been content simply to “go through the motions” in educating students in knowledge of the faith. The curricula of religious education programmes are just one example among many. While committed parents and young people in many parishes are still offering a solid Sunday School programme for the 4 to 8 year-olds—as a rule with astonishing success—in many places, one seeks in vain for a corresponding programme for the 9 to 14 year-olds, which generally requires a competence beyond what parents can provide. The important time before confirmation training is simply left hanging. If we look at the programmes of some leading church academies, we find plenty of wonderful offerings on such important themes as “Wilderness Lying at the Front Door”, “Well-Being for Body and Soul”, “Radio and Knowledge”, “Cotton: Our White Gold”, “Getting a Grip on Your Time”, “Football is King”, “Virtual Communities”, and so on. Theological themes and the central contents of

the faith hardly come up at all any more.

Self-emptying and self-banalization—of course we find a lot of individuals working against these trends: committed Christians, many committed parish pastors, teachers of religious education. Yet that this is a structural problem has only been recognised by a few in our societies addicted to amusement and entertainment. The great task of our age is to win back a sense for the joy and earnestness, depth and orienting power of the contents of faith—that is of course if we do not simply want to accept the process of erosion occurring within the large churches. An example of what this might mean in concrete terms would be, in the different situations and circumstances of our lives, to win back and regain an understanding of at least one of the great words and themes of the faith per year. For this we need careful and competent advice from parish pastors, teachers, leaders and those in positions of responsibility with a theological education. But we also require concentrated discussion on these topics with those people who have become unaccustomed to or become estranged from church and faith, with those people who must daily face other themes, other topics and other logics than those of the faith.

Yet in itself the diagnosis of self-secularization and self-banalization is not enough. We need, above all, a constructive new orientation. A constructive new orientation, though, must grasp the connection of the *sola fide* and the *sola gratia*, without reducing this connection to an empty inner reference to a 'wholly other'.

Faith is a gift of God, but one that needs to be cultivated. In faith, God offers us a bridge, a bridge that does not require a leap into the unknown. God offers us a bridge which brings with it the great power and liveliness of the risen and exalted Christ, as well as God's creativity and the abundant gifts of the Spirit. Faith, which as Paul told the Galatians, has 'come with Jesus Christ', draws us into a life full of richness. As an individual and communal life-form in the light of God's beneficent activity, faith gives us a share in the life of Christ. Faith allows us to have a share in those good powers which even in the greatest affliction enable us to live "wonderfully sheltered", as Bonhoeffer so rightly put it. Faith gives us a share in God's compassion and justice, in God's love and passion for the good. Protestantism in general and Reformed theology in particular must again come to a clear understanding of what it means to be counted worthy of having a share in the good power and good gifts of the Spirit, as Paul also says. This understanding cannot be left to the charismatic movements and churches who, with the grace of God mediated by the Holy Spirit, are better able to get off the dime than the large classical confessions.

We must realise that the different gifts of the Spirit and of the faith work in different ways in different people and in different spheres of social pluralism. God's grace does not come to us as a uniform relation of dependence. It comes with the wealth of the Holy Spirit, with the Spirit's 'outpouring' and good gifts.¹⁰ God's grace takes form not only in the church, but also in the family, in politics, in education, in the law and in other spheres of life. The Protestantism and Reformed theology of the future must learn to rediscover, name and cultivate this pluralistic structure of the gifts of the Spirit, and to do this based upon the contents of the faith. God's grace comes to us in faith, with many formative possibilities in social, societal and cultural pluralism. If the Protestantism and the Reformed piety of the future want to reconnect to their Reformation roots, if they want to rediscover the powers which will unleash a great freedom movement and a great movement of cultural creativity, then they have to take seriously, once again, the interrelations of the *sola gratia* with the *sola fide*, the *solus Christus* and the *sola scriptura*.

Reformed theology and piety have always stressed very strongly the grace-bearing activity of God and the salvific acts of God in history. Today they should help us recognise the *sola gratia* as the gift of a realistic faith which, wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit, is capable of testimony and dialogue at both the personal and the public level. They should elaborate this faith with the help of the *solus Christus* and the *sola scriptura*. They should elaborate this faith in concentration upon the Holy Spirit and the law of God as fundamental forms in which God's grace comes to us. The good law desires to steer us towards justice, mercy and the knowledge of God. Yet the good law is corrupted under the power of sin. That is why we need the salvific grace of God and the power of the Spirit. The Spirit sets us back on the road in search of justice, mercy and the knowledge of God. The Spirit not only frees us, not only saves us from imprisonment to the powers of sin. The Spirit also lifts us up. The Spirit lifts us up to share in the life of Christ, to share in the divine life. Preservation, liberation and uplifting are all works of God's creative power. We must see these works both in a differentiated way and in their interconnection if we really want to understand the *sola gratia*. Faith with its rich contents—the faith that bears witness to God's lordship among creatures—must be elaborated with regard to God's works of preservation, deliverance and uplifting.

In its history within the ecumenical discussion, Reformed theology has repeatedly stressed the major themes of God's law and God's Spirit. Today as well—under altered societal and epistemic conditions—Reformed theology must awaken and strengthen concentration on God's grace in God's law and God's Spirit. It is with regard to God's law and God's Spirit that Reformed theology can and must elaborate how we are to understand the grace of God. In this way Reformed theology can make an immensely important contribution. It can contribute to our rediscovering, regaining, and to the best of our abilities testifying to and preserving a realistic, Christian faith in a pluralistic environment.

¹ Cf. M. Welker and D. Willis, *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), Introduction: "Toward the Future of Reformed Theology," ix ff; M. Welker, *Kirche im Pluralismus* (2nd ed. Gütersloh: Kaiser, 2000).

² G. W. Alston and M. Welker, *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

³ K. Barth, "Reformierte Lehre, ihr Wesen und ihre Aufgabe," in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (2nd ed. Munich: Kaiser 1925) 179ff, 193ff.

⁴ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 43ff.

⁵ See M. Welker, *What Happens in the Holy Communion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), and T. Peters, R. Russell, M. Welker (eds.), *The Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁶ M. Welker, "Kirche als Leib Christi—Was heißt das?", in *Kirche im Pluralismus*, 104ff.

⁷ See M. Welker, "Selbst-Säkularisierung und Selbst-Banalisierung: Verfallen die christlichen Kirchen im 21. Jahrhundert?" *Brennpunkt Gemeinde* 1 (2001).

⁸ In: *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 121 (1996), 415-430.

⁹ H. Schmidt and H. Rupp (eds.), *Lebensorientierung oder Verharmlosung? Theologische Kritik der Lehrplanentwicklung im Religionsunterricht* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 2001).

¹⁰ Cf. M. Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

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