

TOWARD THE FUTURE OF REFORMED THEOLOGY

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Originally this volume was supposed to bear the title *The Future of Reformed Theology*. It was supposed to contain articles by Reformed theologians from throughout the world. There was no problem getting theologians from the United States and Germany to agree to contribute an article. But in other regions of the world our repeated requests for a text on traditions, themes or tasks of Reformed theology were often in vain. Finally it became clear that this volume could not represent the entire spectrum of contemporary Reformed theology. This volume continues to reflect, more strongly than we wish, the predominance of the academic theology of the German and English speaking countries in Europe and North America. It is also limited in its concentration on systematic and ethical contributions. Thus we ended up with the title *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*.

The title is meant to express the fact that this volume seeks to document a development that has already begun and to which this volume would like to contribute. This volume seeks to promote, within an ecumenical framework, the development of a Reformed theology to which men and women creatively contribute out of the most diverse cultural, historical and social contexts. Despite the difficulties in procuring texts from a number of countries, this volume shows that it is already possible for Reformed theology to have an ecumenically responsible community of inquiry, research, exchange and understanding in which women and men, younger and older theologians from many nations of this earth take part. To this extent this volume is a major step toward this emerging reality. About one third of the articles contradict, simply by virtue of their authors, the still common prejudice that Reformed theology is essentially a theology by and for white European and North American men. Above all, though, the themes, the contents, the styles of thought and the prophetic perspectives gathered here contradict numerous prejudices frequently directed toward Reformed theology. We were astonished and delighted to see that contemporary Reformed theology presents itself with a scope, a richness of theological orientations and styles of thought, and an ecumenical openness that can serve as models for all the churches of this earth. At the same time, by no means are the distinctive contours and coherence of Reformed theology lost in this scope, in this richness, and in the corresponding differentiation and complexity. The following introductory reflections seek to draw attention to these distinctive

contours and to the coherence of contemporary Reformed theology.

The Theology of the Church Reformed According to God's Word

A. The Illuminating and Liberating Power of God's Word. Against Emptying It of Its Content and Domesticating Its Structure

The contributions to this volume are in agreement that the truly reforming activity in the life of the church can not simply be the enterprise of a particular generation of theologians and of their theology or theologies. Reformed theology is characterized by the fundamental recognition that the reforming activity in the church and in its surroundings proceeds from God's word.

Today it is difficult to articulate and communicate this fundamental recognition without reserve. In many cases "the word of God" is regarded as merely either a vague cliché or a cipher that masks all sorts of claims to control and domination. Theology can work against this view only by resisting the temptation to empty God's word of its content, and by reawakening a delight in the content, fullness, clarity and specific rationality of God's word. It becomes possible to know the clarity, fullness and content of God's word, its revelatory and liberating power, only when it is not reduced to a mere principle or displaced to a transcendent "beyond." The ecumenical contribution of Reformed theology lies in its calmly, persistently, critically and constructively resisting the many attempts to empty God's word of its content and to bring it under the dominion of metaphysics, morality, mysticism, or the dictatorship of a "spirit of the age."

The contributions to this volume document this Reformed theological "service to God's word" in the midst of the contemporary crisis of trust in this word, and in the midst of the various forces interested in domesticating it and emptying it of its content. Several articles demonstrate programmatically that it is a task of Reformed theology to make the trusting, critical and constructive service to God's word a "theological posture," and to mediate this "theological posture." (In an exemplary way see esp. Brian Gerrish, "Tradition in the Modern World: The Reformed Habit of Mind".) Other articles spell out in concrete detail that

Reformed theology must verify this "theological posture" by relating self-critically and innovatively to its own forms, traditions and "classic" works. (For an exemplary case, see Daniel Migliore, "Reforming the Theology and Practice of Baptism: The Challenge of Karl Barth".)

B. The Theological Art of Discernment in Biblical and Eschatological Concentration

The articles gathered in this volume do not dissipate themselves in laments and speculations on why many cultures in our day no longer trust that God's word holds any power of revelation and renewal. They work against the widespread confusion between "critique" and discouraging "lament over the state of the world". They attempt to restore theological critique to a place of honor as an "oriented art of discernment". Several of the articles show that today a biblical and an eschatological concentration are again necessary in order to unleash the illuminating and creative reforming power of God's word (Jürgen Moltmann, "Theologia Reformata et Semper Reformanda").

Today we need a new biblical-theological orientation in order to recognize interconnections of both contents and forms that make it possible to distinguish clearly the word of God from a mere principle controlling everything or from a numinous entity. After the theologies that directed attention to the "wholly other" word of God that comes to us "straight down from above" or that "always precedes us and always comes to us", we need to be instructed in the biblical-theological recognition that God's word has something clear and definite to say in the realm of our experience of self and world. We need to recognize that God's word--in the midst of complicated, often even desperate states of the world and of life--possesses power that is really illuminating, liberating, uplifting and creative. God's word edifies, comforts, lifts up, enlivens, delights, strengthens and liberates human beings. God's word mediates orientation, certainty and new hope to human beings. And for millennia, this word in its revelatory power has over and over become fundamentally and concretely knowable (see Willem Balke, "Revelation and Experience in Calvin"). Several of the contributions to this volume make clear the way in which Reformed theology justifies and verifies its basic trust in the midst of the contemporary situation. The revelatory power of God's word is brought to light with respect to the biblical traditions in such a way that the christological and

pneumatological determinacy of God's word, and its dual form as "law and gospel," become clear (Michael Welker, "Travail and Mission: Theology Reformed According to God's Word at the Beginning of the Third Millennium").

While some contributions to this volume attempt to construct and expand bridges between systematic and exegetical theology, others elaborate more strongly the link between systematic and socio-ethical work. In the knowledge that, now as long ago, God's word announces the coming of God's reign, they take seriously the power of this word for ecclesiastical practice, for ethical orientation, and for real liberation. They show that this efficacy of God's word can be brought to expression theologically in the most diverse realms of life (John De Gruchy, "Toward a Reformed Theology of Liberation: A Retrieval of Reformed Symbols in the Struggle for Justice"; Nancy Duff, "Reformed Theology and Medical Ethics: Death, Vocation and the Suspension of Life-Support").

C. Ecumenically Verified Truth, Biblical Orientation, and Contextuality

Reformed theology and the church that it serves give ecumenically responsible testimony in all the processes of their life--from doxology in worship to concrete ethical practice--to the revelatory power and the creative activity of God's word. Both the testimony and the ecumenical responsibility can and must acquire greater clarity (Janos Pasztor, "The Catholicity of Reformed Theology"). This ecumenical responsibility is not exhausted by a contemporary and global-political orientation. Instead it takes up the question of truth and the readiness to warrant truth-claims in the sphere of the churches of every time and every region of the world (David Willis, "The Ecumenical Future of Reformed Theology"; Thomas Torrance, "The Substance of Faith").

At the same time, Reformed theology verifies its ecumenical responsibility by orienting itself biblically and eschatologically so as to gain a hearing for the creative and re-creative power of God's word and for its call to continual repentance and reformation (Beatriz Melano, "Potential Contributions of Reformed Theology to Ecumenical Discussion and Praxis").

By exposing itself to the renewing power of this word, and by testifying to that power, the

service to God's word in ecumenical responsibility will find its ecumenical breadth expressed in the biblical textuality of this word and in the contextuality of this word's activity. Many of the contributions to this volume demonstrate that this tension, which in the past has certainly generated numerous conflicts--including within Reformed theology--can be constructively sustained (Choan Seng Song, "Christian Theology: Toward an Asian Reconstruction"; Nobuo Watanabe, "Reformed Theology in East and West"; Wafiq Wahba, "The Ecumenical Responsibility of Reformed Theology: The Case of Egypt"; Lukas Vischer, "The Church - Mother of the Faithful"; Eberhard Busch, "The Closeness of the Distant: Reformed Confessions after 1945").

The relation between the church and Israel remains paradigmatic for the fact that difference in contexts and in those contexts' approach to the biblical tradition is fruitful. The relation between the church and Israel remains paradigmatic for differentiated complementarity, and must be continually renewed in its paradigmatic function. On the basis of its pneumatological orientation and its orientation to the whole of the Bible, Reformed theology has been able to address repeatedly and constructively the community of the church and Israel in eschatological hope. Today as well, Reformed theology can draw from the biblical traditions and from shared eschatological orientation to contribute to the renewal and revitalization of that community (Hans-Joachim Kraus, "The Contemporary Relevance of Calvin's Theology").

D. Creative Pluralism instead of Relativism; Discerning the Spirits; Culture of the Offices of Ministry

If God's word is not conceived as a mere principle or *numinosum*, if its rich biblical constitution and its vital christological specificity are taken seriously, if the fact is taken seriously that the word is mediated by the outpoured Spirit and by the gifts of testimony in the many-membered body of Christ, then the "pluriformity" of Reformed theology and of the Reformed church can be newly valued, treasured, and correspondingly shaped (Edmund Za Bik, "The Challenge to Reformed Theology: A Perspective from Myanmar"). We can also come today to a new recognition that, or to what extent, Reformed theology and the Reformed church in their differentiation and multiformity are defined not simply by this or that

development of the world, but by God's word and its activity (Amy Plantinga-Pauw, "The Future of Reformed Theology: Some Lessons from Jonathan Edwards").

Reformed theology can not add its voice either to the widespread, clumsy and powerless polemic against "pluralism," or to a vague enthusiasm for postmodern "diversity". Instead it must contribute to clear distinctions between the creative "pluralism of the Spirit" and a disintegrative relativism. It must contribute to clear distinctions between the creative differentiation of the body of Christ and vague notions of "multiformity". Here the way is indicated by reflections on a new culture of "the offices of ministry" in the church and by efforts to develop a clear and more profound understanding of "the covenant" (Christian Link, "The *notae ecclesiae*: A Reformed Perspective"; Walter Herrenbrück, "Presbytery and Leadership in the Church").

E. Reformed Theology as a Power Shaping Modern Societies: The Necessity of Self-Criticism and of Creative Renewal in the Crisis of Abstract Bourgeois Theism

For centuries Reformed theology has over and over again looked back with justifiable pride at its own tradition¹, which more than any other theological tradition must be counted among the major formative powers of modern democratic societies (Hans Helmut Eßer, "The Contemporary Relevance of Calvin's Social Ethics"; Jan Milic Lochman, "Radical and Reformed: The Ecumenical Contribution of the Czech Reformation"; John Hesselink, "Some Distinctive Contributions of the Dutch-American Reformed Tradition").

Today this pride has to a large extent given way to an often diffuse consciousness of necessary self-criticism and of the longing for renewal. It is only in a new focus on God's word that this nebulous consciousness can attain clarity and lead to the renewal of religious practice. The knowledge of God's living word and of its reforming power has great consequences not only with regard to the constitution and expressions of Christ's church in the ecumenical sphere and in global society. The knowledge of God's word also necessitates

¹ See also the Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology, vol. 1, Classical Beginnings, 1519-1799, ed. William Stacy Johnson and John H. Leith, and vol. 2, Contemporary Trajectories, 1799 to the Present, ed. George W. Stroup (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1993); Donald K. McKim, ed., Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

exemplary theological self-criticism with regard to God. From K. Barth and E. Brunner to J. Moltmann, B. Melano and J. W. De Gruchy, Reformed theologians of this century have called into question the unholy alliance between the classical church bodies and abstract bourgeois theism. Reformed theology must continue to render problematic the religious tendency--including its own!--to seek the help of a dualistic metaphysics in bringing to expression the sovereignty and glory of God, rather than honoring them in concentration on God's word and its revelatory power. Reformed theology must grow more emphatic in rendering this religious tendency problematic, and it must do so in Christology, pneumatology, theology of creation, and biblical theology (William Placher, "The Vulnerability of God"; Sang Hyun Lee, "Jonathan Edwards' Dispositional Conception of the Trinity: A Resource for Contemporary Reformed Theology"; Alexander McKelway, "The Logic of Faith").

One of the ways in which Reformed theology has taken up this challenge is by taking part in the theological re-evaluation of Anselm's theology of satisfaction. With the help of recent exegesis, Reformed theology has called Anselm's doctrine into question. Reformed thought has begun to investigate the biblical foundations of this theology of atonement, which has left a profound but highly problematic "normative trace" in Reformed theology from Calvin's Institutes to the Heidelberg Catechism. Reformed thought has begun to correct this theology, even when this leads to calling familiar "dogmatic resources" deeply into question (Leanne Van Dyk, "Toward a New Typology of Reformed Doctrines of Atonement").

While the critique of abstract bourgeois theism and of the classical doctrine of satisfaction is still an unsettling factor in theology and the church, as a rule the attendant effects on Christology are experienced as liberating. Why? Several contributions to this volume show that in the realm of Reformed theology, Christology--which is well-developed relative to the theologies of the first and third articles of the creed--makes possible a fruitful mediation between positions that are initially very different or even in conflict. It is obvious that where a certain degree of theological clarity (not reductionistic clarity, but a realistic clarity that exposes itself to the vitality of God's word and corresponds to the complexity of the object of faith!) has been attained, it is also possible both to understand and to interact calmly with heterogeneous theological traditions and positions (Dawn De Vries, "The Incarnation and the Sacramental Word: Calvin's and Schleiermacher's Sermons on Luke 2"; Bruce McCormack, "The Sum of the Gospel: The Doctrine of Election in the Theologies of Alexander Schweizer

and Karl Barth").

All this supports the argument that it pays great dividends in theological content when theology engages God's word in all its richness and vitality. We are led "from clarity to clarity" not by our reductions, abstractions and constructions--even though they might receive the applause of common sense or of a culture's currently predominant philosophy or "general theory"--but by the inner coherence and illuminating power of God's word. We need to gain access to its often foreign rationalities. If theology and the church expose themselves to the foreignness and intrinsic clarity of God's word, they acquire the capacity for an "eschatological realism" that does not need to shy away from critical engagement with all sorts of distorting, obscuring, self-important and short-lived rationalities and plausibilities of the "wisdom of this world" (John Leith, "Calvin's Theological Realism and the Lasting Influence of His Theology").

What is to be gained by engaging in this service to God's word?--A theological realism that is challenged by its context and instructed by the Bible, a theological realism that is in for the long haul and that adopts a truly ecumenical long-range perspective and tolerance. The vitality and multiformity of Reformed theology is sometimes confusing, and the decidedly ecumenical fundamental orientation of Reformed theology appears risky to some. But where Reformed theology entrusts itself to that theological realism, it can affirm and verify its vitality and multiformity, as well as its ecumenical orientation. Where Reformed theology wishes to be and to remain a theology of God's word, it grows into this eschatological realism.

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