

# THE FUTURE OF REFORMED CHURCHES IN SOUTH AFRICA

## Some Random Notes and Reflections\*

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### 1. Introduction

I have always tried to follow developments within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) with close attention. This has been helped by the fact that I have good friends within the DRC. Of course, today the DRC is no longer as newsworthy as it once was. For most people the acronym DRC refers to the Democratic Republic of the Congo! It was quite different during the Koot Vorster era when I worked for the South African Council of Churches and first came to the University of Cape Town, or before that when I was a minister in a congregation in a suburb outside Durban in the nineteen-sixties. I recall how I used to watch the deacons and elders going to the monthly meeting of the local DRC *kerkraad*. Numbered amongst them were all the significant leaders in the community. It was impressive! In those days the DRC was very powerful.

Assuming that we cannot return to those times, what then is the future of the DRC? I myself was often very critical of the DRC, but my criticism was bound up with respect for some of its more prophetic leaders and the many committed people I knew. So it was a 'love-hate relationship'. But one of the things that irritated me about the DRC was the sense I often got from its leaders at that time that they represented the whole of the Reformed tradition in South Africa. That was not true then, and it is not true now. Which is why I insist that the future of the reformed Churches is far more than the future of the DRC. The DRC is a part of a greater family of Churches. Reformed also covers much more than South Africa; we must understand it in terms of a world-wide horizon. From this perspective it is a multi-ethnic and in many respects a very diverse family. But even in South Africa, it includes much more than the DRC, including at least but also not only churches such as the Presbyterian and Congregational, all members of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Of course, it is true that during the apartheid period we were rather reluctant to use the name 'Reformed' because of its association with the DRC!

But in the thinking about the future of Reformed churches in South Africa, let us at start with the DRC as such and let me say straight out that its union with the Uniting Reformed Church is essential. That is both theologically and biblically required. But it is also the only way whereby the DRC can really be transformed. I myself belong to the United Congregational Church (UCCSA), of which more than 90% are coloured and black members. The white membership of the UCCSA is, in many respects, not unlike the membership of the DRC even though we are predominantly English speaking and more liberal in some respects. But there was a great deal of racism amongst us, maybe not blatant but certainly paternalistic. At the same time at certain levels there was interaction between the different racial and ethnic groups. Our children, for example, went to integrated youth camps. And regional councils and synods were racially mixed. So our church context was

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\* Closing address at the Symposium of the DRC: *Present Challenges in the Light of the Past*. Stellenbosch 9.3. 2001.

different in this respect to the DRC. All of which meant that we had greater opportunity to meet with, learn from, and eventually accept the leadership of our black colleagues. Looking back, that was a precious gift even though many white members did not appreciate it at the time. And it was this that made it possible and often forced us white Congregationalists to be different as a church with respect to apartheid.

As I have said, the DRC was such a large and powerful church that it really did not have much understanding of this rich variety. It was too busy keeping its own boundaries intact and too concerned about its own interests to really take much notice of other Reformed perspectives or enter into a meaningful relationship. Of course, for the rest of us it was necessary to know about the DRC because of its role in South Africa. In thinking about the future of the Reformed family in South Africa we therefore need to learn from each other even as we acknowledge that there are disagreements about what it means to be 'Reformed'. Some time ago I wrote a book entitled *Liberating reformed Theology* based on the Warfield Lectures I gave at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1991. In it I described some of the different traditions within the Reformed family and what it means for some of us to be Reformed.

How enriching it is when we begin to learn how to hold these differences together and begin to see them as complementary rather than conflictual, though of course there are times when the boundary lines have to be drawn over matters of principle. How ironic it was that the DRC in its desire to remain pure and undefiled as the Reformed Church, actually found itself declared heretical by the rest of the family! But in our new situation there is now the possibility for us all to learn from each other, to be enriched by the other, and thus to become a genuine family of churches even if there remain differences. Quite frankly, I think this is essential if the DRC is to really become part of the new South Africa, and it is a necessary step in building on unity with the Uniting Reformed Churches – the *sine qua non* of transformation for the DRC.

## 2. Dealing with the Past

Johann Baptist Metz has reminded us that 'the crisis in Christianity today is not primarily a crisis of the content of faith and its promises, but a crisis of subjects and institutions which do not measure up to the demands made by faith.'<sup>1</sup> The problem with Christianity, as many people outside and inside the church indicate, is not Christ; it lies with those of us who proclaim Christ. I recall going on a delegation of English-speaking church leaders to see PW Botha in 1980 when he was State President. We had been delegated to raise with him the need to get rid of the Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act. After listening to him for a lengthy period giving us his version of South African history, with much finger wagging and sycophantic support from his cabinet colleagues, we were told that the real problem was the churches, not the National Party government. If we could persuade the DRC to change its stance on these two Acts, he would certainly support such changes! And that is what in fact happened.

It is not possible or necessary to detail here all the things that have been wrong with the Reformed churches in general in the past, or with the DRC in particular. The association of the DRC with apartheid is well documented and widely known, and being Reformed was often regarded as giving legitimacy to apartheid. But for the past ten years things have begun to change, and there has developed a new sense of Reformed family solidarity and an acceptance of mutual responsibility for the failures of the past. Certainly the DRC cannot be held responsible alone for apartheid. In pointing out the mote in the eyes of the DRC we

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1. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, New York: Seabury Press, 1980, p. 76

have often been guilty of not seeing the plank in our own eyes! But we are all guilty in one way or another. We are all guilty, for example, of patriarchalism, black and white together. But dealing with this does not mean that males should now abnegate responsibility any more than dealing with the apartheid past means that whites should withdraw and become uninvolved in trying to bring about a more just society and a truly reconciled nation. Somehow as a Reformed family we have to deal with the past as a family in order for us to have a future together.

### 3. What does it mean to be Reformed?

As I argue in *Liberating Reformed Theology*, John Calvin was a Catholic scholar who rediscovered the Scriptures in much the same way as Latin American Catholic liberation theologians have done more recently. Of course, the contexts and issues were somewhat different. Nonetheless, if we approach the origins of the Reformed tradition from this perspective creative possibilities emerge for its contemporary renewal and for the church as a whole. As I put it in *Liberating Reformed Theology*

The creative and liberating possibilities latent within the central symbols or loci of Reformed theology are of vital importance not just for the Reformed tradition but also for the church as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

Let us then consider some of the key elements in the tradition that help us to do this and address some of the issues facing us as a family.

#### *The Authority of Scripture*

The Scriptures witness to the gospel that sets us free for life today. That is why Scripture is so fundamental to the Reformed (and other) tradition. So the question of hermeneutics becomes very important. But the Scriptures are not a straightjacket, they must be allowed to speak freely. There is an ongoing struggle about how this can and should happen; how to prevent the Bible from becoming controlled by other interests. To speak of 'Scripture alone' really means allowing Scripture to speak to us freely without being ideologically restrained or controlled. Hence Calvin's use of the historical critical method and other tools of renaissance scholarship in his struggle against Roman hegemony. And this, too, was precisely what Karl Barth was concerned about in his struggle with a liberalism that had supported the German war effort in 1914 and later in the church struggle against Nazism.

Unfortunately Barth was not really allowed to have much impact within the DRC. Even BB Keet, whose critique of apartheid was so seminal and pioneering, and who was positive about Barth in many respects, criticised his position on Scripture. I recall him doing so during his address in 1957 when the Theological Seminary at Stellenbosch celebrated its centenary. The DRC, Keet argued, could not follow Barth at this point. I think that was a mistake for that is precisely what the DRC needed in order to break out of the stranglehold of the ideological control of Scripture! As a result we now speak of the need for the DRC to overcome the legacy of its hermeneutical deficit. Not that Barth said the last word on the subject, but what he did do was to break open possibilities that enabled the Bible to speak afresh.

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2. John W de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, p. 39.

*A World-affirming and prophetic faith*

The reign of God encompasses the world as a whole. We must not separate reality into self-contained spheres, whether through an 'orders of creation' theology or eschatologically, though the latter does provide a focal point for Reformed theology. To recognise the world as belong to God and under God's lordship is fundamental. Not only does this break down any false dichotomy between the church and the political realm, but it also provides the basis for a critique of idolatry, not least human greed. The Reformed tradition demands a critique of all idols and therefore should welcome those social prophets in its midst, even those who are irritants on its boundaries. The DRC had several such prophets during the apartheid era, not least BB Keet and Beyers Naude.

I recall being in the home of Johann Degenaar on one occasion when Keet came to visit. He was visibly angry with the editor of the *Die Kerkbode*, Andries Treurnicht, for the way in which Treurnicht had attacked him for raising critical questions about apartheid and the DRC's support for the National Party. Keet's passionate response was Reformed theology in action! Reformed Christianity needs to develop a public theology related to the tasks facing South Africa today. Calvinism has been one of the major tributaries in the development of democracy in the Western world, both in terms of its more liberal and more radical forms. Reformed public theology should be playing a much greater role in influencing democratic transformation. We need to hold fast to a vision of God transforming the world, the hope of shalom, as that which energizes and transforms us, and provides us with the basis for our prophetic witness. We need a vision of the world that makes us truly reformers and not just reformed.

*Grace: Not a principle but as call to discipleship*

On one occasion Dr JD Vorster asked the Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, Robert Selby Taylor, about the Confessional documents of the Anglican Church. Vorster referred to those of the DRC: the Heidelberg Catechism, and so forth, and wanted to know what the equivalents were for Anglicans. The question had, of course, an edge to it because Vorster was trying to suggest that the DRC regarded the Anglicans as theologically woolly! Selby-Taylor replied: 'Our confession of faith is in the Prayer Book!' In other words, theology was not a matter of dogmatic principles used to test the orthodoxy of priests, but a matter of doxology, of prayer and worship. There is a real danger in some Reformed churches that we turn grace into a principle rather than, as Bonhoeffer insisted, regarding it as a call to discipleship and a source of life.

This does not mean that dogma correctly understood is not important, or that we should not be theologically serious, but we must surely not abuse it as so often has happened in rational Reformed and Lutheran orthodoxy. In turning dogma into principles of orthodoxy rather than expressions of doxology we run the danger of reducing the life of the church to a cold and rational experience. There is no future for Reformed churches along that path. No wonder then that many people leave for the charismatic and Pentecostal churches.

*The contextuality of the Reformed tradition*

The Reformed tradition has always taken particular historical contexts very seriously. Hence, in comparison with the Lutheran churches, there has been a plethora of confessions each of which has been rooted in a particular time and place. But this can become problematic when we reduce the Reformed tradition to ethnic communities. I believe it is theologically problematic to speak of the Dutch Reformed Church, or the 'Hungarian' Reformed Church *et. al.* It is better to speak of the Reformed Church in Holland, or Hungary, or South Africa. This avoids the confusion of the church with national identity or

ethnicity. At the same time, the Reformed tradition is highly contextual, and has always been so. It has taken different forms and shapes in different historical epochs and situations. This is of great significance particularly as we seek to understand today what it means to be both Reformed and African. So in stressing contextuality we must avoid turning the church into an ethnic ghetto. That is a denial of the Reformed tradition.

### *Reformed as ecumenical and catholic*

Reformed Christians have always been found amongst the leadership of the ecumenical movement. Visser't Hooft and Eugene Carson Blake are obviously amongst the more eminent as both served as General Secretary's of the World Council of Churches, but there are many, many others as well. During the apartheid era, the DRC was very scared of the ecumenical movement. One reason for this was, I suggest, a fear of 'the other' and the possibility that contact with 'the other' would mean change. But the Reformed tradition in its better moments has always been ecumenically open, affirming its belonging to the Catholic Church and not being some kind of sectarian movement. This is why it is of fundamental importance for the future of the Reformed churches in South Africa that we affirm our membership in the World Alliance, in the World Council of Churches, and other ecumenical communities even if there is some disagreement at times.

### *The importance of the congregation*

Calvin was a lay theologian, and the laity or *laos*, has always had a key role in the life of the church as well as in its structures of leadership. Likewise, the emphasis has always been on the congregation rather than on any superstructure, though synods have also been important as the means whereby congregations are linked together within the church as a whole. But how that relationship between congregations and synods is worked out in practice is of great importance for the Reformed tradition. Sometimes synods are in advance of congregations, and sometimes it is the other way round. We have to find a way of the two not playing against each other causing congregations to block renewal, or vice versa. For Reformed churches to remain Reformed they must be in an ongoing process of reformation. This requires the training and empowerment of the laity at a congregational level, and also overcoming any tendency towards clericalisation.

### *Dissent and nonconformity*

Although not the dominant trajectory in the Reformed tradition, non-conformity and dissent (as for example amongst Congregationlists or the Huguenots) have been significant in shaping the character of the tradition. The problem is that sometimes, the DRC is a case in point, Reformed churches become so aligned with the status quo, so much part of the power bloc, that they no longer tolerate dissent whether in their own ranks or in the broader society. But the Reformation itself was such a movement! This is also important if Reformed churches are going to rightly play their role within democratic transformation in southern Africa.

### *Christian Humanism*

As I understand him, Calvin was a Christian humanist, and his legacy of scholarship has been an essential part of the Reformed tradition. Such scholarship is not narrowly theological but encompasses all branches of knowledge and culture. It is important that this dimension of the Reformed tradition be not squandered but rather developed and enriched through interaction with the cultural and intellectual life of our emerging nation. I fear

however, that there is a decline in Reformed scholarship today that bodes ill for the future. Where are the Reformed theologians and biblical scholars, the church historians and practical theologians? Certainly not in any great abundance! But even more, where are the Reformed scholars in the other disciplines that are so fundamental to the shaping of cultural values and critique? The future of Reformed churches is not dependent on, but neither is it conceivable without such committed scholarship.

#### **4. The Renewal of Reformed churches in South Africa**

Now let me briefly refer to a few other matters that need attention in speaking about the renewal and hence the future of Reformed churches in South Africa.

##### *Overcoming the Middle-class trap*

Reformed Christianity has traditionally been middle-class, the religious epitome of *embourgeoisment*. This has resulted in an inability to reach the poor, at least, for example, in the way that Pentecostals and Indigenous churches are now doing. This is obviously a key issue facing us, whether black or white Reformed Christians in South Africa today, faced as we are by the need to over the huge gap between rich and poor.

##### *Avoiding the ghetto: overcoming cynicism*

There is a danger that the DRC as well as other Reformed churches, because of our minority status, will tend to turn inwards and develop our own ghettos. Or else we begin to find ways of escaping, even leaving the country. Contrary to a theology in which the orders of creation pre-determine the way in which Christian relates to the world, we have to recover the eschatological, namely that we live in expectation and anticipation of what God is and can do. I recall talking to pastors in Hong Kong some years before the inclusion of the colony into main land China. Some of them were already anticipating the worst and setting up churches and buying property in North America or Australia so that their whole congregations could emigrate! They did not see the need to stay and be a Christian presence under the new order. Sometimes, of course, like the Huguenots, Christians might have to flee, but that is always under extraordinary circumstances. Reformed Christianity is often more true to itself when it goes 'against the stream' of its cultural context, taking risks in being conformed to Christ rather than culture.

##### *Multi-cultural challenge*

This does not mean, however, that Reformed Christianity is unrelated to culture or that it is insensitive to the multi-cultural contexts on which we live today around the world and also in South Africa. I have already referred to the need for Reformed Christianity to become more truly African in the same way as it became Dutch, or French, or Scottish, but without become an ethnic, culturally conditioned faith. What needs to be said in addition regarding our multi-cultural global context is that we should not fall prey to the media and popular hysteria about other faiths, especially about Islam. Yes, of course, Islam has its radical elements that all of us fear, but then so has Christianity especially if we look back in time even within our own context. It has often been said that South Africa was conquered by the Bible and the gun! We need to respect other faiths and seek ways to engage them in dialogue, but without trying to dominate or control that dialogue.

*Liturgical renewal and the recovery of the aesthetic*

Just as some refer to an 'hermeneutical deficit' in the DRC during apartheid, I suggest that there is a 'liturgical deficit' within Reformed Christianity that has serious consequences for the life and worship of the church. We tend to reduce worship to a means of education, so that even the Lord's Supper becomes didactic instead of celebrative! We need to recover the use and value of all the senses God has given us to praise and worship, including the visual. Indeed, the Reformed tradition is what we might call 'aesthetically challenged'. We often have little aesthetic sensibility in our church architecture, music, use of art and so forth.

This also affects the way in which we celebrate the sacraments and is indicative of the fact that we have yet to really appreciate what 'sacramental life', namely a spirituality that is embodied. So the rediscovery of the aesthetic dimension is, I suggest, fundamental to the renewal of the Reformed tradition. In a remarkable letter from prison to his friend Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to this need. He asks whether the church can become again, as at the height of the Middle Ages, a sphere of freedom in which art, formation, culture, play can become possible. I have dealt with this in detail in my recent book *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, especially chapter four. We can learn a great deal here from certain developments within the Pentecostal movement where dance and other forms of art have been reintegrated into worship. This is also, I believe, a major point of contact with African forms of Christianity.