

Reformation and Transformation today: Essentials of Reformation Tradition for Public Witness of Churches and Transformation of Society as seen from the perspectives of the South.

1. At the heart of the reformation was the intent to reform, revive and renew the church. Basic for the understanding of ecumenism is that the Reformers did not intend to found a new church but sought reform of the whole church. In their minds the church was not standing up to the realities of its time in confronting financial corruption, sexual immorality and political power. Reformers such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others called for the 'reawakening' of the Church to address these issues. In so doing they did not hesitate to point out the inadequacies and corruption of the church which impacted on its life, work, witness and theology. Thus the 16th century Protestant Reformation was an attempt to reform and transform both church and society. The Reformation embraced a number of quite distinct, yet overlapping, areas of human activity: the reform of both the morals and structures of church and society, new approaches to political issues, shifts in economics thinking, the renewal of Christian spirituality, and the reform of Christian doctrine (McGrath 2012).
2. In our day and age the Christian church is faced with similar challenges and much more as we deal with corruption, political turmoil, poverty, economic injustice, climate change, sexual immorality, secularization, racism, spiritual apathy, religious factions, violence, the abuse against children and women, migration, refugees, human trafficking, etc. All of these call for a strengthened public witness as we seek to bring about the transformation of church, society and the world.
3. In Reformed theology, we affirm our focus, for example, on the sovereignty of God, covenantal theology, the priesthood of all believers, *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, etc. How do these essentials of the reformation hold true for us today in living out our faith and transforming society? This paper attempts to briefly explore some of the essential theological principles of the Reformation and assess its relevance for today in the light of new realities, encounters and theological developments. It pays particular attention to the realities of the Global South, mainly Africa, and shows how these can form a basis for renewal and transformation of Reformed theology and practice.

Sola Scriptura

4. At the heart of the Reformation was the quest to return to the Bible. The Reformation saw a new importance being attached to Scripture – or, perhaps, an ancient view of the importance of Scripture being recovered. The idea of *sola scriptura*, "by Scripture alone," became one of the great slogans of the reformers as they sought to bring the practices and beliefs of the church back into line with those of the Golden Age of Christianity. According to McGrath (2012), if the doctrine of justification by faith alone was the material principle of the Reformation, the principle of *sola scriptura* was its formal principle. If the reformers dethroned the pope, they enthroned Scripture.
5. Mainstream reformers had no difficulty with the notion of a "traditional interpretation" of the Bible. In fact they advocated that they were not attempting to start a new church but were seeking to reform and renew Christianity, which implied affirming continuity with the

great historic tradition of Christian faith, stretching back through the patristic era to the apostles themselves.

6. For example, Calvin asserted that the institutions and regulations of both church and state were required to be grounded in Scripture. Zwingli stated that “the foundation of our religion is the written word, the Scriptures of God.” Heinrich Bullinger stated that the authority of Scripture was absolute and autonomous: “Because it is the Word of God, the holy biblical Scripture has adequate standing and credibility in itself and of itself.” Such views indicate the consistently high view of Scripture adopted by the reformers. It represents a major point of continuity with medieval theology.
7. The difference between the reformers and medieval theology at this point concerns how Scripture is *defined* and *interpreted*, rather than the *status* that it is given. It is this interpretation of Scripture in a changing world that becomes a crucial element for renewal and transformation. It is a stark reminder that the Reformation can not only be discussed in terms of its ecclesial meaning but also in its relation to culture as a whole. The issue of context and biblical interpretation becomes a serious matter of importance.
8. The Bible is a central document of western civilization, not only as the source of Christian ideas but also as an influence upon education and culture. Today this is being seriously challenged as we question the ‘hermeneutical lens’ we tend to use in interpreting Scripture. Further, the critical question is “Who is interpreting Scripture and for whom?”
9. Gerald West (2009), speaking into the South African context, makes the point that the Bible has always been at the centre of the liberation struggle even though it has been categorised as a tool of oppression. For example, it was used as the tool to build an apartheid South Africa but equally it was used as the key text of the struggling masses in South Africa for liberation and justice.
10. It is important to note that the ideological equation of the Bible with the Word of God has been seriously challenged by many scholars. Tinyiko Maluleke (1996), for example, states the following: “I propose that the equation of the Bible with the ‘Word of God’ is not only naïve but it is a dangerous form of naïveté. Furthermore, I propose that this equation has been and will continue to be more debilitating for Black African theologies than any of the dangers highlighted by Bediako, Sanneh, and Mugambi (1995) combined. The equation of colonialism with Christianity if and where it has occurred, has done far less harm to Black and African theologies than the equation of the Bible with the Word of God.”
11. The above points establish the need for Reformed theology to seek renewal and transformation in the area of further understanding *sola scriptura*, the focus is not only on *what* the interpretation is but, more significantly, on *who* is interpreting. The Reformed faith has the obligation of protecting the text from being co-opted by the powerful and the elite and, thereby, giving vent and expression to the ‘voice’ of the poor, marginalised and oppressed masses. How do the latter groups inform biblical interpretation? How can this become a source for renewal and transformation? In the context of the Global South critical biblical interpretation and application of scripture has become the norm. Whilst Reformed theology and tradition has taught us to do this, contextual realities aligned to the quest for justice and peace has taken it even further. The rise of Liberation, Black and African theologies has help shed new light on biblical interpretation and understanding today. This has, undoubtedly, impacted on Public Theology and witness.

Sola Fide

12. Essential to the Reformation is the doctrine of justification by faith alone: *Sola Fide*. The theme of “redemption through Christ” is central throughout the New Testament, Christian worship and Christian Theology. The term “soteriology” is used in Christian theology to communicate the images which describe the redemption achieved through the death and resurrection of Christ. McGrath (2012) points out that there are five broad components to this network of ideas: Images of victory, Images of a changed legal status, Images of changed personal relationships, Images of liberation and Images of restoration to wholeness. All of these images, no doubt, describe renewal and transformation.
13. It is not my intention here to get stuck in the theological debates of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith. My point of entry into this discussion is to mention that this doctrine provides for us a solid theological undergirding for renewal and transformation. The redemption of Christ through the cross and resurrection provides the basis for renewal and transformation. It is through this act that God in Christ makes all things new. Luther’s focus on the *teologia crucis* makes this point abundantly clear.
14. The new theological emphasis on individual faith also contributed to the growing influence of the new individualistic philosophy. The basic tenet of Protestantism was the doctrine that human beings were justified by faith rather than by works. Each person had to search his or her own heart to discover if acts stemmed from a pure heart and faith in God.
15. Unfortunately, the new theological focus on individual faith was to strongly influence the economic views of the new middle-class artisans and small merchants. Such people felt quite genuinely and strongly that their economic practices, though they might conflict with the traditional law of the old church, were not offensive to God. On the contrary: they glorified God.
16. The new doctrines stressed the necessity of doing well at one’s earthly calling as the best way to please God, and emphasised diligence and hard work. These doctrines subsequently led to the spiritualising of economic processes and the belief that “God instituted the market and exchange.” This emphasis, however, sadly took the Christian focus away from the general concern for the community and the obligation to the poor. It gave acceptance to the liberal paradigm: poverty as backwardness, stressing that the poor should be enabled to reach their full potential.
17. Although this view on poverty has been seriously debated and challenged over the years, we still need to assess how the Reformation relates to imperial capitalism and to the male means-end rationality in science, technology and individualistic calculating mentality? (Duchrow 2015). How does this view of *sola fide* stand in need of renewal and reformation is a question we must continue to engage, especially when it is used to support economic systems that oppresses others.

Sovereignty of God

18. John Calvin’s theology took the believer’s responsibility in the world more seriously than Luther. His view on the *sovereignty of God* gave rise to the idea of mission as “extending the reign of Christ” both by inward spiritual renewal of individuals and by transforming the face

of the earth through filling it with “the knowledge of the Lord”. This particular view led Calvin into bringing about social transformation in Geneva.

19. It stressed the point of *covenantal theology* and laboured the fact that God covenants with all human beings and they are part of the human chain. Calvin employed the traditional organic metaphor for society (as found in Acts 2: 42ff), in which, as he wrote, no member has “power for itself nor applies it to its own private use, but each pours it out to the fellow members”; what chiefly matters is ‘the common advantage of the whole body’ (Inst., 111, vii, 5). Occasionally he identified this community with the whole human race. “All people,” he could maintain, “are bound together as a sacred chain ... [which] ...should be embraced in one feeling of love” (Commentary Acts 13:36; Inst., 11, viii, 55).
20. Consequently, it is not surprising that Calvin, like Luther, showed a particular concern for the poor which resulted in his attempt to transform his society, especially in Geneva. He concerned himself with the issues of commerce and economic justice. His theology was not disembodied, divorced from the realities of life where labourers and employers are often at odds over economic matters. Calvin realised that because of the nature of humanity and the sinfulness of all of our institutions, our endeavours are to some extent motivated by self-interest, pride, and greed. Yet his is a “world-affirming theology” in the sense that he sought to apply the gospel to all of life. For him, that meant seeking the guidance of scripture for the problems besetting humanity, particularly those besetting the citizens of Geneva. In this sense Calvin advocates what could be described as Public Theology and witness.
21. Thus Calvin as a theologian and pastor became involved in everyday matters as diverse as the high cost of dying, hospitals, sumptuary laws, and the regulation of business and industry and the question of wages. Calvin and Farel instituted the first free public education for both sexes. Beyond the welfare system and education the work of Calvin and the pastors reached out to suggestions for railings to protect children on stairs and balconies. Fires and chimneys were regulated and efforts were made to clean the town and for street repair. Regulation of prices for the necessities of life was an accepted principle of the early reformation in Geneva. Some today may not agree with or approve of Calvin's stands, but they must admit that he regarded no area as too secular to be of legitimate Christian concern. The Reformers generally advocated an involvement with the world. However, unlike the Middle Ages, they went a step further to attempt to transform society (Pillay 2002).
22. For example, Luther formulated new social policies to deal with major economic and social change. Luther and his colleague Karlstadt made provision in Wittenberg for the city council to provide low-interest loans for workers; subsidies for education and training for the children of poor; taxes to support the poor- all designed to prevent as well as alleviate poverty. In five years they changed the theory and practice of poor relief which had been established by centuries of ecclesiastical tradition. They were convinced that fundamental human rights of equality, freedom and brotherly love had their source in the Christian faith. However, Luther also believed that this task of social change was essentially a task for the secular ruler and kingdom to carry out. This was the birth of the two “kingdoms” theory. Luther introduced two authorities (i.e. “kingdoms”): spiritual and civil justice and order. Both are ordained by God as forces to combat the empire of Satan. Christians are subject to both authorities; first, however, to the spiritual authority and because they are subject to both

authorities, Christians cannot live exclusively in either the spiritual “kingdom” or the civil “kingdom”. This theory strengthened the separation of state and church. Although Calvin drew a distinction between state and church, he believed that the function of the state was to serve the divine purpose of God.

23. Given the dynamics of a world in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and the numbers of people living in poverty and hunger continues to increase, it is important for Reformed theology to make a clear commitment of standing with the poor and oppressed in the world. We need to shift from a ‘widow-dressing’ theological approach to an in-depth involvement with the plight of the poor. We need to ask whether our theological positions are life-enhancing and life-affirming; do they follow the Bible in socio-historic precision, in essence, do they contribute to liberation and justice?
24. For Allan Boesak the issue of justice is crucial; it is part and parcel to the Christian Gospel. In fact, it is the declaration of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Whenever Christians speak out and act against injustice, inequality and the dehumanization of the human being, they serve as the ambassadors and servants of Christ. Boesak singles out the *Belhar* Confession in this respect where it states “ in a world filled with injustice and enmity God in a special way is the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged... that the church as God’s possession is called to stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged.” Boesak points out that this Confession helps us to, first, *stand up* (and be counted) for the poor and the destitute, and second, to stand where God stands. Not just in front of, in protection, but alongside, in solidarity of struggle. Not in mere sympathy but in *identification with*. The church must do that not because it is obsessed with the poor, but as the possession of God, in Whom its grounds of being, its identity is found” (2005:200).
25. In this sense, we need to explore what Reformed churches can contribute to alleviating suffering and to transforming our societies. God created this world and wants to preserve the world until it comes through its end to its future in a “new heaven and a new earth”. It is God’s will that human life be a life in communion, peace and justice. Boesak certainly understands this and he has constantly pleaded for this deep integration of unity, justice and peace.
26. In addition, we need to reflect on the Reformation and its historical impact in view of the global threat to *humanity and the Earth* – both positively and negatively. We are living in difficult times as we experience climate change and witness the devastation of the earth. Reformed theology must awaken to a renewed sense of responding to our given realities and focus on the need of ‘caring for the earth.’
27. The Accra Confession (2004) is a significant attempt in focusing theology on ‘covenanting and caring for the earth’. It has outlined and prophetically engaged the issues of economic justice, gender justice and eco-justice. It has rightfully pointed us to these matters and prompted us to respond to the unjust realities of life. It also offers a critique on the Empire and explores its damaging effects in the globalized world. Boesak has offered valuable theological reflection on Empire and establishes that the Christian church today is facing “a new Rome.” (Boesak & Hansen 2009:59-72). Consequently, he states that the church is called to resist all these new forms of idolatry for they have moral, political, economic and theological consequences. Boesak has unceasingly offered a solid critique on the concept of power from a justice perspective.

Reformed Spirituality

28. This also impacts on our understanding of *Reformed spirituality*. Spirituality is the pattern by which we shape our lives in response to our experiences of God as a very real presence in and around us (Rice 1991). To be spiritual is to take seriously our consciousness of God's presence and to live in such a way that the presence of God is central in all that we do. Such spirituality turns to the world not away from it. It gives attention to the threats of life and embraces the need for justice.
29. Reformed spirituality is geared towards equipping life-giving transformative engagement in the world. It is a spirituality that is built in community and builds community. Thus, any piety that appears to be content with a personal relationship with Jesus, and which shuns or belittles the horizontal dimension of discipleship, is suspect. Any spirituality that advocates a withdrawal from what is going on in the world is contrary to Christ's spirit. This is precisely what the reformers have taught us.
30. Allan Boesak, no doubt, was a great proponent of this view of connecting faith and spirituality with the transformation of society. For him, it was clear that Jesus Christ is Lord of all areas of life and this conviction undergirded his theological labour and his personal piety (Koopman in Dibeela *et al* 2014:36). Hence, for Boesak, Jesus and Politics was not a strange combination but a necessary one if we are to truly live out the gospel and declare the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It was this firm belief that enabled him to put his own life at risk by opposing apartheid, and struggling against injustice and dehumanization. His book *Comfort and Protest* (1987) recounts and reflects his prophetic calling and ministry in these areas.
31. This concept of spirituality aligns well with the African concept of *Ubuntu* which says that "I am because of you. I belong therefore I am." This concept of community is what shapes spirituality and life. For the African life is not compartmentalised but integrated into a holistic experience in which culture, politics, economics, religion and the earth is all deeply interconnected. Spirituality is not divorced from the realities of life. This essential teaching of the Reformation has a great sense of resonance within the African context. It is thus expected that public theology and witness should be an accepted responsibility of the Christian church. Unlike the western world where secularisation seems to be the growing influence, in the Global South spirituality is still seen as an integral part of life. It is thus not surprising that the Global South is or becoming the new centre of Christianity.

Sola Gratia

32. At the centre of Reformed theology is the message of *sola gratia*. It reminds us that grace alone is the source and sustenance of our salvation. God's provision of saving, sustaining and glorifying grace is the golden thread uniting all Christian scripture and enabling all Christian faithfulness. This means all works honouring God – including our personal sanctification, our love for neighbours and enemies, our zeal for world mission, our free offer of the Gospel, our warnings of judgement, our promises of eternity, our mercy toward the poor and oppressed, our stewardship of God's world, our battles against Satan, our prayer for God's blessing, and our work toward Christ's coming – all find proper motivation and enablement in love for Christ. Of course, this can be misused to use grace to excuse sin, but the principles of grace revealed in all Scripture are the fuel of personal holiness and spiritual revival for those led by the Spirit.

33. Thus, presenting the doctrines of grace in a warm and embracing way is not to obscure holy boldness but to encourage compassion and humility in the face of God's sovereign mercy to all he loves from every tribe, language, people and nation. As the kindness of God has led to repentance and renewal among us, we must be committed to a manner and ministry that reflects God's grace to others (cf. Rom.2:4; 1Pet.3:15). We must be on guard that the grace message that God has brought to us (or our particular expression of it) does not become a jewel that we admire and adore for the joy it brings us rather than for the hope it offers the world.
34. The critical question is: "How do we understand this concept of grace in the light of the new emerging world experiences impinging on the role of women in society, issues of human sexuality, religious intolerance and violence, racism, xenophobia, tribalism, the refugee situation, etc. How do we express grace and hospitality to differing views, theological beliefs and human experiences? All of these impress upon us the need for renewal and transformation as we seek to build inclusive communities and foster better relationships with people of other faiths. These are realities that Reformed theology and public witness would have to deal with, and it is these that would hopefully bring theological renewal and transformation.
35. How does the concept of grace foster Christian unity rather than perpetuate divisions? The Reformed understanding of grace is an essential teaching that should enable us to cross boundaries and barriers of cultural, racial, economic and religious divides. This is precisely what is needed to face the current realities of the world. Grace is an essential principle for Public Theology and witness today.

Conclusion

36. Whilst Reformed theology and tradition may have the same substance of faith and belief, as expressed in the 16th century Reformation, it does not mean that it has the exact same impact in different contexts. Hence what are needed today as a sign of renewal and transformation is a contextual reading, re-reading and adaptation of Reformed teachings and beliefs.
37. For example, in Africa we need to ask what value and significance the Reformed faith can have in the context of poverty, religious violence, civil factions, political instability and dictatorship. How do these realities impact on the understanding and development of Reformed theology and tradition today?
38. Added to this is the issue of globalisation which has impacted on economic, political, cultural and religious spheres of society. These changes have many consequences. Migration, whether forced or voluntary, changes in family structures, economic, ecological and social pressures have encouraged mobility which has created multiple social and religious identities. We have seen this impact on Europe especially in the past year. The resurgence of racism and ethnic and religious violence in Africa, USA and across the globe is generating real cause for concern and the de-stability of peace. These new realities are changing the world, churches and the way we 'do' theology today. It is changing the landscape of Public Theology and ecumenical discourse. How can the renewal and transformation of Reformed theology help us with creating a world with harmony and *Shalom*? Perhaps we need to put the *Belhar Confession* back on the table to provide the (Reformed) theological foundation to uphold human dignity, equality, justice, unity and reconciliation. It is documents such as this

from the Global South that will help us to understand, appreciate and appropriate reformation and transformation today. The context and contributions from the Global South can be a basis for a second reformation today.

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