Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity
Ideas for the 21st Century

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Cross-Boundary Faith: 
The Universal and the Contextual

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Two Christian challenges arise in conversations across national and cultural boundaries. The first is the challenge of discerning what is common to our Christian faith across all cultural and national boundaries, and what aspects of our faith-understanding are, or should be, shaped by the various contexts in which we live and work. What are universal aspects of the gospel and what are contextual aspects? The second challenge, related to the first, is the challenge of listening rather than taking positions. Listening requires taking on a spirit of hospitality rather than a spirit of defensiveness. This listening is necessary for discernment.

The conference “Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity” provided a rare opportunity for sharing and listening across one of the major divides in the world and the church—the contextual divide between those who stand in places of economic power and those who stand in positions of extreme vulnerability. This context frames interpretations of events in the world and thus requires careful listening across borders. The common faith of those attending the conference provided a basis for this careful listening. And in that listening, participants found that their congregations and the Christian communities across the world share many common challenges.

THE GOSPEL: UNIVERSAL AND CONTEXTUAL

Inherent in translating our understanding across borders is the challenge of discerning the boundary between the universal elements of the gospel and those that must be contextualized. A Reformed theology affirms both
the diversity of individuals but also the diversity of communities—the collective—as reflecting the image of God. This affirmation of diverse cultures, not just individuals, as a creative good sets the Reformed tradition apart from many other Christian traditions. A Reformed reading of Scripture affirms the plurality of cultures as part of God’s work in the world. Humans reflect the image of God through their role as culture makers, to use the words of Andy Crouch. Reformed theology, which takes the concept of covenant seriously, has developed a particularly strong theological tradition in terms of its understanding of the role of social structures, cultural expressions that go beyond the individual human. A Reformed theology sees all of life being rooted in a fundamental religious grounding, from economics to politics, from family life to business.

Richard Mouw described this positive image of cultural plurality in his reference to the work of Kosuke Koyama in his book *Water Buffalo Theology*. We read the message of the gospel through particular contexts. We cannot, nor should we, desire to rise above culture. Our understanding of life is “sandwiched” between the Bible and culture, to use Mouw’s words. Yet, while each cultural group develops a unique aspect of the divine image, each culture also reflects the fall. We all fall short of God’s ultimate wishes for us. While the culture-making role is universal and life affirming, each culture has both its light and dark sides. Thus our Christian calling is to be discerning in our acceptance of culture, and we are also called to be transformers of culture so that it aligns more closely with the gospel. H. Richard Niebuhr identifies this transformational vision as particularly tied to a Reformed world and life view.

It is not easy to discern the boundary between life-affirming aspects of cultural plurality and cultural elements that need to be transformed. Where is the line between syncretism and contextualization? In one case study at the conference, we were presented with a case from Java where Psalter hymns, when translated, used Hindu, Islamic, and Hebrew words for God, but tunes associated with other religious traditions were eliminated. What was behind this judgment? And was it a judgment that understood context at a deep level, or was it a judgment that was imposed from the outside? To walk the line between discerning elements of culture that are life affirming and those that are not, we struggle between two aspects of John Calvin’s legacy that are held in tension, according to Richard Mouw. We hold on to order and orthodoxy on the one hand, yet also to the Holy Spirit, who always surprises us with his flexibility, paradox, and mystery. In this tension we remain embedded in the faith while being grounded in context. This grounding allows us to be relevant participants in God’s work wherever we are.

Saved to Engage Our Present Reality

A prominent theme throughout the conference was the need to move from conversion to obedience. A Reformed understanding of salvation emphasizes that we have been saved for something! We are called to make a difference and take an engaged stance in addressing issues in society. This represents the move from universal theological understanding of identity as children of God to the contextual discernment of how this becomes operational in a particular context. This engagement is shaped by the Reformed worldview that sees all of life as religious. Economics cannot be separated from Christian life. The creation is part of the Christian life. The Christian transforming mission involves economic issues, environmental care, missions, and spirituality.

One of the great strengths of John Calvin was his willingness to engage the realities of the world while upholding the authority of Scripture. Calvin was willing to wrestle with the world as well as the Word. In doing this he held two sets of tensions in healthy balance. First, he argued a theological position that was both vertical (humans’ relations with God) and horizontal (humans’ relations with others and with the creation) in its orientation. Second, he argued for a theology that required the faithful to be utterly realistic in their engagement in the world, yet utterly hopeful in the knowledge of God’s victory over death, anticipating the fullness of the coming kingdom of God. For example, a Reformed perspective sees governmental structures, or the political, as needed due to sin, on the negative side; but on the positive side, political activity is a reflection of humanity’s social nature—the horizontal, relational aspect of our being made in God’s image. Kuyper argued that even without sin there still would be political life in some order. We are horizontal beings.

This strong valuing of the development of both critique and involvement in shaping human institutions leads to a strong internal locus of control. As historian Fred Graham pointed out, John Calvin moved politics out of its previous state, where the common person was a passive non-participant. The valuing of public life and institutions led to the common person learning habits of managing affairs that allowed them to engage society rather than withdraw.

The theological basis for engagement in society and the transformational vision in all spheres of life was widespread at the conference. For example, in a discussion on congregations and social services, the common theme of theology supporting engagement was evident. Several quotes from around the world illustrate the common perspective of Reformed Christians:
As Reformed Christians, we have a bigger reason why we do social services. And the basis for our reason in the Reformed community is that God has revealed Himself as a God of creation. He has appointed us as stewards of creation and stewards of revelation. Therefore, mission then, is doing what God intends to do for the creation.

The abstract sounds word nice but if they don’t have legs on them, if they don’t walk and talk and get into equipping the saints and the future saints, we’re left, being noisy gongs.

We’ve discovered that the gospel is not just standing on the pulpit and talking, the gospel is words that are followed by action.

The goal, motivation, and purpose of the engagement should be different from those in many other religions. For example, from a Buddhist point of view, doing good is tied to gaining merits: the focus is on the benefit to the doer of the good deeds rather than the transformation of the environment and society to bring these in line with God’s will for wholeness. Does our engagement, informed by our theology, truly look different? Are we motivated by our gratitude for God’s grace to respond out of obedience?

**OUR MISSION IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS**

Presenters at the conference asked us to continually question ourselves, individually and collectively, What does God want from me, from the church, and from society? The answer to that question is shaped by context, which allows for both faithfulness and an element of pragmatism. Are Christians in the majority or minority? Are you and the church in a place of power or a place of powerlessness? Does the nation-state allow for faithful engagement in the political process, or is it captured by special interests and thus does not speak for the powerless? How powerful is the state in the context of the global power structure? Have institutions been weakened by their powerlessness and a history of colonization?

The societal context of the church impacts not only its approach to engagement in society but also the particular issues of that place and society. For example, the African church cannot ignore the challenges of AIDS and its impact on extended families. Churches that exist in countries that have experienced violence face the challenge of the immediate needs of widows to support families. So unemployment across the world takes different forms and requires different approaches. Then in other places, congregations must focus on the rights and welfare of victims of human rights violations, including their own pastors and lay leaders. As one participant stated, “The congregation speaks as an advocate of those who are not able to speak. They try to provide some encouragement for those who are being victimized by their own self-inflicted fear as perpetrated by the political and military condition.”

Perhaps the biggest challenge the Christian church faces in contextualizing the answers to these questions is individual and cultural biases. If our particular worldviews do not allow us to transcend our culture, and in fact our tradition affirms the goodness of a variety of cultural expressions, then each culture and individual risks being biased and seeing issues principally through their own cultural lenses. This bias can lead a particular group to err on the side of orthodoxy and order, telling other culture groups that their views are wrong, implying that they misunderstand their own contexts. In these cases biases keep those of one perspective from listening and learning from others. As a result, we all experience a limitation in our understanding of both God’s work in the world and also the meaning of our obedience. This is why listening is essential if the church worldwide is to discern the line between the universal nature of the gospel and its contextual expressions. The image of the body of Christ applies to a variety of cultural expressions and experiences as well as individual talents and perspectives. We cannot fulfill God’s desires for ourselves without engaging with others who bring different experiences. We clearly need the whole worldwide church, with all its contexts, to be able to discern the darkness within our own cultures and to understand the fullness of God’s work in the world.

At the conference the Accra Confession discussions brought out this need to listen to each other. The theme of the Accra Confession is “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth.” Like all confessions, it was written in a context, and it went through a consultative process within the church to discern the work of the Spirit in the discussions surrounding it. Many church bodies have found that the Accra Confession speaks powerfully into their lives. These congregations are primarily found in the context of regions of the world that experience high poverty rates and where more than twenty percent of the population receive less than twelve hundred calories a day.

The confession addresses the contemporary issues of environmental destruction and the establishment of an unjust economic system that is backed by political and military powers and that retains no social obligations to the common good. It asks all to confess our complicity in this economic system and the misuse of creation. It goes on to ask us to covenant together in faith, to work for justice in the economic system, and to honor the earth for all communities across the world.
Of particular focus in the Accra Confession is the globalization of the free market and its impacts on the environment and the poor of the world. The language of “empire” is used briefly in this confession, but it appears more extensively in the responses from parts of the world to the confession and in the session of the conference. This use of the term refers to a relationship where one power (whether economic, political, or social) effectively controls others. Thus, the Accra Confession reflects the voice of those who feel powerless, in places where cultural and social systems reinforce the experience of colonialism and lead to the use of free markets that benefit the few. It resonates with their experience of power being found in systems that privilege a small group with a great chasm existing between the governing structures and community, resulting in little accountability. Reflections on this confession in the churches of Africa and Asia have led faith communities to covenant for justice regarding people and the environment. The confession has called for engagement with the world rather than withdrawal. It has led to actions of healing and hospitality, in which congregations emphasize taking care of and receiving the other.

The difficulty in translating this powerful message across boundaries is that the language of empire and the criticism of the global free market do not resonate with the more developed parts of the world, particularly Europe and North America. The perspective from these parts of the world is that, in fact, government structures do regulate the market to ensure it serves the interests of people. Debates over the common good are public debates, and government regulation of the market and financial systems are ongoing, ranging from less to more regulation depending on the decade. Environmental regulation is also part of the public debate that is ongoing. A strong civil society also contributes to accountability around these issues. Because no unregulated free market exists in the West, the issues of wealth and poverty are seen to be much more complex than the Accra Confession portrays them to be.

Like all confessions, the Accra Confession speaks out of a particular context. Perhaps we would do better to listen and learn about contexts and perspectives rather than focus on the use of particular terms that elicit different meanings and emotions across contexts. This approach might be more like a doctor who listens and asks questions in order to understand and identify relationships among symptoms. Jeffrey Sachs argues for this approach when working in the area of development. 

Common Challenges

Many themes that arose throughout the conference, across many cultural boundaries, raised common challenges facing all congregations. As different as the world is in different places, much is also the same. Reformed Christians, with their vision of societal transformation, face the challenge everywhere of diminishing governmental resources. This is true across the world, from North America to Africa. The church and nongovernmental organizations are increasingly being asked to fill the gap in the developed world as well as in the developing world. But limited resources and increasing need have increased the focus of the church—to its benefit—on empowerment rather than charity. The church is increasing its commitment to addressing root causes of problems. This takes various forms such as teaching crafts and trades in some parts of the world, or taking on an ongoing, sustainable ministry to a group of families. Rather than short-term, relief efforts, congregations and denominations are moving toward models of long-term, multi-faceted, and holistic partnership with
particular communities. These types of ministries transform all of those involved, and become acts of listening.

And there is a web off of this. . . . We want the people to be independent and self-reliant, because the more dependent people are, the more vulnerable they become to ills of society.

[It] affects everybody who is helping, and it becomes contagious because you're going at a deeper level, that's where Christ really is, at the deepest level of agony. Not the surface level, that's the symptom, and I think as a church, as a congregation, we have to not deal with the symptoms, we have to deal with the causes, and that takes time and effort.

So we encourage them to think about sustainability in such a way that no job is more important than the other. . . . [We encourage them to] build identity that can sustain them. . . . the image of the God. . . . So we have more or less a building self-concept.

These approaches are motivated not just by a lack of resources but by an understanding that God created the world for a purpose and with design, a vision of shalom that includes politics, economics, environment, and family life. God's people must develop deeper understandings of their faith commitments, the nature of the creation, and the depth of the fall, when they face the needs of society and also see the world as an intricate whole that needs to be restored. This depth when approaching societal transformation also reflects a desire of all to grow roots for the future. Participants expressed a deep desire for the church to have roots from which the next generation can draw nutrients. Sustainability, a theme that crossed topics and borders, went beyond the rich Reformed faith tradition to incorporate the role of humans as sustainers of the creation. Sustainability themes reflected a biblical notion of shalom built on a vision of right relationships between humans and the creation, among human communities, between humans and God, and between generations.

What skills are needed to sustain the church across generations, across borders, and across cultures? Here again, participants found much common ground. All faced increasing religious pluralism that requires congregations to develop new models of collaboration across broader boundaries, yet for the common good. Modern life touching all parts of the world has increased population migration and created a monetary economy. These characteristics of life create common challenges for the church in its efforts to both instill biblical virtues and engage people in a common life together. The dislocation of individuals from their communal ties has increased the need for congregations to be wise and discerning when individuals seek help. Congregations across the world face the challenge of showing God's love while being wise in providing resources that express that love. Facing modern life, they all need the tools of management and the social sciences to be effective in providing for the needs of the many who suffer. But the implementation of these management tools needs to be placed in meaningful dialogue with theology and spirituality, lest the whole mission of church be lost. In spite of our contextual differences, we are united by common challenges along with our common faith.

CONCLUSION

In reflecting on the experience of the conference, I am left with two suggestions or reminders when translating our faith across boundaries. First, we all must be radically honest with ourselves and God in relation to our own culture and society. To be less than honest and realistic is to distance ourselves from our own culpability. We must be utterly realistic about the present without blinking or turning away. Nearly all societal problems are a reflection of ourselves—of what we choose in our lifestyles, our culture, our outlook, our vision of life. Secondly, we must listen to each other with openness. We should consciously set aside the desire to draw boundaries and "lines in the sand," to divide ideas, experiences, and theological truth. As Andy Crouch says in Culture Making, our first response must not be to place blame on others. 2 These types of defensive postures justify us rather than leading to self-reflection and creative engagement with the whole of creation.

Listening is a spiritual discipline. The habit of listening leads to greater hospitality and postures that invite dialogue. Listening counters the effects of context that often divide congregants from different parts of the world, creating a barrier to a common understanding of how we are to engage society. Learning from one another through the practice of listening leads to wisdom and spiritual growth. Listening develops the skill of discernment, required to separate the universal tenants of the faith from contextual differences. Ultimately such cross-boundary encounters enrich our lives and our faith as we see God work in the shaping of the variety of cultures across the world.

NOTES

1 Andy Crouch, Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).


5Graham, The Constructive Revolutionary, 172.


8Crouch, Culture Making, 93.