Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity

Ideas for the 21st Century

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The Calvin Press • Calvin College
in association with
the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship
Grand Rapids, Michigan
Many of us who attended the conference “Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity” have ties to the Netherlands, either through heritage, colonization, or marriage. What are the Dutch known for aside from tulips and decent soccer? Most of the country is below sea level: kilometers and kilometers have been won from the sea through carefully engineered dikes and polders. Theirs is clearly a human-made country! We cannot but admire and wish to emulate their entrepreneurial drive and ingenuity. The Dutch have been masters at responding to God’s creational command: “Fill the earth and subdue it; rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1:28).

But in the celebration of human achievement and all the man- and woman-made wonders, there lies a seed of risk. From human-made we so easily move to self-made, and, like the builders of the tower of Babel, we strive to make a name for ourselves. We aspire to fashion ourselves into a self-ruled humanity, accountable to no one outside ourselves. From the Industrial Revolution to today’s space exploration, especially the Western world has lived under the mirage of unending scientific success and progress. Optimism has been the mark of the day. Our world is constantly new and improved. The world is developing. Drunk with humanity’s achievements, we believe the sky is our limit. Yet, if we are honest, we must admit that the byproducts of the so-called progress, of unrestrained production and exploitation of nature, are unrestrained consumption and exploitation of people. Ours has become a self-consuming society that feeds off and nurtures selfish individualism, plunders the planet, and engenders...
an unquenchable thirst for more. We are trained to strive for success at all costs, to climb over others to the lonely top, even if that means severing ties with family, community, and the rest of creation. In the cranking of the consumption machinery, life itself is lost.

Life is lost in this individualistic contemporary scene because, since we are made by and for community, full life is only possible within community. When God chose to mark humanity with God's image at creation, God rooted God's communal identity at the core of our being. Much as theologians through the years have attempted to describe God by means of abstract, individual, and absolute attributes, God's self-revelation makes God known as the Being-in-relation. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit interact in an ever-mutual love relationship that binds them together as one God. Father, Son, and Spirit respond to one another in love because God is love. This love is not some ethereal, unsubstantial, emotional state. It takes on concrete expression in a covenant of mutual submission, service, and unified action in God's world. We are made for community. We too are responsible, able to respond in love to one another. A full realization as human beings—abundant life—is found, not in reaching the highest individual achievement and the greatest independence, as our deadening consumer society would make us believe, but in being bound in love to God, to one another, and to the rest of creation. That love, again, is not some ethereal, unsubstantial emotional state that ebbs and flows with waves of convenience or desire, but a radical commitment of mutual submission, service, and unified action in God's world.

From the very beginning, the God-who-is-community has reached into human history to engage and reengage God's people in a life-giving covenant that provides the means for right relations between God and humans, among persons as a people, and between God's people and the rest of creation. When human pride, greed, and other sins break relationships and efface God's communal image in humankind, when no human-made solution can breathe life into the dry bones of our disintegrated society, God intervenes. From Adam and Eve in the garden, through Noah and Abraham, to the law and the prophets—which link worship of God rooted God's communal identity at the core of our being. Much as theologians through the years have attempted to describe God by means of abstract, individual, and absolute attributes, God's self-revelation makes God known as the Being-in-relation. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit interact in an ever-mutual love relationship that binds them together as one God. Father, Son, and Spirit respond to one another in love because God is love. This love is not some ethereal, unsubstantial, emotional state. It takes on concrete expression in a covenant of mutual submission, service, and unified action in God's world. We are made for community. We too are responsible, able to respond in love to one another. A full realization as human beings—abundant life—is found, not in reaching the highest individual achievement and the greatest independence, as our deadening consumer society would make us believe, but in being bound in love to God, to one another, and to the rest of creation. That love, again, is not some ethereal, unsubstantial emotional state that ebbs and flows with waves of convenience or desire, but a radical commitment of mutual submission, service, and unified action in God's world.

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fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Eph. 2:14–22)

Christ is our peace, the one who brings together that which was set apart: “Shalom, wholeness and well-being in all of our social, ecological, political, agricultural and economic relationships is rooted in a restored relationship with God.” It is only there where people are living together as one that God is present. Neither church buildings nor religious hierarchy nor doctrinal packages guarantee God’s presence. It is the gathering of God’s people that constitutes God’s temple; it is in the community itself that God makes God’s presence known through God’s Spirit. Conflict and barriers, prejudice and discrimination need not mark the new community created by grace. Because God is with us, because God is a community, and because we are designed for community, such wholeness, closeness, and reconciliation are possible. God-with-us creates covenantal community, and where there is community, God is with us.

Now, this coming together is not some mushy, sentimental affiliation or warm fuzzy that vanishes when the going gets rough. The Christian community “is a community in which the word of Christ dwells richly. A community that is shaped as a countercultural force through the subversive worship of a subversive Lord.” The presence of Christ’s word in the Christian community nurtures an alternative worldview from the one of the dominant culture. According to this renewed worldview, it is not the powers of the market that pull all the strings; it is not the stars of entertainment culture that call the shots; it is not the rich and powerful that make the world go around. Jesus is sovereign Lord over the global market, over all pop stars and over all worldly leaders. Only he is worthy of worship—no matter what the imperial decree or the ruling culture of the day may order.

This alternative Christian worldview is not merely academic knowledge, which could be reduced to categories and doctrinal concepts. In Scripture, worldview is cast in story, the story of God’s relationship with the covenant community. The Christian worldview, then, is incarnational knowledge, the fruit of a commitment to engage lovingly in others’ stories, as our Lord did. In words of José Alcántara, president of IAPCHE and conference speaker, we are especially called to engage with the stories of the most vulnerable and marginalized people of our world. The covenant community is called to make the radical choice for a hospitable inclusion that stands in challenging opposition to the class, ethnic, linguistic, gender categories in which our world slots people in order to discriminate against some and favor others. This choice for inclusion is possible because the members of this community are so fully aware of their personal sin and insufficiency, so aware of and grateful for God’s love, that they hold no grounds for haughty judgmentalism of others. Members of the covenant community recognize that they are sustained only by grace and not by religious appearance.

As a result the human mobility this community should promote is not the upward one, which reduces other people to rungs in a stepping ladder toward the top. The movement this community strives for is a descending one, modeled after the God who became human and experienced the darkest depths of scorn and death for love’s sake. The leadership bred in this community is not the self-seeking protagonism of stardom so common in the political, social, and even religious scene. Leadership is measured, rather, in terms of service and modeled after the Master who—contrary to all social and cultural expectations—washed his disciples’ feet.

The scope of influence of this covenantal community is not the narrow realm of internal church business. The agenda it pursues is nothing less than God’s all-encompassing reconciliation of all things through God’s Son. The entire world is its arena: things personal and socio-political, matters economic and ecological. In all realms, Christians are called to live as citizens of God’s kingdom and agents of God’s justice. In a world enslaved to the pagan gods of money and progress, the covenant community strives to unmask the spiritual powers behind them, claiming liberation in Christ from sin and idolatry. In the face of injustice and poverty, individual compassion is reflected as a Christlike attitude. But then the covenant community is called to move beyond faithfulness and compassion and to enter the real terrain of organizational and institutional life. People of the covenant ask not simply what each member can do individually but how we shape life together in our structures and communities. As Jim Skillen, director of the Center for Public Justice and conference speaker, puts it: “‘I’ questions are typically very small when it comes to the context in which people function. We need to ask ‘we’ questions.” God yearns to enroll his entire covenantal community together in the work of justice. A local church should necessarily ask, in words of Uko Zylstra, Calvin College professor and conference speaker, “Are we engaging in creational relationships of servanthood—in relation to one another—and of stewardship—in relation to creation?” In sum, in what ways are we giving evidence, as a body, of the already of the kingdom of God, as portrayed in Isaiah 65 and inaugurated in Jesus Christ: no more weeping, no more in-
fant mortality, no more disdain of older people, no more homelessness or slavery, no more hopelessness or destruction of creation? Do our church and educational programs engage God’s people with the whole gospel and encourage them to live it out in the whole world? Are we allowing equal voice to members of this community who differ from us and come from places other than the centers of power or from outside our ethnic, social class, or religious ghetto—to immigrants, foreigners, children, women, people with special needs? These and similar questions are ones the covenantal community in each local expression must grapple with if it desires to live here and now as the new humanity God has created in Christ.

The covenantal community is brought together by God’s grace, and it is purposed for mutual grace and as a light to the nations. Dare we allow the light of God’s love to penetrate even the most hidden corners of our personal and communal life, clean us from the inside out, and bestow new life so that, as a welcoming and forgiving community, we can reflect God’s image to the world? The good news revealed in Jesus Christ is that by God’s amazing grace, we need not make ourselves. God has created and, through the Spirit, re-created God’s communal identity at the core of our being. May we step forward together with courage to live in God’s world as God’s covenant community until our Lord returns.

Notes
1Christopher J. H. Wright, Old Testament Ethics for the People of God (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 2004), 19.
3Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat, Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 42.
4Ibid., 200.