Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity

Ideas for the 21st Century

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A little over a decade ago I came across a book with an intriguing title, Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy. I was curious about the suggestion that something “neo-” was happening in Mormonism, so I read what the author had to say.

It turned out that the author, O. Kendall White, a sociology professor, is himself a Mormon and that he wrote the book because he was worried about what he saw as some new developments in Mormon thought. A number of present-day Mormon scholars, Professor White argued, are drifting from what White considers to be the essential teachings of Mormonism’s founder, Joseph Smith. And much to my surprise, at the heart of Professor White’s concern was that he was worried that these Mormons are starting to sound too much like Calvinists!

The reason why that’s a bad thing, Professor White argued, is because Joseph Smith established a religion that stands in stark opposition to the basic teachings of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers of the sixteenth century—and the Calvinists were especially straightforward about this—taught these three themes, he said: (1) God is a sovereign being who is totally “other” than the creation; (2) human beings are depraved sinners who are desperately in need of rescue by God; and (3) salvation is by grace alone. These three themes, White insisted, stand in radical opposition to Joseph Smith’s insistence that the Deity is finite; that human beings are capable of self-improvement; and that we can merit salvation by performing good works.¹

Even though Professor White meant to be describing what he saw as the defects of the Reformed perspective, I was pleased to read what he
had to say. He was certainly right to contrast those Reformed emphases with a picture in which a finite God encourages us to engage in a fundamental project of self-improvement in order to earn our salvation through doing good works. That picture should strike any Reformed Christian as seriously defective in the light of the wonderful message that a sovereign God has sent a Savior to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. But I must quickly add that the Calvinist themes Professor White singles out are not the whole of the Reformed story. They are the way in which Reformed Christians answer a very fundamental question: How does an individual get right with God? Simply to stop with our answer to that question, however, is to be left with a very narrow theological perspective. Our tradition has always insisted that having the grace we receive from God must also move us to an active obedience and to a way of Christian living that has a fairly broad scope.

We Reformed people have always loved the doctrine of election. But at our best we have known that simply to dwell on election as something that happens to us is not enough. Suppose, for example, that a politician were elected to a national office and forever thereafter focused on the fact of having been elected. Suppose that this leader commissioned studies about how it was that he had gotten elected. Suppose also that whenever he addressed his people he talked about what a privilege it was for him to be a person singled out for this elected office. "Isn’t it amazing," he would say, "that of all the people in the world, I am the one who has been elected?" There surely would come a time when his constituents would rightly ask, "What did we elect you for? What are you going to do now that you are in this elected office?" And the same holds for our election by God to the office of believer. We need to think much about what we have been elected to do in the world.

This certainly has been the kind of emphasis advocated by both the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council, the two configurations of churches that are now coming together to form this new World Communion of Reformed Churches. And the planners of this present conference have been very much aware of this more robust Reformed agenda. They are asking us here to think together about how we can draw upon the resources of our Reformed past—as well as resources from other spiritual and theological traditions—to address the complex issues of our contemporary world. Given the “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” that we have long professed, how should we be covenanting with one another today to pursue obedience to God’s will in our increasingly challenging cultural contexts? And, given the proliferation of agencies, parachurch ministries and organizations, including so-called secular ones, that serve the goals of God’s reign in today’s world, what is the role of the institutional church—local congregations as well as ecclesiastical judicatories—in promoting those same goals?

Needless to say, all of this is greatly complicated by the fact that in the four-plus centuries since the Reformation period, the Reformed faith has become a global phenomenon—with, according to one count, about 700 Reformed-Presbyterian ecclesial bodies spread around the world. We come to this conversation, then, with the awareness of voices that represent many tribes and tongues and nations of the earth. And it is an encouraging sign that some from other spiritual and theological homes have chosen to join us in our deliberations here. We need to be sure to draw upon the wealth of diverse experiences, memories, and perspectives that this gathering has made possible. There is a wonderful image in Isaiah 60, where the prophet tells us that the Lord wants the gathered people of the kingdom to “suck the milk of the nations.” That is a striking nurturing image—the reality of many cultures and national identities can be, in God’s program for the renewal of the creation, a life-giving resource, an opportunity for mutual growth and encouragement.

In my own thinking over the years about the kind of multicultural engagement to which we followers of Christ have been called, I have been helped much by those thinkers who have explored the benefits that can come from a sensitivity to the need for theological contextualization. One of my favorite writers in this regard has been the late Japanese-American theologian Kosuke Koyama, particularly as he explored these issues in his delightfully titled Water Buffalo Theology. There Koyama reflected on his experience of being sent, early in his career, by his Japanese church as a missionary to northern Thailand.

Koyama had spent most of his life up to that point in urban settings, and suddenly he found himself in a place of many rice paddies. As he rode around the countryside on his motor scooter, he reported, he saw people whose lives involved many days of standing in shallow water alongside water buffalo; then those days were followed by a season in which they had to find some way of staying dry during the onslaught of the monsoon rains.

Koyama decided to read the Bible as if he were standing alongside a water buffalo in a rice paddy. In doing so, passages and images leaped out at him that he had never really thought about before. He discovered that there is much in the Bible about water. God rules from a place above the rains and the floods. God stays dry! These themes came to loom large in his presentation of the gospel to the people of that region.
At the end of his book, Koyama generalized on the method he had been using in his efforts to understand what the Bible has to say to the culture of northern Thailand. Missionaries, he said, must find a place where they are “sandwiched between” the Bible and the culture to which God has called them. They must then engage in a two-way exegesis, working at two interpretive exercises: they have to interpret the questions and answers of the culture in which they find themselves, and then they must bring those questions and answers to the Bible, in order to interpret anew what God has to say about such matters.\(^3\)

The familiar Christmas carol puts it well in speaking about the Savior’s birth at Bethlehem: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” The “all the years” part of that is extremely important. As he stood “sandwiched between” the Bible and the day-to-day realities of rural Thailand, Kosuke Koyama was exegeting the hopes and fears of the people who worked alongside water buffalo in rice paddies. We too must do that exegeting for our own social locations. And in talking together about our own cultural contexts we can get some overall sense of how our Reformed faith can address “the hopes and fears of all the years.”

We have a wonderful opportunity at this gathering, then, to bring the experiences of many cultural contexts to our shared reflections here about what it means to carry on a Reformed agenda in today’s global arena. Some of us have thought about all of this in our daily lives in large cities, others in the unique kind of suffering that takes place in the world of high-tech management in or near rice paddies, and still others—voices we must listen to with special care—in direct contact with the poorest of the poor and with the most oppressed among the suffering of the earth.

To engage in this kind of multi-“sandwiching” discussion together is not simply a “nice” thing to do. It is not a mere option if we are to think about what it means to be Reformed today. The simple fact is that the factors that have served to preserve and perpetuate Reformed identity in the past can no longer serve that cause. Strong denominational loyalties, ethnic group solidarity, repeating the formulas of the past—none of this can help us much today. We need to be much more theologically intentional, working hard at applying the good lessons from the past to our present multicultural context.

And that is in fact an exciting challenge. The 19th-century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck made a point about the link between what God is doing in the world and the idea of the image of God that highlights the significance of the exploration of diverse cultural perspectives. He observed that the creation of humans in the divine image in the Genesis creation narrative “is not the end but the beginning of God’s journey with mankind.” In mandating that the first human pair be “fruitful and multiply,” Bavinck argued, God was making it clear that “not the man alone, nor the man and the woman together, but only the whole of humanity together is the fully developed image of God.” This is because, he said, “the image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being, however richly gifted that human being may be.” Furthermore, this collective sense of the divine image, Bavinck insisted, “is not a static entity but extends and unfolds itself” in the rich diversity of humankind spread over many places and times. For Bavinck, we will not fully grasp what the image of God really is until the end time, when, near the very end of the book of Revelation, the Apostle John envisions that in the new Jerusalem “the glory and the honor of the nations will be brought” into the Holy City (Rev. 21:26).\(^4\)

For our present discussions, this suggests that we might think of the Creator as having distributed different aspects of the divine likeness to different cultural groups, with each group receiving, as it were, a unique assignment for developing some aspect or other of the divine image. Thus, it will only be in the final gathering-in of the peoples of the earth, when many tribes and tongues and nations will be displayed in their honor and glory in the new Jerusalem, that we will see the many-splendored image of God in its fullness.

That great vision should inform our focus here at this conference as we engage in our more detailed discussions together. We have every reason, for example, to approach with confidence a broad agenda for ourselves as we think about the complex challenges of discipleship in our present world. That confidence has long been the dominant mood of those in the Reformed community. Indeed, the mandate to think big about the Christian mission took effect from the very beginning in our tradition. John Calvin had a strong interest in social, political, economic, and other cultural topics, and this interest was passed on to many of his immediate spiritual heirs; indeed, a concern with such matters often loomed very large in their lives. This was certainly true in Scotland. As one scholar has put it in a study of the first couple of centuries of Reformed thought in Scotland, the immediate theological emphasis of the Reformation was the wonderful proclamation that “none but Christ saves”—a theme that was shared by other Protestants during this period—and, I hasten to add, by more than a few Catholics! But rather soon, the commentator observed, the early Presbyterians added another proclamation to the Reformed agenda: “None but Christ reigns.”\(^5\)
Unfortunately, those early Presbyterian efforts to promote the cause of the sovereign rule of Christ often took the form of bloody battles for political control—which also occurred elsewhere in the Reformed world. But at the heart of those regrettable campaigns was an important Reformed insight: that the God who elects individuals by sovereign grace also intends that those individuals be incorporated into a covenant community that in its collective life will actively show forth Christ’s sovereign authority over all of created reality. And that insight was captured succinctly by the great 19th-century Dutch Calvinist statesman-theologian, Abraham Kuyper, who on the occasion of the founding of the Free University (Vrije Universiteit) of Amsterdam issued his much-quoted manifesto: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”6

Needless to say, we Reformed types are not the only ones who care about promoting the rule of Christ over all of life. We have much to learn from other traditions these days. One of the best of 20th-century expressions of the need for a broad Christian vision of life is contained in a document that the Catholic bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council issued at the final session of that Council, in 1965. Its long title is “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” but it is also known as Gaudium et Spes, Latin for the document’s opening words. Here is how the document begins:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [human beings] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.7

“Nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in [our Christian] hearts.” Not only is that marvelous affirmation one that Reformed Christians can endorse, I am convinced that John Calvin himself would want us to offer that endorsement. To be sure, there are many folks who do not expect that kind of empathy for humankind in general to be compatible with a Reformed view of things. Last summer, Nicholson Baker wrote an interesting review essay about the Kindle in the New Yorker magazine, and one of his criticisms of that e-book reader had to do with what he considered to be the dulling effect of the way words appear on the Kindle’s screen. Things that he found funny when reading them elsewhere, Baker reported, did not have the same effect on him when he read them on the Kindle. The basic problem, he said, had to do with the typeface; the font that the Kindle uses is—and these are his exact words—“grim and Calvinist.”8

That is an image of the Reformed faith that gets alluded to frequently in cultural commentary. And there is something to it—there has certainly been a grim side to the Reformed faith as it has been practiced by some. One of John Calvin’s most sympathetic biographers, the historian William Bouwsma, argued that the grimness was really there in Calvin, but that it was not the whole story about the Reformer’s character. Bouwsma argued that there were tensions in John Calvin’s psyche, and the tensions were so deep that we have to think, as Bouwsma put it, of “two Calvins, coexisting uncomfortably within the same historical personage.” One of those John Calvins was what Bouwsma labeled “the philosophical Calvin.” This was the Calvin who favored a “static orthodoxy” and “craved desperately for intelligibility, order, certainty”; this Calvin was wary of the idea of freedom, and he “struggled to control both himself and the world.”

But there was also a somewhat different John Calvin, said Bouwsma. This was the Calvin who exhibited a “humanist” spirit; he “was flexible to the point of opportunism, and a revolutionary in spite of himself.” This was a Calvin who “was inclined to celebrate the paradoxes and mystery at the heart of existence.”9

I must confess that in my pilgrimage as a Reformed Christian I have found myself more and more attracted to that version of Reformed Christianity that Bouwsma associates with the “humanist” side of John Calvin. I have gravitated to the kind of Reformed perspective that takes delight in all of God’s handiwork, wherever we find it, exploring with eagerness and joy—to use the marvelous phrase that Susan Schreiner chose as the title of her book about Calvin’s view of nature, “the theater of his [God’s] glory.”10 This is the way of viewing things that Lewis Smedes discovered when he began his undergraduate studies on this campus more than a half-century ago. Smedes, who taught at Calvin College for many years before moving on to finish his career at Fuller Seminary, was a fine theological ethicist and a best-selling author who wrote a delightful memoir, My God and I, which appeared shortly after his death in December 2002. At one point in that book, Smedes described his experience of transferring to Calvin College in his student days, after having spent a few years in a program at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

Smedes had not been very happy in the fundamentalist environs at Moody, and he came to Calvin in the hopes of finding a more solid grounding for his faith. He was not disappointed. In fact, as he tells the story, he was surprised by the fact that he discovered exciting new dimensions to his faith commitment during the first class-session of the basic English
composition course required of all Calvin students. The professor in that course, Jacob Vanden Bosch, says Smedes, “introduced me that day to a God the likes of whom I had never even heard about.” This was a God, as Smedes tells the story, who

liked elegant sentences and was offended by dangling modifiers. Once you believe this, where can you stop? If the Maker of the Universe admired words well put together, think of how he must love sound thought well put together, and if he loved sound thinking, how he must love a Bach concerto and if he loved a Bach concerto think of how he prized any human effort to bring a foretaste, be it ever so small, of his Kingdom of Justice and peace and happiness to the victimized people of the world. In short, I met the Maker of the Universe who loved the world he made and was dedicated to its redemption. I found the joy of the Lord, not at a prayer meeting, but in English Composition 101.11

To be sure, when we think of God’s cross-cultural designs, we may want to allow for a little more literary freedom than Smedes does. For example, God may find dangling modifiers distasteful in certain kinds of literature, but God may actually appreciate them when they show up in a hip-hop artist’s well-crafted expression of rage against injustice. But, for all of that, Smedes is getting at something important—not unlike what the Catholic bishops were getting at when they insisted that everything that is “genuinely human” must find “an echo in [our Christian] hearts.”

And if we are to nurture the ability to hear those echoes, we must be willing to explore with enthusiasm together the depths and heights of created reality, for “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and all who dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1). As we try to understand various aspects of that world, we must do it in the awareness that what we focus on is indeed a part of the fullness of a created reality that we are also called to love—and in loving to attempt to grasp the contours of that reality in all of its mysteries, so that we can make connections and cultivate a proper sense of awe and wonder in the presence of the complexities of created being, even in its present brokenness.

I need to appeal once more to a Catholic source. There is a nice story I once heard a priest tell about Pope John XIII when he was still an Italian cardinal. He was having dinner one night with a priestly assistant who was reporting to the cardinal about another priest, a real renegade, who was doing things that were embarrassing the hierarchy. The future pope listened calmly, sipping wine from an expensive goblet. Finally the assistant cried out in a frustrated tone, “How can you take this so calmly? Don’t you realize what this priest is doing?” The cardinal then gently asked the younger priest, “Father, whose goblet is this?” “It is yours, your grace,” the priest answered. The cardinal then threw the goblet to the floor, and it shattered into many fragments. “And now whose goblet is it?” he asked. “It is still yours,” was the answer. “And so is this priest still my brother in Christ,” said the cardinal, “even though he is shattered and broken.”

The creation may be shattered and broken under present sinful conditions, but God still loves it. This is why Jesus came into the creation, on a redemptive mission aimed at restoring that which God loves. In Ephesians 4 the apostle makes it clear that we cannot properly understand Christ’s ascension into heaven until we have first grasped the fact that “he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth... so that he might fill all things” (Eph. 4:9). And the love of Jesus goes so deep that he still suffers in and over the brokenness of the cosmos.

This image of brokenness is an especially pertinent one for our present cultural context, given the phenomenon that is often associated with the idea that we are living in a “postmodern” era, namely, the phenomenon of fragmentation. In the 1930s the well-known American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote some lines in one of her sonnets that for many of us read like a prophecy that is being fulfilled in our present day. She wrote about a “gifted age” that would possess enough “power to wake the moon with its footsteps.” This age, she says, would arrive at “its dark hour; a time when facts would fall from the sky like “a meteoric shower.” These disconnected facts, the poet observes, will “lie unquestioned [and] uncombined.”

All of this knowledge, if integrated, would spin enough material each day to cure us of all of our ills. But—she laments—that there exists no loom to weave it into fabric.”12

That certainly does have a contemporary ring. We regularly hear complaints these days about how scholarly disciplines have become so specialized that it is difficult to gain any overall integrated perspectives on the pieces of knowledge that are available to us. I witnessed this in one university that I visited, where members of the psychology faculty told me that they had a difficult time understanding each other. Each of their areas of research is so specialized that they do not know how to relate what they are studying to the work of even some of their closest colleagues. To use the poet’s phrase: they could find no loom for weaving things together. And we are all aware of the ways in which the results of our Google searches sit there in front of us on our computer screens, “unquestioned [and] uncombined.”

What do we have to say to these fragmented patterns of contemporary life? One obvious thing that we have to say, on the basis of the Bible’s authority, is that Edna St. Vincent Millay’s prophecy, taken literally, is...
false: there does exist a loom to weave all facts into a single fabric. And indeed there is someone who is the Lord of that loom, as the apostle makes clear in Colossians 1: “For by him [Jesus Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Given the increasingly fragmented character of contemporary life, the challenge to explore the meaning of this “holding together” dimension of the person and work of Jesus Christ is both urgent and engaging.

And in this regard, I must emphasize my growing conviction that we need a renewed emphasis in the Reformed community on the importance of the worshiping life of the church as the central arena in which Christ makes the reality of his “holding together” ministry known to us. It is unfortunate that many of us as Reformed Christians have found ways of underplaying the importance of being nurtured by the preaching of the Word and the sacramental life of the body of Christ. Sometimes our academic communities have cultivated a sense of distance from the church’s worshiping life. In other segments of the Reformed community we have tended toward an understanding of a “sphere sovereignty” scenario in a way that has resulted in the marginalization of the institutional church. And, of course, we have often so emphasized the activist strands of our perspective that we occasionally have dislodged the way of discipleship from the church’s crucial role in forming us as disciples by calling us into the communal encounter with the living God.

The theme of this conference is a marvelous one: “Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity.” It emphasizes the fact that we are sent into the world to promote the cause of the reign of Jesus Christ. We have a calling to do God’s work in the creation that God still loves, even in its brokenness. But it is important for us to be clear about the fact that we can only have a calling if there is a Caller, the one who issues the call to us—and this Caller is also worthy of our worship.

In his classic work, A Theology of Liberation, Gustavo Gutierrez insists that the political program associated with liberation movements must draw heavily on “a spirituality of liberation.” Gutierrez is obviously aware of the dangers of absolutizing our own favorite political causes and thereby being highly selective in finding the Christian themes that are useful for promoting our own preestablished goals. As a corrective to this tendency, Gutierrez argues that the Christian life must be “filled with a living sense of gratuitousness. Communion with the Lord and with all [human beings] is more than anything else a gift.” Our participation in worship, he says, is a “‘leisure’ action”; it is a “‘wasted’ time, [that] re-

minds us that the Lord is beyond the categories of useful and useless.” In our worshipful communion with God, Gutierrez tells us, we look forward to a wonderful future as we hear, he says, the “invitation to participate in eschatological joy.”

The setting for that eschatological joy is depicted in an inspiringly dramatic way by the Seer of Patmos, when he reports that he looked to the heavens and saw “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb,” all of them wearing white robes and crying out the joyful victory song: “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9–10).

May our time together in this gathering give us some sense of what it will be like to join that greater gathering that is yet to come.

NOTES


3 Koyama, Water Buffalo Theology, 91.


7 Gaudium et Spes, text available online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.


