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

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Challenges and Opportunities: 
A Next-Steps Discussion

Shirley J. Roels: Now, let’s think. What is the future of people who care about what the Reformed theological tradition and mission has been and might bring into the future, alongside other people who care about the cause of Christ and Christianity in the world and its engagement and creation of culture? We’ve invited a set of four panelists to answer this conference question. We asked them to respond because they are from different areas of the world, regions of experience, academic disciplines, and practical ways of thinking. What did we learn here together that would benefit both the global conversation that we are having, and the particular communities of Christian faith and learning, and practices where we live? How can the conference be of value in the roles in which we participate? How should we use what we have learned here to influence ministry and the realm of the church, the realm of education, and the realm of social institutions? How do we effectively intertwine Christian communion with Christian justice? These are the four questions that each of our panelists is going to address. After the four panelists have each spoken, then the panelists will ask some questions of each other. After that we will open it up to general engagement across the whole audience. Our first panelist is Susan Felch. She is a professor of English at Calvin College and she is also the director of the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, an entity that provided a good share of funding for this conference.

Susan Felch: Thank you, Shirley. It would be impossible to summarize or even list all the rich ideas that we have begun to explore over the last two days.

_Nanu sina farina!_ Welcome to all of you. These are words spoken by the Yareba people in Papua New Guinea, where I grew up. And I brought along this morning a memento of my childhood and adolescence. Many years we would joke that we had two seasons in Papua New Guinea: a rainy season and a rainier season. So this is one of the things I remem-
ber when I’m thinking about my growing up years in Papua New Guinea where I was until I came back to the United States to go to college.

As I was reflecting on the sessions I’ve attended and the conversations I’ve been having here, it struck me that we are using a number of words that are very much like my umbrella. They’re umbrella terms. That is, they’re words that sound deceptively simple but that in fact cover a very wide range of meanings. And like an umbrella, these terms can be very useful, but they can also cover up real differences and difficulties and issues that we need to face. So I’m going to talk briefly about four of those words. As I was writing notes on one side of my page, and then the other side, I kept writing these words down. They kept coming up.

The first of those words is community. In many sessions, we’ve talked about the importance of community, especially in contrast to a Western emphasis on the individual. So we’ve talked about theology as growing out of a communal reading of Scripture; of the importance of authentic ecclesial community of the church. We’ve talked about public justice as promoting the well-being of all members of a community rather than advocating simply for an interest group, say, Christians. All well and good. But we are members of multiple communities: family; church; schools; voluntary associations; professional organizations; local, regional, and national political bodies. How do these overlapping communities interact with one another?

I am just going to take one instance where I have felt, if not tension, at least some discussion. In both higher education and in effective political action, some speakers at this conference have advocated strongly for independence not only from the state but also from the church. To remain Christian, they argued, a university or an association for social activism must remain independent. Others, including our opening keynote speaker, have urged a closer connection to the church. But here, again, we have a split. Are we talking about the need for academics and activists to find their principle identity, their central focus within a worshiping community, within, to quote Professor Mouw, the excess of liturgical practices of Word and sacrament, to develop an ecclesiastically grounded spirituality? Or are we speaking primarily about the need for churches to speak into the arena of higher education and politics? So while we might agree that community or the common life is a good, and that as Reformed Christians we are bound together in covenantal community (to refer to one of our conference themes), exactly what constitutes community? What are its boundaries and its roles? What about conflicting demands of various communities? That is not so easily defined. To what extent are human rights necessarily individual rights?

So merely to invoke the term community or communal, raising that umbrella, is to begin a conversation, not to end it. Community is an umbrella that both shelters but also can obscure. As, in fact, is the term I’ve just used, conversation.

And that’s my second term: conversation. A number of speakers have worried about the potential disjunction between words and deeds, about the tendency of Reformed Christians to talk incessantly. To talk, and talk, and talk, but not always to walk the faith, the Christian life. Here our thinking might be helped by actually turning conversation into an umbrella term by restoring to the word conversation one of its older meanings, a meaning that was current in the sixteenth century, the century of the Reformation. In the sixteenth century, if you said the word conversation, you meant, “a way of life, a way of living.” So if we think about conversation as always meaning both our words and our actions, then I think we will be closer to weaving together belief and desire and deeds, the loom metaphor that we heard about in the opening address. We will be closer to the biblical understanding of knowledge as intimate loving, and we will be less likely to come under the judgment of Jesus for being hypocrites. Conversation also builds on our strength as Reformed Christians, a valued principled reflection of loving the Lord our God with our minds. At the same time, conversation, conversing with others, reminds us that in the real world relationships may be as important as arguments; that dialogue, particularly worldview dialogue—a number of our sessions have been about worldview—requires more than the recognition of difference; that conversation on the other hand is not always sweet and nice, and that even the most carefully constructed system carries with it personal and cultural assumptions and the smell of historical processes, which brings me to my third umbrella term: contextual.

In our desire to bring words and deeds together into an integral whole, we become alert to the dangers of imposition and colonialism and to the power of a gospel working its way like leaven through particular contexts, particular cultures. Some of the most powerful moments of the conference for me have been the stories of God at work throughout the world. The indigenous people of Mexico in tears as they recognize that their slash-and-burn farming methods are dishonoring God and his creation. A high caste Indian taking out the trash in an act of Christian humility. Stories of historic Reformed churches in Indonesia and Taiwan, water buffalo theology. There is no single sacred culture, no single sacred language. Christianity is infinitely translated and translatable. All human-kind together forms the image of God. God is already present in the world. Yes, and yet, when does contextual become synchronism or accommoda-
tion? When must a prophetic “no” be said and said with some force? And does our Reformed focus on the goodness of creation, on the worth of all vocations, and on the call to engage and transform this world, sometimes tempt us to ignore the broader context of that which we cannot see, the invisible principalities and powers of which the Apostle Paul speaks, the glories of heaven where Jesus, and not we, reign. Here perhaps there is a generation gap. My students are not for the most part tempted to turn their backs on the world, to be (in an old American phrase) so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. They do expect to work in this world. They do expect to do good. But they also have short attention spans. And I wonder if we are helping them to build the spiritual habits that will sustain them for a lifetime of faithful service to Christ. I wonder if we are helping them to see the world, to see creation, as the theater of God’s glory, or merely as the mirror that reflects in muted Christian colored images, their own preconceived notions, or their own good works. In other words, sometimes, does our Reformed faith dissolve merely into ethics?

And that brings me to my fourth word: conversion. This is for me the most perplexing of the umbrella terms. We have heard so many encouraging stories of God at work in the world, but we have also heard very discouraging stories indeed, particularly about large-scale political and cultural change. Discouraging, because as Reformed Christians we are intent upon structural and not just personal change. And yet we hear stories: evangelical politicians in Latin America, we are told by social scientists here, are investigated for corruption at a higher percentage than politicians in general, and that is not just true in Latin America. Ugandan Christians, we are told, have identified ethnic superiority as an area which has not been touched by Christian conversion in their experience. So is conversion real? Is the term real? What does it take for a person, an institution, a culture, a nation, to be turned, converted, reformed? To cite Professor Mouw again, what are we elected for? If Christian faith is not merely ethics—my previous worry—it certainly ought to motivate authentic ethical actions. Ought we to build alternative structures as Abraham Kuyper suggested, or to reform existing ones? In too many cases, have we been converted to the prospects of modernism rather than turned to Christ? When have we resorted to trickery and manipulation rather than to conversion? There can be a tendency when we hear these discouraging stories to be tired or discouraged, or perhaps to become cynical about conversion, about piety, about heart religion, about enthusiasm, and lured from belief and action. Yet too often at a Reformed institution, when we hear the cynicism, what we actually hear amidst the buzz of theological conversation or the bustle of social activism, is the rattle of dry bones. When God asked Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?,” the prophet replied quite rightly, “O, Sovereign Lord, you alone know.” And that is true. It is only God who can make our dry bones live, who can convert us. It is Christ who not only draws for us the living water, but who is the living water. Yet we can and should pray for the Spirit. The prophet Ezekiel writes, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says, ‘O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them. Then you my people will know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken and I have done it,’ declares the Lord.”

So I come away from this conference as I think about Reformed mission in an age of world Christianity—my confidence is that the Lord will do it. Thank you.
scribe this approach? Let me try to say it in my own words. Yes, Christ has to do with living his word, to incarnate his actions, to love intensely your neighbors with Jesus’s love. But Christ also has to do with explaining the mysteries of creation, sin, salvation, redemption as a framework to understand other issues that are important to find, in a complex world, how then to love our faceless neighbors, those who are beyond the boundaries of our personal love.

I have experienced and seen you in these days together, where the Reformed tradition is grounded beyond its historical truths. It is in love, in Christ’s love and passion for a better world, and a world with compassion and justice, and this is something that you do not just speak; it is something that you live and you do. Trying to explain this in the form of our worldview is a difficult task, but it is necessary if you are going to be in dialogue with other worldviews. Perhaps what needs to be done is to incorporate the understanding that the Reformed or Reformational worldview, as somebody has pointed out, is not unique, but it is an important contribution in the context of other worldviews. Thus, the Reformed worldview might be in [touch] with what other worldviews have to offer. Perhaps what is needed is to become aware that what is lost to communication between different worldviews, different cultures, different ways of knowing and feeling, is the fact that God, the creator, is above creation, guiding us with the help of his Spirit in the direction that he intends us to go. But it is also a fact that he is also at the bottom, redeeming and restoring humankind and creation through Jesus Christ from the ground up by the reconciliation of our human relationships with [ourselves], with [our] neighbors, with the world, with God. It is then important to understand that there will never be one dominant worldview crafted by the human mind. It should not be, because the wonder of creation is that it functions not out of similarities between its parts, but out of its differences, just as the members of the body of Christ. To pretend to encompass its functioning in a single worldview, would be to destroy it, to reduce it to a meaningless concept, just as when we try to find a single explanation to the meaning of a poem. On the other hand, we also have to affirm that there is a worldview and the best way that I have found to explain this paradox is by telling you a story. This the story of the conquest of Mexico, my country. But it is not a story which you are familiar with.

In Spanish, when we talk about cosmovision, we use the word *cosmovisión*. And there was a time in Mexican history when there was no history but a continued story (*narración* in Spanish) that was told from generation to generation. It was a story of creation, sin, and redemption that was translated into ways we relate to each other as families, and groups, and nation. It was a story that told of peace and love, of injustice and war, of restoration of broken relationships, of learning how to live with others, respecting and appreciating their differences. It is not the Christian story, because it is not told in Christian language. Or is it? In any case, when the Christian conquerors came, they did not recognize the indigenous story because they had transformed their own story in reading colonized history and [had] a rigid theological discourse, which they considered to be far superior to our own original story and, of course, to the indigenous story. Thus, the conquerors imposed their history and theology on the indigenous people and attempted to dismiss the story of the indigenous people and transform their *cosmovisión* into the conquerors’ own view. And in this process, the conquerors lost an opportunity of really discovering their own story.

However, despite everything, the *cosmovisión* and the story were not destroyed. They remain rooted in the hearts of the people, even today, just as it remains rooted in the hearts of the conquerors and in the hearts of all peoples of the earth. Even if they did not know it or did not recognize it, it was not their story, because it was not theirs. It was God’s own story told to humankind in different ways from the beginning of creation. You may call it general revelation or special revelation, or we might call it simply a gift. We might try just to receive it, or we might try to understand it intellectually, but what we cannot do is to possess it and manipulate it to fit our own human interest.

The Reformed worldview isn’t a story to be told [merely] because God entrusted the Reformed tradition with this story, which shaped it according to its own way of perceiving God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the world. But unless we understand that God also entrusted the same story to other peoples with the same purpose, we will not understand the meaning of community and difference. We will not understand the meaning of the church. The church—the community of believers—is a body not only with just one gift, but many gifts; not just one story, but many stories; not just one worldview, but many worldviews. And yet, all of them expressing one fundamental gift, Jesus Christ, the fundamental story, the good news of God’s love impressed on us with his Holy Spirit, and a worldview that we share but that we cannot possess.

In this context, Christian higher education is one of the gifts that God has given to the church to carry on the same story in a different way but one that should be a way that unites knowledge of the story, not a means to turn the story into history and theology and science or any other kind of knowledge, but to let itself be transformed by the story and in doing so, being truly relevant to the world not as the world would like it to be, as is
going to be the case in most projects of higher education, perhaps rendering themselves to the interest of the world, but as a means to transform the world and to become more compassionate and just, more holy, as the Creator is holy. Thank you.

SR: Thank you, José. And our last panelist is Dr. Won Lee, who is a professor of Old Testament in the Department of Religion at Calvin College.

Won Lee: Thank you, Shirley. As you already got a hint from her, my introduction was very short because I have not really had much experience in this field. So in a very typical postmodern, postmodernistic fashion, I must confess my limitations on the subject matter that this conference has engaged in. By the way, it has been very exciting to see all the different faces and different expressions of God’s doing in the world, and also it has been exhausting because within a day and a half there are so many things, so many things that we heard and so many things to digest and so many things to learn from. And at the same time it has been very encouraging even though there are so many things going on, as Susan well put, God will do it and we will get along with it.

So let me share with you some of my limitations on this subject. I have read a few books on Reformed tradition, debated with the others who have different formulations of the term, and I am still grappling with the question, what does the term Reformed constitute? So many diverse expressions on “Reformed” evident in this conference seem to suggest that our effort to articulate the normative definition that adjudicates the value of those expressions is utterly futile. I wonder, what differentiates Reformed engagement in the world from that which all others also do? Should I be simply satisfied with the fact that the Reformed project is a form of Christian in the general sense, Christian enterprise to recover the collective image of God, a genuineness or dignity of a human being in this form of Christian in the general sense, Christian enterprise to recover the unity willed by God, which is that all of humankind shall be in covenant with him and with him only, responding to his purposes of joy, the freedom from oppressive conformity, and a human-made empire, of doxology, and of caring for all God’s creation, and finally relying on his life-giving power. It also strives for the multiversity God wills. Namely, we are regents of God who are attentive to all parts of creation, working in his

What then should I say about the Reformed mission in an age of world Christianity? Nothing much. You already heard the beautiful representation the past two days and also this distinguished panel list. This is what I heard. I heard from Richard Mouw that Reformed mission stems from the irrevocable decree that God elected people for the service of implementing his creational purpose. I heard it loud and clear, saying that election is never divorced from vocation. The concept of mission with a Reformed accent means, then, in essence that the elected people of God, both individually and collectively, proclaim and teach God’s reign over all his creation and the lordship of Jesus Christ in every sphere of life. I also heard from sessions that I attended that the modus operandi of the Reformed mission in the present global world is first to recognize and respect each individual’s distinct and unique experience as well as from his or her diverse social, ideological, and religious settings. That’s first step. Second, to be hospitable toward one another and even invite each other is to share your own [self] in genuine dialogue and conversation, with the hope that all parties involved will learn from each other. And third, to let any particular formulation of God’s action be a full-fledged membership in a roundtable deliberation, not simply conversation, but dialogue, deliberation, put together to make particular conclusions in given time and space.

In my view, we have done the first two steps rather well. But I’m not quite sure of the third, giving each individual’s formulations of God’s mission in the world a full-fledged membership in a roundtable deliberation, whether that has been exercised consciously. Such an attitude is indicative of a shift in emphasis of our works from unity to what I will call multiversity. Know how easily our intention of keeping the unity becomes a self-securing homogeneity. This shift is more than welcome. At the same time, invoking a multiversity should not be limited to celebrating differences alone as though we are not organically related. It demands, however, the openness, even vulnerability from and for each other, that is necessary to be truly integrated. For this integration, we must resist the ever-looming temptation of compartmentalization while stressing individual uniqueness.

Reformed mission in an age of world Christianity should strive for the unity willed by God, which is that all of humankind shall be in covenant with him and with him only, responding to his purposes of joy, the freedom from oppressive conformity, and a human-made empire, of doxology, and of caring for all God’s creation, and finally relying on his life-giving power. It also strives for the multiversity God wills. Namely, we are regents of God who are attentive to all parts of creation, working in his
image to enhance the whole creation, to bring each in its kind to full fruition and productivity. I believe this unity in multiversity is possible and obtainable if we let the Holy Spirit guide our works. It might be a little uncomfortable for Reformed people to talk about the Holy Spirit, which has been regarded as a silent observer within the Trinity. This is the point that I’m striving at. In order for a Reformed tradition to be robust, then the Holy Spirit has to be included in equal partnership. It is imperative for Reformed traditions to integrate the transforming power of the Holy Spirit—the sovereignty of God, the lordship of Jesus Christ, and now the transforming power of the Holy Spirit—if they desire to be robust, not remaining grim.

The Spirit-filled and God-directed life may look like a life in the midst of God’s revolutionary activities in the world. A robust Reformed mission means to engage in a permanent revolution by which all our truth, our precious traditions, our undying stubbornness are painfully transformed, and all behaviors transfigured by continuing repentance and new faith. The born-again life is a life lived not before or after but during a great revolution of God, revolution of radical forgiveness, a revolution of unstoppable reconciliation, revolution of merciful justice. I heard such a call for a revolution at a session on globalization and Reformed faith in the case of South Africa, not just a call for accommodating or modifying the existing order but a call for other transformation. I even felt the spirit of a revolution in the eyes of the presenter. Are we hearing the ongoing chant of a revolution, “Yahweh reigns! Jesus is Lord! Our world belongs to God”? And through our works? Are we suffocated by the teargas of self-righteousness, false superiority, fear of losing control, ignorance, and indifference? Or are we breathing again through the good news of Jesus Christ poured out to each one of us through the Holy Spirit?

This is my hope and prayer for all of us. May we yield ourselves to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit that we may be led to the path of continual conversion. May the Holy Spirit stir us up once again for dreaming a different world. Thank you.

SR: Thank you. Thank you, Won. I am well aware of the time. When you invite four talented panelists who all have things to say, they are eager to do so. So I think instead of having interchange among the panelists, we should go directly to questions and comments with all of you as registrants. Let’s simply go to questions from people who are here. Mercy, you have the first hand up in the back. Go ahead. Speak loudly, and say where you are from so people know.

[Question from the audience follows.]
revelation that comes from the origins. I mention in my presentation the word story, a narrative. Actually, it's not a story, it's not a narrative; it's the Holy Spirit. When we find the creation story, what made us human beings was God's Spirit. What made us able to understand reality beyond our biological being was God's Spirit, and it is what continues to help us to understand, with our own worldview, God's worldview. I appreciate your contribution because I think this line of thinking needs to be reinforced today not only because maybe it's missing, but we are seeing around the world an awakening of the church in the form of Pentecostalism and we do not have any answer to that. And I think we need to work that answer from theologically Reformed and Lutheran traditions because we are not falling into that, we are just not giving enough attention to that; and today, that is very important. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the transformation that is happening today? Not only in the church revival, but also what is an awakening in the interest of those churches or some churches in getting involved in issues of social justice and social change? So how can we make this connection? I think the role of the Holy Spirit is very important.

[Comment from the audience follows.]

PV: If I may, one remark? The whole distinction of general revelation, special revelation, is a typical Reformed distinction. But I think you have to say there is only one God who reveals himself and who has revealed himself in a decisive way in Christ. You can write a book about this theme, but I think this is the most important thing.

SR: Another question or comment? We have time for just maybe one or two more.

Question: In talking about the many cultures and their experience with faith worldwide, one speaker has referred to the “many-faceted wisdom of God.” I just wondered what you thought about that phrase.

WL: Can I share a polytheistic, pluralistic, monotheism? That about sums up some of those issues. But the question I’m wrestling with is somehow whether or not I am willing to give up some of my precious well-argued articulated traditions. That stubbornness hinders me from genuinely engaging in any kind of conversation with others. Even if that experience may be so foreign to me, if I am somehow subject to the lordship of Jesus Christ, then I’m willing to be converted time after time. But those attitudes are stubbornly ingrained. That’s why, somehow, we are simply celebrating differences and yet without any transformation from the particular engagement. So intellectual engagement sounds very novel and great and necessary, and yet are we actually willing to be changed?

SR: Last question or comment?

[Question from the audience follows.]

SR: Did everyone hear the question? That’s a very good question: Christians living in the 21st century compared to the Christians in the 16th century, and did God’s revelation end in the 16th century? What does it look like now? Who wants to respond?

WL: Well, it is very difficult to raise Calvin from the grave and ask him the question. That is the inherent limitations of what we have. We cannot reconstruct the past completely and comprehensively. What we reconstruct of the past is simply through our own perception of the reality of the time. So there is no, for me in a very didactic way, “this is what they looked like and this is what we are going to look like.” It is a very continuum of it. And throughout the continuum of history, some may focus on one aspect and some may focus on the other. The task for us, for 21st-century Christians, is that our focus may be a little bit different from what in John Calvin’s day might have been. That’s why the title, “Living Roots for Living Water,” so we have roots now but what kind of water do we put it in so we can produce different kinds of fruits, which they may never have dreamed of? But through the Holy Spirit, I think we can create so many different kinds of fruits. And for next generation, they may create totally different kinds of fruits than we are emphasizing. And I think it’s exciting, and that’s why I would say this is an ongoing revolution and we are in the midst of a revolution, not living after or before. So I want to share the great chant, the spirit as I have done in my college era, throwing rocks at the dictatorship, the demonstrating, all those things, still remembering a time of that spirit. That spirit has to be in our every day of re-imagining what kind of fruits we are going to yield.

SR: And on that note we are going to end our panel. Please thank our panelists.