Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity

Ideas for the 21st Century

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What is possible for a Reformed mission in an age of world Christianity? In other words, can a Reformed vision contribute in a positive way by giving answers to the challenges of our postmodern world and society? That is the question. The answer in this essay is given from a theological point of view. As such it has its own limitations. At the same time because of the biblical thought that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7), I am convinced that these theological considerations are fundamental for our entire life, for all our thinking and acting, and for our attitude and calling in this world as well.

A Reformed view of our mission in the world is rooted in the theology of the Reformation with its special emphases on sola and tota Scriptura, sola gratia, and sola fide. These topics were very revolutionary in the time they were (re)discovered, and we will see today they still retain their own specific strength, worth, and relevance in a (post)modern and multireligious—and even post-Christian—world.

**Sola Scriptura and Tota Scriptura**

In the Reformed tradition Scripture takes priority. The whole Reformed movement is based on the “back to basics” principle: back to the words of the living God. The presupposition that God has revealed himself in Scripture and the conviction that the Scriptures contain the absolute truth were and are, however, more than a theory that must be accepted. This presupposition is not only based in the idea of authors inspired by the Holy Spirit in the past, but also and ultimately grounded in the continuing and convincing witness in our hearts in the present. This conviction is not only a matter of doctrine that necessarily must be accepted in order...
to be a good Reformed theologian. It should be far more an actual and existential reality that is experienced by people all over the world, again and again. This experience is described in a generous way in one of the Reformed confessions:

We receive all these books, alone, as holy and canonical, by which our faith can be supported, confirmed, and established. And so, without any doubt, we believe all these things that are contained in them, and not so much because the Church receives and endorses them as Canon as because the Holy Spirit testifies to our consciences that they have arisen from God. (Belgic Confession, art. 5)

With other words it is also confessed by contemporary believers, including the well-known mission leader John Stott. In his book Why I Am a Christian he wrote about this overwhelming and decisive experience. After describing impressive stories of Paul, Augustine, Malcolm Muggeridge and C. S. Lewis, he writes: "Looking back over a long life, I have often asked myself what it was that brought me to Christ. It was neither my parental upbringing nor my own independent choice; it was Christ himself knocking at my door, drawing attention to His presence outside." Irresistibly, the gospel became for him the true word of the living God! This conviction could be rejected as a subjective one. True . . . but every presupposition has this subjective character. The difference between this conviction and others is that we have to consider something beyond absorbing personal experience. Instead with the study of Scripture, conviction is, as Hendrik Kraemer stated, a gift of the Holy Spirit; and as such results in the highest objectivity.

Though a plural understanding of truth would be more attractive in our multireligious society, it is exactly because of this personal witness of the Spirit that it is impossible to pander to the "popular taste" of modern society. I am deeply convinced that in an age of secularization this living root is indispensable to the survival of living faith and, as such, to the future of the church.

This remaining wellspring for a Reformed view is rooted in the principle of the unique and exclusive character of biblical truth. In the Reformed tradition, however, this normative character of Scripture should be understood in a less static and more dynamic way. Accordingly, the principle of sola Scriptura has always stressed another theme: reformatio semper reformanda. It was a typical Reformed principle, contrary to Roman Catholic theology, that the Scriptures must be read by individual people and in a certain independence from the tradition of the Church. Scripture has its own authority. By humble listening to the Scriptures and the illumination of the Spirit we will discover in every time and context new dimensions of biblical truth. God's purposes are not once and for all discovered and explored in the past or during the time of the Reformation. This dynamic understanding of the Bible is truly a root for living water. In our time the Reformed missionary Lesslie Newbigin emphasized especially that Scripture will constantly be reinterpreted and be better understood until the end of time. This always happens in a kind of hermeneutical process that he explains by saying:

All events in Scripture are interpreted as divine actions, as the presence of the absolute among the contingent events of history. But the interpretation has to be reinterpreted over and over again in terms of another generation and another culture. It has become very clear that Scripture as we have it is the result of the operation of this hermeneutical circle from the very beginning. The original interpretative language became a text in which in turn needs interpretation, and so on till the end of the time. It is never enough just to repeat the text.

In light of this understanding of sola Scriptura, the principle of tota Scriptura then gives Reformed theology a broad vision of reality. In the light of Scripture we can develop a holistic worldview, considering on the one hand the world’s actual state due to its fall in sin, and on the other hand God’s remaining work in this world (so-called common grace) as well as his ultimate purposes with his creation in Christ (so-called special grace). As a consequence of God’s providential work we can expect everywhere sparkles of his presence and justice (cf. Rom. 2:14–16). There are many points of contact with biblical ideas, especially in the quest for greater humanity, social order, and justice. However, in the meantime as a result of the sinful reality, Reformed mission can never be too optimistic about these points of contact. The Bible also teaches us that God’s renewing work in Christ always happens in a sinful and broken world, thus in a hidden and broken way. Moreover, we have to realize that in many countries Christians are a minority and that their influence is very limited in this world. So renewal of life in this world-age will be nothing more— as a consequence of sinful reality but in accord with the Biblical promise— than a foretaste of the coming kingdom.

This typical Reformed restriction prevents us from experiencing crippling disappointment. I do not agree with the American optimism that supposes American (Christian) culture is a blessing for the world and Reformed Christianity in particular. This optimism is closely related to the culture-optimism of the neo-Calvinistic view of Abraham Kuyper, which underrates the reality of sin and brokenness and overestimates the possi-
bilities of God’s people. Moreover, there is no promise in the Bible that the world will slowly get better and the kingdom will become more and more visible, especially through the eagerness of Reformed Christians—on the contrary! Let us not forget the word of Jesus: my kingdom is not of this world. Entered by rebirth, it exists first of all in the hearts of God’s people. Sure, his kingdom is coming on earth, but in this world-age it regularly grows and exists in hidden ways.

At the same time, the Reformed confession of God as Creator, who is concerned with creation, and Christ as the Kurios of the world, has far-reaching consequences for our calling in society. We have to be good ambassadors of the gospel and God’s merciful love in Christ. Through our witness he wants to make all people his disciples, because all the power in heaven and earth is given to him (Matt. 28:18–19). As God’s people and inhabitants of his kingdom we have to purge all injustice as evil and promote the justice of God. In the Word that became flesh in Christ, we received an abundance of tools to distinguish between righteousness and unrighteousness; and the biblical message penetrates all spheres of life to redirect them toward the will of God. So a Reformed view of mission should have a great impact on society. Inevitably it has a comprehensive character in trying to bring one’s entire life to the lordship of Christ; and this comprehensive nature can have a worldwide perspective. For example, the Belhar Confession affirms and actualizes the dignity that the triune God bestows upon us and as a consequence pleads for reconciliatory justice to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. Another example is a document titled “The Accra Confession,” which addresses worldwide economic and ecological problems. Both were explored at the “Reformed Mission” conference, and we can be deeply impressed by the spirit of faith that urged the writing of these confessions as global tools to aid us.

Last but not least, Scripture delivers insights about the origin, essence, and value of non-Christian religious feelings and convictions. In a time of globalization and multireligiosity it becomes all the more important to have a clear understanding of other religions based on Biblical principles. During the conference I was surprised by the well-thought contribution of Dr. Diane Obenchain, professor of religion at Calvin College. She responded to the question, How can those of Reformed mission share well the correcting, reforming, transfiguring gift of Jesus Christ with those who are religious but do not yet know him? She answered with two principles. First, the indigenization principle, which means that God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ involves the translation of the Word of God into our fallen humanity, as we are in all our diverse ways of living. Second, she noted the pilgrimizing principle, which understands Jesus Christ as purifying salt, clarifying light, and lifting, expanding yeast who corrects and reforms all our ways of living. These two understandings liberate the special gifts in our ways of living for the worldwide body of Christ. This framework of sola and tota Scriptura is a good start on a refreshing Reformed theology of religion.

**Sola Gratia**

From such a framework flows a missionary theology that considers mission in principle as a work of the triune God. It happens because of the love of the Father for the world; it is realized in the redemptive work of the Son; and it is applied through the activity of the Holy Spirit. The essence of all mission is the grace of God. Nowadays there is every reason to emphasize this very Reformed idea of sola gratia (by grace alone). This living root contains a lot of hope.

It is by grace that **God the Father** is searching for people. This grace is independent of the desires in human hearts, whether they are pious or not: mercy begins with the compassionate God (cf. Rom. 9:16). In His grace God elects “what is nothing” (1 Cor. 1:28). This can be shocking. But in the context of the Bible it is especially hopeful. God’s searching love is unconditional. Therefore mission can be done with great expectation everywhere in this godless and sinful world and even in this hardened post-Christian society. We do not need to select beforehand where mission can occur in a fruitful way. Our lives can bear fruit everywhere (cf. John 15:16).

Scripture testifies to an act of sola gratia. It is God in Christ reconciling the world to favor with himself, not counting and holding against humans their trespasses but canceling them (cf. 2 Cor. 5:19). Always and especially in our (post)modern world people have to overcome their sense of responsibility and inescapable faults. This claim is a heavy burden, which makes many people uncertain and even depressed. What a privilege and delight it is in view of this to have the best message ever to be imagined and proclaimed: not a message of severe religious duty but a message of liberating grace by the forgiveness of all our sins. In Christ we can invite people to become honest about all their shortcomings and failings and send them on their way in peace (cf. Matt. 11:28–30). In principle the church is the only place in the world where people are accepted as they are, without any preconditions, and radically set free from their past and given a new future. Because I know of no other message that is so full of hope, we should never lose or give up such a message!

It is a matter of grace that the exalted Lord through the Holy Spirit is gathering people from all over the world by convincing their hearts
by the Word of God, to participate in salvation in Christ and to enter his kingdom. This grace-full power of the Spirit makes it possible to do our mission work with hope: our own impossibilities to reach human hearts are not decisive—we can lean on the possibilities of God’s Spirit. Always this Spirit is more powerful than all other powers. There is no reason to think that the Spirit cannot conquer the secular and religious powers of the 21st century. Statistics need not have the last word while there is persevering prayer (1 John 5:4). Then even beyond this graceful work in converting people, the Holy Spirit also equips believers (Acts 8:4) and preachers (Eph. 4:12) with the necessary gifts to proclaim the Word of God and empowers them to preach the Word with boldness. So, not only our conversion but also our ongoing tasks are done through grace.

I want to add one more point. If the first priority is the gospel of God’s grace, then the second should be prayer. To become a blessing for the world, the church and Christians need to pray. The early Christians at Jerusalem were successful in every way imaginable, and there was no bigger reason than the fact that their efforts were based in prayer. It was Jesus himself who needed daily prayer to fulfill his blessed task in the name of God; and it was the Apostle Paul who lived from the power of praying. Because of his strong belief in the powerful and tender mercy of God, he prayed constantly for all people and ordered us to do the same (1 Tim. 2:1): “I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people and intercede on their behalf.” So enduring prayer is basic for all Christians as we experience God’s grace in Christ.

There is nothing that is as encouraging in mission affairs and the specific calling of every Christian in this society as the Reformed principle of sola gratia. It guarantees the living waters of salvation will constantly stream both in this world and through our efforts.

Sola Fide

Finally, the principle of sola fide, if understood well, is also a third very refreshing principle and living root today. First, this living root liberates people from their endless struggle with God—whether they are aware of it or not—in which they attempt to restore the disturbed relationship by manipulating God in one way or another in their own favor. We are invited to accept all the gifts of grace only by faith: by prayer and trust. Faith sets us in a reconciled relationship with God without any other condition. As a consequence it is a relationship of mutual love with God and each other. Faith alone is the real and right answer to God’s covenant with us instead of a standard for morality or piety; and the gate of faith according to the biblical witness opens the door for the whole world, for all kinds of people, to be taken up in the covenant (Rom. 3:21–26; 4:12; Heb. 8:10–12).

Second, the principle of faith should make us humble in our (missionary) contacts with other people. Faith is something personal and moreover a gift of the Spirit. For that reason it is contrary to the essence of faith to force or to manipulate people. The development of faith demands space, time, and freedom to make a choice. Postmodern culture makes us especially aware of this specific essence of faith, because postmodern people don’t want to be forced in one or another direction. So the principle of sola fide fits in a certain way with this postmodern atmosphere. By humble and patient witnessing we will create openness for our college and university students, friends, and neighbors.

Third, because faith alone is enough, the possibility of a relationship of trust can be very attractive in a world of individualism, fear, uncertainty, high standards, many obligations, and a lot of loneliness. This is the one area in which we do not have to achieve but only surrender: in the encounter with God. This would be a great relief for many people. It would be a major loss if we were to replace the gospel of grace and faith with either a moral message full of obligations, as sometimes happens in orthodox circles, or in endless repeated calls to the impossible duty to realize God’s kingdom on earth, as sometimes happens in liberal theology. A Reformed view is far preferable!

Fourth, at the same time as an inevitable consequence, establishing this relationship by faith alone separates Christians from other religious efforts to restore the relationship with God. It does exclude them. This may not be very popular in our multireligious world, but the alternative is that we give people up to their own thinking and keep them away from the liberating principle of faith. In my view such an attitude may seem polite but would be cruel.

Last but not least, it is this personal relationship of mutual love that has the potential power—stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13)—to change and renew the whole of our thinking and acting and make us authentic. This mutual love became, for example, very clear in discussions of the Accra Confession. In its origin this confession arose from a fruit of spiritual life and worship, from personal obedience to the Lord and Christ-centered compassion for other people.

On the base of faith alone—one Spirit, one hope, and thus one God and Father (cf. Eph. 4:1–5)—we are closely connected with others worldwide and unified in diversity, members of God’s family and responsible for each other. This is also the principal basis for the Belhar Confession,
which works out the consequences of racial and culture divides related to social, political, and economic life.

The renewing power of personal faith and mutual commitment is very important for the missionary impact of every believer in our culture, where convictions often are measured by authenticity and by their consequences in daily life. Other people don't want to hear more explanations. They want to see more examples.

The principle of *sola fide* has far-reaching consequences for our attitude in this world of injustice and violence. The consequences of living by faith alone are that we have the right to fight for justice and protest violence, but we must always do so without doing injustice or using violence for ourselves. The way of the Lord is this: "not by strength and power, but by my Spirit it will happen" (Zech. 4:6). Living by faith alone often requires a humble attitude and preparation for suffering. At the same time it gives us hopeful hearts that we will conquer in Christ!

**Conclusion**

In the light of above we can conclude that these basic Biblical principles of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*, *tota Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide* have not lost their value. On the contrary we can be surprised once and again by their implications. In many ways they give Reformed people the possibility of living with an open mind in this world and operating with compassion and hope in this society. Well understood, they generate not only a strong connection with the Lord himself but with other people as well. These principles are essential for the coming of God's kingdom. As a consequence they should not be discarded as old-fashioned, but should be rethought time and again in a refreshing and fruitful way regarding present-day situations. They really remain living roots for living water.

**Notes**