Semper Reformanda as a Confession of Crisis

JASON A. GORONCY

This essay takes three aims: (i) to map in brief the theo-historical genesis of the semper reformanda aphorism; (ii) to consider that idea vis-à-vis the Reformed habit of confessing Jesus Christ; and (iii) to suggest one area where the witness of many Reformed communities today might call for urgent attention in the spirit of the semper.

Semper reformanda: Some Theo-Historical Particulars

There are, at the outset, a number of ways that the tradition has conceived the notion of semper reformanda. I will here note just six:

1. While there is general consensus that the idea of semper reformanda is not foreign to the ethos and instincts of the sixteenth century reformers, the etymological history of the reformanda sayings is somewhat disputed. Some have argued that their origins emerged from developments towards the close of the Dutch Nadere Reformatie, a claim bolstered by drawing attention to passages from Jacobus Koelman (who himself attributed the idea to his teacher Johannes Hoornbeeck) and from Koelman’s friend Jodocus van Lodensteyn. In 1678, Koelman, when describing the designation “Reformed,” rehearsed ideas that he had published in 1673; namely, that we must come to be called Reforming, and not only Reformed, so that we always must be Reforming if we want to be Reformed and be worthy of that name, because that is what we are attempting." The notion also appears in van Lodensteyn’s Beschouwinge van Zion [Contemplation of Zion], first published in 1674, where the relevant passage reads:

Such a person of understanding [i.e., one who was busy working toward restoration] would not have called the Reformed Church reformata, or reformed, but reformanda, or being reformed. What a pure church would that become that was always thus occupied? How precise in truth? How holy in practice? Evident here is a way of thinking about reformanda in terms of repairing "the ruins of the Church," as John Calvin would plead with Edward VI of England, the concern here being with the ecclesia's repentance rather than its inventiveness. Here, reformanda encapsulates a vision for restoring the purity of the church deformed by theology and practice back to some more fitting state. This interpretation of the reformata/reformanda aphorisms appears, in fact, more than a century before Koelman and van Lodensteyn in the work of the Italian reformer Girolamo Zanchi (Jerome Zanchius)—in, for example, his 1562 correspondence to Theodore Beza, and in his treatise De Reformacione Ecclesiarum based on verses from Isaiah 1. Concerning the latter, and after recalling that the work of reform is God's—i.e., is that action undertaken by God at a time and via a method of God's choosing—Zanchi proceeds to describe the mode of God's "most pure and most sincere" (purissima et sincerissima) reform as one of judgment, of the turning of God's hand against God's elect, of smelting away the dross and removing all the alloy (Isai.25). "Everything," he writes, "that is not according to the word of God [secundus Verbum Dei] is alloy." The "first in needing to be Reformed," Zanchi argues, is the Pope "who has first place in the church of Rome," and then, in addition, "everything else"—worship (religio, cultus), faith (fidem) and morals (mores), among other things, must be restored/reformed (reformanda) sicut ab initio, "as they were at first," until everything is "perspicuum" (transparent, clear). Only then can the church be truly called "reformed" (reformata): "A church that claims it is reformed (reformata), while retaining anything of papism," is not in truth "a city of faith." So understood, the eclesia reformata, was not, according to Zanchi, impossible in principle, although it was not easily obtained and would require constant vigilance. For Calvin, on the other hand, in whose writings the reformanda sayings themselves are absent, the idea is present not as a goal to be acquired (as it was for Zanchi) but as the description of an ongoing process of unshackling the church from liturgical, pastoral, and theological abuse, a process that could, to be sure, achieve an acceptable and maintainable measure. As abuse ridden and as deformed "among the ruins of Papism" as the church was, Calvin still hoped that it could be rebuilt.

2. This sense of reform as an ongoing process, as semper, as "a permanent condition of the Church's health," appears in a number of early sources: The Edict of Nantes in 1598, for example, signifies the National Synods of the French Reformed Church evidencing a "strong commitment to continuous reformation." Also, according to Theodor Mahlmann, the Lutheran theologian Friedrich Baldus argued, in 1610, that reform was an unremitting posture for the church to adopt, a position repeated among the Reformed in a plethora of revisions of seventeenth-century confessions of faith. A few decades later, in 1644, John Milton, in his eloquent tract Areopagitica, argued that "God is decreeing to begin some new and great period in his church, even to the reforming of reformation itself." The Westminster divines, in their Directory of Public Worship (1645), also spoke of God's call for "further reformation." The spirit of the semper in the reformanda aphorisms was not always met with welcome, however, even among the Reformed. For instance, the Synod of Privas (1612)—called amid bitter political struggles, division among nobles and among churches, and the rise to power within the church of bureaucratic hardliners such as Daniel Chamier—witnessed the practical end to a commitment to confessional development on the basis that such would in fact promote further destabilization and challenge to those who found themselves empowered on the winning side of debates. Unlike, for example, the Scots Confession (1560) which made plain that any church confession was strictly subordinate to Holy Scripture—that "interpretation or opinion of any theologian, Kirk, or council" which is found to be "contrary to the plain Word of God" is to be corrected by such and that such was expected to be a continual process undertaken by a listening church whose
fidelity was never to be directed to the Confession itself—the Confession
which was the fruit of the Synod of Privas, and which all pastors—Hugue-
not and other—were required to sign, “effectively closed off the possibility
of any further substantial change to the confession; hence, for all intents and
purposes, it brought to an end the previous commitment to the concept of
semper reformanda.” The oath begins as follows: “I, the undersigned, do
receive and approve the entire contents of the Confession of Faith of the
Reformed churches of this Kingdom, do promise to persevere in it to the
very end, and not to believe nor teach anything which does not conform
to it.” Measures which on the surface appear to be concerned to promote
unity and conciliation are, on closer inspection, “only part of a hard-line
position that tends more toward exclusivity than inclusiveness.” So Brian
Armstrong, reflecting on this period, describes “an official reversal of posi-
tion regarding continuing reformation”:

For the first fifty or more years the Huguenots considered it impor-
tant to revise the confession in the light of other confessional positions
and new insight into, and understanding of, Scriptural teaching. The hope was to forge an atmosphere of inclusiveness
in the Reformed world. At the beginning of the seventeenth
century, under the pressure of external threat to an established
church and under the scholastic methodology and precision
that emerged in the face of this new polemical orientation, there
was a gradual but steady move to affirm that their confessional
position was the only true and acceptable interpretation of God’s
truth. So it became an atmosphere in which definitive charges of
heresy could be made and applied. Such betrays a spirit not too unlike that which has for many yielded the
Westminster Confession, from 1690 onwards, as “a doctrinal test for min-
isters and office bearers.” Clearly, the understanding among the majority
of Reformed churches in the earlier centuries of the Reformed movements
of reformanda as restoration towards the church’s former or yet-to-come
purity discovers a markedly different accent in ensuing centuries when the
reformanda sayings “flowered and mutated in the hothouse of histori-
cal, theological, and devotional writing into an entire genus of aphorisms
that are given entirely different interpretations.” This development has
witnessed most of its growth since Karl Barth’s 1947 essay “Die Botschaft
von der Freien Gnade Gottes,” and his lecture given the following year on
“Das christliche Verständnis der Offenbarung.”

3. The reformanda aphorisms themselves function as something of a
confession that the church is in need of reform and that it can in no way
reform itself. True reform would happen, Calvin averred, when people
“look for the good which they desire from none but God,” confide in God’s
power, trust in God’s goodness, depend on God’s truth, and turn whole-
heartedly to God, resting on God with full hope, and by necessity resorting
to God. Reformation, in other words, is not, in the final analysis, in-house
repair work, as it were, but an action of God (Deus ipsa) who in the grace
of love’s judgment calls the church to renewed obedience and continuing
reformation through the “unchangeable and highest standard given in the
Scriptures.”

4. In the hands [sic] of God,

Scripture . . . builds the church up by breaking the church open,
and therefore in large measure by breaking the church down . . .
Scripture is as much a de-stabilizing feature of the life of
the church as it is a factor in its cohesion and continuity . . .
Through Scripture the church is constantly exposed to interrup-
tion. Being the hearing church is . . . the church’s readiness “that
its whole life should be assailed, convulsed, revolutionized and
reshaped.”

The Word, together with his undivided counterpart the Holy Spirit,
reveals, puts to death, makes alive, and leads. This is God’s way of reforming
the church, and is “at once the miracle and the tribulation of the Church,
for the Church is condemned by that which establishes it, and is broken in
pieces upon its foundations.” Again, Barth:

In order to be able to come about at all, in order to be born again
as a Christian church, Reformed doctrine needs the free, sharp
draught of the knowledge of the Word of God from the Scrip-
ture and the Spirit, “born” with the natural violence of a volca-
nic outburst, from the one-time unity of the Reformed church.

14. Ibid., 137.
15. Ibid., 138.
16. Burleigh, Church History of Scotland, 155.
Reformed “through the Word of God”: This is the original and proper meaning of the name we carry.23

Any reform of the church’s doctrine or worship or governance, just as everything else under heaven, is subject to interrogation with “the exact standard of the Word of God.”24 At its best, the Reformed project has encouraged the church to keep returning to Holy Scripture in order to discern its vocation described in light of the Word proclaimed therein. This has often involved hearing the command to repent of the godless banality and trivialization of its worship and to recover its nutrition in the Spirit’s gifts of Bible, font, and table; to reject self-veneration and be given over to service of the Word fleshed out in the living documents of congregations and thereby confess the eternal and living Word who breaks himself open to God’s people in new times and in new places.

5. Relatedly, while reformatorische Theologie is to be considered a “theology of permanent reformation,” this does not indicate a habit of “endless cycle of idea and action, endless invention, [and] endless experiment”25 for its own sake. Ecclesia semper reformanda is not ecclesia semper varianda. We might here recall Calvin’s final address to the Company of Pastors in Geneva wherein Calvin cautioned that while the pastors should continue the work of reforming the church’s worship, they should (at least according to Jean Pinant) modify nothing about Geneva’s additional ecclesial arrangements: “I pray you make no change, no innovation. People often ask for novelties. Not that I desire for my own sake out of ambition that what I have established should remain, and that people should retain it without wishing for something better, but because all changes are dangerous and sometimes hurtful.”26 Clearly, if Calvin is to be among our guides here, the idea of semper reformanda is not one that can simply be taken up by way of justifying the efforts of those calling for ecclesial modernization, a charge that Calvin himself had to ward off: “We are accused of rash and impious innovation, for having ventured to propose any change at all in the former state of the Church.”27

27. Ibid. 21:893–94. Also in Calvin, Letters, Part 4, 576.
28. Calvin, “Necessity of Reforming,” 185. Working in the sensitivity of Calvin’s wake but less anxious about unconstrained ideas than is the French lawyer, Michael Jinkins considers the notion of semper reformanda precisely in terms of “innovation,” defined as “the capacity to draw from the experience of ancient Christian communities and to adapt these lessons to new situations,” and as the “capacity to adapt and change

6. To regard semper reformanda as a description of the church’s perpetual posture during this time between the times is to regard it as a mode of witness (signa) to God’s eschatological promise, as “an event that keeps church and theology breathless with suspense, an event that infuses church and theology with the breath of life, a story that is constantly making history, an event that cannot be concluded in this world, a process that will come to fulfillment and to rest only in the Parousia of Christ.”28 To this note we shall return.

Semper reformanda: Confessing Christ

The Dutch missiologist Hendrik Kraemer attested that “Strictly speaking, one ought to say that the Church is always in a state of crisis and that its greatest shortcoming is that it is only occasionally aware of it. The Church,” he continued, “ought always to be aware of its condition of crisis on account of the abiding tension between its essential nature and its empirical condition.”29 This deeply Reformed instinct provides a fruitful platform for our thinking further about the notion of semper reformanda vis-à-vis the Reformed habit of confessing Christ, the subject to which we now turn.

Confession as response

Because the birth, witness, and end of the Christian community finds its decisive ground, content, and orientation in the life of one begotten of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, and raised from the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, the most responsible Christian theology grants priority to the question of who over that of how, and always seeks to answer the latter in terms of the former. We might understand Reformed confessions too as being foremost not about articulating a set of theological formulae—still less about justifying the church’s existence!30—rather than about taking up the particular invitation31 to participate in a movement of response, and

48

49
that principally to two very specific, and related, questions—"Who is Jesus Christ today?" and "What is he doing in the world?"

Christians ought to abandon the temptation to build uncritically and unrepentantly on foundations laid yesterday, must refuse to live today on the interest amassed from yesterday's capital, and instead take up a perpetual posture of beginning anew at the beginning, of "freely granting the free God room to dispose at will over everything that [human beings] may already have known, produced, and achieved," and to submit to God's care, judgment, and disposing of history's continuance. This is not a call to discard that which the community has heard before, to of necessity substitute past hearings with new ones, or to build on foundations of our own making. It is, rather, a call to risk taking seriously the transcendent Word who breaks afresh into our state of affairs in continuously new ways, and who calls for the hard work of discernment and interpretation upon the horizon of the present. Far from treating the Reformed tradition akin to a museum piece, the church is a summons to the church catholic to be what Alasdair MacIntyre names a "living tradition," the virtuous bearer of a "continuous" and "socially embodied argument" about what it is and about the goods that constitute its life.

**Responding to the Word**

However else we may wish to define the Christian community, it is a community distinguished by its being addressed by and its making public of this Word who is gospel. As Barth asserts, "What always makes [the church] the church, what distinguishes it from any other fellowship of faith and spirit and distinctive orientation and sacrament, is the vital link between this very specific hearing and making heard, the Word which it receives and passes on." The church, in other words, is a community continually brought into being by and for God's audacious speech-claim from which its concrete existence hangs and about which it is compelled to speak. The latter is the church's principal theological task—to examine its public confession in light of what it has heard (principally in Scripture but not only there), to enquire as to the extent that the address that takes place in Christian preaching is congruous with the revelation that engendered the prophetic promise which has to be continually apprehended by the Church, in faith and in the obedience of faith—it already is—the Word of God.

God's first summons to a teaching community, therefore, is "to hear, that is, to listen to Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture." The provisionality and sinfulness of the church means that its hearing of and participation in God's address is always imperfect and uncertain. It therefore carries the skepticism of faith towards everything it speaks and produces, aware that its responsiveness is always a less-than-perfect correspondence to the divine speech that elicits it. Such hearing indubitably in no way guarantees that the community will not slip into idolatry—"from obedience into disobedience, from the doing of the Word of God into the doing of human will or fancy"—but it does signify that the community's principal and continuous task is to hear, to respond to, and to come under the judgment of the divine address.

**Responding in tempore et in loco**

The church is not unique among creaturely societies in its need to make decisions, without a spirit of rigidity or exclusiveness, about the paths on which it should walk in the world. Such decisions are often fraught with conflict and complexity but, as Dag Hammarskjöld reminded a gathering at the Royal Albert Hall in London in 1953, "No institution can become effective unless it is forced to wrestle with the problems, the conflicts, and the tribulations of real life." It is the church's dangerous claim, however, that its judgments and confessions—its own unique wrestlings—are not

---


made entirely ex creatio but represent a community under the lordship of the Holy Spirit who goesad response to the Word in the array of socio-historical contexts in which hearing is effected. A community's responsible witness, therefore, calls for something more (and certainly no less!) than simply for its best minds to be at work, and something more than simply repeating what it has heard and spoken in times past, even though responsible listening will not show disdain to either resource. This means, among other things, that responses to the Word in tempore et in loco from communities at once ecumenical, catholic, and historical will "not support any compulsion towards homogeneity which subjects all churches to the same self-understanding and expects an identical orientation in doctrine and life." We can expect, therefore, that faith's confession will be characterized by continuity and departure, both of which are fruit of the hearing of the one Word of God, hearing which admits a plurality "as wide as that already found in the biblical witness." Another way of conceiving this idea is to think about confession as commentary. As the community hears the Word, it remains inadequate to simply repeat biblical texts. It can point to such texts, but it must also speak in its own words and with the accent of its own time. Confession, of course, is much more difficult than parroting, and the risks of mis-speaking and of speaking out of turn are manifestly heightened. But there can be no other way for the community made new in the event of hearing and speaking, the event which rescues the church from being a museum. Conceived otherwise, freedom threatens metamorphosis into confessionalism, and the gospel into an ideology; moves which, for the Reformed at least, are oxymoronic because their project is not concerned to defend shibboleths, or to erect systems, or to police boundaries of interpretation, but, in a spirit of self-criticism (apart from which its work would be a "nonsense (or worse)" and of faith, to call the world's one catholic community back to its ground and raison d'être in the insubordinate Word of God.

42. Weinrich, "Openness and Worldliness," 4.
43. Continuity here does not imply something static, as if past hearings become dogmas that are then either apotheosized or replaced entirely by a new authority. Rather, as Michael Polanyi has argued in The Tacit Dimension, knowing is always embodied, always relies on personal commitments—dogmas can never be wholly discarded or examined in abstraction from previously-formed judgments, but are lived in and reshaped by the reality with which we engage and in which history is neither lost nor determinative.
44. Weinrich, "Openness and Worldliness," 5.
45. Williams, Resurrection, 53.
If, where, and when the community deems that such revisions are required, such will most responsibly take place, as I have already intimated, in the most respectful conference with the ancient catholic faith—with that which has been heard and confessed before, semper, ubique, ab omnibus, always, everywhere, and by all believers—and with the significant risk that a listening and speaking faith demands in the world. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, for example, properly makes plain that the call upon “pardoned sinners” is not to form ecclesiastical bubbles which isolate and insulate them from the “sinful world,” but rather to “testify in the midst” (Barmen III) of such while resisting every temptation to “become a propaganda weapon of a political movement” or “a society for the propagation of views about the next world.” The “free, grateful service to [God’s] creatures” (Barmen II), in other words, is undertaken by a community profoundly aware of its own worldliness, and intensely on guard against any hint of “artificial opposition to the ‘world.’”  

With Michael Weinrich, we might identify three possible ways for the church to understand its own worldliness vis-à-vis the world: The first concerns the church tending towards “self-dissolution . . . into the secular ‘world,’” properly appropriating “the self-understanding of the ‘world’ as its own,” acknowledging the maturity of the “world” and establishing with such “genuine agreement of the Gospel” so that the church “attains complete solidarity with the ‘non-religious’ world precisely where freedom is promoted.” By so doing, the church advocates for freedom—wherever it is sought and no matter how secularized its expression—on the basis of the Gospel, whereby “helping the ‘world’ which is trapped in the problem of self-explanation, discover the necessary blessing of a total meaning which the church is to preserve from all ideological petrifications in which the spreading secularization as the specific danger for a society that is considered in principle to be part of the world, inconceivable apart from it and sharing with it creation’s distress, groans replete with hope, and the suffering and abysmal alienation associated with God’s hiddenness. The church is “not called to demonstrate the realization of allegedly steadfast principles and maintainable values but to the continually new search to live the humanity of human beings in solidarity with the world and its needs.” It does, however, see “the ‘world’ which it shares with all other people in a particular light”—a light which testifies that neither it nor the world are self-explanatory; that witnesses to God’s reconciliation of the world to himself in Christ (2 Cor 5:19); which offers an explanation of the “world” which the “world” can never accept on its own terms and which contradicts the world’s inescapable distress because it sees and hears in Jesus Christ God’s promise that humanity is no longer bounded by “the nothingness with which death threatens us.” And because the church “trusts this promise it has to witness to the ‘world’ in word and deed that it is not the distress that is the true motor of all worldly events. Rather,” Weinrich continues, “in the midst of the doubt and distress it confesses that the ‘world’ has not been abandoned to itself but has an opposite that is turned toward it, which has combined itself with the destiny of the ‘world’ in a simply salvific way so that in all its distress the ‘world’ can create courage and hope out of that.” At the same time, it “shares with the ‘world’ the unavoidable embarrassment of not being able to prove its particular interpretation of reality as either generally evident or at all compelling.”  

The Christ who comes “clothed with his gospel” impedes the idolatrous pretensions of religious habits and exposes them for what they are, admonishing and announcing to the church that insofar as it exists as a visible institution it exists as and among every other sinful entity in the world, with no claims of privilege upon God or upon God’s movements and activities in the world. So Weinrich:

It is certainly not given to the church . . . to demonstrate convincingly to the “world” that it speaks of more than the strange self-prescription of a Baron von Münchhausen, who pulled himself out of the quagmire by his own hair. The church is and remains

48. Conway, Nazi Persecution of the Churches, 84.
50. Ibid., 8-9.
51. Ibid., 9.
travels not without significant commendation, however. It is, after all, the community of God’s election. In such is its freedom from all particularity of express forms, including cultural ones. Moreover, the divine election recalls that is the content of the community’s proclamation activities—the Word that the earthly-historical body of Christ is constituted by the same event this is noted by the Dutch missiologist Christiaan Hoekendijk:

of God “visibly and concretely actxmlised.”” One important implication of

59. Barth, CD III/2, 616.

Weinrich’s use of the word “witness” here recalls that the community travels not without significant commendation, however. It is, after all, the community of God’s election. In such is its freedom from all particularity of express forms, including cultural ones. Moreover, the divine election recalls that the earthly-historical body of Christ is constituted by the same event that is the content of the community’s proclamation activities—the Word of God “visibly and concretely actualised.” One important implication of this is noted by the Dutch missiologist Christiaan Hoekendijk:

We should be aware of a temptation to take the Church itself too seriously, to invite the Church to see itself as well-established, as God’s secure bridgehead in the world, to think of itself as a beatus possidentes [a blessed possessor] which, having what others do not have, distributes its possession to others, until a new company of possidentes is formed. We reach here a crucial issue. It is common to think of evangelism, to think of the apostolate, as a function of the Church. Credo ecclesiam apostolicam is often interpreted as: “I believe in the Church, which has an apostolic function.” Would it not be truer to make a complete turn-over here, and to say that this means: I believe in the Church, which is a function of the Apostolate, that is, an instrument of God’s

60. Hoekendijk, Church Inside Out, 38.

Hoekendijk is correct, moreover, to aver that “Church-centric missionary thinking is bound to go astray, because it revolves around an illegitimate centre.” The church, as “a function of the Apostolate,” is reconstituted and reformed anew only by the interruptive movements of Word and Spirit is a central insight of the Reformed, both in the sixteenth century and in the radical witness of the dialectical theology of the twentieth century—Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei.

That reformanda is coupled with semper is, partly, a confession that the confessional community witnesses amidst present concrete conflicts and challenges and is not frenzied to repristinate debates of earlier centuries. It is the community, in other words, elected to exercise a responsibility to hear and to witness to Christ in tempore et in loco. This singular call is bifurcated by efforts to defend static definitions of particular ecclesial traditions, efforts often motivated by modern quests for identity but which, when apotheosized, raise significant barriers for the witness of a community which is ecumenical and catholic. Put otherwise, such endeavors denote that the community has little theological sense of its own time and eschatological way; i.e., the sense that it always confesses more than it has been or than it can be. Such concerns, moreover, can signify an effort to “make a name for ourselves” (Gen ii:4), and may also betray a misjudged conviction that fidelity to and participation in the movement of divine election calls for seeking salvation via the restoration of one’s tradition (of which Scripture and the interpretation thereof is a part) and its particular social embodiments. Such would signify a community witnessing to itself rather than to God’s soteriological achievement in Jesus Christ, a witness truly of interest to the “world.”

Moreover, as we shall have reason to further develop below, the community confesses Jesus Christ only ever as “a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal” but never there, always aware of the temptation to trust in golden calves along the way but pressed to make plain that that which it believes “was from the beginning,” is the “word of life” which it has heard with its own ears and seen with its own eyes and touched with
its own hands (1 John 1:1). This ecclesiology of journey is powerfully articulated in The Basis of Union for the Uniting Church in Australia, most explicitly in Paragraph 3. Through that “most fundamental Paragraph in the whole Basis of Union,” the Uniting Church confesses that “the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” is not a “series of human aspirations” but is built upon and emerges out of a life and history given to it by God, namely Jesus’ own life and history. This gift—who he is and what God does in him—is the content of the community’s confession and witness; acts which, because of the nature and scope of God’s claim upon all creation in Christ, extend to the entire cosmos. The ecumenical body of Christ is called by God to witness to God’s will for all creation which is life with creation’s catholic Lord in whom, through whom, and for whom all things exist, hold together, and come into God’s promised shalom (Col 1:16-17, 20). This is to recall, among other things, that God’s pilgrim people live both by and towards promise. It is also to confess that here among all the communities of the world is one which would stray into utter disorientation were it not for One who “feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments,” and for the gift of the Spirit given “in order that it may not lose the way.” It is to offer no claim that it represents God in the world, nor that God has entrusted God’s work to it in toto, nor that it in any way mediates between God and the world. Rather, it bears witness to the fact that the content of God’s good news is the mediatorship that God himself provides in Jesus Christ.

Confession as eschatological event

Insofar as it properly belongs under the rubric of the third article, the church is a movement open to God’s future, a movement without sense apart from eschatology. As Michael Owen has observed, “The meaning of Jesus Christ is not exhausted in ecclesiastical realities, but is to be fully expounded only in terms of the universal eschatological reconciliation and renewal. The Church’s function is to serve that. Its nature is to be described in terms of its participation in the process and anticipation of the end of it.” Its branches might extend to the present, but its roots exist in the future it mediates to the world, and so its life is “shot through and through with tension and crisis.” Consequently, the church must ever be aware of its own provisionality, its transitoriness, and its imperfection, disregard for which threatens to turn a movement of the Spirit’s work into a series of idolatrous sects whose resources will, with little doubt, in turn be exhausted by efforts at self-preservation. This reality informs the content of the community’s witness regarding the radical discontinuity between Jesus and the world, that belonging to Jesus disrupts all other modes of belonging.

To confess, therefore, is to choose a way of being which is both continuous and discontinuous with one’s history, a way that confesses with saints past but also confesses as if for the first time. This is not to abandon or to disregard the past (for that too is God’s gift) but it is to confess that creation is not oriented to return to it, that creation is being pulled forward by the Spirit of the Father into the promises of life with him who was crucified before the foundation of the world. He who promises to be present as Emmanuel is ever the coming one who eludes our capture, and whose being-with-us is characterized by an invitation to follow, to seek, and to love. To confess, in other words, remains an act of hope, faith’s broadcast love. To confess, therefore, remains an act of hope, faith’s broadcast love. To confess, therefore, is to choose a way of being which is both continuous and discontinuous with one’s history, a way that confesses with saints past but also confesses as if for the first time. This is not to abandon or to disregard the past (for that too is God’s gift) but it is to confess that creation is not oriented to return to it, that creation is being pulled forward by the Spirit of the Father into the promises of life with him who was crucified before the foundation of the world. He who promises to be present as Emmanuel is ever the coming one who eludes our capture, and whose being-with-us is characterized by an invitation to follow, to seek, and to love. To confess, in other words, remains an act of hope, faith’s broadcast love.

The temptation to capture revelation as some fixed given, as “a thing,” is precisely what the formula ecclesia reformata semper reformanda seeks to safeguard against. The formula is itself a confession that the church is never more or less than a creature of an ever-new event of God’s disruptive achievement in Jesus Christ, a “happening” which cannot be fixed to a date on this world’s calendar but is, as Rudolf Bultmann has argued, “always present (in proclamation),” always that which “demands our decision,” always “in actuality… a beginning for us, whether we want it to be or not.” The “omnitemporal event” of Christ marks the end of secular time. To hear the Word of God thus is to hear “a word which is addressed to me, as kerygma, as a proclamation” which, precisely because it is God’s act, precludes verification. This puts a nail in the coffin of both evangelical fundamentalism (with its attempts to locate certainty in a fixed dogma or set of writings, the Protestant equivalent to Rome’s inerrant magisterium) and of liberal historicism (with its efforts to deify human experience), and
brings about both an existential and epistemological crisis while at the same time functioning as a critique of any suggestion that the present possession of the Spirit represents history's telos.

The event of Christ pronounces a judgment against attempts to universalize the concrete relation between God and human persons, or those efforts to offer neutral and observable comment. "God is not a given entity" but remains radically transcendent, *sui generis* in action, and resistent to objectification.71 As J. Louis Martyn avers, God's event in Jesus Christ "is not visible, demonstrable, or provable in the categories and with the means of perception native to 'everyday' existence . . . The inbreak of the new creation is itself revelation, apocalypse." Faith alone knows, although can never grasp, this transfiguration of the vista of history, the aftermath of which is the loss of "spiritual stiffness and a pious know-all manner," is "always a preparation for emergency."72

To gather our thoughts: The call *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* is a call, like that advanced to Kierkegaard's Abraham, to the risky work of staking one's entire being upon what one believes one has heard from the coming God, a word ready to fall only on today's soil, and which eludes all efforts of capture. It is a call to stake all upon the claim that "the nerve centre of the design and the firm ground which gives us confidence concerning our own destiny"73 is solely the promise made to "those who see its logical absurdity"—that "Christ must reign."74 So Bar­men's attestation that "in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order," the church is "solely [Christ's] property," living and wanting to live "solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance" (Barmen III). For a community to embody the spirit of *semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* is, at least, to construct its life and doctrine "in the light of its future goal." Eschatology, therefore, "should not be its end, but its beginning."75 It is to herald the righteousness of the coming God—the indivisible relationship between eschatology and ethics, of hope vis-à-vis the imminence of judgment, the characterization of which is not only the freedom of being-as-responsible

73. Sauter, *Protestant Theology at the Crossroads*, 14, 59, 64.
the embarrassing service of Jesus, and that not for God's sake but solely for the sake of the world. It is a community that risks the refusal to participate in the politics of violence and in the economies of human indignity. It is a community that manifests God's orientation for every part of creation. It is a community that ventures out "beyond the security of objective certainties, [and] worldly possessions, [and] finite aspirations and society's approval." It is a community seeking toalienate itself from any notion that displays inane optimism about the church in se. It is a community that risks even its life with God so that it might "become contemporary with Christ." It is a community that has the occupation of its hope precisely in the shattering of human certitude and in the call to witness to the claim that one "can exist authentically only in the surrender of certainty and by the grace of God." It is a community, therefore, that is always learning how to fail, always discovering and unveiling its uneven record, always losing the taste for "ecclesiastical earnestness" which can only ever truncate the truth and which will sooner or later lead to heresy.

I suggested earlier that the community's principal and ongoing task is to hear God's address. "But," as Barth reminds us, "it must listen in such a way that its whole life is put in question. It must listen in a readiness that its whole life should be assailed, convulsed, revolutionised and reshaped." Its continual return to this "starting point" in faithfulness, gratitude, and with regard for all that it has hitherto received from the hand of the Lord, means that it is "radically prepared for the fact that to-day, to-morrow and the day after the whole of its treasure will again be enlightened and illuminated, assessed and weighed by the Word of God." In view here is a community for whom the event of divine self-exposure to destruction "for the sake of history's deliverance from destruction" is determinative for its own life, and provides the pattern for its own witness in this time between times. In view here is a community which recognizes as Lord one unisolated "against the catastrophe and boundless sorrow which would be creation's devastation and time's annihilation," one who risks losing history in its entirety through the dereliction of the beloved Son in whom "all things hold together" (Col 1:17). Such a community recognizes that its participation in the missio dei is always accompanied by repentance and transfiguration, by an awareness that it itself is a community under judgment, "a community perceptibly in process of transformation away from exclusivity and uncriticised patterns of power." It is a community delighting in the freedom of existing for others only. Consequently, its witness is "always a witness of resistance to the status quo in politics, economics, and all society. It is a witness of resurrection from death," a reminder that the event par excellence of the new creation—namely, the resurrection of the dead Jesus—generates a movement and ethic undetermined by that which is passing away and determined by what is to come. This is to "constantly risk death—through execution, exile, imprisonment, persecution, defamation, or harassment—at the behest of the rulers of this age. Yet those who do not resist the rulers of the present darkness are consigned to a moral death, the death of their humanness. That, of all the ways of dying, is the most ignominious."

The confessing community is called to lose faith in present arrangements, to be entirely undaunted by "what the world calls possible," and to trust instead in the completely irresponsible impossibilities which "exist first on God's lips" and in God's imagination. As the community journeys the infrequently-trodden path away from the centers of imperial power and towards the embarrassing outskirts of Jerusalem and its public scorn it is given the kind of freedom to be the light of the world and the city on the hill of which its Lord speaks, the kind of freedom characteristic of the Holy Spirit unconstrained by the "protective guardianship" of the status quo of establishment. Such journeys are never free of cost; neither is the political and ecclesiastical dead hand of authoritarianism that would tame the Spirit in the name of "orthodoxy" free of such. Like the dogmatic task itself, the quest for existence before and in God requires that the subjects learn "some sort of dispossession, the constant rediscovery and critique of the myth of the self as owner of its perceptions and positions." The truth, as Rowan Williams reminds us, "requires loss, self-displacement, a never-ending 'adjustment,'" a move "away from the illusions of rivalry," and the sacramental practice of "relinquishing the fantasy that the work of Christ is 'resigned' into our hands." As Williams would reflect elsewhere:

If we had to choose between a Church tolerably confident of what it has to say and seeking only for effective means of saying

80. Rae, Kierkegaard and Theology, 180.
81. Barth and Bultmann, Letters, 92.
82. Barth, CD 1/2, 808; cf. Ernst, Multiple Echo, 221.
83. Barth, CD 1/2, 804. See also 809–10.
84. Lewis, Between Cross and Resurrection, 298.
85. Ibid., 298.
it, and a Church constantly engaged in an internal dialogue and critique of itself, an exploration to discover what is central to its being. I should say that it is the latter which is the more authent­ic—a Church which understands that part of what it is offering to humanity is the possibility of living in such a mode. What the Church "has to say" is never a simple verbal message: it is an invitation to entrust your life to a certain vision of the possibilities of humanity in union with God. And to entrust yourself in this way is to put your thinking and experience, your reactions and your initiatives daily into question, under the judgment of the central creative memory of Jesus Christ, present in his Spirit to his community.  

The missiological implications are obvious—the good news is shared with the explicit awareness of its strangeness to us, of its being entirely un­bound to our understanding. To preach the gospel, therefore, is to experi­ence a profound letting go, an unmastering, dispossession. It is to experience time.”® Even such a community-in-diaspora is always betraying its “exodus culture,” is always a description of the character of a community en route, of pilgrims “journeying through the midst of time.” Such a community-in-diaspora is always betraying its “exodus culture,” is always willing to travel “away from the old institutions”®® and fixed abodes. It lives an “eschatological existence,” thrust into “an unprecedented history” of free people and into a “continuous risky adventure with always hazardous improvisations.” Insofar as this is true, its life manifests the act of God’s creation liberated from the oppression of worlds too tamed and is called into an open and risk-charged history with unbridled horizons. Only a people who are open toward this future are “up to date,” take a realistic position among all the facts, and deserve to be called “sanguine.”

God’s “wandering people”®® are no continuing city and have no last­ing possession, “no finality in [their] institutional life.”® They are those for whom the paradox articulated in the theologia crucis is inescapable—the verbum crucis which alone makes life intelligible, and which “should give us pause when we are tempted to go a-whoring after those delicately balanced systems of philosophical theology that academic teachers offer us from time to time.”®® People on pilgrimage travel light, are awake to the truth that their strength lies in the knowledge that they are, in principle, weak; that they are not “called for [their] own sake or to develop a particular splendour which all too quickly tempts [them] toward a problematic self-consciousness.” A pilgrim people live without “any special authorization or qualifications” that can be summoned up over against the world in order to obtain “a special self-consciousness.” A pilgrim people is not “an institution of salvation” which has “at its disposal means of grace that it can simply distribute.”®® Rather, as Ben Myers has noted, it is:

the most vulnerable of all communities, roaming through the world with no place of its own, suspended over the abyss of nonbeing, upheld solely by a Word that calls it continually into being. It is a church whose identity lies outside itself, whose institutional continuity is not a possession but an eschatologi­cal promise . . . Without a time, without a place. The church of Jesus Christ is the most fragile of all institutions, since its own constitution (so to speak) strictly prohibits any attempt to win for itself institutional security and continuity . . . [T]o confess is to venture the risk of obedience. To confess is to stand exposed before the strangeness of the one who calls.  

To confess is to put “safety last,”®® to take up the sole vocation of the Word of God wherein there is neither norm nor ideal nor principle from which preconceived speech can be derived. To confess is to abandon all pre­sumption of God’s mind, to disown all commandeering of privilege in God’s economy, to patiently abstain from claiming precognition of the judgment of God’s Word, to continually risk the judgment of God’s Word, to esteem the autonomy and freedom of God’s will, to risk declaring in word and deed the grace who encounters us (1 John 1:1).  

94. Hoekendijk, Church Inside Out, 158. We must be careful not to say that the diaspora community must always travel "away from the old institutions" lest we fix the form of the church in advance. Barth’s caution against radicalism applies here. See Barth, Romans, 525; cf. Tillich, Protestant Era, 162.
95. Hoekendijk, Church Inside Out, 161–63.
96. A phrase borrowed from Käsemann, Wandering People of God.
97. McCaughey, Commentary, 41.
98. MacKinnon, Church of God, 95.
100. Myers, "In His Own Strange Way," 40, 41.
That the church in the West may be witnessing the collapse of the Constantinian arrangement in which the Reformed have so deeply invested occasions the opportunity to reconsider its relationship vis-à-vis the State, a reconsideration demanded moreover by the gospel's eschatological character. Certainly, a community marked by a determination to be sustained by God's Word alone will be a community that risks dismantling the old alliances between throne (or parliament) and altar. It will become an "unreliable ally" (Barth) for every political system because to be church is to be engaged in ongoing renegotiation about practices and their fitness to the Gospel in unreliable circumstances. It will be a community, therefore, which discourages all "stupid allegiance to political authority as if that were service to the church and, a fortiori, to God," and therefore a community that risks radical dissent from all current arrangements, Constantinian or otherwise. Such dissent is an indication not only that the stakes are high, but also that human achievement has, as Davis McCaughey reminds us, a "transitory character" about it. "The great weakness of all ideologies," he writes, "is that they are utopian and self-righteous," a reality about which rises the question concerning the fallenness of principalities and powers, fallenness which is conjunctive with but not dependent upon or derivative of humanity's renunciation of life in the sheer gift of God's Word who is not bound to any "system" and who acts to undo the scandal that recalcitrance has fashioned, to announce his sole lordship over all things uninitiated by power." Indeed, a project like the Reformed's is, after all, essentially forged under its assumptions, atmosphere, and protection undergo criticism not will that the world go to the dogs—Nulla salus extra mundum—"There is no salvation outside the world." I have written elsewhere in support of the church's positive contribution to civic life, a contribution that acknowledges the State as a power ordained by God, and that affirms public service and even the dignity of political office which, though habitually debased, can remain an expression of God's gift and calling. Certainly, I have no qualms with the Reformed instinct to perceive both the law and the gospel as expressions of divine grace. I do believe, however, that realities about the State and the Church are not simply transferable, that there are responsibilities of government that are incompatible with service of Jesus Christ, that the Christian community, unlike the State, is, for example, called to operate "without human force and by God's Word alone," and, with de Gruchy, that "creative infidelity and sterile fidelity ultimately amount to the same thing—a failure to hear the liberating and life-giving Word in relation to our own historical context." There is a conflict to be named here, a conflict that alone makes both history and the Christian life intelligible, and that if avoided empties the Word of God of its free and gracious character, creating a crisis incomparable with any whose origins lie in this world, and that thrusts the church into a new situation before God's seat of judgment. It is a crisis especially for those who hanker after a secure life, a kind of stumflieles Gebiet ("invulnerable area") in the world—whether it be in the form of ecclesiastical establishment, or of philosophical, constitutional and/or institutional guarantees such as threaten to sabotage the community's prophetic and apostolic character by blasphemously envisioning it as an "embodiment of an ultimate security."

106. Schillebeeckx, Church, 12.
108. The Augsburg Confession, 28.
109. De Gruchy, Liberating Reformed Theology, 73.
Such a move only encourages "a ground for boasting rather than an opportunity for presence" and a status at pains to ensure "a counterfeit security rather than a way of assuring that there shall be no withdrawal from the actualities of human life." More scandalously, such a flight to security signals "a withdrawal from accepting the peril and the promise of the Incarnation"; namely, the call to live "an exposed life" before God, one "stripped of the kind of security that tradition, whether ecclesiological or institutional, easily bestows." Such exposure characterizes equally the epistemic precariousness and necessary incompleteness of faith's orientation, a situation that invites people of faith to grasp towards what—or, more properly, towards him whom—they seek to know. Faith lives not on abstract principles but in, dependent upon, and oriented towards the mysterium Christi in which we are deprived of the "sort of security that we tend uncritically to associate with a dependence for which we claim ultimacy." Here, as Donald MacKinnon avers, we are left asking questions in a process of interrogation that is partly, though not entirely, self-interrogation, to which we see no easy end; but this may be as it is because the mysteries that set our inquiring in motion have their authority over us, thus continually to disturb our minds, only because they do touch what is ultimate, which is at once within and yet wholly beyond our comprehension.

Such ceaseless vacillation, the irresolution between finding and fashioning, calls for a mode of unremitting receptivity to, dependence upon, and reformation by the Word—Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei—witness to whom, in the inconspicuous reality of God's self-giving, is the raison d'être for this most idiosyncratic of communities. For such a community to compromise or abandon fidelity to this vocation is to invite "mistrust, repudiation, [and] contempt even if it seeks to justify that infidelity by reference to historical necessity or even pastoral opportunity." Against the "unyielding commitment" of "ecclesiological fundamentalism" that, apprehensive at the prospect of institutional death and radical alteration, gropes for "a return to a seemingly unequivocal set of credal standards," practices, or causes which, it is hoped, might "justify" its position vis-à-vis the world, the church is given "only one identity that theologically enshrouds its entire existence from birth to death"—namely, the Word of God by which it is birthed through the waters of baptism and by which it is oriented through the proclamation activities of table and pulpit where the ecclesia via media hears the Word afresh and is commissioned for its strange service in the world, service fulfilled precisely by being true to its own self as the creature of the living Word and thereby confronting the world, its principalities and powers, with the truth concerning its own nature and destiny. Only when the church is "the church"—i.e., a people who embrace life in the world under the judgment of the divine Word—might the world be given a vision of an alternative way of being that recognizes the necessity for repentance and that looks forward to the kairos of the Word's coming again.

111. Ibid., 33, 34.
114. MacKinnon, Stripping of the Altars, 9, 23, 60.

Always Being Reformed

Challenges and Prospects for the Future of Reformed Theology

EDITED BY
David H. Jensen

©PICKWICK Publications · Eugene, Oregon