

Epilogue

Heleen Zorgdrager

Sustained discernment has always been a guiding principle of Reformed theology.¹ Every generation needs to revisit the confessions and declarations of the Reformed tradition and to live them out in response to the challenges of the present. To discern how the church shall bear witness to Christ today, contextual self-explanation and critical self-reflection, as a recalibration of one's basic view and attitude in light of scripture and tradition, are paramount. It is accompanied by the belief, deeply engrained in Reformed identity, that the social, political, and cultural context of every church is acknowledged as an important factor in the way discernment takes place.²

In this volume, the authors have undertaken the task of discernment in a faithfully committed and academically inspiring way, giving voice to the questions of their times, their local and regional contexts, and to the faith experiences of people of different continents. The focus on contemporary issues within a theological/ecclesial tradition and in specific geographical contexts is what makes this collection of essays both unique and valuable. There is a shared endeavor to articulate Christian faith and the calling of the church as relevant to conflicts and processes of societal polarization in which the churches and its members are actually involved.³ The variety of engagements from different disciplines (political theology, sociology of religion, historical theology, missiology, queer and postcolonial studies, etc.) makes for a rich and varied engagement with a complex subject matter. Authors do not shy away from addressing the inconvenient but unavoidable self-critical question: How do churches and theologies themselves play an active role in processes of polarization? It has

1 See *Proceedings of the 26th General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches*, Leipzig, Germany, 29 June–7 July, 2017, “Appendix 9a, Concept Paper: Theology. Taking Up the ‘Unfinished Agenda’ of the Reformation” (Hannover: World Communion of Reformed Churches, 2017), 240.

2 Pieter Vos, “Introduction,” 10.

3 We should note here that the essays were written before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, which increased existing inequalities, and fueled polarizations in local and global contexts. The pandemic stressed the urgency for theology to engage with realities of polarization and to rethink and actualize the church's calling for peace, reconciliation and the integrity of creation in the midst of crisis. Common theological reflection by Reformed scholars was undertaken in the World Communion of Reformed Churches' process “Discerning, Confessing, and Witnessing in the Time of COVID-19 and Beyond,” <https://wcrch.ch/require> (accessed November 13, 2021).

turned out, already in the IRTI conference in Amsterdam, 2019, that at the heart of all deliberations the fundamental question arises: how is the ‘other’ seen and related to in our basic views and life attitudes, and which concepts, notions, or approaches can help to (re)discover the horizon of a new ‘we,’ a new understanding of common humanity, and the common good?

1 Theology of Retrieval and of Liberation

The chapters contain a wealth of constructive proposals and new imaginations in the ongoing work of Reformed theology. We try to gather the harvest and identify some trends.

About half of the chapters examine a particular contemporary polarizing situation. The other half draw out lines and trajectories from classic Reformed doctrines such as baptism, Christology, sanctification, divine election, covenant, church polity, and vocation. The authors use the resources of Reformed theology to further understand the progressive dynamics of polarization and to interpret it in theological and ethical categories. They acknowledge that the Reformed tradition has often contributed to polarization and its resulting violence and suffering. Interestingly, in many chapters it is felt that more is needed than the classical concepts to theologically counter dynamics of polarization. Concepts and inspirations are also derived from the broader ecumenical tradition, from contemporary philosophy, from Jewish sources, and/or from diverse cultural and religious traditions that continue to serve as sources of wisdom in African or Asian contexts. Authors of this volume show a shared awareness that the ‘classical’ contents and approaches need continuously to be reconfigured, recontextualized, and creatively actualized in order to speak meaningfully and prophetically to the context.

The volume clearly demonstrates the fact that there is ‘unfinished business’ of the Reformation.⁴ Theologians can engage with this in different ways. On the one hand, there are themes and insights of the Reformation that we have not fully ‘made good on’ and that deserve renewed attention and study. This is being done in a ‘theology of retrieval.’⁵ J. Todd Billings has defined the approach of retrieval as “hearing the voices of the past in such a way that they are allowed to exceed and overcome the chatter of the present.”⁶ On the other

4 *Proceedings of the 26th General Council*, 239.

5 Martha L. Moore-Keish, *Reformed Theology* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020), 13.

6 J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2011), 2.

hand, Reformed theology is driven by the urgent need to “read the signs of the times,” to focus on the lived experiences of oppressed people and to have theological reflection explicitly governed by the norm of human flourishing, or, as it is increasingly recognized, of planetary flourishing. This ‘liberationist approach to theology’⁷ usually includes interdisciplinary conversation with social sciences and humanities, and applying the lens of postcolonial and/or feminist hermeneutics to renew and transform a theological tradition that is still shaped by Western and androcentric paradigms.

2 Classical Reformed Notions Reread and Retrieved

With regard to the first approach, the pathway of retrieving and unpacking the notions of Reformation theology for our times, we can ask: Which notions do the authors attend to and which constructive proposals do they bring to the fore in addressing the issue of polarization?

Well-known and powerful Reformed notions of *covenant*, *justice*, and *vocation* are in the background of David Fergusson’s contribution. He proposes transposing impulses of classical Reformed social theology for today, at a time of rising populism. Looking at long-established, ‘national’ churches in the West-European context, he actualizes notions such as *politics as a vocation*, the *stand for democracy*, and an awareness of the dangers of *nationalism*. They are retrieved in a critical way. The author accounts carefully for the learning process the churches have gone through in their histories. From a different perspective, that of World Christianity, David Daniels also accounts for the learning process of the churches. With Moten’s concept of *xenogenerosity*, developed in black studies, Daniels illuminates how in the Dort debates there were already currents who voiced an understanding of the link between baptism and manumission (being released from slavery), as well as an understanding of the commonness of humanity. In today’s world, awakened by the Black Lives Matter protests, this sheds light on early Reformation impulses to connect to if the churches want to help overcome the painful divisions and polarizations caused by systemic racism, also in their own midst.

Allan Janssen, whom we honor and commemorate in this volume posthumously, deeply grateful for his committed fellowship in IRTI, shares his thorough knowledge of the Reformed theological tradition by revisiting the doctrine of *election* of the Canons of Dort. His guide is A.A. van Ruler, whose

⁷ Moore-Keish, *Reformed Theology*, 12.

theology was characterized by a deep appreciation of creaturely goodness and an eschatology that connects the future world with our earthly existence. In this light, Janssen reinterprets and revitalizes the doctrine of election. Instead of a doctrine that would feed into a passive attitude, it can be considered as the basis for a well-founded hope. *Hope* is also the key notion in the chapter of Jan Jorrit Hasselaar, Philipp Pattberg and Peter-Ben Smit. They recur to Rabbi Jonathan Sack's concept of hope which allows one to consider conflicting positions as a source of creativity and renewal. The authors apply it to practices of dialogue with various stakeholders and opponents in polarized conflicts between the agricultural sector and sustainability advocates in the Netherlands.

Another topical reinterpretation of Reformed doctrine is found in Emanuel Gerrit Singgih's chapter. Reflecting on the context of the Council of Churches in Indonesia, he proposes mission as *presensia* instead of a traditional concept of mission, understood as a centrifugal, churchplanting movement. He links this ecclesiology of presence to the call for a renewed understanding of the notion of *sola scriptura*, namely *sola scriptura with pluses*. He asserts that something must be added to the classical notion, in particular *sola caritate*, so that the Bible will no longer be used as a tool for condemning vulnerable groups in the margins, such as LGBT people.

3 Unity and Holiness

Several authors problematize the divine calling of the church to holiness and truth, in relation to the question of how to build or maintain *unity* in the church and in society. In Reformed history, this dilemma has left its painful mark. Against this backdrop, Klaas-Willem de Jong and Jan Dirk Th. Wassenaar question the 'majority of vote' principle in the Church Order of Dort, article 31. Expressing unity in the church by majority vote can easily lead and has led in the history of Reformed churches to polarization and disunity. Recalibration of ecclesial decisions in light of scripture and tradition remains the task. Henk van den Belt lays out the Reformed understanding of *vocatio interna* for a view on the calling of the church with regard to polarization. According to Van den Belt, it follows from the calling of the church to *holiness* that there are genuine and necessary forms of conflict; however, the acknowledgement of the essential unity of Christians implies that such conflict shall not lead to rejection of the other as a fellow saved sinner. From the context of Protestant churches in the Middle East, Najib George Awad opposes this view. In an intriguing reading of John 17, he diagnoses how churches in Greater Syria, due to a 'self-otherizing' theology, emphasize their being called out of the world instead of their being

called to exist in the world. Holiness is falsely understood as 'self-alterity.' It makes them, in the view of Awad, responsible of perpetrating certain polarizations in their societies. He seems to plead, as Singgih, for *mission as presence* in the multireligious context. Also Jozef Hehanussa goes for mission as an actively lived presence and coexistence in society. He stresses that in the multi-religious context of Indonesia, Christians are primarily called to promote and encourage all people to live peacefully and appreciate differences. The churches' mission through schools and hospitals should not contribute to polarization but to harmonious coexistence with people of other faiths, for which he believes the pre-Christian tradition of *religious tolerance* in Yogyakarta can serve as a common resource.

In this way, contemporary Reformed theology has to face the fact of divergent positions when it comes to understanding the relation between the church being called to holiness and the church being called to unity. These positions are not easy to reconcile. The beginning of a constructive dialogue could be found in Elizabeth Welch's presentation of an ecclesiology of *koinonia*, to which the International Reformed and Anglican Communions (IRAD) arrived in their ecumenical dialogues on the nature of communion. *Koinonia* is seen as God's gift and calling. It draws people to the gift of fullness of God's inclusive love, makes people humble, and calls people to live in relationship with one another. This notion seems to be highly suitable as the key to the calling of the church on its way to address polarizations both in the church and in the world. *Koinonia* emphasizes that the unity of the church is always intrinsically related with the unity and peace of the world.

Another promising notion is that of *conviviality*, as the art and practice of living together, which Nadine Bowers Du Toit presents in her chapter on a crossing-boundaries initiative in her home city of Cape Town. The term conviviality, coined in the work of Ivan Illich, was introduced in diaconal ecumenical theology by Tony Addy. The simple sharing of food and drink is at the heart of such practices of living together. For learning to encounter the other in an attitude of hospitality and conviviality, Louise Prideaux, in her innovative reading of neo-Calvinist theology, highlights a Christ-centered approach to deal fruitfully with tensions of *otherness* and *commonness*.

4 Other Constructive Proposals

The proposals of Bowers Du Toit, Singgih, Hehanussa, Awad, and Welch already show a creative adoption and actualization of concepts and inspirations drawn from the broader ecumenical tradition, from contemporary philosophy,

from Jewish sources, and from pre-Christian traditions. Other authors join in, addressing the issues of social justice, racism, sexuality and gender, euthanasia, and migration in their contexts.

Jaeseung Cha finds in Daoism a new approach to understand the suffering of Christ as a powerful, sacrificial suffering, without falling into the trap of a glorification of suffering. The Daoist concept of (feminine) *passivity* as an active power of productive and embracing love is explored as a concept that might help to get the conversation started in the polarized debate between traditional atonement theology and feminist critique.

From a postcolonial, Zambian perspective and in sharp criticism of a US fundamentalist separation of Gospel and social justice, Thandi Soko-de Jong presents the *palaver hut model* to include the voices of all members in the Reformed conversation on scripture and social justice. The palaver hut model suggests a postcolonial translation of recognizing the priesthood of all believers. Soko-de Jong also pleads for an ethos of *tcheni pa kalanka*, which is interpreted as applying transformative and liberating hermeneutics in reading and hearing the Word of God in the social context.

For Annemarieke van der Woude, the biblical notion of *holiness* as a relational concept can serve as a meaningful bridging concept between polarized positions in the euthanasia debate in the Netherlands. She describes how a suffering person's request to end their life takes us into a realm over which society does not have control and which grasps believers and non-believers alike with a sensitivity or more precisely timidity. Holiness, Van der Woude concludes, is always attributed in the relationship; not life as such is holy. Every person who longs for the end of life deserves our cautious commitment.

On issues of sexuality and gender, the polarization within and between churches is extremely intense and emotional. For Wim van Vlastuin, apostle Paul's notion of receiving our deepest *identity in union with Christ* is an insight that may help to relativize our sexual identity. Regardless of whether one is hetero- or homosexual, the calling is to fight against selfish lust in order to attain holiness in the life with Christ. Heleen Zorgdrager points to risks in recurring to the notion of 'identity in Christ' regarding matters of sexual and gender diversity. In current conservative Reformed discourse, the notion appears to be strongly connected with the view that Christ has sanctioned (heterosexual) marriage as an order of creation, thus undergirding its normativity. Alternatively, she proposes to leave identity discourses and adopt Mark Jordan's queer notion of *sacramental character* and the concept of the *broken middle* of the late Jewish philosopher Gillian Rose.

Viktória Kóczyán brings the *unity and catholicity* of the Church to the test of how churches in Hungary and how the World Council of Churches respond

to the migration crisis in Europe. The dividing line cuts right through Christianity. Where the Hungarian churches argue from incompatible sociocultural identities and fear of strangers, the WCC stresses a sense of common humanity, responsibility, and solidarity. Kóczian believes that global ecumenical dialogue should continue embracing a Trinitarian economy of grace and hospitality, while addressing more seriously the issues of fear of strangers and sociocultural identity.

5 Conclusion

In sum, this volume shows the strength of both approaches, a ‘theology of retrieval’ and a ‘theology done in a liberationist key,’ as well as how much they need one another in the contemporary task of Reformed theology. The new ideas, concepts, terms, imaginations, and visions do not so much replace the familiar Reformed notions, as need to be understood as an attempt to translate the ancient ones in an appealing way for today. They thereby correct the one-sidedness of traditional interpretations, and/or deconstruct the implicit privileged position, and welcome into the conversation the voices of groups from the margins and the wealth of other cultural resources. In this respect it is remarkable that there is little to no reference in the chapters to the pronounced anti-idolatry and Empire criticism of twentieth and twenty-first century confessions of Reformed origins, like the Barmen Declaration, the Belhar Confession and the Accra Confession, which play such an important role in the ecumenical Reformed discourse.⁸

If one takes this volume as a round table conversation of a family called together, the discussion shows a strong mutual commitment, yet also reveals certain strained relations and divergent visions within the Reformed theological communion and within and between churches in the Reformed tradition. There are serious discussions going on. The contributions to this book are part of these ongoing discussions, which are only rudimentary, and therefore flawed, characterized by opposing terms such as ‘liberal’ versus ‘conservative,’ or ‘mainstream’ versus ‘liberationist.’ One should be aware that such binaries stigmatize and polarize rather than build bridges in the discussion.

Whether theologians in the Reformed tradition retrieve a classical notion for testing its strength in situations of societal and ecclesial polarization, or

⁸ See for an overview and interpretation Margit Ernst-Habib, *Reformierte Identität weltweit—Eine Interpretation neuerer Bekenntnistexte aus der reformierten Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

whether they creatively look for gifts from other traditions and movements, they are joining in in the common task of witnessing Christ to the world today. As part of such an endeavor, this volume strikes the chord of refreshing and broadening the landscape of global Reformed theology in response to the wounds of the world and in the joyful perspective of Christ's gift of fullness of life for all.

Bibliography

- Billings, J. Todd. *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2011.
- Ernst-Habib, Margit. *Reformierte Identität weltweit—Eine Interpretation neuerer Bekenntnistexte aus der reformierten Tradition*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017.
- Moore-Keish, Martha L. *Reformed Theology*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020.
- World Communion of Reformed Churches. "Discerning, Confessing, and Witnessing in the Time of COVID-19 and Beyond." accessed November 13, 2021. <https://wrc.ch/require>.
- World Communion of Reformed Churches. *Proceedings of the 26th General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches*, Leipzig, Germany, 29 June–7 July, 2017. Hannover: World Communion of Reformed Churches, 2017.