How Shy Can A Reformed Theology Be?

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Abstract
The prospects of Reformed theology in Australia are not promising. The most recent sociological work done on religion and spirituality situates this tradition inside a context that is demonstrating a much greater level of diversity and a preference for orthopassy over rational belief. How can a Reformed faith develop an energetic habitus in a dominant culture that is often suspicious and shy of such a theological position.

Keywords
Reformed, Australian soul, shy, habitus, iconopoiac energies, imaginative architecture

Re-forming Our Bearings

Writing in his beginner’s guide to the Reformed faith, Donald McKim observes that what constitutes a theology bearing this qualifying description is far from clear. The difficulty does not reside so much in the relative absence of such language as is the case in contemporary Australia. The problem is not first and foremost hermeneutical and concerned with how a specific way of thinking about faith and theology might have migrated from one part of the world and another time into another at the ends of the earth. The dilemma is of a much more essentialist nature. What does the word ‘Reformed’ signify with respect to the Christian faith? What is its character and tendency? What, indeed, are the criteria for being Reformed?

The task McKim identifies was at one level, then, a matter of definition. For the sake of an answer, he scanned a range of options. Being Reformed can be the kind of term which might refer to a ‘certain history or tradition,’ ‘a certain set of doctrinal beliefs,’ or maybe a form of polity or church government.
McKim implies that it is seemingly easier to ask the question ‘what is Reformed’ than to furnish an answer in a way that is compelling. Here McKim is under no illusions. Reformed theology is not ‘monolithic.’ It is not likely to be expressed in a way that commends itself across the spectrum of those who might use this label or have it assigned to them. There is no absolute ‘Reformed formulation.’ In the circumstances, the best option may well be to speak in terms of “Reformed emphases,” “Reformed expressions,” and “Reformed responses to doctrine.”

The body of McKim’s study guide is designed to explore how a Reformed theology is thus established through some distinctive emphases and conceptions. It clearly presupposes a level of confessionalism and a commitment to the revelatory self-disclosure of God and the authority of scripture. Towards the end of his Introduction, McKim becomes a little bit more precise and lists the ‘distinguishing marks,’ ethos, ‘characteristics,’ and ‘imperatives’ that a handful of selected Reformed theologians have privileged. It is evident that a Reformed theology does not rely upon the construction of novel doctrines but represents a mode of weighting, assigning importance, and highlighting a perspective.

Now McKim is far from alone in turning attention to the need to focus on a Reformed essence and identity. The dawn of a new millennium has posed this problem afresh and established a close link between definition and hermeneutics. Brian Gerrish’s introduction to the 2001 Sprunt Lectures pulls no punches: “The heyday of self-consciously ‘confessional’ theologies is long past.” Their origins lie in the sixteenth century, and the question must be posed: “Why Reformed theology in the third Christian millennium?” The dilemma now before those who stand inside these emphases, polities, and histories is how can such a confessional theology maintain its plausibility in a ‘pluralistic day’? How can such a theology place itself in the contemporary ‘market’ where ‘product loyalty,’ according to Peter Berger, is on the decline?

The conundrum identified here is not peculiar to Gerrish. The matter of how a Reformed theology moves from the past into the present and a new

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2 McKim, Introducing the Reformed Faith, 178-180.