

ecclesia

reformanda

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Editorial

Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est.

Reformed theology should be reforming theology, for the Church – finite, sinful, not yet fully glorified – always stands in need of God’s reformation, by his Spirit, through his Word taught, trusted, and obeyed. And so, *Ecclesia Reformanda* exists to assist the Church in the ongoing task of listening to Scripture in all its depth and richness. It will seek to be truly theological, distinctively Reformed, and prayerfully reforming.

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All true theology is Church theology, conducted by the community of God’s people, to serve the community of God’s people, in the power of the Spirit, for the glory of God in Christ. This is not to despise academic theology, but simply to locate it properly in the service of the Church. *Ecclesia Reformanda* therefore exists to serve the Church, primarily by serving pastors, theological students, and those who train them. Although the journal will seek to advance theological knowledge, and so contribute to academic theology, the primary goal is to equip pastors and teachers in the Church to discharge their ministries more fruitfully and faithfully. Our intention is thus unashamedly pastoral.

However, the editorial board is united by a conviction that to be truly pastoral it is necessary to be deeply theological. The Church, founded on the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself being the Cornerstone, grows to maturity through the equipping ministry of the ascended Christ’s gift of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (Eph. 2:20; 4:11-12). These pastor-teachers are to be approved workmen, rightly handling the Word of truth (2 Tim 2:15).

They must be those who hold fast to the trustworthy message, encouraging others by healthy doctrine, and refuting those who oppose it (Tit. 1:9). And they are to make progress in doctrine as well as in life (1 Tim. 4:15-16). All pastors must, therefore, also aspire to be theologians, precisely so that they may be better pastors. This has several theological entailments.

First, the Church, founded on God's Word, ruled by God's Word, built up by God's Word, must be reformed by God's Word; it is therefore necessary for her to have deep roots in the Scriptures: true theology is biblical. What we need is not theology that has biblical foundations, nor theology that is biblically-based, but rather, theology that is saturated in the Bible. And that saturation must be in the whole Bible; not simply the New Testament, nor only the Pauline Epistles, nor merely favourite stories from the Gospels, but every detail of the text from Genesis to Revelation. When a true pastor-teacher encounters a difficult or unclear portion of Scripture, he does not turn the page to more familiar, obviously edifying territory. Rather, he wrestles prayerfully, with the food laws of Leviticus, the architecture of Solomon's Temple, the genealogies of Genesis, the Old-Testament quotations in Matthew's Gospel, the symbolism of the Apocalypse. And one of the tasks of theology is to aid him in that wrestling.

Second, since theology is a Churchly activity, it is necessary to pay attention to the whole Church as she has listened to Scripture, throughout history, and across the globe: true theology is catholic. The foot must not say to the hand, 'I do not need you', nor should the ear withdraw from the body because it is not an eye. God has placed us downstream from the historic creeds, councils, theologians, exegetes, liturgies, and prayers of the Church; and he has done so for a reason. They are our inheritance, given to us for our good.

Third, since theology seeks to serve the Church *today* (and not to equip pastors simply to face anything the seventeenth century could throw at them!), it is necessary for it to pay close attention to the world(s) the Church inhabits, and, in conversation with the whole Church, to apply the truths of Scripture to the issues of today. Theology must be contemporary, and must seek to aid the Church in mining the insights of the different eras in her history and her different locations around the globe, in order to bring them to bear

forcefully on the situation in which she now finds herself. Karl Barth commented on Calvin the commentator thus:

[H]ow energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent! Paul speaks, and the man of the sixteenth century hears. The conversation between the original record and the reader moves round the subject-matter, until a distinction between yesterday and to-day becomes impossible.¹

Would that this were true of every exegete, every theologian, every preacher. It is vital that this should be true of the Church as she wrestles with Scripture today; it ought also to be true as she engages with her own history: Augustine speaks, and the men, women, and children of the twenty-first century hear.

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Ecclesia Reformanda is committed to the ecumenical creeds, and to historic Reformed theology, as expressed in documents such as the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort), the Westminster Standards, the First and Second Helvetic Confessions, and the 39 Articles of the Church of England. This is no mere idiosyncrasy, but stems from the journal's desire to be faithful to Scripture: it is the firm belief of the editorial board that Reformed theology has value precisely because it is the most biblical theology.

That said, it must be acknowledged that Reformed orthodoxy is diverse. Within certain confessional boundaries, there is room for charitable, cheerful, disagreement and discussion. The Reformed tradition has never been monolithic; any honest engagement with the tradition makes it clear that there is much variety. Indeed, a document such as the Westminster Confession, to take but one obvious example, is precisely a consensus document, designed in a number of places to allow differing views among its subscribers. This

¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th edn, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: OUP, 1933), 7.

is no less true in the wider Reformed tradition. To take some examples, more or less at random, Reformed confessions and theologians have tolerated diversity on: the order of the divine decrees; the precise definition of a covenant; the existence, or not, of an eternal intra-trinitarian covenant; whether the prelapsarian covenant with Adam was gracious or strictly meritorious, or indeed whether there was a covenant with Adam at all; the precise relationship of the Mosaic covenant to the covenant with Adam; the relationship of covenant and election; whether or not Christ's active obedience is imputed to the believer in justification; the instrumentality of the sacraments in conveying God's grace to worthy receivers; the validity and usefulness of a law-gospel hermeneutic; the use of the Mosaic Law in regulating the civil laws of modern nation states; apologetic methodology ('classical' or presuppositional?); and issues of eschatology (preterism? a- or post-millennialism?).

Sometimes it is necessary to draw lines, to oppose error, and to do so strongly. However, there is also a time to listen, to reflect, and to acknowledge that not all disagreements are of the same order of importance, not all errors place one outside the Reformed faith, let alone the Church of Christ. In any case, theological writing that is not marked by love is but a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. It dishonours Christ. It does not build up the Church. It lacks the spiritual maturity and theological wisdom that expresses itself truthfully, clearly, precisely, *and* with a love that bears all things, believes all things, endures all things, and hopes all things. Therefore, *Ecclesia Reformanda* hopes to acknowledge legitimate Reformed diversity, and to serve as a forum for charitable, patient listening and debate that seeks to enable the community of God's people to discern together the truth of God's Word.

...semper reformanda est

The Church remains finite and sinful; at her best, she has only a partial grasp of the riches of God's infinite Word, and through sin, she holds the truth in imbalanced, disproportioned, and sometimes inaccurate ways. And so, Reformed theology should be reforming theology. Sometimes even deeply cherished beliefs should be challenged or supplemented by further and deeper reflection on

Scripture. Sometimes new situations confront the Church, which previous generations never had to address, new apologetic challenges arise, new idolatries seek to rival the supremacy of Christ in her affections, new ethical questions press for her attention. In the words of Andrew McGowan:

It simply is not an option to create little communities of people who attempt to live as people did in earlier centuries, using seventeenth-century language and seventeenth-century Bibles and circling the wagons against the outside world. Apart from anything else, we do our children a serious disservice if we fail to address the issues that present the most serious challenges to their remaining in our churches.²

More positively, as history progresses, God, by his Spirit, is transforming the Church from one degree of glory to another. In the Church, he is growing humanity to maturity in Christ. And as she matures, the Church will grasp new things in new ways, not contradicting old truths rightly held, but enriching her understanding and ability to serve her Lord. It is the glory of God to conceal things; the glory of kings is to search them out (Prov. 25:2). What is needed, then, is a new generation of kings, glorious in their union with the glorified Christ, who will devote themselves to seeking new treasures in God's Word and new treasures in his creation, and who then, like well trained scribes, will bring out of their treasury new along with old, in the service of Christ's Church.

Soli Deo gloria.

² 'Introduction', in A. T. B. McGowan, ed., *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology* (Leicester: Apollos, 2006), 13-18, at 14.