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ANDREW ATHERSTONE

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# The Implications of *Semper Reformanda*

**What does it mean for the church to be 'always reforming'? This is a call encapsulated in the well-known saying *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*. In this article – based on his address at the Reform National Conference for Action in October 2008 – Andrew Atherstone argues that the motto lays down a challenge to both radicals and conservatives in today's church.**

Evangelicals love their mottos, especially in Latin! One of the most honourable and the most urgent is the famous slogan *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum dei*: 'the reformed church, always reforming, under the word of God'. This has become a clarion call amongst evangelical Christians not to be satisfied with the *status quo*, not to put up with things as we find them in the Church of England, but to keep on reforming. It is a motto which sums up the sense of restless and continual energy of the reforming movement in every generation.

The origins of the saying are obscure. Almost certainly it was never used by the great reformers of the sixteenth century, although it is consonant with their teaching. The roots of the expression are found in the writings of Dutch theologians in the 1670s, like Jodocus van Lodenstein and Jacobus Koelman, probably derived from Johannes Hoornbeeck. Yet only in the twentieth century did the aphorism grow in popularity, so as now to be almost ubiquitous.<sup>1</sup> Although its antiquity is in doubt, the motto is an excellent one which we would do well to remember and recapture. But what should it mean in practice? What are its implications? It is frequently quoted, but often misunderstood and misused. How, for example, could it rightly guide and motivate attempts to reform the Anglican Communion at the start of the twenty-first century?

## Radicals and Conservatives

The motto speaks to two particular groups of people, found in the church in every generation, pulling in opposite directions – the radicals and the conservatives. The radicals are always champing at the bit for continual change. Instinctively, they dislike the old teaching and practices and want to grab hold of the new. They are trend setters. At the opposite pole, the conservatives instinctively stick in their toes

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1 See further Bush 2008 who rightly challenges us not to pretend antiquity for the motto without documentary evidence. However, his claim that the exact phrase, *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*, derives

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from a lecture by Karl Barth in 1947 and first appeared in print in 1962 is obviously wrong, as a cursory search of Google Books proves.

and dig in their heels, and dislike change of any description. They prefer life the way it used to be and are constantly lamenting the erosion of the church's historic heritage.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, that model Anglican reformer, identified both types of people as co-existing in the Church of England as long ago as the 1540s. Yet he laid down a challenge to both the radicals and the conservatives. The archbishop was not willing to be either an innovator or traditionalist. He wanted both those natural tendencies to be brought under the word of God. Both radicalism and conservatism, Cranmer insists, must be subject to the Scriptures. In his famous essay, 'Of ceremonies, why some be abolished, and some retained' (1549), which now appears at the front of the *Book of Common Prayer*, he writes:

And whereas in this our time, the minds of men are so diverse, that some think it a great matter of conscience to depart from a piece of the least of their Ceremonies, they be so addicted to their old customs; and again on the other side, some be so newfangled, that they would innovate all things, and so despise the old, that nothing can like them [i.e. please them], but that is new – it was thought expedient, not so much to have respect how to please and satisfy either of these parties, as how to please God, and profit them both.

To the radicals who want to overthrow the old ways, Cranmer says they ought to be 'more studious of unity and concord, than of innovations and new-fangleness' which are 'always to be eschewed' because they lead to chaos, division and disorder. On the other hand, to the conservatives who want to hang on to their ancient teaching simply because it is old, Cranmer warns that some of their heritage has 'much blinded the people, and obscured the glory of God', so is 'worthy to be cut away, and clean rejected'. Some of the historic practices they have inherited from previous generations are 'so dark' that the only right reformation is outright abolition. In that case, Cranmer suggests, if you insist on keeping to the old paths simply because you are conservative, then you will keep walking in the darkness.

Whether we are instinctively radical or conservative, both those tendencies must be brought in humble subjection to the word of God. That is the message taught by the motto we are considering here: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum dei*. It is a lesson which everyone in the Anglican Communion needs to hear again and take to heart. Both radicalism and conservatism must be subject to the Scriptures. Let us unpack both parts of the message in turn.

## **A word to the Radicals: Reformation is not innovation**

In recent decades, *semper reformanda*, that glorious evangelical motto, has become a favourite liberal catchphrase. Even the Episcopal Church (USA), the most radical of all Anglican provinces, welcomes the concept, but uses it as an excuse for their notorious departures from Christian orthodoxy.

It is precisely because of reformed theology's healthy desire for cultural engagement that it is so often exposed to unhealthy forms of innovation. It would be easier to lock down the hatches and refuse to relate to the contemporary world. The motto of the Church of Rome is often said to be not *semper reformanda* but

*semper eadem*, 'always the same', never changing.<sup>2</sup> One of the reasons that Roman Catholicism has remained so impervious to liberalism over the centuries is because of its hostility to cultural and theological change. Yet evangelical churches are willing to run the risks, because of our mandate to connect the never-changing gospel with our ever-changing world. Nevertheless, there are risks, and too often Protestantism has succumbed to the dangers. As Michael Welker observes, because of our strong emphasis upon *semper reformanda*, reformed theology has put itself 'at the mercy of the shifting *Zeitgeist*' and has fallen 'victim to the cultural stress of innovation'.<sup>3</sup>

Sexual ethics remains one of today's most contentious issues. Here the most radical innovators are quick to claim the motto *semper reformanda* as their own. Chris Glaser, for example, has been working for the last thirty years in the United States of America to bring acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender lifestyles into the mainstream Christian church. He was once an evangelical Christian, but found that the only way to reconcile his sexuality and his spirituality was by cutting adrift from his evangelical roots. His books include, *Come Home! Reclaiming Spirituality and Community as Gay Men and Lesbians* (1990), *Coming Out to God: Prayers for Lesbians and Gay Men, Their Families and Friends* (1991); *The Word Is Out: Daily Reflections on the Bible for Lesbians and Gay Men* (1994); and *Coming Out as Sacrament* (1998). In his autobiography Glaser tells how he married his lover, Mark King, in a 'ceremony of the heart' in the sanctuary at Ormewood Park Presbyterian Church in Atlanta in October 1994. The day chosen for their 'marriage' was Reformation Sunday – the annual commemoration of the iconic occasion when Martin Luther is said to have nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg, protesting loudly at the corrupt and oppressive teaching of the medieval church. That Reformation Sunday morning, before Chris and Mark's wedding, their pastor lamented that 'the reformed church, always reforming' had too often become 'the controlled church, always controlling'.<sup>4</sup> The implications were that those who genuinely believe in *ecclesia semper reformanda* should welcome same-sex marriage as an authentic expression of Christian discipleship and that people like Chris Glaser are the true heirs of Martin Luther. Yet such teaching is not reformation, but unbiblical innovation.

Another evangelical motto which radical innovators love to quote is that coined by Pastor John Robinson in the 1620s – '*there is more truth and light yet to break forth*'. They argue that we can abandon the evangelicalism of our forefathers because God has revealed new truths to us in our generation, fresh approaches to doctrine and morality appropriate for the twenty-first century. The motto has, for example, been adopted by another gay and lesbian pressure group in the United States, *More Light Presbyterians*, founded in 1998 with their roots in the 'Presbyterian Gay Caucus' of the 1970s. Yet we can be confident that their understanding is not what Pastor Robinson had in mind. Robinson was an Anglican minister, connected with the great puritans in Cambridge like William Perkins and Paul Baynes. He renounced his orders in 1606 after being persuaded that the Church of England

2 There have, of course, been reform and renewal movements within Roman Catholicism and the Second Vatican Council spoke of '*ecclesia...sancta simul et semper purificanda*' ('the church...at once holy and

always needing purification'). See Tanner 1990: Vol. 2, 855.

3 Welker 1999: 137.

4 Glaser 1996: 219, 226.

was insufficiently reformed. Moving to Leiden in the Netherlands to pastor a separatist congregation he was a vocal advocate of the reformed doctrines expounded by the Synod of Dort. In 1620 over forty members of his congregation joined the puritan pilgrimage to New England on the *Mayflower*. Before they left Robinson exhorted them to follow Jesus Christ and him only – not to be disciples of Luther, or Calvin, or Pastor Robinson, but disciples of Christ. He urged them to be willing, in Christian humility, to continue learning from Scripture. ‘For he was very confident’, says the earliest account of that farewell sermon, that ‘the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word.’<sup>5</sup> Notice the emphasis - usually omitted by today’s radicals – ‘out of his holy Word’. This motto is not an excuse to abandon reformed theology, but an exhortation to drink in the Scriptures more deeply. We cannot separate God’s truth from God’s word. Robinson’s plea is ably expressed in a hymn by the Victorian Congregationalist, George Rawson:

We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind,  
By notions of our day and sect, crude, partial and confined  
No, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred  
For God hath yet more light and truth to break forth *from his Word*.

A similar principle applies to the motto *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*. The two halves of the slogan must not be separated. The church is to be both *reformata* and *reformanda*, both reformed and reforming. The foundational truths of evangelical Christianity – expressed by those other Latin mottos, the five *solas* – remain inviolable for *ecclesia reformata*:

- *sola scriptura* (the Bible alone). The final authority for Anglicans is not the Lambeth Conference, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Anglican primates, the Jerusalem Declaration, or the Thirty-Nine Articles, but only the Bible. All those who want to reform the church must therefore continually go back to the Scriptures.
- *sola fide* (faith alone); *sola gratia* (grace alone); *solo Christo* (Christ alone). What news are Anglicans proclaiming today? Is it that reconciliation with God and life eternal is to be found only through faith in Jesus Christ, the unique and universal saviour? We dare not, under the banner of ‘always reforming’, depart from that message, because the salvation of men and women is at stake.
- *solī deo gloria* (glory to God alone). Why do we long to see the church reformed? Is it to build our own ecclesiastical empires, or only for the Lord’s glory?<sup>6</sup>

Those are the gospel foundations of the reformed Church of England – the *ecclesia reformata*. Once those anchors are in place, and within those limits, radicalism is very welcome. But as soon as our innovations begin to undermine the foundations of the reformed faith, which is biblical Christianity, the church will come crashing down. These wonderful gospel truths, encapsulated by the *solas*, need to be clearly and enthusiastically proclaimed without hesitation in every generation.

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5 See further George 1982.

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6 See further Johnson 2004.

Anglican radicalism, in all its forms, must be subject to the word of God. Andrew Goddard, in his discussion of how *semper reformanda* relates to today's moral questions, helpfully puts it as follows:

All appeals to change moral teaching must...be brought under the authoritative witness of Scripture. Scripture as the *norma normans* [the rule that rules] must judge all proposals for reforming the Reformed church, for it (not evangelical tradition nor church authority nor contemporary consensus) is the final and supreme authority.<sup>7</sup>

He boldly concludes that evangelicals must not waver in their conviction that

God rules us through the Word of God in Scripture. Evangelicals must therefore not be afraid to confess in relation to their ethics *Scriptura sacra locuta, res decisa est* [Holy Scripture has spoken, the issue is decided].<sup>8</sup>

Anglicanism needs to hear that admonition. As Karl Barth observed, *semper reformanda* 'does not mean always to go with the time, to let the current spirit of the age be the judge of what is true and false', but in every generation it means holding to the unalterable gospel. In his *Church Dogmatics* he writes:

it is not the newness, the modernity, the up-to-dateness of a Church which as such proves and commends it as the true and catholic Church.... Modernity, up-to-dateness, has nothing whatever to do with the question of the truth of the Church. For that reason the idea of progress is a highly doubtful one as applied to the Church. What counts in the Church is not progress but reformation ...<sup>9</sup>

Michael S. Horton, of Westminster Seminary in California, makes the same observation in his recent fourth and final volume on reformed dogmatics:

'singing a new song' and 'always being reformed' are only commendable goals if they are invitations to courageous and obedient faith rather than simply following the spirit of the age. It means that the church is always *being* reformed, not reforming itself, submitting itself to the judgment of God's Word and asking anew whether its confession and practice are in accord with Scripture. Only in this way is any church truly apostolic.<sup>10</sup>

The Christian gospel is an 'old, old story', not a new discovery. Our obsession with the latest trends in modern and post-modern theology, and our Athenian love for novelty (Acts 17:21), is spiritually detrimental. As Nicholas Selnecker, the sixteenth-century German hymn-writer, once put it:

Against proud spirits stand and fight,  
Who lift themselves in lofty might,  
And always bring in something new  
To falsify thy teaching true.<sup>11</sup>

The 'old, old story' needs to be retold and reapplied, but its glorious content does not change and cannot be bettered. Therefore, as Brian Gerrish suggests, there is a right sense in which reformed theology is deferential, willing to say with Elijah, even after the triumph of Mount Carmel, 'I am no better than my fathers' (1 Kings

7 Goddard 2003: 258

8 Goddard 2003: 263.

9 Barth 1956: 704-5.

10 Horton 2008: 223.

11 Quoted in Barth 1956: 705.

19:4).<sup>12</sup> We are not better Bible expositors or theologians or reformers than they. Just as they faithfully proclaimed the message in their generation, without vacillation, so must we in ours.

In 1877 J.C. Ryle (soon to become the first Bishop of Liverpool) published a series of addresses expounding the heart of the Christian gospel, covering themes such as the cross of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, the sinfulness of humanity, justification, repentance, faith, conversion, and Christ's power to save. He called the book *Old Paths* and explained the title in this way:

The name which I have selected will prepare the reader to expect no new doctrines in this volume. It is simple, unadulterated, old-fashioned Evangelical theology. It contains nothing but the 'Old Paths' in which the Apostolic Christians, the Reformers, the best English Churchmen for the last three hundred years, and the best Evangelical Christians of the present day, have persistently walked. From these 'paths' I see no reason to depart. They are often sneered at and ridiculed, as old-fashioned, effete, worn out, and powerless in the Nineteenth Century. Be it so... The longer I live the more I am convinced that the world needs no new Gospel, as some profess to think. I am thoroughly persuaded that the world needs nothing but a bold, full, unflinching teaching of the 'old paths'. The heart of man is the same in every age. The spiritual medicine which it requires is always the same. The same Gospel which was preached by Latimer, and Hooper, and Bradford – by Hall, Davenant, Usher, Reynolds, and Hopkins – by Manton, Brooks, Watson, Charnock, Owen, and Gurnall – by Romaine, Venn, Grimshaw, Hervey, and Cecil – this is the gospel which alone will do real good in the present day... They are the doctrines, I firmly believe, of the Bible and the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. They are doctrines which, I find, wear well, and in the faith of them I hope to live and die. I repeat most emphatically that I am not ashamed of what are commonly called 'Evangelical principles'. Fiercely and bitterly as those principles are assailed on all sides – loudly and scornfully as some proclaim that they have done their work and are useless in this day – I see no evidence whatever that they are defective or decayed, and I see no reason for giving them up.<sup>13</sup>

The first word we and the Anglican Communion need to hear today is therefore that reformation is not innovation. The old gospel message, as laid down in the New Testament, is the only true gospel message. We innovate at our peril. Our instinctive desire to be Anglican radicals must always be brought in subjection to the word of God in Scripture.

### **A word to the Conservatives: Reformation is not reassertion**

Daniel Waterland (1683-1740), master of Magdalene College, Cambridge and archdeacon of Middlesex, led the defence of Christian orthodoxy in the early eighteenth century against attacks from Arians and deists. He wrote many books upholding the doctrine of the Trinity, especially vindicating Christ's divinity, which was being challenged by other Anglican teachers like the philosopher Samuel Clarke and his disciples.<sup>14</sup> Waterland argued that it was sheer dishonesty for these

<sup>12</sup> Gerrish 1999: 13.

<sup>13</sup> Ryle 1877: vii-viii.

<sup>14</sup> See further Holtby 1966 and Ferguson 1976.

heterodox clergymen to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles in order to keep their parishes and their university posts when they did not believe in the fundamental truths about the nature of God and of the Saviour. Yet his defence laid such a strong emphasis upon antiquity, on maintaining the historic teaching of the fathers and the reformers, that he downplayed any need for continual reformation. In one of his major treatises against Arianism, *Remarks upon Dr Clarke's Exposition of the Church Catechism* (1730), he concludes:

...we have (God be thanked) still an excellent Church, pure and primitive, and by conforming to it, are in as safe a way to salvation as were the ancient martyrs, or other Christians of the best and purest times. Happy might it be for us, could we but forbear tampering, and be content when we are well. Reformation is good, when reformation is wanting: but to be always reforming is no reforming at all: it is behaving as children, tossed too [*sic*] and fro with every wind of doctrine. All errors of any moment have been purged off long ago, by the care of our Reformers, and why then are we still reforming? Physic may be proper at certain seasons: but to pretend to live constantly upon it, instead of food, is a certain way to impair, and in a little time to destroy, the best and soundest constitution in the world.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, according to Waterland, the reformers got it exactly right in the sixteenth century. They purified the church and nothing more is needed. Therefore all we need to do is defend our heritage and the church will be safe. Yet Waterland's conservative policy is neither safe, nor fruitful. Like many conservative Anglicans today, he failed to take on board the implications of *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*. Such conservatives attempt to reassert the *ecclesia reformata*, but forget that the other half of the motto urges us to keep reforming.

Mere reassertion is insufficient for three reasons:

- When reformation stops, deformation sets in. This basic biblical principle has been evident throughout the history of God's people.<sup>16</sup>
- Reassertion is reactive, reformation is proactive. Those who stop reforming lose the initiative in the church. This explains why conservative Anglicans so often find themselves on the back foot, simply responding to somebody else's agenda. As Kevin Vanhoozer warns, the best description of much contemporary evangelicalism is not 'always reforming' but 'always reacting'.<sup>17</sup>
- Reassertion locks us into the past, reformation connects us with the present. There is no 'golden age' in the history of Christianity which needs to be recaptured. The primitive church was no golden age, despite the claims of puritans like Thomas Cartwright in his controversies with Richard Hooker,<sup>18</sup> nor was the reformed church in the sixteenth century. We honour the reformers for their courage, clarity and confessional statements, but attempting to reconstruct Cranmer's church in modern Britain is folly. It is what Barth called 'ecclesiastical romanticism'.<sup>19</sup>

The motto *semper reformanda* reminds conservative Christians to seek continual reformation, not just historic reassertion. Even our most cherished Anglican and

<sup>15</sup> Waterland 1823: vol 5, 430.

<sup>16</sup> See further Phillips 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Vanhoozer 2007: 22.

<sup>18</sup> See further Luoma 1977a, 1977b.

<sup>19</sup> Barth 1956: 704.



evangelical traditions must be brought in submission to Scripture. Just because they are old, does not mean they are excellent. As the *Scots Confession* of 1560 wryly observes, Cain was older than both Abel and Seth yet he was a murderer of the righteous.<sup>20</sup> Or as Calvin retorted to Cardinal Sadolet's appeal that the citizens of Geneva return to the old religion: 'the safety of that man hangs by a thread whose defence turns wholly on this – that he has constantly adhered to the religion handed down to him from his forefathers'.<sup>21</sup>

The dangers of substituting reassertion for reformation were sharply exposed during the late nineteenth century by Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), the pre-eminent evangelical theologian in the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, NHK). He was a fierce critic of modernism and a seminal Calvinist thinker. Yet he was thrown out of the established church in 1886 for his forthright views, grieving the loss of reformation distinctives and standards, and fighting a losing battle to ensure that church property remained with the orthodox. About ten per cent of NHK members left with him from several hundred congregations, many from the Dutch 'Bible Belt', to form a new evangelical denomination, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, GKN). Over the decades the new denomination became as liberalised as the old one it had left and they were re-amalgamated in 2004 as the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (*Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*, PKN).

Kuyper was the leading conservative churchman in his day, and yet he spoke out passionately against what he called a false conservatism (*behoudzucht*). In his farewell address to his congregation at Utrecht in July 1870, before his departure for Amsterdam, he chose as his text the words of the risen Christ to the church at Philadelphia, 'hold fast to what you have' (Revelation 3:11). It was a bold appeal for them to engage in the present, not merely maintain the status quo of a previous generation. In a powerful passage, worth quoting at length, he lamented:

fascinated by what lies behind, we close our eyes to what lies ahead. Quenching life, we find our peace solely in the past...many are joining our ranks whose goal is not, as is ours, the victory of Christianity but merely the triumph of conservatism.<sup>22</sup>

In particular, Kuyper addressed those who were so bound up in their historic formularies that they failed to make any impact in the present:

The past gradually begins to attract them so powerfully, that their imagination is increasingly fascinated by the manly strength so brilliantly displayed by the heroes of the Reformation...If only they could have lived then! If their lot had fallen in that age, how they would have expanded their lungs to inhale all that fresh and vital air!...'Return! Return!' they cry to the age of our ancestors. Matching the deed to their cry they gird themselves for imitation and set out to reconstruct what the hands of their ancestors had fashioned.

But why was it that they never succeeded in keeping one stone permanently on another? It was because they wanted to *repristiniate* and because *repristination* is an undertaking that is self-condemned. 'Always flow and never

**20** Scots Confession, chapter 18 in Schaff 1884: Vol 3, 461 and online at [www.kirkweb.org/scots.htm](http://www.kirkweb.org/scots.htm)

**21** Calvin 1958: 64.

**22** Kuyper 1998: 72.

reverse yourself' is the high decree that the Creator himself laid down for the stream of time. No place can be found today for what existed yesterday, so their cries ever come back to them without effect. 'Hold fast' not to what your fathers had but 'what you yourselves have' is the word of life that renders sterile from the start whatever ventures to violate that law of life. And so they squander their energies in building something they will never finish. They force themselves outside of their own time at the cost of having any influence on the life that surrounds them. In the end they turn against their own brothers, fragmenting even more the little power that remains. Worst of all, their own spiritual life has to suffer, and as a result of continual disappointment, the grave of their dearest wishes must become the grave of their faith itself.

No, you men who honour the fathers: first seek to have for yourself the life your fathers had and then hold fast what you have. Then articulate that life in your own language as they did in theirs. Struggle as they did to pump that life into the arteries of the life of our church and society. Then not being a dead form but a living fellowship will unite you with them, faith will be a power in your own life, and your building project will reach complete success.<sup>23</sup>

Utrecht prided itself on being a centre of orthodoxy, yet Kuyper urged his congregation: 'If people elsewhere envy you, then let it be on account of something more than your orthodox *name*. Let it rather be the vitality flowing from your orthodoxy that arouses others to jealousy'.<sup>24</sup> As he bade them farewell, he concluded:

We do not know what things will come over our country and our church. But whatever storms erupt, beware of false conservatism. Do not bury our splendid *orthodoxy* in the treacherous pit of false *conservatism*. Hold fast to what you have in Christ...<sup>25</sup>

Conservatism, like radicalism, must be brought into continual submission to Scripture. Within the Anglican Communion that means ensuring that the Bible always takes priority over all our traditions and assumptions, even over our cherished Thirty-Nine Articles. The Articles themselves make it very plain that Scripture must come first. Likewise, the Scots Confession (drawn up by John Knox and his friends) set an excellent example by humbly challenging its readers:

We protest that if any man will note in this our confession any article or sentence repugnant to God's holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness, and for Christian charity's sake, to admonish us of the same in writing; and we, upon our honour and fidelity, by God's grace, do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God (that is, from his holy scriptures), or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss.<sup>26</sup>

The Scots Confession was deliberately provisional. It was superseded in 1647 by the Westminster Confession, which similarly affirmed that 'The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined...and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture'.<sup>27</sup> To

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**23** Kuyper 1998: 73-4.

**24** Kuyper 1998: 84.

**25** Kuyper 1998: 85.

**26** Scots Confession, Preface in Schaff 1884: Vol 3, 438.

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**27** Westminster Confession, I.10 in Schaff

1884: Vol 3, 605-6 and online at

[www.reformed.org/documents/](http://www.reformed.org/documents/)

[wcf\\_with\\_proofs/](#)

put our conservative creeds alongside the Bible is to repeat the error of the Church of Rome. As Horton warns,

traditionalism also has its own way of looking away from Christ...While the creeds and confessions remain treasures to be defended, we easily forget that they serve rather than substitute for the living confession of Christ as we return in each generation to the original well from which they are drawn.<sup>28</sup>

One of the signs of spiritual life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the proliferation of reformed confessions. Yet the motto *semper reformanda* reminds us to continue the task. Professor A.T.B. McGowan has recently made the following appeal:

In our twenty-first century we face many complex issues, which earlier generations have not been required to face and it will not do merely to restate old ideas in the old familiar words and try to hide away from the modern world. 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.<sup>29</sup>

*Semper reformanda* means the rigorous reapplication of reformation principles to the theological questions of today. Who will take up the challenge?

If we are serious about our commitment to being *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* then the reformation of the Church of England must be pushed forward vigorously and ceaselessly. The work is never done. As McGowan reminds us, reformation is 'a movement rather than a completed event'.<sup>30</sup> Jürgen Moltmann concurs: 'As reforming theology, Reformed theology is eschatologically oriented theology.'<sup>31</sup> In other words, the need for reformation will never cease until the return of Christ. Hughes Oliphant Old is right to protest that *semper reformanda* does not mean 'permanent revolution', a sort of 'theological Trotskyism'.<sup>32</sup> Yet it is a call for 'permanent reformation' under the word of God. Moltmann describes it 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 fulfilment and to rest only in the Parousia of Christ...<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum dei* is a glorious motto for a reformation church. Yet its implications lay down a challenge which all of us in the Anglican Communion need to hear. Both radicalism and conservatism must be subject to the word of God. To radical Anglicans, the motto reminds us that reformation is not innovation – the gospel never changes. To conservative Anglicans, it reminds us that reformation is not reassertion – the gospel needs to be continually reapplied, and our historic assumptions need to be continually reformed. *Semper reformanda* is a clarion call to throw ourselves energetically into the reforming movement – ruthlessly to scrutinize our evangelical and Anglican

<sup>28</sup> Horton 2008: 223.

<sup>29</sup> McGowan 2006: 14.

<sup>30</sup> McGowan 2006: 14.

<sup>31</sup> Moltmann 1999: 121.

<sup>32</sup> Old 2002: 165.

<sup>33</sup> Moltmann 1999: 121.

traditions in the light of Scripture, to shake the ecclesiastical *status quo* with all our might, and never to give up.

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