

# Being Reformed in Contemporary Nigeria

1993???

NOTE: The materials below are a very rough draft I prepared for some lectures at TCNN. In fact, I did not even deliver them as you have them here. In other words, this is a very preliminary set of notes that I release to members of the class only because of the request. Under no circumstances are they to be quoted, for they are too preliminary for that.

## INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago I gave a bird's eye view of the Reformed community in Nigeria. I did this as an introduction to what I want share with you today, so that you may understand where I am coming from. We are all Presbyterian Reformed but in different ways. Some of us have a pietistic background; others have a stronger strain of rationalism. Mine is neither of the two, though I have high regard for both reason and piety.

As Reformed people, we are part of the main stream of the Protestant church. We have most of our doctrines in common with the Anglicans and Lutherans especially. We also have many doctrines in common with churches of the Anabaptist traditions, though to a lesser degree. Sometimes what distinguishes one tradition from another is not the doctrines themselves so much as the emphasis a tradition gives to a particular doctrine or the doctrine it tends to centralize.

I could not tell you what doctrine the Anglicans emphasize. But as far as Lutherans go, I believe I am close when I suggest that the doctrines of justification by faith and of the cross are close to their central concerns. We Reformed agree with almost all of the Lutheran doctrines, but we place our focus on a different place, with the result that we sound different, very different, especially with respect to our relationship to the world and culture. And that is where I place my emphasis today. Not on theological doctrines in themselves but as they affect our stand in the world of today. It is *here* that the Reformed – my brand of Reformed,

at any rate – are different from other Protestant traditions. What I am really talking about here is our Reformed *worldview*.

## WORLDVIEW

The last few years we hear a lot about worldviews from Evangelicals, especially from evangelical missiologists. Suddenly Evangelicals have discovered the central importance of the role one's worldview plays in his life and of the role of worldviews in cultures. Especially the people at Fuller School of World Missions in California. And perhaps most especially Prof. Charles Kraft, a former CBM missionary with EYN. His book *Christianity with Power* is by and large a book about worldviews. In addition, he has designed a whole course on the subject that he teaches all over the world, including here in Jos. I am grateful for that new recognition; it is very helpful in the church's mission to understand the worldview of the people among whom we are working, even if they are our own people. But this business of worldview is nothing new among the Reformed. In fact, the concept has long played a crucial role in my own background and in my own work with the ICS.

What then is a worldview? It is a fluid concept. Each writer has his own definition and I will not bore you with a long line of definitions and their different meanings. I will present you with one single definition, the one suggested by Prof. Albert Wolters of Redeemer College in Ontario, Canada, a Reformed university. He is a member of the CRC. First, he points out a number of synonyms. Some of them are: life perspective, a person's principles or ideals, system of values. Some may even call it an ideology. Wolter's definition is simple: *the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things.* (*Creation Regained*, p. 2 – IVP edition). It is this worldview that underlies your own life, by which you guide yourself, on basis of which you make your decisions, that determines your relationship and attitude to the world. It may be defined. You may be conscious of it. But for many people it is not defined and they are not conscious of it. They absorb it from the society around them, from their church, from their family. But conscious of it or not, it is always there and it always plays a most crucial and

central role in the lives of individuals and societies. It is always a major key to understanding individuals or societies.

## BUILDING BLOCKS OF A REFORMED WORLDVIEW

As I outline the building blocks that together produce a Reformed worldview, you will notice that most Protestant denominations accept these building blocks. Most of them are not unique to us. But they *are* unique in the way we combine them and in the way we use them in society.

### 1. GOD IS LORD OVER ALL CREATION – SOVEREIGNTY

The Reformed tradition is known for its central emphasis on Lordship. Though the term “Lord” does not occur in the creation stories of Genesis, I know of no Christian who denies that by virtue of His having created everything, God is Lord over everything. He rules everywhere (**GIVE SAMPLE VERSES FROM LIVING IN GOD’S WORLD**). There is no limit to His rule. It is not restricted to one or two areas, such as the spiritual or the ecclesiastical. He is Lord over everything.

Christ is involved in that lordship, that rule. We have many examples of His rule in the Gospels. (**SAMPLE VERSES**) In addition to all these examples, we also have that magnificent Christological passage in Colossians (**READ VERSES**)

Now here you have some differences among denominations. There has been a strong tradition to narrow the lordship of Christ down to a certain area of life, the religious, the spiritual. This is true especially of *pietists*. Most missions that have come to Nigeria have emphasized this religious lordship without concerning themselves with the rest of life, with other cultural concerns, etc. That is the background reason that the first generation of Christians kept out of politics and left the affairs of the nation to the Muslims. Here you see how crucial it is to have the right theology. Many of our current political and related problems of today stem from the kind of piety introduced by the early missionaries. It is up to *you*, this generation, to provide a more Biblical theology or worldview that will encourage God’s children to involve themselves in His world, to let him rule through you.

NOTE WELL: Pietism does not outrightly deny the lordship of Christ over the entire world. In fact, if challenged, it will affirm it. But if you watch Pietists, if you study what they have done in history, you will see that they emphasize the area of grace at the expense of nature, the area above the line. (**WHERE IS THE LINE?**)

Another tradition that quarrels, actually quarreling, with the full lordship of Christ is that of those who claim that Satan is the lord of the world. We won't spend time on them.

## 2. GOD RULES OVER ONE KINGDOM

Creation is one, not two or more. Within that creation there are a great variety of beings and things, animate and inanimate, spiritual and physical – but they all make up and are part of one creation *and one kingdom*. Now you may wonder why I make a point of this. The reason is our neighbours, the Lutherans next door. Probably the most important area of disagreement with Lutherans is the question of the Kingdom.

According to Luther, there are two kingdoms, the kingdom of God and that of the world. God rules over both, but in different ways. In the kingdom of God, He rules with His Spirit. It is the church. In the kingdom of the world, He rules through law. A person is a Christian in the church, but in the Kingdom of the world, even a Christian is just a citizen and acts like a citizen, not as a Christian. Over against this, the Reformed insist on one kingdom and that is the Kingdom of God. All the distinctions that need to be made must be made within that one kingdom that subsumes all.

A major difference between the Reformed and Lutheran tradition here is the way they perceive God's rule. Lutherans make a sharp distinction between law and grace. The Christian is guided by one force (the Spirit) in grace; in the world he is guided by reason. And this brings us to the next building block.

## 3. REVELATION

The Reformed believe that the one God reveals himself in two ways: nature and the Bible. Both are of great value. Both teach us about God and His world.

Biblicism is not our tradition. Nature, science, history – all of them are important sources of knowledge and revelation. That is a major reason Reformed have always been concerned with education, general education, not just Bible schools or colleges. That is also a reason that in the older Reformed churches theological training is preceded by general education.

Just as nature teaches us about God, so does the Bible teach much about the world and provides us with a perspective for the world, a worldview, the very thing I am talking about. While the Lutherans and traditional Roman Catholics have sought to restrict the appeal to the Bible only for the spiritual area, the Reformed insist that we have to take the Bible into the world and be guided by it in all we do, in our personal *and* political life. One Danish missionary said: “I am a soldier only as a citizen, not as a Christian.” Some Danish missionaries had never seen books relating the Gospel to different areas of life until they came to Nigeria and to the ICS. In the Lutheran scheme, there is no need for such. I am happy to have learnt that Lutheran graduates of TCNN are not aware of this part of the Lutheran tradition. That is just as well.

It is for this reason that as a Reformed theologian I cannot accept the CAN insistence on a *secular* government and constitution. Lutherans can accept that and so can Roman Catholics and Evangelicals, but not the Reformed. I want to be guided in all I do by the Bible. That Bible contains the wisdom of God that would be the utmost folly for us to reject in our political life. We *have* ignored God in our political life and look where it has brought us. I prefer the idea of a government that is just in its treatment of the various religions. I prefer a government that does not enshrine one religion in the constitution but that as much as possible seeks to utilize the ideas the religions have in common. At any rate, whatever our problems are, as Reformed Christians we *cannot* ignore the Word of God in our political life.

#### 4. TOTAL DEPRAVITY

This doctrine does *not* mean that man can do nothing worthwhile. But it *does* mean that everything he does is tainted by evil, even his noblest achievements are tainted. Including human reason. Not only is human reason insufficient to

arrive independently at a full knowledge of God and His way of salvation, but even at its most noble level you will find it complicated and derailed by selfishness, pride, greed, etc.

That is why the Reformed insist that we need the light of the Bible in all that we do, for if we only follow our reason, we will go in the wrong direction. Here we go against the major Western tradition of rationalism: the doctrine that reason is capable of independently finding the truth. That our reasoning faculty is basically sound. To that we have a loud *no way*. Autonomous reason is faulty and guided by evil impulse, even though it can discover many important strands of truth.

Here we also go against most other Christian traditions. Pietism is guided by a practical assumption that reason is sound and can independently solve human problems in the area of nature. Roman Catholic theology is based on it. It is one of their basic assumptions, a foundational building block to their worldview. Same for Lutherans: Revelation in religion; reason in society. You do not bring the Bible into society. It is wrong to do so. *Always this dualism*, wherever you turn.

Over against all of these we ask: what perspectives does the Bible offer on this or that problem or enterprise? We accept reason in so far as it goes, but in addition insist on letting the light of the Bible shine on the issue as well, no matter what it is. Again, that's why a Reformed person or community cannot accept secularism, including a secular government or institution.

##### 5. COMMON GRACE

The last doctrine, Total Depravity, sounds terribly negative. And it is. It affects all we do, say or think, all of us, no exception. But that is not all there is to be said. That is the *human* side of the story. That's how we are.

But God in His love has not left us to our own devices. He has released a force that we call common grace. This restrains the evil in this world and the evil in our own hearts and keeps it within certain bounds. This common grace affects all people. Hence the term "common." They may not be aware of it. If told about it, they many deny or reject it, but it is there and it is the explanation why we are

not worse than we are. It helps us understand how it can be that even ungodly people can be reasonably good.

Rationalists and many Christians may say that there is so much good in this world because man is a rational being and with his reason he does many good things. The Reformed say: it is not because of human reason that there is as much good as there is. It is because of God's grace, His common grace that restrains the evil within us.

When we put these two building blocks side by side, we have some important considerations for our involvement in society. On the one hand, we expect to find deep evil there and will be on the watch for it. We will counter it, oppose it. The devil is there with all his helpers. There is an antithesis there between the force of evil (Satan, etc.) and the Holy Spirit. We must identify it before we can deal with it. We should always do so by asking: what is the basic or root problem we are facing and deal with it at that level.

At the same time, we can find elements of truth and half truth precisely *because* God has not left those non-Christians totally. He has poured out his common grace over them. Those, too, we must search for, identify and build on them.

Muslim theology has a heavy emphasis on justice. When we work with them we should realize both the weakness and strength of their position. Having rejected total depravity, Muslims think a man has it within him to be just by his own power. It is a matter of persuasion and obedience to Allah. But we know better: it is difficult to be just because of our depravity. Sin deep down in our hearts makes it difficult. So we expect Muslims to be half-hearted about justice. Nevertheless we can work with them by appealing to their sense of justice and together try to construct a national policy of justice.

Common grace makes it possible for us to work with others in society.

## 6. GREAT COMMISSION AND CULTURAL MANDATE

Almost all Christians know the Great Commission (GC), but few know about the Cultural Mandate (CM). In fact, there are many Christians who feel that the total

duty of the church is to carry out the GC. There are many missionaries who are driven by the GC. It is my Reformed opinion that the GC separated or isolated from the CM leads to superficial Christian work. So, let's take a look at it.

First, the CM. I have written about this Mandate in different books. So, let me quote from them rather than start from scratch. (MISSIONS --- pp. 150-152 until middle and pp. 154-156 first line.)

And so, we conclude that working in the world is very basic for the Christian. It is his primary mandate. Evangelism is important, very important, but secondary. The need for it arose because man no longer knew how to fulfill the CM. We evangelize not merely to bring people into heaven or into the church, though these, too, are very important. We evangelize in order to enable us to carry out the CM in a constructive way. So that the carpenter does his carpentry constructively, the industrialist makes good and useful products, the farmer knows how to get the most out of the soil without ruining it, etc. etc.

The work of the church and evangelism are thus important as supportive to the primary task. I have just turned upside down the picture most Christians have of the relationship between CM and GC. I believe it to be in the spirit of Reformed thinking in so far as the latter rejects the nature-grace scheme.

You see, the grace of God does not bring something new into the world, but it redeems that which is there but in a corrupted form. Roman Catholics and all others who think dualistically, tend to think that grace brings something new into this world. The Reformed tradition has it that grace restores, renews, redeems that which was there all along. That is the purpose of GC.

## 7. PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

There is a tendency in the human heart to lust for power over other people, over money, over nations and over churches. Few people who have access to power will turn it down. And few of those in power would even think about voluntarily relinquishing their power or even part of it.



There is nothing wrong with power in itself. In the cultural mandate we have been given the power over all creation. Once the people of Israel had reached a certain development, God Himself provided them with leaders: Moses and Aaron, Joshua, various judges, Samuel, King Saul and King David.

The problem after the fall is that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. That statement does not come from the Bible. I do not know its origin, but it is a profound truth that human experience after the fall has demonstrated time and again. At all times and in all cultures. In every area of life, including both church and government.

For example, in the Western world the major issues for many centuries were power issues. Who should have the ultimate authority – government or Pope? That struggle absorbed tremendous energy on the part of both parties. It led to all kinds of unproductive politicking and corruption. Officials of both state and church were more concerned to uphold or regain their power than to carry out the basic mandates of their government or their church. Of course, power and money go together. And so gross financial indiscipline also characterized the church. Both power and money became more important in the church than its central task of preaching the Word of God, ministering to its people and empowering them to utilize the skills and talents they had received. This eventually led to the Reformation.

One of the emphases of the Reformation was the *priesthood of all believers*. The corruption in the church had led to a concentration of power in the clergy, especially the higher clergy. The clergy had power over everything in the church, even over spiritual issues, even over the Spirit of God Himself – or so they thought and so the people had come to believe. The people were afraid of the clergy, for they were seen as having the power over eternal life and over forgiveness of sins. And you know what happens. What you fear, you obey.

The Reformation sought to put an end to this regime of spiritual monopoly and fear by proclaiming the priesthood of all believers. This is a Biblical emphasis that had become lost under the regime of domination and fear. The meaning of this term is that everyone has equal access to God and to His power and blessing.

There is no special group or occupation, members of which control access to God. The only mediator is Christ and He is accessible to all. Through Him all can come to the Father – and no one apart from Him.

There is some good Biblical foundation for this emphasis. In John 14:6 Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Look at Acts 2, where we read,

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

And in I Peter 2:9 we read,

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

This, of course, is the fulfillment of the Mosaic prophesy of Exodus 19:5-6 –

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priest and a holy nation.

This priesthood had been lost because the people, the church, had not fulfilled the condition, namely obedience and keeping the covenant. The priesthood was still there in structure, but it had been distorted and served the purposes of those in power.

The Reformation reiterated the Biblical principle: everyone is a prophet, a priest. Everyone has access to God. Everyone has access to the truth and the power of the Spirit. Not just some group or class or clergy who have convinced the people that only they have access to the resources of God and they then used this pretended power for their own benefit.

The Reformation said: Away with spiritual monopoly and domination. But they not only spoke against this monopoly, they also changed the structures in the church and, later in government, so that it would become difficult for any future attempt to dominate. The most radical changes were made in the Reformed and Baptist traditions.

These churches did away with bishops and other forms of hierarchy. They established only one level of clergy, with everyone being the same. These clergy were then placed under the elders, a group of people nominated by the members and then selected by the consistory. This was a radical break in both spirit and structure.

And that is the Reformed church that came to Nigeria. But here it clashes with tradition once again, this time African tradition. But that African tradition is just one example of how human nature, when given the chance, will go for power and become authoritarian, no matter what culture. African tradition is also hierarchical, the spirit of which goes against the Reformed tradition.

Pastors tend to see themselves as the head of their congregation. They tend to feel that the people and the elders should obey them. In the CRCN there is now talk about greater centralization of power because the present setup seems not to be working very well. There is nothing wrong with changing things. Even Reformed church structure may change, but be sure you have a good basis for the changes you want to bring. Be sure you are not simply repeating mistakes made in the past that brought tremendous suffering. Ask: *why* is it not working. There are at least two possibilities:

1. Is it because the structures are not suitable to the people? Well, neither were they at first suitable to the members of the Reformed churches. They also had to learn to operate with them. It was also against *their* tradition of lust for power. Being against a particular tradition or way of doing things is no sin. Often Christians *must* be against certain traditions. Then the question becomes whether you must *reject* it altogether or whether you should *reform* it. In most cases, reformation should be tried before you decide to reject.

2. Is it because the existing structure assumes a certain spirituality and mentality that has disappeared? When in the CRCN it is said that the present structure is not working, could it be that those operating the structures have lost the spirituality that was meant to underlie it? Could it be that worldliness has taken over, i.e. lust for power and authority, immorality, etc.? More and more people are coming to me with complaints of this sort. If that is indeed the reason, no amount of changes of structures will bring the desired results. The need then is not structural change but change of heart, rededication, revival. I believe this is the need of the hour right now in CRCN.

Governments are always dumping existing structures and creating new ones, but the changes never bring the desired results because the problem is not in the structures but in the people who operate it. No matter what structures you have, if the people in charge are out for themselves, no structure will work, whether in government or church. Nigeria keeps talking about new constitutions, but it is nonsense, for not even the first one has been given a fair trial. Let us not make the same mistake in the church.

The church needs to remind itself of the Reformation emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. Not only for activities within the church, but also for our impact in society. Within the church, leaders must beware that they do not rob the members of this priesthood. They must respect these members as being filled with the Spirit of God and therefore they must listen to their advice. Even young people, women and *talakawa* must be respected and listened to. They must be given the chance to participate, for they too have the same Spirit you have. You may have the education, but education is no substitute for spirituality.

Instead of suppressing the members, leaders must equip them to use their talents for the perfection and growth of the community. In Ephesians 4:11-15 we read:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become

mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Not suppressing talents and powers of members, but enhancing them to prepare them for service. To teach them so they can stand up for themselves in society and church both, so they are not tossed back and forth by waves, by colleagues, by politicians, by every wind of doctrine or cunning and crafty people. They need to grow up in Christ so that when they go out into the world, they do so in full faith, with confidence in the Lord and full of His Spirit.

I have often said that politicians are the main obstacles to good government, lawyers to justice, doctors to health and pastors to godly religion. This is so because too often members of these professions are after money or power rather than service. The true pastor will build up his people so they become strong and can stand up to any storm or temptation.

It is such members, such strengthened members, such built up members that are equipped to work in the world. They go there with the backing of the church, with the prayers of the church, with the blessings of the church. They do not say, Ah, this is a spiritual something that does not concern me. Ah, this is a religious issue. Not my business. This one I don't know oh, for I am not a pastor.

These strengthened Christians have dreams and visions. They have the Holy Spirit. They are prophets and royal priests. All the things the Bible promises apply to them. They are mature. They are strong and perfected in Christ. And in that sense they go out into the world of business and politics, into the world of academics and professions, into the civil service.

Your parishioners. When you stand on your pulpits on Sundays, do not simply think of the faces looking at you as faces of sheep, of people over whom you have power. See them as prophets and royal priests. Treat them in that way. Preach to

them in that spirit. Pray for them in that vein. And then send them out fully equipped.