

The Relevance of Theological Education in the 21st Century

Lecture Presented at the
25th Anniversary Celebration

of the

Reformed Theological College of Nigeria

Mkar, Benue State, Nigeria

February 13, 1996

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Preface 2014

For quite some time after the anniversary celebration at which this lecture was delivered, requests for copies kept coming in from people who had not attended the event. These requests were siphoned to me through my dear friend, the now late Dr. John Orkar. Due to a sudden upheaval in our lives, I was not able to satisfy the demand.

By republishing this lecture on this website, though some years later, I hope that at least some of those people will at last get to read it. Here it is.

The event at which this lecture was delivered took place in Mkar,¹ a small mission-initiated village close to Gboko, Benue State, Nigeria. The NKST², the proprietor of the Reformed Theological College of Nigeria (RTCN), inherited the place with its missionary institutions from its missionary partner, Christian Reformed World Mission (CRWM), a global outreach of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. CRWM, in turn, inherited the place with its institutions from its predecessor mission, the Dutch Reformed Church Mission from South Africa. The NKST, the denomination that emerged from that mission history, decided to retain Mkar with all of its institutions as their administrative headquarters. Hence, it was quite natural for them to locate their theological college also near Mkar along a little sandy road winding through the farms for which the Tiv are so deservedly famous.

¹The story of my invitation and its larger context is summarized in Jan H. Boer & Frances A. Boer-Prins, *Every Square Inch—A Missionary Memoir*, vol. 2, p. 459. An ebook on < www.lulu.com >.

²“NKST” is the acronym for Nongo U Kristu U Ken Sudan Hen Tiv, the official Tiv-language name of the Church of Christ in the Sudan among the Tiv. “Sudan” is an outmoded term that used to refer Black Africa. It now refers exclusively to the two East African countries of Sudan and South Sudan.

International readers, especially Westerners, must remember that, like all theology, this lecture addresses a specific situation. A different context might require a different emphasis. Nevertheless, the major points are of global relevance.

Plans are for this document to be republished in two forms or places. Besides its republication here on this website, I also expect to publish it as part of an anthology of articles and lectures of mine in an ebook by < www.lulu.com >, where it will be offered free of charge.

So, whether you are reading this on my website or as an ebook, I wish you a belated but happy read. Though NKST has not stood still since that time, the major thoughts of this lecture remain relevant.

Introduction

This is a great occasion worthy of a joyous celebration. 25 years of RTCN. I am happy that so many members and pastors and other leaders of the NKST are here today to celebrate the blessings of God on your efforts to establish and maintain this college. The fact that some of us from other denominations have come to join you in this celebration shows that God's blessings and your achievements are recognized beyond your denominational borders.

Some of us remember the early obstacles placed in the way of this effort. Though the SUM-CRC had been your partner for years, they had their reasons for refusing to join in this effort at first. But you are Tiv. You are strong. If you have made up your mind, you will proceed. No one will stop you, not even the opposition of your mission partners. Later, these partners came around and supported you with staff and some other forms to help. You had little money, but you collected the kobos of widows and other poor. You bypassed mission channels and found other sources of support even in the Christian Reformed Church in North America.³ And here we are today, celebrating 25 years of RTCN, 25 years of theological education in NKST, 25 years of leadership training, 25 years of sacrifice and devotion – 25 years of God's blessing.

In the words of Revelation 5, I can almost hear with John the songs of adoration raised by ten thousand times ten thousand angels encircling the throne of God and that of the living creatures and the elders who together raised their voices in jubilant chorus singing:

³The story of the struggle for RTCN between NKST and the Christian Reformed Church is summarized in a report on the anniversary celebration by A. T. Mbachirin in NKST Newsletter, March 1996, pp. 1-3.

Revelation 5:12 – “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

I can almost hear with John:

Revelation 5:13-14 – every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!” The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

It is in this spirit of thanksgiving, praise and adoration that I would like to deliver this lecture.

The subject you have assigned has come to me in at least two different ways in the form of garbled radio messages. I believe it is something like “The Relevance of Theological Education in the 21st Century.” I am happy to address this issue and I will do so by suggesting various aspects of a theological stance that is properly within the basic Reformed tradition. That means it will be a broad and open approach, for the best of the Reformed tradition is not marked by fear and narrow mindedness. It is daring to the future and open to others within certain basic parameters. Within these parameters it is not afraid of change and challenge. Any church that claims to be Reformed but is known for sitting tight on old ways of doing things and refuses to examine these ways in the light of new circumstances is hardly worthy of the name Reformed.

A Reformed theology and training in it that is relevant for the 21st century must first of all be a

1. Theology of Praise

This I believe also to be the proper atmosphere in which to conduct and teach theology. At the Free Reformed University from where I received my doctorate, there was a famous theologian now retired, Prof. G.C. Berkouwer, who wrote a whole series of *Studies in Dogmatics* in which the element of praise and adoration is a constantly recurring theme. There are few doctrines more difficult than that of election. Many books dry as dust have been written about this subject in a very rationalistic way so that the doctrine has received a bad name in many churches. Berkouwer writes,

Theological reflection on the veracity (or truth) of God's election must, in true surrender to the Word of God, make it increasingly clear that the preaching of the gospel does not intend to lead believers to mute submission to a hidden and unapproachable being but to adoration and praise.⁴

In a book called *Faith and Perseverance*, in the same series, Berkouwer writes about another potentially dry and rationalistic sort of subject, perseverance of the saints.

... according to the deepest intention of the Church, the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is a song of praise to God's faithfulness and grace. The saying is applicable here, if anywhere, that in doctrine a song of praise sounds forth.⁵

This theme of praise is found throughout this series. Without praise and adoration, insists Berkouwer, theology shrivels up into a dry and

⁴Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, p. 26.

rationalistic venture that reflects little of the exciting reality of God and His works towards us.

Theology is not always conducted in an atmosphere of praise and adoration, an attitude that cannot be separated from that of joy and thanksgiving. In the world of Reformed churches, praise and adoration have not always characterized us. We have often been stiff, surly, formal, cold, rationalistic and very logical in our theological life. We have been more concerned to be correct in even the most remote theological points than to be sure our reflection is carried out in praise and adoration and leads to joy and thanksgiving.

I once had the doubtful privilege of sitting in on a theology class in which my daughter had enrolled. Till this day I have not overcome my shock. Here was this lecturer reviewing for his young adult students the covenant of God with his people. A most exciting arrangement God prepared for us. However, his delivery and content was so dull that most of the students were hardly paying attention. Instead of turning his students on, he turned them off. Instead of making them excited about God and His covenant, he bored them to tears. How can theology deteriorate to that level? Theology – however you define it precisely, is about God and His way of salvation. How can this ever become dull and boring? At the end of the hour, I walked out in a state of shock. I did not know what to say. Only a few days later I returned to Nigeria. Then I decided to write the man a letter. I sent it via my daughter. It took her two years to tell me that she never delivered it! Oh, well

I want to ask the faculty of RTCN whether they carry out their theologizing in that spirit of praise and adoration. That spirit, of course, is contagious; it spreads and gets hold of its participants. Where it

exists, it cannot be hidden under dry rationally correct lectures or under stiff liturgical formalities. That spirit will insist on a degree of spontaneity in our response to a theology of praise. It will insist on a degree of freedom to express its natural joy in an occasional "Amen!" or "Halleluiah!" It will make it difficult to sing our songs with expressionless faces or motionless bodies.

So, what is the theological atmosphere at RTCN? People are growing restless under rationalistic correctness and stiff, lifeless liturgies. They are running away from our churches. This is true for all TEKAN churches, of which NKST is one. NKST is right now struggling with this issue. We cannot continue to merely suppress. The Word of God is a Word of salvation, of life, of joy and peace. Rejoice always, we are admonished. Does your theologizing reflect this? Does your theological training encourage this? Channel it in proper ways? Or do you merely suppress this spirit by dull theologizing and thus encourage the continuing exodus into Pentecostal churches?

There is nothing in the Scriptures that encourages coldness and stiffness. Neither is there anything inherent in the Reformed tradition that would lead us in that direction. If we are talking about the relevance of theological education for the coming century, we cannot continue closing our eyes to the reality of mass dissatisfaction in our churches, including NKST. The attitude displayed in a recent issue of NKST NewsLetter, p. 2, concerning this issue is not promising, for it does not recognize the reason for current developments. I am not encouraging these developments. I am pleading that we forestall them by teaching our theological students a theology marked by praise, thanksgiving and joy that will spill over in their pastoral work, especially in our liturgies.

We do not know what the 21st century has in store for us, but if we are allowed to make tentative forecasts based on present tendencies, then we can safely predict our efforts at theological education will become increasingly futile and irrelevant, unless we move over into a mode of praise, thanksgiving and joy. Stiff formalities will be considered irrelevant. People will turn elsewhere. And they will do so en masse. *Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, Rejoice.* A theological lecture that never ends up in a song of joy is neither a good lecture nor good theology.

2. Theology of Critical Engagement

I am not a member of NKST, though I have great respect for this church and love. Thus I cannot speak of NKST or RTCN as an insider. However, I do read about the NKST. I meet many NKST members, including pastors now studying at TCNN. In fact, I am developing an increasingly close relationship with these students. From what I have read and from what I hear, I sense a need to emphasize a theology of critical engagement.

First of all, engagement. Though we all appreciate the pioneer work of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission that led to the establishment of NKST, it is a known fact that though that was a Reformed mission, it was also a pietistic mission. Pietism is not the same as piety. We all need piety and can use much more of it in our churches. Pietism is different. It is a movement in the church that has led to a separation of the church from society. A Reformed pietistic church will likely adhere to the so-called 5 points of Calvinism, but it will not be marked by the strong social concern that has characterized historical Calvinism.

Historical Calvinism has contributed much to the shaping of the cultures where it was strong. You cannot understand the histories of Scotland, of The Netherlands or of the USA without acknowledging the formative powers of Calvinism not only in the church but in every aspect of society.

However, when a Reformed church is affected by Pietism, it tends to lose that broad social concern and cuts itself off from the main streams of life. In the early years of development, the DRCM refused to teach English in its primary schools, for it felt that English was the door to worldliness. They did not see it as a door through which NKST would spread its salt and light in the society. The Roman Catholic Mission picked up on this and started teaching its students English. During a later stage, NKST “warned against involvement in politics of any kind by affirming that Christians had nothing to do with such matters of the world, but belonged instead to ‘the party of Jesus’.”⁶ Even today I hear of similar sounds from NKST via your students at TCNN.

I have the impression that NKST is trying to overcome the pietistic part of its heritage. Not only have you established RTCN – that is quite in keeping with Pietism --, but you now also have your fledgling Hilltop University with the vision, I understand, that this will one day blossom into a full-fledged Reformed Christian university. I applaud this development and I actively support it. It demonstrates to me that NKST is developing a new vision of engagement in the world.

I also sense that NKST leadership is trying to move the church into political engagement, especially through TEKAN. Your own Dr. Achineku has been very active along this line. That, too, I applaud. I believe the

⁶Rubingh, p. 164. Boer, 1979, p. 477.

Reformed part of the heritage is overcoming the Pietistic part. And I trust this is true also for other aspects of life. Such a direction will pay rich dividends for the church as well as for the society and the country as a whole.

This move towards engagement needs theological guidance and support. If you go about it anyhow, if you merely follow the trends as we see them in TEKAN and other churches, we will fail to make the creative contributions to the church and the nation that the Reformed have been known for. We will simply ape others and follow their patterns.

Following the patterns of other Christian denominations fails to take into account a basic difference between the Reformed and almost all other Christian traditions. According to Al Wolters, a Canadian Christian Reformed philosopher and theologian, all other Christian traditions somehow restrict or limit the scope of the Christian religion. They all subscribe to a variation of a scheme that divides created reality into two realms. One realm is that of the world, the natural, the secular; the other, that of the religious or sacred. He explains,

All of these “two-realm” theories ... are variations of a basically *dualistic* worldview, as opposed to the *integral* perspective of the reformational worldview, which does not accept a distinction between sacred and secular “realms” in the cosmos.⁷

RTCN should theologically support this move towards engagement in the society. The Reformed have a long tradition of such engagement and have produced a distinguished body of literature that is the envy of

⁷Wolters, p. 10. I have described this type of dualism in several other publications. See Boer, 1979, throughout, but especially pp. 240ff, 449ff, 480ff; 1984, throughout, but especially pp. 131ff; 1989, pp. 10-13.

those Evangelicals who are becoming more interested in society. NKST theologians should acquaint themselves with this creative tradition and body of literature and adapt them for our Nigerian context. With all humility I suggest that my own publications are examples of that tradition. That tradition underlies all of my social work, my writings and my teaching.

We have too much creativity to offer Nigeria to simply ape others. We must seek to apply the integrative force of the Reformed tradition to our church and society. We must do so by rejecting the dualisms with which almost everyone else is working. When we begin to investigate all of this, we will probably find that we will not support the dualistic secular response of CAN to Islam. We will direct our energies to more creative solutions that do not compartmentalize reality into separate boxes.

The Reformed tradition has long affirmed a theology of engagement in the world. But it is never a matter of just engagement. It is a matter of *critical* engagement. It is not just a matter of being out there in politics, but being in politics in a critical way that does not follow either the way of the world or the dualistic secular patterns of other Christians. Our way of involvement is with the Bible in our right hand and the Holy Spirit guiding us towards creative insights and solutions. We do not operate with the Lutheran two-kingdom theory that sends people into the world without the Bible but only with human reason.

Theology at RTCN should work at unmasking and identifying the principalities and powers that currently hold sway over all aspects of Nigerian life. And not only unmask them, but with the guidance of the Spirit, see creative solutions to the problems we face daily. Why is it

that we have become a nation of complainers and a church of complainers? Why do we feel so intimidated by the powers that be? So helpless? Just four days ago I had the privilege of hosting a fine Christian who has held some very high posts in the land, but who had thrown in the towel completely. His response to all the corruption around is simply, "What can we do?" The implied answer is: "Nothing!"

Reformed theology, when not burdened by Pietism or Rationalism, has not generally been that defeatist. It insists that Christ is Lord of life. It will go to great lengths to find creative solutions against all odds based on the Bible and on the faith that Christ *is* indeed Lord and in ultimate control.

Engagement, yes, but critical engagement. Theologians of the NKST, theologians at RTCN have their work cut out for them as we move into the 21st century. The people will not forever stay in a church that has nothing to offer in the face of corruption and oppression. The people will sooner or later leave a church that is no longer relevant to their needs. Or a church that simply plays the game by the rules of the world and that curries the favour of the oppressors of the people. Or a church whose pastors are as materialistic as their fellow elite and as power hungry.

3. Theology of Liberation

We have already eased our way into our next topic: theology of liberation. I propose that for our theological education to have any relevance for the 21st century, it must respond to the felt and actual needs of the people who are our target group. That target group is first of all our students, secondly, the NKST constituency and, thirdly, the

people of Nigeria as a whole. However, the first group is trained to minister to the other two groups. It exists only to serve the other two. It has no other reason for existence.

When I say “liberation theology,” you may immediately think of its Latin American version – and, since you probably do not like that, you may well promptly reject the very idea of liberation theology. However, Latin American liberation theology is only one of the various types that have appeared in history. And it definitely is not the type I am recommending.

The earliest form of liberation theology centres on the *Exodus* story in the Old Testament. It was the liberation of the people of God from their Pagan economic and political oppressors. Leaping over many centuries, we have the *Reformation*, which definitely was a type of liberation. It was especially the liberation of the people from a clerical class – note well: from the class of priests and of the clergy – that oppressed them spiritually and economically.

At the turn of the 20th century, there were two types of liberation theology in action. One was that of West African nationalists who adduced the theme of Biblical liberation against the colonialists.⁸ The other took place in my own homeland, The Netherlands, where a liberal state church oppressed the poor and pious. A prophet of God arose by the name of Abraham Kuyper. Some of his writings are very powerful, emotional and Biblical calls for the peasants to stand up in the Name of

⁸I would highly recommend someone doing a masters or doctors thesis on the liberation theology of Nigeria's nationalists. In my own writings, you will find data about West African nationalist theology in Boer, 1979, pp. 76-79, 106-108, 152, 215-217, 230-237, 271, 301, 334-343, 388-390, 400-402, 407-408; 1984, chapter 6 and throughout.

Christ. This was a Reformed type of liberation theology that did much to turn the country around.

West African, Dutch and Latin American liberation theologies all had certain characteristics in common. They all reject the dualism I have described above, the separation of the sacred and the secular. More positively put, they all insist on the integration or interplay of spiritual and social concerns. That is, they are all tending towards being wholistic. They seek to apply religion to all areas of life.

Nigeria is in need of liberation. Of that we are all acutely aware. Our resources are being squandered by a small group of people who have turned this country into their personal corporation. We need liberation from people who allow our educational system to fall apart, but who send their own children to private schools in the UK and elsewhere and who reportedly provide them with pocket money of \$100 million dollars at a time. Of people, who when they are submitted reports of N50 million being squandered by a university administration, merely shrug their shoulders with the comments, "What's N50 million? Not enough to bother with." Of federal ministers who are sent to cover up such scandals. Of people who, when they are submitted reports of over 200 administrative misdemeanours in one university, totally ignore the report. We need liberation from such situations and people. What role is the church playing in bringing such a liberation about? What kind of liberation theology are we developing over against such wholesale oppression? True, churches and fellowships of churches, CAN, TEKAN, CCN,⁹ and others pay occasional visits to the centres of power. But we

⁹These acronyms are household terms in Nigeria for major overlapping ecumenical groups of denominations. They mean respectively: CAN--Christian Association of Nigeria, the umbrella for almost all Christian churches and other organizations, organized basically to counter the Muslim challenge and to have a common voice with respect to governments at all levels. TEKAN is the popular Hausa-language acronym for the original Hausa name of the

see little accomplished in that way. We publish our communiqués and blame the government for all our woes. But publishing complaints is hardly the same as liberation theology.

And who are the perpetrators of all this oppression? Half of them are members of our churches. Why is it that we do not stop them from looting our wealth? *Could it be that the group in need of greatest liberation is the clergy?* I so declare. And this is where liberation theology comes in again. This is where our seminary can play a decisive role. Our students need to be taught the deep concern God has for injustice and oppression. Because we tend to read and study the Scriptures with dualistic glasses on our noses, we fail to notice or feel the impact of the tremendous emphasis on justice and liberation in the Bible. When a member solicits the services of a *boka* or a diviner, the church is quick to put him under discipline. Same for polygamists and adulterers. But a church member can plunder the state or the nation of its resources without any worry about discipline from the church. The pen pirates are greatly admired in the church and given the best chairs at launchings and anniversaries. The church leaders continue to blame the government for what their own members do. Pastors feel beholden to these thieves because of the gifts they receive from them. And cannot all of us think of the names of people who paraded as national

Fellowship of the Churches of Christ in Nigeria, an ecumenical organization of mostly northern Evangelical churches that have emerged from the efforts of the Sudan United Mission. All of these TEKAN churches also belong to CAN, singly as well as through TEKAN, which comprises one of the several pillars of CAN. CCN—Christian Council of Nigeria, the oldest ecumenical organization in Nigeria of older southern churches. It is the Nigerian counterpart of Christian Councils in many other countries and is closely affiliated with the World Council of Churches. The organization for which I work(ed), the Institute of Church & Society (ICS), is a department of CCN. At the time of the republication of this document (2014), both organizations are in shambles and all but dead. The sad story of the demise of CCN is summarized in vol. 2 of my memoirs. Anyone trying to produce a clear chart of the relationships of these three organizations to each other and their membership would have to be an accomplished artist with rich imagination and unusual technique!

prophets, but who were subsequently domesticated and silenced? Where are those voices of yesteryear?

What is the church's response? Prayer, yes. Absolutely. A few of us even refuse to profit from this corrupt system and I honour them, for they are courageous at high personal expense. I know some of them.

But it is time we go beyond prayer while we participate in the system. It is also time we go beyond refusal to participate personally. It is time our seminaries and theological colleges produce graduates who dare to serve God and our people as *prophets*. It takes no more courage to do so today than it did during the days of the major and minor prophets. James encourages the church to take up the mantle of the prophets.

James 5:10 – Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

But it takes courage and faith to be a prophet. It is one of the important tasks of theology in our present context to encourage the development of graduates who will follow their examples and to be willing to face suffering as those prophets did.

As long as we all secretly share the materialistic ambitions of our members in government, we will not produce any prophets and Nigeria will continue its present path. We need to produce people with a holy anger and sanctified impatience. Our traditional emphasis on patience, on *hakuri*, has now turned against us. The virtue of patience, of *hakuri*, has become a vice; it has turned us into cowards.

One reason we continue to put up with this rot is that we have spiritualized our religion. That has deprived us of all motivation to apply

the Word of God to the hard places in our society.¹⁰ As long as we fulfill our spiritual duties, we can do as we like the rest of our lives. We are not sensitive to God's utter anger against injustice. We do not hear God's profound anger at economic and political injustice and oppression:

Deuteronomy 27:19 – Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow.

Isaiah 10:1-3 – Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches?

Isaiah 61:8 – For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity.

In my publication, *Living in God's World*, there are 17 pages of Biblical quotations of this type, but how many of our theologians, let alone pastors, are aware of the bulk of these materials scattered throughout the Bible? Our students need to hear these verses and fear their impact. They also need to hear the promises of God to those who dare to buck the present reign of corruption in both society and church.

Isaiah 58:10 – and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

¹⁰Boer, 1989, p. 11.

If we so spend ourselves in every department of our churches, our Mkar Hospital today would not be at the point of collapse. It is not money that will set it aright; it will be the Spirit of prophecy, of liberation, of courage. The Spirit of God. Our theological students, our pastors and all our workers need to hear the call to speak up:

Proverbs 31:8-9 – Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Proverbs 24:11-12 – Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, “But we knew nothing about this,” does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?

Our theologians need to make their students aware of God’s extreme anger at it all and His impatience.

Lack of faith is another serious problem. We do not believe God will stand by us when we stand up against corruption. We simply don’t believe it. We think Nigeria with its corruption is stronger than God. And so we don’t dare. Our theologians need to instill a sense of deep faith among their students in a God who will stand by us. They need to make them aware of how He has done so in the past.

I confidently though sadly predict that over the next 20 years, our theologies and our graduates will become increasingly irrelevant to our people – unless we produce graduates that will actively and courageously work on liberation by preaching a gospel of justice without fear or favour. Unless our graduates dare to discipline its

corrupt members – including our generals, governors, contractors and civil servants. These people themselves need to be liberated from the unprecedented greed and corruption that now rule their hearts. That, in fact, would be the aim of disciplining them.

Our theologians need to teach their graduates to be free from their attachment to this corrupt class of elites and the mutual support such elites give each other. Our graduates must come to identify themselves with the victims, with those who suffer the most from our present dispensation. They must speak up for them and, even more important, teach them to speak up. You can use the services of the Institute of Church & Society in Jos to accomplish this as well as Dr. John Orkar's office in Jos. You may call upon me for consultation.

Finally, in terms of relevance and liberation, the church itself needs to be freed from clerical domination. The doctrine of priesthood of all believers is basically an expression of liberation theology. We as clergy and theologians have long ago forsaken this doctrine and pay little more than lip service to it. And we have become so successful at this clerical domination, that our members are happy to accept it as normal and Biblical. They refer all religious questions to us and we are flattered. When I as a pastor have a personal reason for opposing a project in the church, we will do so with all the power at our disposal. Pastors head up all programmes and departments. Our clerical class interest has so blinded us that we do not see that these departments generally fail to produce. Why is there so much friction between pastors and elders if not for this hunger for power? Our graduates must be trained to become liberators also within the church and be prepared to be servants and trainers rather than masters and power brokers. They are to be freed from this evil in our church system.

4. Theology of Dialogue

There is no time to develop this aspect of the subject and so I will only briefly outline the concerns here that need more exhaustive treatment. NKST is a strong church with strong principles and strong control over its members, including its theologians and pastors. But you are also an isolated church. The main body of your church is amongst your own people, amongst the Tiv. This gives many of you the feeling as if you are the only church on earth. Certainly the only *true* church on earth. You tend to have a kind of contempt for all others.

The 21st century will not allow you the luxury of such isolation. On the one hand, your yourself are reaching out into the cities, where your members meet all kinds of people, other kinds of Christians and even non-Christians. Furthermore, more and more non-Tiv are entering your towns and villages and they bring their churches with them. You are not going to be alone anymore. The 21st century will not allow it to continue.

This means your members and your pastors will be meeting people with different questions you never thought of before or which you could afford to ignore. That will no longer be possible. You will be meeting new needs and new challenges for which you must prepare. I trust that the name chosen for this college, Reformed Theological College of *Nigeria*, was chosen consciously. Not RTCT (*Tiv*), or RTCB (*Benue*), but RTCN (*Nigeria*).

Your theologians at RTCN must be given the freedom to prepare for these challenges; otherwise they will continue to train pastors for the 20th instead of the 21st century. This means that you must allow, no, not just allow them, but encourage them to mingle with other peoples and

churches. You must encourage them to listen to these peoples and churches with open ears, open minds and open hearts. Critically, of course, but I hardly need to encourage you to be critical at this point. We are professionals at that. My point today is that we must also listen to them openly. Our theologians and pastors must be encouraged to dialogue with them, discuss with them, even be prepared to be challenged by them enough so that they need to rethink some of the most traditional attitudes we are now living with.

My own experience in the ecumenical setting of the ICS has been that it deepens my Reformed convictions, while it also shows me many true and beautiful ideas in other denominations. For example, while I reject the traditional Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, I have learned something very valuable from the Lutheran emphasis of a theology of the cross that emphasizes suffering for Christ's sake. Our Reformed heritage needs that reminder or correction at times, for we often think in terms of ruling rather than suffering.

Even when it comes to Islam. How much are we listening to them, really listening to them? All we do is shout at each other and kill each other. Is that the way to peace? Will that bring salvation to them in the 21st century? Listen to them carefully and you will better understand them as well as yourself.

Dialogue, careful listening, sympathetic discussion, openness – all these are now a *must* with the 21st century just around the corner. The luxury of our splendid isolation is over.

This is not a call to become careless about your Reformed theology, but to deepen it, to enrich it, to enhance it, to keep it relevant for the sake of our theology and for the sake of our church. Without it, you will be

left alone, in the dust – you and your empty churches. Your people will go elsewhere – as they are already doing. I meet any number of former NKST members in Jos who have joined other denominations. The future is already here. It has already entered NKST at the edges.

Closing

A topic of this nature cannot be exhausted in a lecture; it requires a book. So, I will leave it at this in the belief that I have given enough to challenge you for some time to come. I know, your theologians will complain that the church, the NKST, will not allow this kind of vigorous Reformed theology. They will complain that synod will call them on the carpet and beat them into the traditional mold for which NKST is known. But I will tell you, NKST, my fathers and my mothers, my sisters and my brothers, I will tell you out of the depth of my love and concern for NKST, for the Church of Christ as a whole and for the nation of Nigeria, if you are serious about your church's future you will have to change course. You have invited me to talk to you about relevant theological education for the 21st century. I don't believe you invited me to tell you not to change anything, to keep going in your present track. You have invited me to challenge you with an eye to the future.

I have done so, but I have done so within the bounds of Reformed theology. I am deeply grateful for that Reformed tradition. I deeply believe it has the basic wherewithal to bring healing to our church and nation. But not in its Pietistic dress. Nor in splendid isolation. And definitely not in rigid traditionalism. Where you have these three together – pietism, isolation and traditionalism – you have an unholy trinity. You may have the five points of Calvinism left, but you have cut

yourself off from that basic spirit of Calvinism that dared courageously to step into the world and shape whole nations. The 21st century will need a courageous and open variety of Reformed theology that will subsume all of life under the Lordship of Christ and take the Bible to shed light on all segments of life. It will not be an opiate that puts the people to sleep, but it will wake them up to the challenge of the 21st century. It will contribute to the liberation of our country and throw off that blanket of evil that now seems to cover us.

Postscript

The above lecture was delivered under somewhat trying circumstances. It was outside. The audience was spread out under a large U-shaped area protected from the very hot sun by grass matting. However, the speaker's podium was placed squarely in the glaring sun. There I stood in the hot sun in my big blue *very warm* Nigerian *babbar riga* ("big gown") with which Nigerian men throughout most of the country's Middle Belt strut around for formal occasions—and formal it was in spite of the humble arrangements.

The editor of the NKST Newsletter,¹¹ Rev. A. T. Mbachirin, reported on the event as follows:

Then it was time for the guest speaker, Rev. Dr. John Boer. He presented a paper entitled "The Relevance of Theological Education in the 21st Century." I bet you, you have not listened to an elaborate speaker well versed in Calvinism and able to Africanly contextualize Calvinistic principles like this. John Boer is a great writer and speaker on such issues. He has never failed to impress the most dull audience. I am not kidding: The guy spoke convincingly and energetically in hot weather for more than an hour.¹²

The able orator contended that a Reformed theology that is relevant for the 21st century, must be one that is conducted in an

¹¹March, 1996, pp. 1-2.

¹²If that seems mercilessly long under a hot sun for Western readers, it should be understood that a lecture at such an important event is *expected* to be long. In fact, I was allotted one and a half hour! A hot sun is not that bothersome to Nigerians nor a long lecture.

atmosphere of praise and adoration, be critically engaged, have a strong liberation component and be steeped in dialogue.

Thank you, brother A. T., for these kind words. I am pleased and, yes, properly flattered. Such high praise does not come every day!

Comment by Rev. Iyortyom Achineku, Rector

The pertinence of this thought-provoking lecture to theological education in the 21st century is most obvious, especially in relation to the preparation of effective Reformed ministry. The lecture lays a solid bridge between social theology and covenantal theology by advocating a theocentric and wholistic approach to life. True theological education is defined by what it does, not by cold philosophical presuppositions and concepts. The new approach places emphasis on both knowing and being. To know and to truly impart the concept of grace one must be gracious himself.

The mind of the Dutch Reformed Mission staff in Tivland has not been expressed in writing as has that of their successors of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. This fact makes it difficult to pin down the thoughts of the Dutch Reformed Mission without falling into speculation. Their practices have been hailed by some and highly criticized by others. Thus, when we seek to interpret them, we must be very careful in our assertions. I find it difficult to believe that their insistence on the use of the Tiv language in schools was motivated by their pietistic approach to life. This approach may have purely didactic reasons. Verbal discussions with one of them, Ortese Bem, otherwise known as "Rev. Scott," indicated that these South African missionaries firmly believed in the principle that firm knowledge of one's mother tongue is a great aid in learning a second language. Many of their practices may have been influenced by apartheid, but even this is mere speculation.

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