

INTRODUCTION TO RELEVANT REFORMED INSIGHTS FROM A MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE¹

A. Initial Remarks

The intention is not to present the whole gamut of Reformed Theology (RT) as it concerns all of missiology. Our focus is on devising a *wholistic practical world-affirming realistic mission approach with a special emphasis, though by no means exclusive, on Nigeria*. I want to suggest some facets of RT that have special relevance for our struggle to achieve this goal. You will hopefully be able to think of more as we proceed with the discussion. Though I list some of these doctrines below, I do so only in summary fashion, trusting that you are familiar with them.

In this seminar we will make a definite distinction between RT and Christian Reformed practice. I have always had enthusiasm for basic Reformed theology, but I have been less enamoured with some of our mission policies and practices. Our policies and practices have often been set without serious reference to basic Reformed theology, a fact that will become more clear as we proceed.

I have chosen Nigeria as a special focus for various reasons. For one thing, that is where I have worked for some 20 years and am thus well acquainted with the situation there. Secondly, it is the country in which the CRC has spent more missionary power, prayer, finances than any other. Thirdly, Nigeria is the giant of Africa. It is the richest Black African country, apart from South Africa. It has by far the largest population: about 100 million, more than double the next contender. Because of the size of her population, one finds many Nigerians all over the world in international organizations. Another reason is that Nigeria has a larger Christian population than any other African country: some 45 million. It is, in other words, a very influential country in Africa as a whole, economically, politically and

¹ For background to this lecture, see our *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, pp. 298-299.

religiously. It is thus clear that a healthy approach to mission in Nigeria can have significant spillover effects in other African countries.

When I talk about a mission approach to Nigeria, I do not refer only to the approach of *foreign* missionaries in that country. I am talking just as much about the approach of the Nigerian church. At this point in time, the influence of the foreign mission is small when compared to that of the Nigerian church.

B. The Status of Creation

The emphasis in the creation account is on the positive value of creation in the eyes of God. Note the 5-fold “And God saw that it was good.” The sixth time in Genesis 1:31 this is repeated with double force: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was **very good**.” It is useful to note that this six-fold goodness of creation does not refer in Genesis 1 to spiritual beings or spiritual truths. The goodness refers to the material things of this creation. Animals, plants, water, land, fish, sun and moon—these are declared good and valuable.

There are some Christian traditions that, under the direct or indirect influence of Greek philosophy tend to berate the earth/world/body/material aspects of reality as of secondary importance in God’s scheme. We are all acquainted, I trust, with the dualistic nature/grace scheme of Thomistic Roman Catholicism. In this scheme, creation takes a secondary place; the world of the mind and spirit deserves greater priority. I am not prepared to say whether the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms includes a denigration of the material world. However, Pietism, a product of Lutheranism and a component of most forms of Evangelicalism, certainly does accord second place to the physical world, ascribing greater importance and urgency to the spiritual. This aspect of Pietism will be the subject of a discussion in this course. Hence, I will not treat it any further.

C. Man’s Task in Creation—Cultural Mandate

Directly related to creation is the human task as expressed in the *Cultural Mandate* of Genesis 1:26 and 28. This task is directly related to the material

world. There is no hint of an exclusively spiritual task, let alone a spiritual task that is more superior inherently than a task dealing more directly with the things of this earth. Every legitimate task is done before God and is meant in some way to contribute to our exercise of dominion over the world. There are, therefore, no tasks performed by Christians that may be called “secular.”

Again, traditions marked by dualism tend to uphold spiritual tasks as inherently superior to more “earthly” tasks. Catholicism, Lutheranism, Pietism and its Evangelical cousin are all in this camp. Church vocations and religious activities are considered to be more pleasing to God than those of carpentry and business. If anything, this seminar should demonstrate the terrible problems and difficulties this dualistic perspective has created in the church and her missionary outreach. Lutherans say they would perform, e.g., military tasks not as Christians but as good citizens. There the Spirit of God has no contribution to make; human reason will suffice.

An important consideration here is the *relationship between the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission* (Boer: 1979, p. 491; 1974, pp. 154-155).

D. Redemption of Creation

Especially in Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20 we find great emphasis on the salvation not only of the church or of Christians or even of people, but that in some way all things are to be reconciled to God through Christ. Redemption here is as wide as creation itself. He who sat upon the throne is overheard as saying, “Behold, I make all things new.” If mission is, amongst other things, the task of planting signs of that salvation, then this theme also pushes us towards comprehensive task.

We have here an emphasis hardly found amongst our Evangelical partners.

E. Religion: the Basis of All Human Activity

While rationalists would define the human being as a rational animal and Marxism as an economic being, in the Reformed camp we hold that we are first of all religious beings. We do everything on basis of the heart commitment we have

made. That means that there are no neutral people, structures or cultures. All of these are guided by some basic commitment or belief residing in individuals and/or societies.

How does this approach differ from that of Church Growth thought—e.g. C. Kraft?

F. Reason: Corrupted

Human reason has been deeply corrupted by sin and cannot function properly without the infusion of the Spirit of God.

The Roman tradition has, of course, always upheld the soundness of human reason in non-spiritual matters. Though Luther referred to reason as a “whore,” the scope of that radical insight was limited to the spiritual realm. In the Kingdom of the World unredeemed human reason is sufficient. Evangelicals seldom talk about reason, but if you watch them closely, you will find that they basically operate with the premise of sound reason in the affairs of the world.

G. Scripture Is for All of Life

Because of the corrupted reason, we need the input from God’s wisdom in all of our efforts. There is no area where that input is not needed. The moment we seek to go it alone, we end up with what the Bible calls the “foolishness of this world.”

The other traditions are much weaker with respect to the role of the Scriptures in the affairs of this world; they give more credence to reason.

H. Common Grace

While it is true that without special revelation we wander about like a blind man, it is also true that God has not left himself without a witness. No individual, society or culture is completely left in their corruption. One will always find positive characteristics or gifts.

I. Kingdom of God and Lordship of Christ

I, for one, identify myself with that trend of Reformed thought that identifies the Kingdom of God with all of creation. Genesis 1 can be seen as the announcement

of the establishment of the Kingdom of God. His kingdom extends to every nook and cranny of creation. It cannot be limited to spiritual realities or to the church. Moreover, it is one.

Such a view of the Kingdom implies that the Lordship of Christ is of similar extent. He is to be obeyed in every realm and in every activity.

Lutheranism posits two kingdoms: the Kingdom of God and that of the World. God reigns in both and man is to obey him in both. But in the one he obeys as a Christian on basis of revelation, while in the other he obeys as an ordinary citizen on basis of his reason or common sense.

J. Two Sources of Revelation

God, according to Reformed thought, reveals himself in nature as well as through the Word, i.e., through Christ and the Scriptures. This means, among other things, that we take the findings of science, when based upon careful research and not inconsistent with Scripture, seriously. These findings cannot be ignored in mission. Knowledge gained through science is, therefore, not to be considered secular knowledge of secondary value to mission. Mission can therefore not afford to ignore or to be ignorant about politico-economic systems and scientific knowledge.

K. Communal and Structural Concerns

RT is not individualistic. Sin is not only an individualistic phenomenon; it also marks the community as a whole. Nay, more: it also marks the structures individuals and communities erect. Thus mission cannot ignore communal and structural concerns. Failure to recognize this has led to serious Christians, who may be very sensitive to personal sin, participating in communal and structural sin without any sense of contradiction.

Evangelical support of colonialism is a case in point. So is most Christian investment in corporations.

L. Realism

I do not believe there is an explicit Reformed doctrine of realism, but when you take all the above tenets, you will find a pervading sense of realism. We take the world seriously. We take science seriously. We recognize the all-pervasive evil and good in our midst—at least, in principle!

Conclusion

If you add up all the above tenets of Reformed thought, you will conclude that is very *wholistic*. In contrast to some other Christian traditions, it does not separate religion from ordinary life and does not separate the material from the spiritual. These are all intertwined in both principle and reality. However, they are *not* intertwined in a hierarchical fashion. They are all aspects of creation of equal importance. A mission approach that follows the contours of dualism and fails to be wholistic will surely cause problems as we will see in this seminar. So, the two antithetical poles between which we will be conducting our seminar are those of dualism and wholism or, to put it in more controversial terms, Evangelical vs Reformed.

For a definition of dualism I refer you to Rookmaker in Boer: 1979, p. 453; 1974, p. 132. For further background as to its role among Evangelicals, see Boer, 1979, pp. 39, 41, 43, 240ff, 255, 340, 362-363, 442, 445, 447, 449ff, 468-469, 472, 477, 479, 480ff, 484ff; 1974, pp. 30, 116, 120, 131ff, 140, 156, 159, 161, 172, 178.

NOTES:

(1) It may seem as if I am very unecumenical in my insistence on a Reformed approach. This would be a false conclusion: I doubt that there is a CRC clergyman who is involved more in the ecumenical world than I am. However, my studies and experiences have brought me to the conclusion that Reformed wholism, Reformed Kingdom approach, contains the potential seed for the most Biblical, practical and radical approach to mission and to life in general than any other tradition. That wholism is so powerful and so instinctively embraced when brought before Africans, that I have come to recognize it as the *main contribution of the Reformed tradition to the world*. A mission approach that ignores that aspect of

RT has often led to an anemic evangelical approach without the evangelical fervor. It has led to doubtful propaganda and deceit in the CRC, to contradiction and confusion in missionary policy, programme and work. In Nigeria, failure to be aware of this wholism has so confused other missions and churches that I have been asked more than once what CRC really stands for. Failure to insist that our missionary contribution be based on a programme including the above components of RT is a betrayal of the CRC constituency but even more of our hosts.

(2) I am not proposing that other traditions have no contributions worth considering. The Lutheran emphasis on the **cross and suffering** is all too lacking in the Reformed tradition; we tend towards triumphalism. There is good reason, of course, to think in terms of triumph when we confess Christ as victorious King. However, triumphalism results when we ignore the equal reality and imperative of the cross and suffering.

Furthermore, **Evangelical joy, fervor, simplicity and practicality** are assets that we can only learn to our profit. Reformed tradition has long been marked by theory devoid of practicality and by an intellectualism devoid of obvious usefulness and fervor. Both in N. America and in Nigeria the Reformed churches lose many people because of our stern intellectualism. It is time that the Reformed both in writing and programme become more obviously practical and joyful.

Though in RT the **Holy Spirit** is acknowledged, this acknowledgement has been scant and not fully explored and utilized. Not only has this weakness contributed to our stern intellectualism, but it has also prevented us from being open to the power of the Spirit in various aspects of our missionary work, especially in healing, business, politics. Our mission has not helped much to have new Christians run their affairs and build their structures on basis of openness to the Spirit. In Nigeria, e.g., Christians are fatalistic about endemic corruption and do not believe in the power of the Spirit as a potential force to overcome it.

RT has had much to say about the application of the Word of God, especially the Bible, to all of life. It has not had much to say about **justice**. At one time I felt that these were two different issues. I thought of the Free University and its Canadian

equivalent, the Institute of Christian Studies as representing the former, while WCC and its constituency stood for the latter. I felt that WCC's approach to the Bible was politicized and that it required the correction of the VU tradition. I have since come to realize that concern for the application of the Bible over all of life and for justice are basically the same. When the Bible is not applied fully by Christians, they invariably and inevitably end up supporting injustice. Wolterstorff has criticized the tradition of the VU as having ignored justice issues and I agree. Unfortunately, now that the VU has become more concerned with justice, I get the impression that it has lost some of its traditional concern for a wholistic application of the Bible. I have come to consider the two concerns as basically one. In today's world a missionary approach that ignores issues of justice will have little to contribute to the host society.