



On dreaming a different world together?

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Abstract

The article provides some broad perspectives on what is happening in the global Reformed world today. It takes its point of departure in two recent editions of the *Reformed World*, the official journal of the World Communion of Reformed Churches that is again being published since 2021 after a short interruption in publication. It shows how these editions embody the present self-description of the global body, namely “Called to Communion; Committed to Justice” as well as its strategic vision, “Confessing the God of Life in a World Fallen Among Thieves.” In this process, a brief overview is offered of distinct Reformed emphases in four of the most important bilateral reports in which the World Communion participated in recent years. Based on this overview, four brief theological observations conclude the broad picture.

Keywords:

World Communion of Reformed Churches; bilateral dialogues; Reformed World; Accra Covenant; Wittenberg Witness

The Reformed world today?

The request was for “somewhat of a global picture,” for “some perspectives on what is happening in the Reformed world today,” as background to other more local and contextual contributions.¹

This is an intriguing request. Any attempt to offer some global picture of the Reformed world is already somewhat of an internal contradiction, since the Reformed world is by definition a world without centre, without

1 This essay is an annotated version of a plenary paper that was read on invitation during a Conference on “Mirrors and Windows: Reflecting on the Reformed Tradition Today,” hosted at the Theology Faculty, Stellenbosch University, South Africa, on 17–19 October 2022, by several Churches and other institutions.

representative authority, without hierarchy, without a single face and voice and story. Being Reformed is always a story of many stories. What is happening in the Reformed world is therefore precisely what is happening in all the local and particular and contextual times and places – together.

Still, this “together” is extremely important for being Reformed. *Kerkverband* belongs to the being of the church, not merely to its well-being. We are church together, need one another, listen to one another, and learn from one another, treasure one another, and hold on to one another, endure and suffer one another, at least, that is what the Reformed faith claimed during its better moments.

Therefore, one may perhaps respond by asking what is happening in the Reformed world today when and where Reformed people are together? What is happening when and where they share their times and places with one another in *kerkverband*, in *koinonia* and fellowship and communion, in mutual recognition and belonging and shared mission? In short, what is happening in the Reformed ecumenical world?

To make this question even more concrete, is it possible to gather some perspectives on what is happening today in the World Communion of Reformed Churches, in their activities and studies and documents and strategic visions and their ongoing worldwide service and witness? I therefore begin with an overview of recent developments and conclude with four comments on this account.

“Called to communion; committed to justice”

In 2021, the World Communion of Reformed Churches committed itself anew to the publication of *Reformed World*, its official journal. Since the beginning of Reformed ecumenism, this journal, under different names, has been central to the work and witness of being Reformed in the world. One may in fact follow the story of the Reformed tradition for almost a century and a half by following the fascinating history of this journal.²

2 See e.g. the brief but informative overview by Hanns Lessing, “A Short History of the Journal Reformed World,” *Reformed World* 69, no. 1 (2021): 5–10. It was earlier known as *The Catholic Presbyterian* (1879–1883), *The Quarterly Register* (1886–1936), *The*

Its themes vividly embody the successive slogans and visions of this ecumenical trajectory. In 2021, two volumes were published. Together, they are instructive to see what is happening in the Reformed world today.

One volume is a special edition in the form of a *Festschrift* honouring the retired General Secretary Chris Ferguson. Essays by well-known figures in recent and contemporary Reformed ecumenism, including Najla Kassab, Roderick Hewett, Kim Yong-Bock, Ofelia Ortega, and Allan Boesak, give intriguing content to the current strategic plan of the World Communion under the heading “Confessing the God of Life in a World Fallen Among Thieves.”³ Behind this strategic vision and motto, one hears of course the histories of Belhar, Kitwe, Debrecen, and Accra.⁴

This motto summarizes the present-day strategic vision of the World Communion – and every word in the expression is of importance. It was approved after the General Assembly in Leipzig in 2017 and today gives orientation for the life and work of the World Communion. In the past year, this was also the theme for the Lombard Prize, the annual international essay competition for young theologians hosted by the World Communion.⁵

Presbyterian Register (1937–1948), *The Presbyterian World* (1949–1955), *The Reformed and Presbyterian World* (1956–1979), and since 1971 as the *Reformed World*.

- 3 *Reformed World. Special Edition: A Festschrift Honouring General Secretary Chris Ferguson*, 69, no. 2 (2021).
- 4 For a brief overview of this history of reception, see for example my “Challenges for Reformed Churches in Africa. A Contemporary Narrative,” in *Essays on Being Reformed. Collected Essays 3*, edited by Robert Vosloo, (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2009), 441–460, as well as several other essays in the same volume and also in the earlier volume *Essays on Public Theology. Collected Essays 1*, edited by Ernst Conradie (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007).
- 5 The full theme for the 2022 Lombard Prize was “Ecumenism from the Margins: Confessing a God of life in a world fallen among thieves.” Qualifying essays were to illustrate a familiarity with Reformed tradition and theology and to demonstrate both theological imagination and a willingness to relate theology to modern-day challenges. Essays by three young theologians from the United Kingdom, Brazil, and United States were selected as winners, namely Victoria Turner from the United Reformed Church in the UK who took first place for her essay, “Structural Flourishing or Life Flourishing? A Critical Response to the Popular Tool of Receptive Ecumenism,” Paulo Camara from the Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil for his essay on “Evangelism as an Act of Hospitality: A Local Church Case of Ecumenism from the Margins,” and David Brandon Smith from the Presbyterian Church in the USA for his “A Liberative Reformed Linguistic: Ecumenical Formation Programs, Gender and Sexuality.” These essays will be published in a future edition of the *Reformed World*.

So, what is happening in the Reformed world today? The worldwide Reformed communion is together, as *koinonia*, “confessing the God of life in a world fallen among thieves.” The official explanation is that this call involves four verbs, namely “discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being Reformed together.”⁶

The second volume of *Reformed World* from last year includes three reports of major bilateral dialogues in which the World Communion was involved,⁷ namely with the Roman Catholic Church,⁸ the Anglican Communion,⁹ and the Pentecostal World Fellowship.¹⁰ A fourth report, on the dialogue with the Lutheran World Federation, had been published already.¹¹

This fourth report in turn formed the basis of the *Wittenberg Witness* of 2017, a joint witness between the Lutheran World Federation and World Communion of Reformed Churches, which made the moving ecumenical service of July 2017 in Wittenberg possible, commemorating the birth of

6 The current strategic plan of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, developed and adopted by the Executive after the General Council in Leipzig in 2017, stands under the heading “Confessing the God of Life in a World Fallen among Thieves” and describes the WCRC as a global *koinonia* based on four verbs and five actions. The four verbs are discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being Reformed together. These four verbs take up the theological trajectories that have guided the work of the World Alliance and now the World Communion from the beginning. The five actions describe the areas in which the WCRC will strive to confess the God of life, namely “cultivating a just communion,” “covenanting for justice,” “doing theology for transformation,” “engaging God’s mission in contexts of crisis,” and “working with all the partners God provides.”

7 *Reformed World* 69, no. 1 (2021).

8 See the Report of the Fourth Phase of Catholic-Reformed International Dialogue called *Justification and Sacramentality: The Christian Community as an Agent for Justice*. [Online]. Available: http://wcrch.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Catholic-Reformed_Dialogue_Report.pdf

9 See *Koinonia: God’s Gift and Calling The Hiroshima Report of the International Reformed–Anglican Dialogue* (IRAD) 2020. [Online]. Available: <http://wcrch.ch/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/IRAD-Koinonia-Gods-Gift-and-Calling.pdf>

10 *See Called to God’s Mission: Report of the Third Round of the International Dialogue between Representatives of the World Communion of Reformed Churches and Representatives of the Pentecostal World Fellowship 2014–2020*. [Online]. Available: [http://wcrch.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ CalledToGodsMission.pdf](http://wcrch.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CalledToGodsMission.pdf)

11 See *Communion: On Being the Church, Report of the Lutheran–Reformed Joint Commission between the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) 2006–2012*. [Online]. Available: https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/DTPW%20Reformed-Lutherans%202014_0.pdf

the Reformation. The *Wittenberg Witness* provided the structure for the whole worship service.¹²

The *Wittenberg Witness* also made it possible for the World Communion of Reformed Churches to associate with the important ecumenical process on the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* – during the worship service in Wittenberg this association was welcomed by the original partners, namely the Roman Catholic Church and Lutheran World Federation, as well as those that joined later, like the World Methodist Council.¹³

All these reports together tell a remarkable story. All six – the four dialogue reports, as well as the *Wittenberg Witness* and the *Association with the Joint Declaration on Justification* – albeit in different ways, deal with the question of koinonia, of communion, of the church as being together, being one, sharing fellowship. All six documents, albeit in different ways, underline the integral link between communion and justice, understood in broad and complex ways. All six documents, albeit in different ways, lament the past and ongoing failures of the church in practicing this communion and embodying this justice.

So, what is happening in the Reformed world, today? The Reformed communion is still learning from its own experiences with Belhar, Kitwe,

12 For the official text of the *Wittenberg Witness, A Common Statement of The World Communion of Reformed Churches and The Lutheran World Federation, 5 July 2017*, in four different languages, see <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/gc2017-wittenbergwitness.pdf>. The preamble explains: “Today, in the city of Martin Luther and in the church where he used to preach, we gather to respond to the unique opportunities for continuing renewal which the 500th anniversary of the Reformation offers to the Church. On this momentous occasion, the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, in the presence of representatives of the whole church, make a common witness. This Wittenberg Witness builds upon the steps towards unity taken by our member churches around the world and upon decades of theological dialogues, whose fruits we now claim.” The *Witness* then proceeds with seven statements. During the ecumenical worship service these seven statements were then followed and developed with liturgical forms like hymns, Scripture readings, meditations, and witnessing statements, again fully in several languages from across the globe. For the full liturgy of 36 pages, see <http://wrcr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/GC2017-WittenbergService-web.pdf>

13 For the official text of the *Reformed Association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, see <https://rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/WCRC-Association-to-JDDJ-EN.pdf>

Debrecen and Accra and is intentionally bringing these insights into all its dialogues with ecumenical partners and into all its studies and statements and strategic visions. The Reformed world is therefore longing for communion, while acknowledging the key importance of justice, and lamenting its own woundedness and complicity. Communion – justice – lament, these three belong integrally together. This is the self-understanding and the commitment and the witness of the Reformed world today.

To see this, several of these documents make instructive reading. The most recent one, the 2020 Hiroshima Report of the International Reformed-Anglican Dialogue (IRAD) called *Koinonia: God's Gift and Calling*, is particularly fascinating. It is well-written, rich in content, sensitive and moving. It uses the expression “wounded” no less than ten times. The woundedness of the Church and of God’s creation is like an underlying motif from beginning to end. The Report is in fact presented to the member churches “as an offering to a wounded Church in its ongoing search for *koinonia*” (Introduction).

The whole text shows a strong sense that the Church itself is wounded in so many ways and is therefore deeply challenged by its own claims about *koinonia* in a wounded world. At the same time, it confesses its conviction that *koinonia* as gift of God has the power to transform conflict so that conflict loses its power to divide. In several of the central – and most inspiring – paragraphs of the document, it therefore focuses on “healing and wholeness” (32–39, again 51–53). Its first finding summarizes the heart of the Report – the good news of *koinonia* is a message of hope to a world torn apart by division, conflict, and exploitation. With this, the Report helps to orientate ecumenical discussions in a significant way.

Still, the critical question for the Reformed self-understanding will of course be the question of reception, whether the Church in its many forms everywhere in our wounded world will truly “hear” these words. For the Reformed mind and spirituality, this is always *the* crucial question.¹⁴

14 On the importance of reception as “one of the most important challenges for the ecumenical process today,” see Piet Naude, “Accept One Another. An Introduction to ‘Reception’ as Ecumenical Concept,” in *Pathways in Theology. Ecumenical, African, and Reformed*, edited by Henco van der Westhuizen. Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2015), 7–21; also Piet Naudé, “Reception,” in *Neither*

This self-critical awareness already played a key role in the earlier Report of the Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue called *Communion: On Being the Church* (2006–2012). Both traditions agreed that the churches of the Reformation struggled from the beginning to develop a proper ecclesiology – and this often led to tragic developments in the life of Protestantism.

In the *Wittenberg Witness* they therefore together lamented this in unmistakable words.

“Together, we acknowledge, confess, and lament that divisions still obscure our unity and hamper our witness. We regret that through our history we have too often formed divisive habits and structures, failing to discern the body of Christ. Injustice and conflict scar and scandalise our one body. We are implicated in colonialism and exploitation that have marked our history. We are saddened by the ways we have allowed race and ethnicity; class and inequality; patriarchy and gender bias; and arrogance of nation, language, and culture to become divisive and oppressive in our churches and in our world.”

The *Wittenberg Witness* therefore continued that they hear God’s Word and Christ’s claim as a call to continuous reform towards communion and justice.

“We hear this call when the Word is preached, and the sacraments are celebrated. We hear this call from those of our forebears who were deeply committed to the visible unity of the Church, who regretted schisms and called them sin, who described the divided church with sadness as a dismembered body. We hear this call from the many protests born in pain, in the plight of refugees and migrants, in the frustration and humiliation and longings of so many in our common world, in the voices of young people who express concern for the future of the earth, our common home.”

At the heart of this lament and this call is the deep conviction that justification and justice belong inseparably together. This is at the heart

of the story of what has been happening in the Reformed world in recent years. Since its formation in Grand Rapids in 2010, the World Communion has described itself as “Called to Communion, Committed to Justice.” Increasingly, they are becoming aware of their own complicities and their own failures – and therefore they also lament and confess, while committing themselves anew.¹⁵

In broad strokes one may probably say that this is what is happening in the worldwide Reformed communion today – there is a strong sense of being called to communion, being called to justice, being called to confession.

This self-understanding became particularly clear, for example, in the process and final report of the joint study on economic injustice and ecological destruction between the Evangelical-Reformed Church in Germany and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa of 2010. Together these Churches initiated a joint study process on the challenges of the Accra Confession. Allan Boesak and Johann Weusmann were co-chairs of this international and inter-disciplinary study process of several years. Many consultations took place, much research was done from diverse scholarly disciplines and historical backgrounds, many publications saw the light. The final report concluded with a Joint Declaration called “Dreaming a Different World Together.” In many ways the story of the Reformed world today was at work in this process and Joint Declaration. It is the story of dreaming a different world together.¹⁶

I conclude with four brief theological observations.

15 On the *Wittenberg Witness*, see my *Confessing Together? Considering the “Wittenberg Witness” and the Future of the Church*, Tainan: Tainan Theological College and Seminary, 2020 (published in both Chinese and English).

16 For essays originating during this study project, see Allan Boesak & Len Hansen (eds.), *Globalisation – The Politics of Empire, Justice and the Life of Faith* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009), as well as Allan Boesak & Len Hansen, (eds.), *Globalisation II – Global Crisis, Global Challenge, Global Faith. An Ongoing response to the Accra Confession* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2010). For the final volume of essays, including the final report, see Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali (eds.), *Dreaming A Different World. Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth. The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches* (Stellenbosch: Evangelisch Reformierte Kirche, Germany/Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, 2010).

“Seeing the God of life”

It is not merely for rhetorical purposes that the World Communion speaks about “Confessing the God of Life.” For the Reformed tradition, their commitment to communion and to justice flows from the way they see God. This conviction is not about ethics but about theology. The longing for communion and justice is not merely following popular slogans. This passion is rooted in their understanding of Godself – and this is of critical importance.

In this story, Russel Botman played a key role at a crucial moment. When the Reformed world was invited to co-sign the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, they explained – in Columbus, Ohio in 2001 – that they were not ready, because they found it impossible to speak about justification without also speaking about justice. Botman argued that it would be “a scandal to people who are dying daily of poverty, violence and oppression to postpone discussion on the relationship between justification and justice, treating the latter as merely a matter of ethical application.” For the Reformed mind, any separation between justification and justice, between theology and ethics, would be “a betrayal of everything that Christianity has learned about justification after Auschwitz and apartheid,” he said.¹⁷

It would take fifteen years before the Reformed world was welcomed to add their specific voice – on justification *and* justice – to the reception of the *Joint Declaration* and they could associate themselves with this process. It is this same emphasis on justice as a theological claim, as a doctrinal conviction, not merely an ethical issue and a slogan of the times, that characterizes the Reformed contributions to all these recent ecumenical dialogues. Sometimes these documents explicitly acknowledge that the emphasis on justice is not about ethics but about theology.

¹⁷ See H. Russel Botman, “Should the Reformed Join In?” *Reformed World* 52 no. 1 (2002):12–17. For the historical background and some of the history of reception of these comments, see my “From Conflict to Communion? – Remembering the Reformation,” in *Essays on the Real Church. Collected Essays 8* (intended for forthcoming publication, Stellenbosch: Sun Press).

But why? The roots of this theological conviction lie way back in Reformed history. The North American philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff gave a moving account of this in his well-known essay on “The Wounds of God: Calvin’s Theology of Social Injustice,” still worthwhile quoting at some length. He finds in Calvin a theology that helps us to “genuinely hear the cries of the victims” and calls this “Calvin’s theology of the tears of the social victim.”¹⁸

He begins with Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 9:5–6. “Human beings are indeed unworthy of God’s care, if respect be had only to themselves; but since they bear the image of God engraved on them, God deems Godself violated in their person ... This doctrine is to be carefully observed, that no one do injury to their brothers or sisters without wounding Godself. Were this doctrine deeply fixed in our minds, we should be more reluctant than we are to inflict injuries.” For Calvin, Wolterstorff says, to inflict injury on fellow human beings is to wound Godself; it is to cause Godself to suffer. Behind the social misery of our world is the suffering of God. If we truly believed that, suggests Calvin, we would be much more reluctant than we are to participate in the victimizing of the poor and oppressed and assaulted of the world.

He then quotes from Calvin’s Commentary on Habakkuk 2:6. “When people disturb the whole world by their ambition and avarice, or everywhere commit plunder, or oppress miserable nations – when they distress the innocent, all cry out, How long? And this cry is heard by the Lord ... It is as though God heard Godself, when God hears the cries and groanings of those who cannot bear injustice.” Wolterstorff summarizes, “Not only is the penetration of injustice against our fellow human beings the infliction of suffering upon God. The cries of the victims are the very cry of God. The lament of the victims as they cry out ‘How long?’ is God’s giving voice to God’s own lament.”

These notions are rooted in Calvin’s view of the divine image in humanity. God willed that God’s own glory be seen in human beings as in a mirror (*Inst.* II/7.6). God looks upon Godself and beholds Godself in human

18 Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Wounds of God: Calvin’s Theology of Social Injustice,” in *Hearing the Call. Liturgy, Justice, Church, and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 114–132.

beings as in a mirror (sermon on John 10:7). This allows Calvin to say, “We cannot but behold our own face as it were in a glass in the person that is poor and despised ... though they were the furthest strangers in the world. Let a Moor or a Barbarian come among us, and yet inasmuch as they are human beings, they bring with them a looking glass wherein we may see that they are our brothers and sisters and neighbours.”

In Calvin’s words, “The Lord enjoins us to do good to all without exception, though the greater part, if estimated by their own merit, are most unworthy of it. Yet Scripture adds a most excellent reason, when it tells us that we are not to look at what people in themselves deserve, but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all, and to which we owe all honor and love ... God means all people universally, not a single one of whom we can behold, without seeing, as in a mirror, ‘our own flesh.’ It is therefore a proof of the greatest inhumanity, to despise those in whom we are constrained to recognize our own likeness” (Commentary on Isaiah 58:6-7).

For Wolterstorff, “the demands of love and justice are rooted, so Calvin suggests, in what may be called the pathos of God. To treat unjustly one of these human earthlings in whom God delights is to bring sorrow to God. To wound God’s beloved is to wound God ... The call to justice is the call to avoid wounding God; the call to eliminate injustice is the call to alleviate divine suffering. If we believed that, and believed it firmly, we would be far more reluctant than we are to participate in the acts and the structures of injustice. If we believed that and believed it firmly, we would ceaselessly struggle for justice and against injustice.”

This is the first observation. What is happening in the Reformed world today is part of a long tradition, deeply rooted in a way of seeing God.

“Seeing our world with new eyes”

Again, it is not merely for rhetorical purposes that the World Communion expresses their commitment as “Confessing the God of Life in a World” – in a world. For the Reformed tradition, their commitment to the world has always been of crucial importance. Being Reformed is not merely about private faith, about personal spirituality, and religiosity, or for that matter only about the church, but about the world, about life and life together,

about communities and societies, about history and culture and politics and the economy and education and science and law and work and leisure and health and well-being and flourishing, about creation as theatre of God's glory and about the earth and universe and cosmos and all things seen and unseen. So many have said this in so many ways through history in so many different ways. So many communities have embodied this for centuries in so many concrete and everyday ways.

The world-renowned church historian Jaroslav Pelikan explained that this was the distinguishing characteristic of the early Reformed communities, for them the slogan *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, Reformed churches are continuously being reformed according to the Word of God, intentionally also applied to their societies and their times and their worlds, not merely to their congregations and personal lives.¹⁹ The equally authoritative Reformation historian Heiko Oberman movingly described how John Calvin's life and work could be described with the motto *sola scriptura civitate interpretata*, the Scriptures alone, but the Scriptures read for the city, in the light of the city, with a view to the city.²⁰

Yet another highly respected historian Randall Zachman recalls how the universe was the living image of God for Calvin and how God's whole universe was for him "an area of passionate interest" – both the beauty and terror of the universe.²¹ After all, according to scholars, Calvin was a practical theologian, political theologian, public theologian, prophetic theologian, social humanist, constructive revolutionary, a reformer of

19 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700). The Christian Tradition 4* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1984), 183–244.

20 See Heiko Oberman, *Zwei Reformationen. Luther und Calvin – Alte und Neue Welt* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 2003), 200. Originally, this chapter was his 1986 Abraham Kuyper Public Lecture Series at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, *De Erfenis van Calvijn: Grootheid en Grenzen* (Kampen: Kok, 1988). In the English translation, which appeared simultaneously with the German edition, *The Two Reformations. The Journey from the Last Days to the New World* (New Haven: Yale University, 2003), *interpretata* is unfortunately given as *inspirata*, 142.

21 Randall Zachman, "Contemplating the Living Image of God in Creation," in *Calvin Today. Reformed Theology and the Future of the Church*; see also his 2009 Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary, *Reconsidering John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

city and world.²² The public intellectual from the Netherlands Abraham Kuyper famously described Calvinism in his Stone Lectures in Princeton as a comprehensive worldview with consequences for every square inch of reality and every sphere of our life together.²³

In a rich and complex recent study, *Calvin and the Resignification of the World*, the Harvard historian of doctrine Michelle Sanchez gives an intriguing depiction of how Calvin, the political refugee, exile, and stranger, provided a new way of seeing the world in his *Institutes* through the lenses of his doctrines of creation, incarnation and election, with innovative and far-reaching political theological challenges.²⁴

A century ago, Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch analysed the world-formative implications of Protestantism and specifically also its Reformed trajectories. Richard H. Niebuhr used the Reformed faith as example of his Christ transforming culture type in his well-known typology of spiritual

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- 22 From the flood of available literature, see the important historical studies by André Bieler on Calvin's social humanism and for example also John de Gruchy, *John Calvin: Christian Humanist & Evangelical Reformer*, (Wellington: Lux Verbi.BM, 2009).
- 23 See Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone-Lectures* (New York: Revell, 1899); and from the flood of secondary material, for example the careful study by Peter Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview. Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); as well as James Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper. Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), and Craig Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition. A Systematic Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017). See for example from this tradition also the authoritative work by Richard Mouw, including *Called to Holy Worldliness*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), as well as earlier studies like *Uncommon Decency. Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992); *He Shines in All that's Fair. Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship. Essays in the Line of Abraham Kuyper*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); and more recently *Restless Faith. Holding Evangelical Beliefs in a World of Contested Labels* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019).
- 24 Michelle Chaplin Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification of the World. Creation, Incarnation, and the Problem of Political Theology in the 1559 Institutes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 208: "The question that challenges the prospect of church reform is not a wrong question, but rather the question of life in general. For Calvin, that question refers back to the particular way that sin distorts our eyes, our conscience, our minds, and our senses such that we construct a world ordered by and related to false divinities."

traditions. Wolterstorff described being Reformed as world-transformative Christianity.²⁵

The *Theological Declaration of Barmen* made these convictions central to its legacy for the ecumenical world, when its second thesis claimed that Christ is God’s mighty claim upon our whole life, so that there are no areas of our life where we do not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords. The church confesses in the midst of the sinful world (thesis three), itself fully part of the as yet unredeemed world (thesis five) and brings the message of God’s free grace to all people (thesis six).²⁶

In the report “Dreaming a Different World Together,” this characteristic of the Reformed faith was illustrated in a remarkable way. The co-chairs wanted the genre of the final report to be such that one and the same document could be used both as litany during worship and as press release to the public media. The prayer had to be in the form of a public statement, the public statement in the form of a prayer. This decision demonstrated a conviction rooted deep within the Reformed faith. Prayer and public life belong together – famously, for Calvin, for the *Heidelberg Catechism*, for Karl Barth. In prayer, we see the world *sub specie Christi*, in the light of Christ (Bonhoeffer), in worship holiness joins liturgy and justice

25 See for example Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, originally published in 1906 and translated into English in the 1930s by Talcott Parsons; Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress. The Significance of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), also Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992; first English edition, 1931), and the instructive volume of his collected essays, *Schriften zur Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die moderne Welt (1906–1913), Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Band 8*, edited by Trutz Rendtorff, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001); H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

26 See for example the documentation in Martin Heimbucher & Rudolf Weth, (eds.), *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung. Einführung und Dokumentation*. 7th ed., with an introduction by Wolfgang Huber (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009); as well as the instructive reflections on the lasting impact of Barmen on ecclesiology and ethics, in Eberhard Busch, *The Barmen Theses Then and Now* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), and Wolfgang Huber, *Folgen christlicher Freiheit. Ethik und Theorie der Kirche im Horizont der Barmer Theologischen Erklärung* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985). For the reception of Huber’s influence in South African circles, see my “On the Witness of the Church,” Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Peter Bubmann, Hans-Ulrich Dallmann, Helga Kuhlmann, Torsten Meireis (eds.), *Kritische öffentliche Theologie. Wolfgang Huber zum 80. Geburtstag* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2022), 31–46.

(Wolterstorff), in prayer we think our way into God’s world (Douglas John Hall), in prayer we see things differently (John de Gruchy).²⁷

It is this passion for the world which moves the Reformed world, even today. Still, it remains important to be reminded of this, because in changing times and places there are always new temptations to forget this tradition and to betray this commitment to our world. This was the second comment.

“Seeing a wounded world”

The crucial question for the Reformed faith therefore remains, again and ever anew, what kind of world do we actually see? How does our world seem to us, through the lenses of our faith, what do we see in our mirrors and through our windows? What do we discern, together?

“We hear the cries of your people and see the wounds of your creation” – these are the opening words of the report “Dreaming a Different World Together,” the first words of the litany and press release. The full sentence reads “Together, from North and South, discerning the signs of our times, we hear the cries of your people and see the wounds of your creation.”

The litany continues “We are shocked by stories ... and disturbed by accounts ... We are moved by experiences ... We listen to warnings ... We are told of threats ... We receive reports ... We read studies ... We learn about statistics describing our time and our realities and they shame us.” It is clear, together we hear the cries of people and see the wounds of creation. Together, we see a wounded world.

But there is more, since we see something hidden behind these cries and these wounds. “Behind much of these,” the litany continues, “we observe in our world a spirit, a spirit of domination, a spirit that seems to lord it over all and everything.” We experience this spirit in many ways and forms, the spirit shows many faces and is at work in many ways – and the litany continues to name many. It is a spirit of destructive self-interest, even

27 See for example my “What Makes Worship Good?” in *Liturgy and Ethics. New Contributions from Reformed Perspectives*, edited by Pieter Vos (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 19–48; also my “Gebed in die Gereformeerde tradisie?,” in *Essays on the Real Church. Collected Essays 8* (intended for forthcoming publication, Stellenbosch: Sun Press).

greed. It is a spirit that worships money, goods, and possessions. It is a spirit which lacks compassionate justice and shows contemptuous disregard for the household of life and for the gifts of creation. It is a spirit which serves, protects, and defends the interests of the powerful, whether corporations, nations, elites or privileged people. It is a spirit willing to sacrifice human beings and creation. It is a spirit that even takes the form of religion, of a gospel of consumerism, supported by powerful religious propaganda and followed by many in our world, who see this as simply the spirit of our time. In all of this, we sense the seductive power of idolatry, and the danger of losing our soul, says the litany.

Once again, it is clear, we see a wounded world – and we can name this world with words rooted deep in our Reformed tradition, words like lordless powers, greed, disregard for life, false doctrine, idolatry. “Therefore we lament,” says the litany, “with the cries of all afflicted people and the wounds of the suffering creation,” saddened by the scandalous world we see all around.²⁸

Of course, not everyone would see our world like this. Much will depend on our social location, our lenses, our mirrors, our windows. But there are those who see the world like this. It almost sounds like the world described by Achille Mbembe in his recent *Out of the Dark Night. Essays on Decolonization*, and his earlier *Necropolitics*, his essays on the politics of enmity, the politics of death, depicting our world today.²⁹ It sounds like much of the recent work by Allan Boesak, including his contribution in the *Reformed Journal* on “A Witnessing and Confessing Church in a World Fallen Among Thieves.”³⁰ It certainly is the world as seen by the World

28 For the full text, simultaneously both litany and press release, see “Dreaming a Different World Together,” in Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann & Charles Amjad-Ali (eds.), *Dreaming a Different World. Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth. The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches* (Stellenbosch: Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche, Germany & Uniting Reformed Church, South Africa, 2010).

29 See Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), especially the “Epilogue: The Politics of the Future World,” 223–230, with its argument for “an alternative imaginary of life”; also his earlier *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

30 Allan Boesak, “Not with Our Heads in the Clouds’: A Witnessing and Confessing Church in a World Fallen among Thieves.” *Reformed World*, 69, no. 2 (2021); 89–99.

Communion of Reformed Churches, after all, this is their strategic vision. This was the third comment.

Seeing a wounded church

The editorial of last year's *Reformed World* volume with the dialogue reports, actually quotes the strategic vision as "Confessing the God of Life in a World Falling Among Thieves" – not fallen but falling. It was probably only a typing error, but the error might in fact be a stroke of genius – since falling offers probably a more Reformed and better description of our world.³¹

After all, we are not talking about events from the past, but about what is still taking place, and we are involved in what is happening, we are part of the cries and the wounds, we are complicit in many ways. We do not live with clean hands, innocently observing a world outside of us from a distance, a world fallen in the hands of robbers. Rather, we are agents, we are part of the action, also actors in this world. Again, this is a conviction rooted deeply in the Reformed faith and self-understanding of vocation and call and responsibility and complicity.

The strategic vision reminds one of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and its call to do likewise, becoming neighbours for others, irrespective of who they may be, in the same way the estranged Samaritan became a neighbour for the helpless victim fallen among thieves. The Samaritan went to him, bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine, put him on his animal, brought him to an inn, took care of him, and paid the innkeeper to continue this care. But what, Allan Boesak often asked over many years, would the Samaritan have done, what should the Samaritan have done, were he to arrive on the scene while the attack was still ongoing? What if he was there while the thieves were stripping and beating the wounded victim, until half-dead? What if we have to respond while the violence and injustice are ongoing, while the cries are heard and the wounds are being inflicted, what

31 Hanns Lessing, "Editorial." *Reformed World* 69, no. 1 (2021): 3.

if we were involved in the struggles, participants in the process, actors in the events, role players in the drama?³²

This is again a deeply Protestant sensibility. The Lutheran tradition has helped many of us to see this, to understand ourselves as *simul iustus et peccator*, but the Reformed tradition should help us to understand ourselves then as involved, co-responsible, called, claimed, challenged – and therefore as ourselves also wounded.

The Reformed tradition challenges us to see the wounded church – as broken and complicit and responsible. This is after the all the deepest intention of *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, we never arrive on the scene as neutral and uninvolved observers, rather we are all actors, called and claimed to renewal and transformation.

This is the importance of what we have seen happening in the Reformed world today, in the dialogues of recent decades with ecumenical partners. There is developing a renewed sensitivity for the fact that we are not arriving in our wounded world after the fact, but we find ourselves amidst the cries of people and the wounds of creation, in many and complex ways, we have benefitted from, and we are still part of what is happening and therefore co-responsible.

This is the importance of all the talk about the spirit of empire and of the claims that these powers who lord over us may seem to be lordless, but they are not, rather the spirit and powers were created and are being sustained by humans – like us, including us, with our desires, with our habits, with our priorities, with our support.³³

32 See for example Allan Boesak, “Combative Love and Revolutionary Neighborliness: Kairos, Solidarity, and the Jericho Road,” in *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid. The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 169–197; also his “‘For the Tyrant Shall be no More’: Reflections on and Lessons from ‘The Arab Spring’ in North Africa, the Middle East and the Civil Rights and Anti-Apartheid Struggles.” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 67(3), 2011, Art. #1159, 9 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i3.1159>); as well as my “Justice as/and Compassion? On the Good Samaritan and Political Theology,” Juliana Claassens & Frits de Lange, (eds.), *Considering Compassion: Global Ethics, Human Dignity and the Compassionate God* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 109–128.

33 The world Reformed community used the expression “empire” in Accra to name the contemporary challenges and in the process of receiving the Accra document South African and German Reformed churches together defined empire by speaking of a spirit

This self-critical sensibility of awareness that we ourselves are wounded and therefore called to renewal is deeply engrained in the Reformed faith. Remember Karl Barth. In 1925, when Barth was asked by the Reformed world whether they needed one universal Reformed confession for their time, he argued that it was neither necessary nor possible, partly because as Reformed people they were not able to see and name the real challenges of their time, they were too much part of the problems to simply claim to offer solutions.³⁴ When he later looked back on the *Theological Declaration of Barmen* he lamented the fact they at the time they were not seeing clearly enough and able to speak about the atrocities done to their Jewish neighbours, they were too concerned with their church. When still later invited to participate in commemorations of *Barmen* he often declined, also because he now saw with sadness that at the time many of them did not really understand what they were saying and never really intended to embody those convictions.³⁵ In the 1960s, having been invited to Rome

of the time, “We speak of empire, because we discern a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today, that constitutes a reality and a *spirit* of lordless domination, created by human kind yet enslaving simultaneously; an all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while imperiously excluding, even sacrificing humanity and exploiting creation; a pervasive *spirit* of destructive self-interest, even greed – the worship of money, goods and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed; the colonization of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic; a spirit lacking compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life,” see Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann & Charles Amjad-Ali (eds.), *Dreaming a Different World. Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth. The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the Churches* (Stellenbosch: Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche, Germany & Uniting Reformed Church, South Africa, 2010). The “spirit of lordless domination” clearly refers to the well-known § 78 of Karl Barth’s ethics of reconciliation, see Barth, *The Christian life. Church Dogmatics Vol. IV, Part 4, Lecture Fragments* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 205–272. For the discussion on empire, see for example also Martina Wasserloos-Strunk, in Martina Wasserloos-Strunk (ed.), “Empire – provocation with a perspective,” in *Europe covenanting for justice* (foedus-verlag for The Communion of Reformed Churches in Europe, 2010), 69–80.

- 34 Karl Barth, “Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses (1925)” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925. Gesamtausgabe III* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1990), 604–643, with an English translation in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920–1928*, ed. T.F. Torrance, (London: SCM Press, 1962), 112–135.
- 35 Karl Barth, *Texte zur Barmer Theologischen Erklärung* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1984), especially 159–184, 213–220 and 227–231.

after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council to meet the Pope and other main figures, Barth was asked by the leaders of the Reformed world in Geneva to send them his impressions of Rome. In a moving letter, published in *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, on the threshold of the apostles, Barth warned the Reformed leaders of his fear that the Reformed world may sit back self-righteously observing others, while those others may actually surpass them in doing the very things that they claim to represent. Conversion in the church always means our own conversion, first of all, he wrote.³⁶

All these anecdotes together illustrate the same Reformed sensibility, namely, never to imagine ourselves to be innocent observers outside of history and our world, but rather to see how deeply involved and complicit and wounded we also are – and therefore how much called and claimed for conversion and renewal.

Seeing together the unseen

In the *Wittenberg Witness*, this awareness of God's call and Christ's claim led them "to long for renewed imagination of what being the church in communion could mean – for our world, in our time." As Lutheran and Reformed ecumenical worlds together, they therefore prayed,

"We need new imagination to dream a different world, a world where justice, peace and reconciliation prevail. We need new imagination to practice spiritualities of resistance and prophetic vision, spiritualities in service of life, spiritualities formed by the mission of God." Against this background, one may perhaps claim that the critical question is indeed always anew whether our local and contextual forms of being Reformed indeed share and embody these convictions, whether we see God as "in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged," whether we see our world through lenses of faith rather than through the spirit of our times, whether we together hear the cries of God's people and see the

36 Karl Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press, 1969).

wounds of God's creation, whether we recognize and acknowledge our churches as themselves deeply wounded.³⁷

37 *Wittenberg Witness, A Common Statement of The World Communion of Reformed Churches and The Lutheran World Federation*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/gc2017-wittenbergwitness.pdf>. In contemporary theological reflection there is a widespread and important stress on the crucial role of imagination and of our social imaginaries, the ways we perceive and inhabit the world. Princeton Theological Seminary, for example, recently published a historical Slavery Audit in which one of the most important conclusions was the conviction that their historical involvement in slavery was the result of a failed theological imagination, see the full report at <https://slavery.ptsem.edu/>. The emphasis on “seeing” in these reflections was therefore intentional. The crucial question is indeed what we see and how we see. The theme of “mirrors and windows” was therefore very well chosen for a conference reflection on the present and future calling of the Reformed faith and tradition. Already in the life and work of John Calvin metaphors of seeing – lenses, glasses, mirrors, marks, blindness – occupied a central place, see for example the well documented work by Cornelis van der Kooi, *Als in Een Spiegel. God Kennen volgens Calvijn en Barth. Een Tweeluik*, Kampen: Kok, 2002 (translated *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth On Knowing God: A Diptych*, Utrecht: Brill, 2005). In this regard, see also the instructive recent dissertation by AnnMarie Bridges, *Blindness, Imagination, Perception: Calvin's 1559 Institutes and Early Modern Visual Instability*. Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2020. She shows how “perception,” including the role of the imagination “even before it becomes the basis for conscious thought” is “a previously unrecognized but central organizing concern of Calvin's magnum opus.” For an insightful as well as moving reflection on the mirror in Calvin, see also Gerrit Neven, “De Kwintessens van Calvijn,” in Rinse Reeling Brouwer, Bert de Leede, Klaas Sprink (eds.), *Het Calvinistisch Ongemak. Calvijn als Erflater en Provocator van het Nederlandse Protestantisme* (Kampen: Kok, 2009), 73–97.