

Reformed identity, theology, communion

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Brief description of the Theme

The word “communion” is important in the name of our organisation: World *Com-munion* of Reformed Churches. The Executive Committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches gave at its meeting in Trinidad (October 2007) the following definition of the word communion:

Communion is an expression of our being together in the body of Christ as we move towards that oneness which is the gift and calling of God, fully expressed in the Trinity. Our desire to enter into communion signifies the commitment of our churches, in the richness of our diversity, to mutual caring, respect and service of one another, as witness to our common calling by the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ.

In a communion of Reformed churches the communion cannot be a “super structure” that overrules the autonomy of the member churches. It starts with the member churches coming together and being willing to form the communion. It is obvious that first and foremost the communion is present when the churches are together where they share the Table, where they discuss and take decisions, where they share their glory and their suffering, where they pray and sing together. Concretely this means that the communion needs a regular global gathering that brings the communion into a visible reality. It also means that the question of why there should be a World Communion of Reformed Churches is not one to be answered by the organisation itself. The staff of the organisation does not have to “sell” the need for it to the member churches. The member churches want the organisation, they want to be in communion and they are willing to support the communion as is needed.

In the constitution of the WCRC (III B) it is said that the organisation is a communion of churches, also, through “interpreting Reformed theology for contemporary Christian witness”. In this sentence there is a clear relation between communion, theology and Reformed identity. It is therefore important at this first General Council of the WCRC to give guidelines for fostering communion by interpreting Reformed theology for contemporary witness.

Analysis of the issues

Communion

Communion as a gift of God's grace is first experienced in an awareness of growing together. But what is revealed to us by God needs a continuation in further theological clarification. This may also help to answer questions that are logically connected to being a communion. Not only the implications of pulpit and Table sharing are of importance. Also the relation between the local member churches and the worldwide communion needs further thinking. Will the communion of Reformed Churches decide what it is to be Reformed? Then there is the question of how decisions are being made. Will the so-called "consensus system" really be the best option? There is the discrepancy of wealth. Does "communion" not imply a sharing of resources that could have enormous consequences? There is the question of the role of the Secretariat and its relation with the governing body. There is also the question of representation of the Reformed world. Does the communion speak for it and do member churches feel well represented? Finally, I mention the important question of how we can have great differences in doctrine and life as member churches and still be part of the same communion.

Reformed identity and theology

The year 2009 was an important year for the Reformed family worldwide. It was the Calvin Jubilee year in which the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth was commemorated. Of course, even in the celebration of this anniversary the Reformed division was made visible since the totality of the Reformed world could not be brought together in the festivities. However, an enormous number of articles, lectures and books were produced. It gave a great stimulus to rethink Calvin's theology and with that also Reformed tradition and identity. Again a diverse pattern came to light but one could say that there is at least some shared opinion on what is essential for Reformed identity. The German theologian Eberhard Busch mentions these basics for Reformed identity:¹

- The unconditional subordination of the own tradition and doctrine to the holy scripture.
- The assignment of the own denomination to the one, ecumenical church.

¹ Eberhard Busch, Reformed Identity, in *Reformed World* 58/4 2008, pp.207-218.

- The integration of the own denomination in the pilgrimage of God's people.
- The continuing importance of the first commandment.
- The powerful claim of God to our whole life.
- The common character of the Christian life under one head.

It is clear that what Busch mentions as fundamental for Reformed identity is descriptive but also challenging. Reformed identity has also often been worked out theologically as a sort of fortress. The clearer Reformed identity was, the more closed the circle. Reformed theology should see as its greatest challenge to give clarity to the understanding of Reformed identity while at the same time being open and self-critical. The dialectical tension between Reformed and ecumenical, between scripture and doctrine, between sovereignty of God over life and liberty should be made fruitful.

It is of great significance that theology in general and thus also Reformed theology has something of the global North and the global South, of men and women. Because of this, Reformed theology over the years has been greatly stimulated, with a fruitful tension between tradition and renewal.

Notwithstanding the fact that Reformed theology has often been developed and is still sometimes being developed from the perspective that truth can only be found in the Reformed Church, traditionally in the line of John Calvin there should be awareness that the true church can only be the universal church of all ages and all places.² Calvin always sought for a balance between truth and unity. He was very critical of the Church of Rome and was unable to foresee concrete unity of the whole church in his time.

Reformed theologians have for a long time been in the forefront of the ecumenical movement. They have seen themselves to be in line with Calvin regarding his desire for the unity of the church. Regarding the aspect of truth they were certainly not always following in the footsteps of Calvin. This does not need to be a point of critique in itself. Calvin is no saint in the sense that he should always be respected. It is however more fruitful to work out the relation between the perspectives of ecumenicity

² Most famous in this sense are the words of John Calvin in a letter of 1552 to the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer that he would like to cross ten seas in order to promote the unity of the Church.

and truth than to make a choice for one of these and to give up any balance.³ This could be the ongoing challenge for Reformed theological education.

Theological education today must recognize the interreligious context of the world, and that this context varies from place to place. Sometimes there are deep tensions, sometimes there is silent animosity, sometimes we see an unbalanced openness and sometimes an enriching dialogue. The patterns are very diverse. Reformed theology is part of these patterns.

It is often heard in the Reformed world that inter-confessional dialogue is of less importance than interreligious dialogue. This is especially understandable where churches are in a frontline situation, for example in Pakistan. In that context there is sometimes a critique of the “soft” attitude in more liberal theological circles where a too optimistic view of Islam, for example, is manifest. On the other hand, especially in Indonesia where there is a long tradition of dialogue, there is a strong plea to rethink Christian tradition so that openness to interfaith dialogue will be a fundamental part of Christianity.⁴

It is difficult to find something in Calvin’s writings that might be considered as a direct statement about interfaith matters.⁵ There is however in the Reformed world great awareness of the fact that Calvin’s theme of God’s sovereignty over all life can also be a helpful starting point for interfaith dialogue.

In Reformed tradition the relation between theology and society has always been a vital part of theological education, which has sometimes been criticised for being too much part of ‘this world’ and lacking spirituality. This has not changed with the shift of focus from North to South. On the contrary, matters of social justice, politics, and economics are regarded more and more as theological issues. Here Reformed theological education is really at a crossroads because it may cause a paradigm shift in doing theology and the related important questions. Are the poor and marginalised the lens through which the analysis has to be made? Can a word like “sin” be used to

³ See Bernard Williams, *Truth and truthfulness*, (Princeton 2002), p.8 for what happens when the search for truth is being given up because then “we are indeed left with a space structured only by power”.

⁴ It is worth noticing here that many Protestant churches in Indonesia that have a Reformed background do not call themselves “Reformed” and that in many of their theological schools there is no longer teaching of subjects such as “systematic theology” let alone “dogmatics”. These churches regard themselves almost as post-denominational.

⁵ Here there is a difference with Luther. See Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A study in sixteenth-century polemics and apologetics*, (Leiden 2007).

characterise an economic system? Is a political or economic statement in itself also a theological statement?

For Reformed theology the whole process of being outspoken in (Reformed) ecumenical circles is important because the position of theological reflection itself is at stake. What is the relationship between economic analysis and theological vision? Is any separation possible? The influence of liberation theology is very strong though, in many cases it is a critical dynamic process. We can see at this point a paradigm shift within “classical” Reformed theology.

Reformed theology is deeply rooted in culture. The challenges are overwhelming, but the fact that so many bright women and men from all over the world are still interested in “doing theology” is a very hopeful sign for the future.

A selective overview of work done

Communion

For the theme of communion the most important work done were the eight consultations on communion and justice. They were done regionally but in such a way that more or less the whole WCRC constituency could be covered. The “Fondation pour l’Aide au Protestantisme Reformée” (FAP), based in Switzerland, gave the required funds for this project. It was a very generous donation! The eight consultations took place in the following order:

Switzerland (Europe Region)	March 2009
Lebanon (Middle East Region)	March 2009
Brazil (Latin America Region)	May 2009
Indonesia (South East Asia Region)	June 2009
Ghana (Africa Region)	August 2009
USA (North America and Caribbean Region)	October 2009
New Zealand (Pacific Region)	October 2009
South Korea (North East Asia Region)	November 2009

All consultations were organised by the Office for Theology of WARC and the Executive Secretary for Theology was present at them all. It was an intensive period of travel and work. But it was also very fruitful. A ninth and final consultation, also with help from FAP, took place in March 2010 in Geneva. For this consultation one participant of each of the regional consultations was invited. In this final consultation the

results of the regional gatherings were brought together and a final document of recommendations was produced.

The regional consultations showed that our churches are living in very different contexts. Even the most basic confessional and theological truths need a contextual resonance that deeply influences the way these truths are expressed. We may all confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, which is the basic statement of Reformed theology, but saying this in Indonesia in a context of an overwhelming majority of Islamic believers will have different implications than in an African context where there is still a vital presence of traditional religion. However the difference in contextual reflection and expression will not exclude a global understanding of each other. With all our differences in language we are also speakers of that Pentecostal language of the Spirit whereby we all can recognise the other as a brother or sister in Christ.

In the eight regional consultations the Accra Confession, adopted at WARC's General Council in 2004, played a substantial role, especially when we focused on matters of justice. The Accra Confession is a text adopted at a global gathering with a global outreach. The basis of the Confession is a series of universal truths, from biblical, social, economic, ecological and political perspectives. It is meant to be applicable in every contextual situation of our worldwide Reformed community. The reception however differs greatly according to the variety of local contexts. Difference does not mean contradiction. But the implications of adopting the Accra Confession are different for Europeans than for Africans. Although even this is too general—as if the division between global North and South is only geographical. It was said in the North America/Caribbean consultation, for example, that there is a global South in the North and a global North in the South. However this difference in implications will not hinder us from a global call to be committed to justice.

Reformed identity and theology

In conjunction with the Uniting General Council, a Global Institute of Theology (GIT) is being organised. The GIT is an event where a global community of theological students comes together for courses at academic level. It is a place for theological reflection on the themes important to the Uniting General Council and the work of the World Communion of Reformed Churches in the years hereafter. The GIT is a place of training for future global ecumenical leadership and has as its objective to participate in the formation of Reformed theologians, working from a global ecumenical

perspective. For the GIT there is an international faculty of renowned academic theologians. The core course is on the theme of the Uniting General Council: “Unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”. And there are the following four *elective* courses:

- *Interfaith Dialogue*
- *New Directions in Mission for the 21st century*
- *Reading the Bible in Context*
- *The Epistle to the Ephesians*

The Calvin Anniversary Year 2009 with all the events WARC and REC were involved in made us aware of the fact that we should not forget the need for theology as the interpretative help for translating the activity of God in his world. In the Reformed world we have a great theological tradition. We should always be aware that theological reflection belongs to the heart and matter of a Communion of Reformed Churches. It should be part of what we do in covenanting for justice work, mission work, etc. Should the Reformed Communion have a theological deficit in its work, then this work would become superficial and therefore no longer challenging.

Important for reflection on Reformed identity was an edition of *Reformed World* on this theme (December 2008). Through it we can see that defining Reformed identity cannot lead to a fixed set of definitions. Again the challenge is to see unity in variety. This *Reformed World* edition also clearly showed that defining Reformed identity can only really be a global process.

Questions to be discussed

The following questions could be considered for further discussion:

- How do we affirm and guarantee our common understanding of our common faith as expressed in the constitution of the Communion?
- How do we strengthen the consciousness in the churches of what we have in common?
- What theological hermeneutics and criteria (scripture, confession, etc.) are needed to strengthen the basis of our Communion?
- How can we work from the perspective of a dynamic interaction between Communion and justice?

- How can we work from the perspective of a dynamic interaction between universal and contextual?
- What kind of work will show the Reformed identity of the Communion?

Conclusion

In this short article more items have been suggested than really discussed. The field of Reformed identity and theology is very wide. Concerning communion we are far from saying that we have reached the final stage. It is a cliché but not less true that with these subjects we have great challenges before us. However, to see these challenges as part of our commitment will be the *raison d'être* for the WCRC.

I will close with a brief commentary on a Bible text that I see as inspirational. In the letter to the Hebrews there is the famous chapter 11 about the examples of faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses... Rahab is the only woman mentioned, so we may feel the lack of gender balance, but the list is impressive. However the nicest part comes in chapter 12 when, and now I cite the first two verses, it is said:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews uses here with the word “race” an image of athletes running in a stadium—a well known picture throughout the Roman Empire where sports were almost as important as nowadays. The athletes are surrounded by the spectators or better said the supporters. The race in the stadium with the athletes and the supporters is a metaphor for perseverance of faith. Our life of faith is a life of joy and grief, of defeat and victory, of perseverance and having reached the finish! We are not alone in that race; we are not the first ones running that race. We have our supporters, those who have run that race before us. We have our great coach, Jesus the pioneer, who all the time encourages us.

As with every metaphor, we should not take this one too far. The race in the stadium does not mean that we as individual believers are running a race in competition with each other. There is competition but that is with all evil powers that would work

against our reaching the goal. In the struggle with these we have the supporters and we have Jesus the perfecter of our faith. As such the whole picture of the race in the stadium is a metaphor for the Communion of Saints. Precisely because of this we are part of biblical salvation history. Precisely because of this our present time is part of the ongoing salvation history. The Communion of Saints is a matter of communion throughout the ages. But it is also a matter of communion of all places. Communion, *koinonia* in Greek, is first of all this most far going Communion of Saints, of women and men, of all ages and of all places. May God give us to work for that communion!

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