

Church and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition: An Old Relationship and a New Communion

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This essay represents an attempt to reassess the relationship between church and state in our post-Constantinian era. In the Reformed tradition, the church has been understood to be committed to the task of transforming civic institutions and social structures. But too close an alliance between the spiritual and the temporal always threatens to reduce the church to an instrument used by the state to advance purposes often contrary to the witness and mission of the church. Alert to this danger, theologians in the neo-Anabaptist tradition have stressed the need for the church to maintain separation from the state in order to constitute itself as an alternative polis and exercise its prophetic witness in the world. The contemporary challenge facing Reformed communities, including their theologians, is to articulate and enact a vision of being in and for the world that conforms to the scriptures on the one hand and promotes engagement in the institutions of state and civil society on the other.

“Grace must find expression in life, otherwise it is not grace.”¹

It is an oft-made thesis that while the sixteenth-century Protestant reformations altered the structural uniformity of the medieval church and paved the way for national Christian identities, they “left the underlying construct of Christendom intact.”² We might recall, for example, the way that Calvin did not hesitate to employ the instruments of the state in order to further the perceived interests of the church.³ We might also remember that a chapter in the nearly final version of the Scots Confession describing the legitimacy of civil disobedience appears to have been deleted by censors appointed by the Scottish Parliament in August 1560.⁴ Or, more recently, we might point to those patterns of political life in Latin America or in South Africa where, in John de Gruchy’s words, “Constantinianism has been cultivated by the state in the service of its own

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- 1 Karl Barth in Helmut Gollwitzer, *An Introduction to Protestant Theology*, trans. David Cairns (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), p. 174
 - 2 Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2008), p. 94.
 - 3 Calvin, it seems, is not entirely consistent here. Note, for example, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), III.xix.15; IV.xx.1: “Now, these two [kingdoms] . . . Christ’s spiritual Kingdom and the civil jurisdiction are things completely distinct . . . [I]t is a Jewish vanity to seek and enclose Christ’s Kingdom within the elements of this world.”
 - 4 See W. Ian P. Hazlett, “The Scots Confession 1560: Context, Complexion and Critique,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 78 (1987), p. 316.



legitimation, and where the church has cooperated in the process.”⁵ Of course, this is not to tell the whole story and there are some notable exceptions—the witness of the Covenanters against the Stuart monarchy in seventeenth-century Scotland, for example; or, more recently, the Uniting Church in Australia’s persistent criticisms of the Australian Government’s shameful policies regarding seekers of asylum. But still I suspect that few contemporary Reformed theologians and historians would challenge the claim that the relationship between church and state has most often been too closely set, producing on the one hand a deplorable prejudice against all those not professing the Reformed faith and, on the other, an alliance between the two that has sponsored political corruption, a denigrated witness of the body of Christ, and a crisis of her vocational identity in the world. What exposed the fact that Christendom remained the dominant model of Christianity among western European peoples and subsequently those colonized by them, was, more than any other factor, the modern missionary movement. That same movement also, in many cases, helped to “expose the limitations of Christendom as an exportable model or universal ideal.”⁶

My intention here is not to flag concern over the Reformed instinct to perceive *both* the community and the individual as living under the word of God and to perceive *both* the law and the gospel as expressions of divine grace.⁷ I believe that this instinct remains the proper one. But the kind of co-operation of which de Gruchy (and others) warns engenders some unsalutary features, not least, for example, those exposed in our own tradition by the theology of Barmen. However, such exposure has birthed relatively little by way of creative reassessment of Reformed ecclesiology and mission. Nor has it led to conversion or repentance that such re-assessment hopes to encourage. In spite of the gifts that the modern missionary movement and the Barmen Declaration have bequeathed to the church, de Gruchy’s assessment remains accurate: that since its genesis the Reformed tradition has struggled to maintain the tension between “a church seeking to be faithful to scripture, yet trapped by the prejudices and weaknesses of its members, their cultural norms, and the protective cocoon of Christendom”.⁸ Moreover, how far such exposure has encouraged a rigorous reassessment of the Reformed church’s continuing identity vis-à-vis Christendom’s underlying commitments⁹ is an

5 John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids/Cape Town: Wm. B. Eerdmans/David Philip Publishers, 1991), p. 197.

6 Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, p. 94.

7 See Eberhard Busch, “Church and Politics in the Reformed Tradition” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 180–95. We see some vestige of this instinct, for example, in Article 22 of the Accra Confession: “We believe that any economy of the household of life, given to us by God’s covenant to sustain life, is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and well being of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation.”

8 de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, p. 197.

9 This is not a criticism of Christendom *per se*. While I think that Oliver O’Donovan’s claims in defence of Christendom that Christendom “is constituted not by the church’s seizing of alien power, but by alien power’s becoming attentive to the church,” and that “it was the missionary imperative that compelled the church to take the conversion of the empire seriously and to seize the opportunities it offered. . . for preaching the Gospel, baptising believers, curbing the violence and cruelty of empire

important question for the Reformed communion at a time in history in which the social context of pluralism and the de-christianization of the West demand calls for a more credible Christian script and prophetic witness. Coupled with this, there is a resurgence of neo-Anabaptist models which encourage, to varying degrees, the separation of ecclesial life from its wider civil counterpart.¹⁰ While Reformed attempts to understand the church as committed to the tasks of social transformation and critical support for the state remain valid, the contemporary Reformed community, including her theologians, have some work to do here.¹¹ This essay simply represents a modest attempt to place the discussion on the table.

While there is some truth in the assessment that we are always in a new situation, the work that this essay invites Reformed theologians to take up is not a new work. The tradition of discerning how to rightly “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mk 12.17) has a long and vexed history in the church, from Stephen’s stoning (Ac 7) in the first century, to Hildebrand (or Gregory VII) and the investiture conflict¹² in the mid-eleventh century, to the work of

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- and, perhaps most important of all, forgiving their former persecutors” represent an idealization of the data at our disposal, O’Donovan is not oblivious to the danger of the church’s colluding with the state’s assumption of its own inherent and autonomous authority. He writes: “The peril of the Christendom idea—precisely the same peril that attends upon the post-Christendom idea of the religiously neutral state—was that of negative collusion: the pretence that there was now no further challenge to be issued to the rulers in the name of the ruling Christ.” Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.195, 212, 213. For a recent and careful defence of Constantine and Constantinianism, see Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010); cf. Stanley Hauerwas, “Review of *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* by Peter Leithart” *The Christian Century* (2010) <http://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2010-09/nonfiction-1>. (Accessed 19 October 2010.)
- 10 So John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), p.198: “the function exercised by government is not the function to be exercised by Christians.” It is helpful here to recall Jüngel’s reminder to us that Barmen had something significantly more important to say than any mere “No.” Rather, its primary concern was to affirm God’s “Yes”, i.e., the “inconceivable” and unconditional divine affirmation of humanity which God has spoken in Jesus Christ. “The meaning of the Barmen Declaration for the church’s task today,” Jüngel avers, “consists in learning anew what is meant by, ‘Lo! I am with you always till the end of the world’ Listening to this ‘I’ means stating *positively* what is to be affirmed validly as evangelical truth in the context of a world which is increasingly setting in motion its own apocalyptic devastation.” Eberhard Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace: Toward a Theology of the State*, trans. D. Bruce Hamill and Alan J. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), p.18.
- 11 This is not to suggest that such work is unfamiliar territory to the Reformed communion. See, for example, Karel Blei, *On Being the Church Across Frontiers: A Vision of Europe Today* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches/WCC Publications, 1992). See also *Reformed World* 57, nos. 2 and 3, (June and September 2007).
- 12 This refers to that conflict which took place between the Holy Roman Empire and the Gregorian papacy over the question of who would control appointments of church officials. See Uta-Renate Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy: Church and Monarchy from the Ninth to the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); Maureen Catherine Miller, *Power and the Holy in the Age of the Investiture Conflict: A Brief History with Documents*, Bedford Series in History & Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).



Barmen, Belhar and Accra in the past century. That the time for reassessment of our ecclesial identity in a post-Constantinian situation is upon us is simply an invitation to take up another chapter in this ongoing work. One way to take up this challenge in my part of the world (and I suspect in others too) might be to begin by asking, “What would a post-colonial Reformed theology look like that neither denies nor blindly defends our rich heritage but expands (in the spirit of the *semper*) our understanding of it in order to engage missionally with the culture where God has placed us?”

But it is precisely at this point, if Michael Welker’s assessment is to be believed, that the Reformed are particularly vulnerable. For, he argues, while the Reformed community has made its mark on the dialogue with the social sciences and with jurisprudence throughout the twentieth century, and has been one of the most actively committed proponents of the ecumenical movement, “it seems that precisely Reformed theology’s delight in innovation and new departures, its interdisciplinary, cultural, and ecumenical openness, has brought it into a profound crisis at the end of the twentieth century.” This crisis, he avers, finds its nexus in the rapid, diverse and diffuse cultural and social developments that have characterized the Western industrialized nations. Welker believes that Reformed theology with its special openness to contemporary cultural developments has been particularly tested and assaulted by these developments in ways in which other theologies, perhaps those with more dogmatically or liturgically oriented brakes, have been less vulnerable. The *theologia reformata et semper reformanda* seems “to be at the mercy of the shifting *Zeitgeist*”. The profile of Reformed theology seems to have disintegrated into “a plethora of attempts to engage contemporary moral, political, and scientific trends, either strengthening them or fighting them”. Exposure to continual renewal has left Reformed theology both vulnerable to losing its profile through the “cultural stress of innovation”, and in danger of betraying its “typical mentality and spiritual attitude”.¹³ Welker’s prescription for response to this “travail” is to clarify our understanding of, and attend to the address of, the word of God over against the cacophony of competing utterances, addresses and presentations. Such “evangelical freedom” will mean not only joining the ancient Hebrew prophets in naming the perversion of justice, the misuse of the cult, and the refusal to practice mercy, but also drawing repeated attention to “the situation in which religion, law, politics, morality, rulers and ruled, natives and foreigners make common cause against God’s word and God’s presence.” It will mean bearing witness to the creative power of the word of God who “overcomes the power of sin, renews and lifts up Christian persons and communities in the church of all times and regions of the world, and radiates a beneficent influence on their environments.”¹⁴ Such freedom also invites a change of direction (*metanoia*) regarding the church’s yielding to three temptations: (1) the turn inwards, or the burying of itself, in its own affairs to the almost complete neglect of any meaningful engagement with non-churchly cultures; (2) the engagement in a flurry of

13 Michael Welker, “Travail and Mission: Theology Reformed According to God’s Word at the Beginning of the Third Millennium” in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp.136–137.

14 Welker, pp.146–147.

welfare activities, or what P.T. Forsyth once referred to as “affable bustle”,¹⁵ the focus and essential content of which is set by the moment’s popular interest; and (3) the uncritical alignment with the most sympathetic leaders of other faiths in a profession of loyalty to “Truth.”¹⁶ Such actions threaten to retard the church’s ability to be the priestly, royal and prophetic community it is called to be in the gospel, and to embrace the new situations in which it finds itself in hope and with a robust and theologically informed imagination.

In a helpful essay on “Church, State, and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition,” David Fergusson argues for a necessary differentiation between church and state for two reasons. The first is what Fergusson sees as the need for greater eschatological reserve. “The eschatological *polis* of the New Testament, cannot be identified with any earthly *polis* in the interim period. This means that the church cannot constitute itself a *polis* in advance of the eschaton, nor can the civil state be viewed as the perfect instrument of God’s will.”¹⁷ Here the Reformed position is at odds with the neo-Anabaptist insistence that the community of faith is “the true politics.”¹⁸ The second reason Fergusson offers concerns the freedom of the Christian life in the Spirit, a freedom, he insists, which “is threatened by any attempt to create political conditions under which the Reformed religion is imposed upon a community.”¹⁹ So, after some discussion on the role of the civil magistrate in Chapter 23 of the Westminster Confession of Faith,²⁰ Fergusson writes:

The problem facing Reformed theology today is whether this social theology is irretrievably anachronistic. Does it reflect the context of early modern Europe? Is it available for *fin de siècle* [“end of the century”] western society let alone for the different polities of South East Asia or Africa? At least two problems require to be faced. One is the emergence of pluralism, with its insistence on tolerance of variations in religious practice, lifestyle choices, and patterns of association in both the household and civil society. This is particularly acute in those cases where the church finds itself

15 P.T. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ* (Blackwood: New Creation Publications, 1987), p.119.

16 This situation was acutely observed more than half a century ago by Lesslie Newbigin. See Lesslie Newbigin, “The Quest of Unity through Religion,” *Journal of Religion* 35 (1955), pp.17–33.

17 David Fergusson, “Church, State, and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition” in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (ed. Wallace M. Alston Jr. and Michael Welker; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), p.116.

18 William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2002), p.15: “It is the Church, uniting heaven and earth, which is the true ‘politics’. The earthly city is not a true *res publica* because there can be no justice and no common weal where God is not truly worshipped.”

19 Fergusson, “Church, State, and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition,” p.116.

20 The relevant section reads: “The civil magistrate . . . hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.”



as a minority religion overshadowed numerically by other faiths. A second problem . . . is whether the critical and prophetic voice of the church can be articulated if there is too close an alliance between the temporal and the spiritual.²¹

This brings us back to Fergusson's first point about church as an eschatological *polis*. Among his concerns here seem to be those in the Reformed family who are tempted to uncritically embrace Anabaptist ecclesiologies (whether those of the so-called "new monasticism", or those more carefully articulated by Stanley Hauerwas). Fergusson acknowledges Hauerwas' "colorful call for a distinctive, countercultural church that will eschew the task of contributing to a social consensus in the interests of greater Christian authenticity". Hauerwas, According to Fergusson, Hauerwas:

speaks to those who are conscious of the divorce between church and culture at the end of the second millennium, particularly those within liberal, western democracies. Christian theology and ethics become distorted by increasingly forced attempts to stand on common ground with those outside the colony. [Hauerwas'] stress upon the distinctiveness of the Christian community and its narrative provides a stronger basis upon which ministry can be conducted. In a context of social fragmentation and moral disarray greater Christian authenticity becomes possible.²²

Fergusson believes that the ecclesiological model proposed by Hauerwas (with its suspicion of the Lutheran doctrine of justification as an inherently ethical description of faith, its withering criticism of mainline Protestantism, and its desire to further distance the church from civil society) is likely to find increasing and widening support, at least in the short term.

The declining membership of the established churches, the loss of social influence, the dissociation of the rising generation from the precepts, traditions, and scriptures of the Christian faith—these", Fergusson avers, "will make it inevitable that the church is perceived as a distinct, if smaller, community that nurtures, forms, disciplines, and makes greater demands upon its members. Greater stress will be placed upon a ministry that evangelizes and builds up the life of the congregation. There will be a questioning of 1960s enthusiasm for the setting up of chaplaincies in hospitals, factories, prisons, and educational institutions. There will be a loss of confidence in centralized, bureaucratic mechanisms for dealing with these problems. The widespread questioning of the practice of infant baptism should be seen as one symptom of all this."²³

Fergusson acknowledges that the imprecise and loaded charge of sectarianism²⁴ often

21 Fergusson, "Church, State, and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition," p.119.

22 Fergusson, p.121.

23 Fergusson, p.122.

24 See, for example, Arne Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* (South Bend: University of Notre

leveled at Hauerwas is manifestly unfair, that Hauerwasian ecclesiology acts in the interests not of withdrawal but of witness and mission, and that the purpose of a countercultural distinctiveness proposed by Hauerwas is not isolationism but rather a proper contribution to the wider social world, cautioning other churches against too easy an accommodation with civil society. "For the Reformed community", Fergusson writes, Hauerwas' project "might remind us of the ways in which a political theology that at one time warranted opposition to the political powers, at other times too easily lapsed into quietism".²⁵ We shall return to this point soon.

In further defence of Hauerwas, I think his project is driven by a profound alertness to the fact that the politics of the church is a social ethic in itself which forms a way of life, of life-together, and of life-in-community. He understands that all politics—whether ecclesial or "secular"—are simply the practices, conversations, and processes of forming and sustaining particular communities, and that the church has her own particular formation activities—sacraments and prayer, for example.²⁶ The Reformed too understand the church as elected to engage in practices, conversations, and processes which are both formed by, and bear witness to, the reign of God among us in Jesus Christ. Moreover, that her catholicity contrasts to all nation-states, whose geographic and cultural boundaries are defended at all costs, does not mean that she does not have boundaries. Nor does it mean that some of those boundaries may not overlap. Rather, it means only that the boundaries established by the gospel (of the *esse*, and not merely of the *bene esse*, of her life) *alone* justify her presence in the world. And this is important to clarify, because it is precisely *in* the world, and *for* the world (because *for* God), that she exists.

But while Hauerwas and Yoder exercise more care than do many who are working in their shadow, the neo-Anabaptist vision with which their names are associated remains vulnerable on a number of fronts. At this point, let me simply name two. First, it is something of an irony and a paradox that the dominant grammar and primary frame of reference for the neo-Anabaptists is political (e.g., Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*). This suggests a striking and somewhat embarrassing resemblance to both the Christian Right and Left against whom neo-Anabaptists are keen to set themselves. Second, and more importantly, the neo-Anabaptist criticism of the Reformed on the basis that the

Dame Press, 1995), pp.231–247. See also Stanley Hauerwas, "Why the 'Sectarian Temptation' Is a Misrepresentation: A Response to James Gustafson" in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pp.90–110.

25 Fergusson, "Church, State, and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition," p.124.

26 William Cavanaugh too argues that the church must constitute itself as an alternative social space, economy and authority vis-à-vis the nation-state, and not simply rely on the latter to be its social presence. He encourages us to think of the nation-state "as a kind of parody of the church" and argues, with Alasdair MacIntyre, that "the urgent task of the church . . . is to demystify the nation-state and to treat it like the telephone company." William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), pp.41–42; cf. William Cavanaugh, "Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is not the Keeper of the Common Good," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 2 (2004), pp.243–274.



latter's theo-social position has been carved out against the backdrop of Christendom recalls something about logs and splinters. For the Anabaptist position itself was carved out in such a milieu. Furthermore, it still seems to operate as something of a parasite insofar as its own position seems to *require* that parts of the church with a less separatist impulse exist. So James Hunter:

[Neo-Anabaptist] identity *depends* on the State and other powers being corrupt and the more unambiguously corrupt they are, the clearer the identity and mission of the church. It is . . . a passive-aggressive ecclesiology. The church depends on its status as a minority community in opposition to a dominant structure in order to be effective in its criticism of the injustices of democratic capitalism.²⁷

Fergusson proposes a less antithetical, more constructive and more carefully nuanced reading of the Reformed tradition of critical support for the state and the institutions of civil society than the polemical Hauerwas. But at the same time he sustains a reading that is more sympathetic to Hauerwasian concerns for the church's distinct witness and mission than Oliver O'Donovan's proposal for some kind of modified Christendom.²⁸ Fergusson, however, is concerned about the "incipient Pelagianism of the radical position" over against the (especially) Lutheran and (later) Reformed emphasis upon *sola gratia*, which sponsors a view of the church as a community gathered by the grace of God and not by human ethical achievement. "For this reason", writes Fergusson, "it has generally been willing to accord membership to those whose allegiance is faltering and intermittent. Ecclesiology has in practice often been inclusive rather than exclusive. There are ever-widening circles of formal commitment that have been tolerated in the name of grace and catholicity."²⁹ And against the inclination in some Anabaptist ecclesiologies towards insularity, the Reformed are more emboldened by the fact that God's covenant people inhabit multiple communities and fulfil social roles beyond those of church membership. Fergusson suggests that this has two consequences: "On the one hand, the insights, experiences, and practices that accompany these roles will be of hermeneutical significance in the understanding of Christian belief . . . on the other hand, the church has a responsibility to provide its members with the resources by which they can live faithfully and with integrity in modern society."³⁰ Here, the ecclesiological task concerns not merely prophecy against, but also support for, and conservation of, those elements of society which accord with the word of God. Rather than adopt the neo-Anabaptist pessimism and disparagement about, and negation of, the world, which only "reinforces rather than contradicts the discourse of negation so

27 James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 164.

28 Hauerwas offers a helpful critique of O'Donovan in Stanley Hauerwas and James Fodor, "Remaining in Babylon: Oliver O'Donovan's Defense of Christendom" in *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* eds. Stanley Hauerwas and Peter Ochs (London: SCM Press, 2001), pp.199–224.

29 Fergusson, "Church, State, and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition," p.124.

30 Fergusson, p.125.

ubiquitous in our late modern political culture”,³¹ the Reformed seek to hold together and bear witness to a triple awareness: that the earth *is* full of the glory of God (Ps 19; Isa 6.3; Hab 3.3), that *at present* it is groaning in travail (Rom 8), and that it *will* be full as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11.9; Hab 2.14).

That we live in an age of unprecedented complexity of “intradependence”³² highlights the provincial nature of the *corpus christianum* and brings to the fore the celebratory reality that wherever and whenever the church in its involvement in economic, political and cultural processes bears witness to the lordship of the one word of God she is involved in world processes. Such involvement is characterized by a putting to death the temptation to exist for its own sake rather than for the coming of the kingdom of God as the future of the whole creation, a future for which the church prepares together with others.³³ It is also characterized by total immersion into the world but with no loss of saltiness (Mt 5.13), as kept by the word of God alone. So Karl Barth:

The community of Jesus Christ is for the world [It] is the human creature whose existence as existence for God has the meaning and purpose of being, on behalf of God and in the service and discipleship of His existence, an existence for the world and men. That it exists for the world because for God, follows simply and directly from the fact that it is the community of Jesus Christ and has the basis of its being and nature in Him. He calls, gathers and upbuilds it. He rules it as its Lord and Shepherd. He constitutes it ever afresh in the event of His presence and by the enlightening power of His Holy Spirit.³⁴

To retreat from the world, therefore, is to retreat from God, for in Jesus Christ and in God’s election of a people, God has self-disclosed as the one who is for the world. It is at this point that there is both significant convergence and divergence between Reformed and neo-Anabaptist tendencies. Both traditions are certainly concerned with the question of what it takes for the church to be free *for* the world. The neo-Anabaptists insist on a more radical disassociation and freedom *from* the world in order to be free *for* the world and to address the world as a concrete “foretaste” of the eschatological politic than do the Reformed. Moreover, the former typically charge the latter with not fully appreciating the need for both kinds of freedom, i.e., freedom *from* and freedom *for*. The challenge posed by our neo-Anabaptist sisters and brothers should be welcomed as a gift with which we might profitably engage as we seek to faithfully articulate for our time the substance and shape of the Christian faith.

31 Hunter, *To Change the World*, p.166.

32 See Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), pp. 26–27.

33 See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1977), pp.163–189.

34 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.3.2* eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), pp.762–763.



I have sympathy for the notion that God's people best serve the world not by becoming more like it but rather by becoming more unlike it. Such a position reminds us that the only way the world can know that it is "the world" is if the church is "the church."³⁵ When the church is "the church", i.e., a people who embody a different form of politics, the world is given a vision of an alternative way of being that recognizes the necessity for repentance. This is the reality, for example, that martyrdom presents as a gift to the world, for this is the kind of gift that exposes false cities from the true one in an effort to bring all cities under Christ's rule. But I am concerned about the posture of anxiety that often attends such a position, as if the one who encounters us in the fleshliness of the world is not also our other, the divine stranger whom we "pass by on the other side" (Lk 10.25–37).

Our tradition, at its best, has embraced in hope the riskiness of encountering God in the world (here meant in both senses of the word³⁶). It has shown a commitment to the transformation of civil society in the light of the life given in Christ *both* from without *and* from within. And it has embraced and joined a multitude of voices who have engaged in the socio-political-ethical orientation of theology and stressed the involvement of the church in critical and formative conversations taking place both within and outside her gates.³⁷ At work here is the theological impulse that the church cannot be saved apart from the world. Again, it is Christology which does the work here. Specifically, it witnesses to the vital tension between Christ's *distinction from* the world, on the one hand, and his *solidarity with* and *conformity to* it, on the other.³⁸ Here, James Hunter's proposal of "a theology of faithful presence" contains many aspects of the Reformed vision I am seeking to articulate.³⁹ Proposing an ecclesiology grounded in the reality of God's incarnation as the Creator's kenotically-shaped movement towards the world in the face of its erosion of trust and its dissolution,

35 See Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p.461; Karl Barth, *Gespräche, 1959–1962* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1995), pp.352, 354.

36 To be sure, the Reformed have tended to blur the grammar of "world" as creation and "world" as fallen sociality, a blurring which has led to some ambiguity about what precisely is being proposed. Here too we might also welcome the challenge posed by others to articulate with greater clarity what we mean when we say "world."

37 See, e.g., The Accra Confession, Article 41: "The General Council commits the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to work together with other communions, the ecumenical community, the community of other faiths, civil movements and people's movements for a just economy and the integrity of creation and calls upon our member churches to do the same."

38 See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.3.2* eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), p.773; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance; trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and R.J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), pp.242–243; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1* eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), pp. 750–751; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.2* eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), pp. 610–611; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.3.2* pp.762–795; Karl Barth, *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde*, Kirche für die Welt 7 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1946).

39 See Hunter, *To Change the World*, pp. 238–254.

Hunter calls upon the church to embrace “a theology of engagement in and with the world around us.”⁴⁰ Beginning with the acknowledgement that God’s faithful presence with us calls for our faithful participation and response, Hunter asserts that this means we are called to be fully present to ourselves and to those outside, directing our pursuits, identity and lives towards mutual flourishing through sacrificial love. This calls not for retreat but for the full affirmation, presence and commitment of the people of God in their various vocations, and for the exercising of power in conformity with the way of Jesus (Phil 2). But this in no sense implies

passive conformity to the established structures. Rather, within the dialectic between affirmation and antithesis, faithful presence means a constructive resistance that seeks new patterns of societal organization that challenge, undermine, and otherwise diminish oppression, injustice, enmity, and corruption and, in turn, encourage harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, security, and well-being As Miroslav Volf puts it, [it is] a “bursting out” of an alternative within the proper space of the old. This does not, by any means, preclude direct prophetic opposition to established structures, but rather makes such opposition a last resort. Instead, prophetic witness becomes the net effect of a lived-vision of the shalom of God within every place and every sphere where Christians are present.⁴¹

So where does this leave the Reformed? The churches scattered across Australasia and the Pacific face many of the same challenges as those in other parts of the world where a largely uncritical synthesis between gospel and culture transplanted by nineteenth-century missions continues to (1) provide social structure and religio-cultural stability for the community,⁴² and (2) widen an already significant disconnect (felt most acutely

40 Hunter, p.243.

41 Hunter, pp.247–248.

42 Of course, as Alan Torrance reminds us, the social context from which the Barmen Declaration emerged was also one where “prior cultural and nationalistic (one could say ‘indigenous’) agendas were prescribing and determining the church’s political perspectives together with its theological affirmations and, indeed, self-affirmations.” Alan J. Torrance, “Introductory Essay” in *Christ, Justice and Peace: Toward a Theology of the State* (ed. Eberhard Jüngel; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), p. xi. For a contemporary expression of this thesis in the context of Vanuatu, see Randall Prior, *Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu: The Founding Missionary and a Missionary for Today* (Wattle Park: Gospel Vanuatu Books, 1998); Randall Prior, ed., *Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu 2: Contemporary Local Perspectives* (Wattle Park: Gospel Vanuatu Books, 2003); Randall Prior, ed., *Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu 3: The Voice of the Local Church* (Wattle Park: Gospel Vanuatu Books, 2003); Randall Prior, ed., *Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu 4: Local Voices on Jesus Christ and Mission* (Melbourne: ATF/Gospel Vanuatu Books, 2005); Randall Prior, ed., *Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu 5: Women in Culture and Church and Other Issues* (Melbourne: ATF Press/Gospel Vanuatu Books, 2007); The Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu, *25 Tingting: Reflections on 25 Years of Independence in Vanuatu* (Wattle Park: Gospel Vanuatu Books, 2010). Cf. Annelin Eriksen, *Gender, Christianity and Change in Vanuatu: An Analysis of Social Movements in North Ambrym*, Anthropology and Cultural History in Asia and the Indo-Pacific (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008); Fiama Rakau, “The Prophetic Role of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu as a Conscience to the Nation and its Government” in *25 Tingting: Reflections on 25 Years of Independence in Vanuatu*, ed. The Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu (Wattle



in the young and 1.5 generations) between faith and existence in the world, and (3) encourage the “justification” of the church’s existence in a competing marketplace. The work of the Gospel and Culture Network, inspired in no small part by the ministry of Lesslie Newbigin, is but one example of a constructive, strategic⁴³ and faithful response to the new missionary situations and rich opportunities made available by the crumbling of the high wall of the *corpus christianum* and the engagement in mission outside of the old compounds.⁴⁴

Speaking only of the western context of dechristianization, Fergusson calls upon the Reformed to recognize that the “use by this date” attached to those models of establishment derived from early modern Geneva and Scotland has now passed:

We can no longer assume nor aspire towards co-extensive membership of church and civil society, and shifting patterns of establishment in western Europe confirm this. In this limited respect, the secularization thesis which recognizes the differentiation of civil and religious spheres must be accepted. The separation of the state, the market economy, and science from the influence of religious institutions is an undeniable feature of modernity. Yet, this entails neither the decline of religion nor its confinement to a private or sectarian sphere. The public contribution of the Christian churches . . . works not so much at the level of the state or political parties but instead through the exercise of influence upon civil society. Here much depends on making common cause with other groups and movements, and articulating anxieties and aspirations that are experienced both inside and outside the church. At the same time, the public contribution of the churches will depend upon the maintenance of a distinct Christian subculture that nurtures and equips individuals for authentic service at a time of increasing moral fragmentation and confusion. While there may no longer be an organic unity between church and secular society, the Reformed vision of social transformation and critical support for the state is still relevant. It continues to offer a badly needed perspective in its intent to make common cause in search of a positive social contribution, in a hopeful though sober vision of political possibilities, in the affirmation of public service, and in the dignity of political office which, though frequently demeaned, remains a gift and a calling of God.⁴⁵

Park: Gospel Vanuatu Books, 2010), p.57: “The Presbyterian church [sic] of Vanuatu is right to believe that there are Christian insights about human nature which are significant for the welfare of the State. As servants of Christ it is incumbent upon us to impact society and government and place the stamp of Christ’s love upon all peoples and nations; and so it is in Vanuatu.”

43 John Flett argues that one imperative for mission to the West arises from the significant role that Western culture continues to play in shaping global culture. He writes: “Through the process of modernization many values implicit in the technological, commercial and democratic enterprise are being exported to non-Western countries.” John Flett, “Unpacking Gospel and Culture” in *Collision Crossroads: The Intersection of Modern Western Culture with the Christian Gospel*, ed. John Flett (Auckland: The DeepSight Trust, 1998), p.11.

44 This metaphor of the compound is taken from Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM, 1953), p.12.

45 Fergusson, “Church, State, and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition,” pp. 125–126.

Finally, in light of this discussion and with a view to fostering further conversation, I wish to change tack here and offer a few thoughts regarding the life and witness of the member churches of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). While history encourages us to maintain modesty about what bodies such as WCRC and its members and networks might achieve, the challenge of rigorously reassessing the Reformed church's continuing identity vis-à-vis the state and civil society has implications too for what it might mean for WCRC to be a "communion" and no longer simply an "alliance" or "fellowship". Some of these implications may impinge on how we as a communion and our member churches relate to various civil authorities. WCRC acknowledges that the affirmation of communion has implications for our life together. The shape of this life together is fashioned upon the gospel, that is, upon the gracious economy of the Triune God who makes us one. Our identity and communion is created, sustained and fleshed out by Jesus Christ. This reality, which the Bible calls "life in Christ Jesus" (Ro 6.23; 1 Co 1.30; 2 Tm 3.12), redefines and reconstitutes our identity. It makes all other identity-forming relationships secondary.

Therefore, as one of many concrete expressions of being in communion, we might embrace the following four propositions:

1. We will refuse to kill one another. Not only is this the proper response to a direct command of God (Ex 20.13) but it is also a basic implication of the divine command to love one's neighbour as oneself (Lv 19.18; Mt 22.39; Mk 12.31; Lk 10.17; Ro 13.9–10; Gal 5.14; Jam 2.8; *et passim*). Moreover, it is a basic implication of our principal ecclesial identity in Jesus Christ, the violation of which can only mean in this case our readiness to give up following Jesus and to give to Caesar what is God's alone (Mt 22.21). One implication of such hideous infidelity would be a loss of the ecclesia's witness to the radical reconstitution of human community in him who came "preaching peace" (Ac 10.36) and who made "peace through the blood of his cross" (Col 1.20).
2. We will make disciples in our congregations who might learn to resist participation in the state's machinery of violence and thereby offer a distinctively Christian witness to an alternative way of living that is determined not to perpetuate the practices of that world which is passing away but which is formed by the new creation inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.
3. We will communicate—in word and in action—to our respective nation-states and governments that while it is possible, and insofar as it depends on us, we will live peaceably and hospitably with others, but our principal allegiance is not to the nation-state but to Jesus Christ. This will mean that there will be times when we will be considered poor citizens of the nation-state.
4. We will support by all means possible all those in our communion for whom such a commitment will come at great cost.



The Reformed are a people who profess to follow one who puts himself in the way of evil, who intervenes on behalf of the oppressed and the weak and the downtrodden, and who does so not with swords and spears, but by bearing on his body blows and resisting retaliation. Jesus confronts the cycle of violence and declares that “the violence stops with me.” He suffers in his own person the wrong that is done, and entrusts the outcome to God. That is the pattern of obedient life that all Christians are called to follow and into which they are incorporated through baptism. Forgiveness, compassion, prayer and sacrifice are the tools that Christ takes up in his war against evil and sin. When those who bear his name take up arms to wage war, and insist that such action is necessary, unavoidable and a last resort, they are resorting to a logic other than that of the Logos incarnate. It must be confessed therefore that they have failed in the call to inhabit God’s new creation, a call which allows for no exceptions when it comes to loving even our enemies.⁴⁶

Alan Torrance reminds us that political theology, even when engaged in the name of the church, has too often been theologically naïve and superficial. While it might reflect admirable and widely held sentiments and concerns, it can lack theological consistency and coherence and so theological warrant. Historically, one of the real gifts that the Reformed have bequeathed to the wider church and to the discipline of theology has been the rigour with which it has undertaken this indispensable task of talking about God. The twin temptations of abandoning this rigour and/or buying too uncritically into the humanist and enlightenment programme with which it has sometimes been associated are real. But it is only to their detriment and—more importantly—to the detriment of the church’s ongoing witness to Christ that the Reformed would neglect this fundamental task. So Torrance:

If the Church and the Gospel are not simply to be used to claim divine sanction for various world-views then much more is required than appeals to individual life experience, political ideologies and “intuitive” ethical convictions. What is necessary here is serious theological consideration as to how precisely we do determine God’s will and God’s Word to us in our various contexts. Furthermore, at a time when the church and society are becoming increasingly characterised by cultural and ethical pluralism, theological affirmation requires clarity as to the theological criteria which operate in relation to our God-talk within the Christian faith. This requires us to ask questions of the form: What is the nature of the critical controls upon our attempts to interpret the divine intention? What are the theological grounds of the socio-political claims we make? How far does the specific and concrete Word of God to humankind in Christ require a revision of our intuitive interpretations of the nature and function of the state and of its obligations and responsibilities for justice, peace and freedom? How far does the Word, as the impetus and warrant for God-talk within the political domain, involve a semantic reconstruction of these terms reorienting their meaning rather than simply

46 I am indebted here to an unpublished paper by Murray Rae on “The Unholy Notion of ‘Holy War’: A Christian Critique”

endorsing their everyday usage? These questions are of fundamental importance if there is to be responsible and integrative engagement with socio-political issues and if we are to avoid further fragmentation and division within the church and society with different parties indulging in claims of divine sanction from their various perspectives.⁴⁷

Embracing the liberty that comes in the word of God, we are called to freedom from the tyranny of tradition, creative fidelity to the scriptures, to an ecclesial hermeneutics characterized by faith, hope and love, and to messianic fellowship and hopeful living *in* and *with* the world in the face of the violent and hopeless forces within and about us. A Reformed vision of social transformation involves a celebration too of the strength of the Reformed tradition and the contribution it has made and continues to make to wider Christian witness and life. This is a vital undertaking for our communion, because societies or organizations which ignore or abandon their heritage and their history are societies or organizations which have abandoned any soteriology which involves time. And this is a particular problem for those bodies who wish to claim any interest in God. "A people without history," wrote T.S. Eliot in *Little Gidding*, "is not redeemed from time."⁴⁸ Eliot might properly be read here as saying "To lose one's history is to be condemned to an 'unredeemed' condition, to absolute bondage to the temporal process."⁴⁹ This is not to encourage a kind of gross nostalgia. On the contrary, it is to confess that our ability or otherwise to be liberated from the ways in which the present and the imagined future might serve as a trap and an enslavement requires that we engage in an ongoing work of historical awareness.

By way of conclusion, I have chosen to attend to the matter of the relationship between church and civil society *not* because this is *the* matter of *most* pressing concern to the contemporary Reformed churches (who but God can tell!), but because many Reformed theologians seem to have developed again a habit of placing this ever important task in the "that's too hard basket" even when we discern that the stakes are so high. This is not to record that there have not been a significant number of political theologues

47 Torrance, "Introductory Essay," pp.ix–x.

48 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943), p.58.

49 I am indebted to Rowan Williams for this point. See Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), p.30: "We do need to be careful not to fall into the trap of regarding 'the self' (or the 'soul', or whatever) as a spring of action determined by pure will' or as a timeless substance operating by pure reason. Both these myths represent attempts to guarantee that the self remains transcendent of its surroundings, free and (possibly) immortal—that it is more than an 'automatic' system of conditioned reflexes. But it might be truer to say that the self's transcendence is in its memory, precisely in its recollection *now* of another reality, a past reality, both distinct from and part of the present situation. Memory affirms that the present situation has a context; it, like the self, is part of a continuity, it is 'made' and so it is not immutable. By learning that situations have wider contexts, we learn a measure of freedom or detachment from (or transcendence of) the limits of the present When we see societies losing or suppressing their past, we rightly conclude that they are unfree, diseased, or corrupt: either they are oppressed by an alien power intent on destroying their roots and identity (the classic case being the colonial contempt for indigenous memory and culture), or they are engaged in an internal repression, a conscious or unconscious restriction of present human possibilities."



advanced in recent decades. But, as Alan Torrance has reminded us, there is literally all the difference in the world between “political theologies” and “theological politics”, between a politically-driven approach to God and a theologically-driven approach to the state. While there has been no shortage of the former, there’s been an embarrassing and painful paucity of the latter. That is, there are few approaches which interpret the church’s responsibilities *to* and *with* the state in the light of “God’s inclusive, recreative and healing purposes held forth in God’s Word of grace to humanity. Such [approaches] to society, to culture, to the state and to the ecosystem would be both more *radical* and more *liberating*—theologically and politically—than so much that has sought in recent times to lay claim to these attributes.”⁵⁰

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50 Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace*, pp. xx.