

Confessional Continuity in the Reformed Family of Churches

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Almost seventy years ago, in 1923, the still relatively young and (outside the German and Swiss context) almost totally unknown *Karl Barth*, who had recently been called to the professorship of reformed theology in Göttingen, addressed the General Assembly of the Reformed Alliance in Germany on the theme, «Reformed Doctrine, its Nature and Task»¹. That lecture is still today well remembered, at least in Germany. *Barth* began by launching a frontal attack on the idea that the true and valuable fruits of the reformed tradition in the twentieth century were not to be sought in theological disputation, but in exploration of the tradition's non-theological, purely religious and cultural significance for the present day. The words in which this idea was expressed were taken by him from a report on the meeting of the Eastern Section of the World Reformed Alliance in Zurich earlier that year: «It could not escape any wakeful observer that unfruitful theological debates played only a minimal role in these days. The meeting was informed by a strong spiritual drive to grasp the ancient truths of the Reformation as untheologically as possible in their religious significance for the present, to allow them to come alive again... and to test out these venerable truths in practice in changed circumstances»². The reporter clearly had a certain conception of the kind of «continuity» necessary in the reformed church – but one which *Barth* could by no means accept. As he himself went on to say, «If the attitude expressed here is typical of the likes and dislikes of the broadest and currently most influential circles in our modern reformed churches – and there can be little doubt that that is the case – then it is no thankful task that I have been given today. I am supposed to speak about reformed doctrine, theology, preaching, proclamation, i.e. about all those things about which those in Zurich remained <so far as possible> silent...»³

Two generations on it is no bad thing to be reminded by *Barth* that the question of the continuity proper to reformed confession is in the end a theological issue, not merely an historical or cultural one. The search for marks of confessional continuity in the reformed family of churches – whether as already given or as needing to be recovered – cannot bracket off the question of the theological calling and commission of the churches themselves. Otherwise discussion of

¹ *Karl Barth, Reformierte Lehre, ihr Wesen und ihre Aufgabe*, reprinted in: *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, München 1929, pp. 179-212.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 179.

³ *Ibid.*

«reformed continuity» is all too likely to remain on the surface, concerned more with tradition than with truth.

This said, however, it is still proper for us to take a look at the reformed tradition of confession through the centuries and to ask whether or where signs of continuity can be traced.

First of all, «it could not escape any wakeful observer» that the reformed family of churches does not and cannot lay claim to certain of those patterns and marks of continuity through the centuries which are prominent in some other confessions and traditions. The reformed churches spread throughout the world of today do not belong to one, uniform organisation organically and institutionally united around a single visible, earthly centre and apex, as does the Roman Catholic Church. Nor, unlike the Orthodox or Anglican communions, do they constitute a family united by one pattern of church order and a broadly common liturgical heritage. Nor, unlike the Lutheran fellowship, can they point to one relatively narrowly defined selection of confessional documents stemming from the era of the Reformation as the definitive and abiding standard of authentic reformed faith. The reformed churches are much too diverse in origins, order and liturgy to fit into any of these patterns; they possess a rich abundance of confessions from the most various times and contexts over four-and-a-half centuries; they have been caught up more than most other ecclesiastical families in the complex political and social movements of the modern era, both influencing and being influenced by them. Not without ground has a recent collection of studies, chiefly by historians, emphasised that even in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries «international Calvinism» was a far from uniform movement⁴. That verdict is only reinforced by consideration of the history of the reformed churches since the seventeenth century. It is hard, at first sight, to discover any distinctive theological – or other – principle uniting the various churches which belong to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, to say nothing of those churches which are not members of the Alliance, yet clearly do, historically speaking, belong to the reformed family in respect of their origins and broad theological tradition⁵.

Is the answer, then, to be found in the historical origins and broad theological tradition of the reformed family? Up to a point, no doubt. But we should be careful not to overstate the case – not, at least, if we wish to be realistic about the actual situation. It would be overstating it, for instance, to assert that the reformed churches today are in one way or another the heirs of Zwingli and Bullinger, Bucer and Calvin, Beza and Knox and know themselves to be committed to that he-

⁴ International Calvinism, 1541-1715, *Menna Prestwich (ed.)*, Oxford 1985.

⁵ One thinks here first of all of the reformed churches which do not belong to the Alliance but to the Reformed Ecumenical Synod – but also of other churches, such as the Disciples of Christ, which have sprung from reformed roots, albeit generally preferring not to identify themselves as «Reformed»: *Reformed and Disciples of Christ in Dialogue*, *A. P. F. Sell (ed.)*, Geneva 1985, (Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 6).

ritage. Calvin, certainly, continues to be regarded and treated as a major point of reference in many reformed churches, at least so far as theological education and the training of ministers goes. The others just mentioned, to say nothing of a host of others, are largely ignored and unknown, certainly not regarded as having any special authority today. And so far as Calvin is concerned, the scholarly debates about the precise nature of the continuity and contrast between Calvin's thought and later Calvinist orthodoxy seem to be coming to take up almost more space in the learned literature than serious engagement with Calvin's thought for its own sake⁶. There has certainly been a significant Calvin renaissance in the twentieth century, comparable to the Luther renaissance which preceded it; but it has remained very largely the preserve of specialists in history and historical theology, only here and there trickling through to play any really effective part in the training of ministers or in shaping the life of the reformed churches.

The situation is largely similar in respect of the old reformed confessions. So far as the world of Anglo-Saxon Presbyterianism is concerned, the Westminster Confession continues to retain a tenuous hold on a kind of classical status, but one that is more honoured in the breach than in the observance⁷. Confessions such as the French of 1559, the Scots of 1560, the Belgic of 1561 and the Second Helvetic of 1566 are known and used mostly as quarries for historical research. Of all the sixteenth century reformed confessions and catechisms, only the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 continues to be widely used as an instrument of education and edification, and that largely in the German reformed churches, who well know what a treasure they have in it. But perhaps the first two questions and answers of the Heidelberg Catechism itself can help to carry us a stage further in reflecting upon the continuity of reformed confession through history:

Q.1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Q.2. How many things must you know, that you may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort?

⁶ Cf. e.g. *R. T. Kendall*, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, Oxford 1979; *M. C. Bell*, *Calvin and Scottish Theology, the Doctrine of Assurance*, Edinburgh 1985.

⁷ Cf. *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, *Alasdair Heron (ed.)*, Edinburgh 1982.

A. Three things. First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness. Second, how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences. Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption⁸.

One could of course be critical of the individualism of these questions and answers, although their «individualism» is nothing other than a reflection of Luther's insight that the message of the Gospel is only rightly understood when it is understood as being «pro me», as the address of forgiveness and acceptance and commissioning that places each individual personally under the promise, claim and challenge of the Gospel. And there lies the permanent and unchanging core of the evangelical message in its double aspect. First, Jesus Christ is our faithful Saviour, to whom we belong in life and in death. Second, our own life as human beings is set under the triple sign of real sin, proclaimed forgiveness and responsive gratitude issuing in obedient service. The particular form that obedient service takes must depend upon the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves placed; the task remains the same: to witness in this world to what the Scottish Covenanters in the seventeenth century called «the crown rights of the Redeemer».

What this can alert us to is that continuity of reformed confession is not to be looked for in the first instance in the continuity of reformed confessions, but in the witness and faith of reformed Christians. Theology is a practical discipline; it has to do with the calling of men, women and children to glimpse and serve the glory of God displayed in Jesus Christ and in the process to discover their own calling to be members of a chosen people, a royal priesthood. Or, as Calvin put it at the very beginning of the «Institute», all true and proper knowledge consists in knowledge of God and of ourselves; the two are intimately connected; and the true function of the knowledge of God is to awaken and enable trust and obedience⁹.

But there is still a further step to take. Confession is always a matter of testimony. And the question has to be asked: Who testifies, before whom and for whom? There is a great temptation for Christians, reformed and other, to imagine that confession and testimony means, first, last and all the time, their confession, their testimony, their witness before the world and God to the Gospel and the person of Jesus Christ, to set themselves in the role of the witness who is faithful and true. But that designation is reserved for another: the witness, testimony and confession on which Christian faith and hope and love depend from start to finish are not ours but those of Jesus Christ, the one «faithful and true witness» (Rev. 3.14). He is the witness before the court of the world to the faithfulness of God to his creation and to humankind. He is the witness before God the Father that the sins and failings of this same humankind have been borne and carried away. He is in his own person the witness to all who believe of the covenant which will not pass

⁸ The Constitution of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Part I: Book of Confessions, Philadelphia 1967.

⁹ Calvin, Inst. I, 1, 1; I, 2, 1.

away, for it is built on nothing less than the faithfulness of the triune God. Jesus Christ, «the same yesterday, today and always», is the sole proper ground, content and goal of all Christian and therefore also of all reformed confession. Our confession echoes and is carried by his and cannot stop short at itself. To speak of reformed confession and reformed confessions is not to speak of anything other than Christian confession and Christian confessions which attempt – and that is the proper and original sense of «reformed» in this context – to make precisely that clear and to give the glory to God.

Yet the single, normative testimony of Jesus Christ supports and is reflected in a long history of Christian confession and Christian confessions, a history of which reformed confession and reformed confessions are a part. And here we are confronted with and must take seriously the complex history and variety of the reformed churches with their various traditions, church orders, liturgical patterns – and their numerous confessions of ancient or modern provenance.

The multifold character of the reformed churches in the world of today certainly does not make our enquiry at this point any easier. But it ought also to be a cause for rejoicing. If it puzzles us because of the lack of obvious unity in structure, liturgy and order, it can at the same time help us to see that what is of the esse of the church is not necessarily to be looked for on that level. More than that: it should be a positive encouragement to realise to what an extent precisely the reformed church has proved capable of leaping over boundaries of culture and tradition in order to establish itself in new and unfamiliar settings far from its original European heartland. There has been, is today and doubtless will be into the future a dynamic at work in the reformed family which cannot be neatly theologially – or otherwise – categorised, except by saying that it is the dynamic of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in interaction with the lives of human beings in cultures and civilisations far from the old European centre of the western church, albeit by no means unaffected by the impact of western society. That should be a sign of hope for the future, even in a world threatened by national rivalry, by dictatorship and by poverty.

If there is one thread which runs through reformed confessions from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, it is the repeated affirmation of the glory of God and the calling of humankind to be children of the Father in and through Jesus Christ by the power of his Spirit. This too is in itself nothing exclusively reformed; it is, rather, universally Christian. Recognition of that fact has certainly been one reason why so many ecumenical impulses in the last century have gone forth from reformed churches. If, from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth, they showed a depressing tendency to sectionalism, fragmentation, and division, they have for the last century and more been marked increasingly by a concern to rediscover and re-express the unity in Jesus Christ which binds all Christians together. More is involved here than simply the work of ecclesiastical joinery, as the work of ecumenical negotiations has more than once in unflattering fashion been described. Institutional «joinery» is part of the task and, in the appropriate

time and place, important. But more important still is the rediscovery by Christians of the fellowship that unites them above and beyond their confessional divisions. That discovery belongs irreversibly to the ecumenical reality of the world of today – and, no doubt also, tomorrow.

The attempt to reconsider the continuity of reformed confession through the centuries and across the continents ought not therefore to be undertaken in any narrowly confessional or denominational spirit. Whatever marks, signs or notes we may discover or suggest, they have to be tested not only to see whether they are authentically «reformed», phenomenologically or historically speaking, but also whether they are authentically Christian and correspond to the demands of confessing the faith in today's world. To take a simple but by no means trivial example from the related area of forms of worship: for centuries many if not all reformed churches regarded the use of an organ in worship as something approaching blasphemy, and certainly not as consonant with the principles of reformed liturgy. That is hardly the case today in the vast majority of reformed churches throughout the world. What was once upheld, at least by some, as a reformed «*proprium*» has been in effect abandoned – and most of us would doubtless say, rightly so. Or, to take a related but theologically much more substantial issue: the second commandment, «Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...» is much more heavily and consciously emphasised by reformed churches in mainland Europe, surrounded as they are by Roman Catholics and Lutherans who follow the medieval reorganisation and renumbering of the Decalogue, than it is by British and American Presbyterians in whose culture the biblical arrangement of the Decalogue from Exodus 20 has been accepted since the sixteenth century as simply normal. (The attitude to church decoration also tends to be very different in these different settings!) Again, a Scots Presbyterian like myself, coming from what has been described as the high catholic wing of the reformed tradition with its solemn emphasis upon the authority and responsibility of the Presbytery, is sometimes forced to rub his eyes and look again when confronted with statements by German reformed theologians insisting that the distinctive reformed emphasis is on the fundamental ascription of authority to the local congregation rather than on synodal fellowship. To say the least, some care is needed here in disentangling the authentically reformed from the accidentally reformed features. We should not be surprised to find that the same is the case with the history of reformed confessions.

It would be quite impossible within the scope of this paper to attempt anything like a thorough study of the history of reformed confessions and their theological contents and emphases. The last attempt to publish a more or less comprehensive collection – *E. F. Karl Müller's* «Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche», which appeared in 1903¹⁰ – contained no fewer than 58 documents, the

¹⁰ *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*, *E. F. Karl Müller* (ed.), Leipzig 1903. Two important older collections compiled in Germany were *H. A. Niemeyer*, *Collectio Confessionum in Ecclesiis Reformatis Publicatarum*, Leipzig 1840, and *H. J.*

oldest being Zwingli's «Schlußreden» of 1523 and the youngest the North American statement on the revision of the Westminster Confession presented to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1902 (and subsequently approved in 1903). Müller divided these up into nine separate groups: 1. Pre-Calvinist confessions; 2. Swiss confessions after Calvin's arrival on the scene; 3. Confessions from the West (i.e. Western Europe in the third quarter of the sixteenth century); 4. Hungarian confessions; 5. Pre-reformation groups (Bohemian Brethren and Waldensians); 6. Anglicanism and Puritanism; 7. The German territories; 8. Orthodox decisions on specific doctrines (the Canons of Dordt and the Helvetic Formula of Consensus); 9. Modern confessions. To this must be added the collection of twentieth-century reformed confessions edited by *Lukas Vischer*¹¹. These two volumes together provide the most wide-ranging collection of material so far available, but there is more that could be included in a really comprehensive edition¹². Useful but more selective collections can be found in the third volume of *Philip Schaff's* «The Creeds of Christendom»¹³, in *Wilhelm Niesel's* «Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen»¹⁴, and in the 1967 «Book of Confessions» of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America¹⁵. This last collection can be taken as fairly representative of a widespread if not universal reformed consensus upon which confessions may claim a kind of classical status, though it is a deficit that it includes no Eastern European documents¹⁶. It contains the Nicene Creed; the Apostles' Creed; the Scots Confession;

L. Hepp, Die Bekenntnis-Schriften der reformierten Kirche Deutschlands, Elberfeld 1860. Older still: *William Dunlop*, A Collection of Confessions of Faith, Catechisms, Directories, Book of Discipline, etc. Of Publick Authority in the Church of Scotland, 2 vols., Edinburgh 1719.

- 11 Reformed Witness Today, a Collection of Confessions and Statements of Faith issued by Reformed Churches, *Lukas Vischer* (ed.), Bern 1982. German translation: Reformiertes Zeugnis heute, eine Sammlung neuerer Bekenntnistexte aus der reformierten Tradition, hrsg. von *Lukas Vischer*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1988.
- 12 An even fuller collection than Müller's has been in planning for some years in West Germany and work is at present proceeding on it. A new series of volumes of evangelical (including reformed) confessions from east central Europe has also recently been begun: Ostmitteleuropas Bekenntnisschriften der evangelischen Kirchen A. und H. B. des Reformationszeitalters, hrsg. von *Peter F. Barton* und *Laszlo Makkai*, Budapest 1987ff.
- 13 The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes, ed. by *Philip Schaff*, rev. by *David S. Schaff*, 3 vols., 6th edition, New York 1931 (reprinted Grand Rapids 1983).
- 14 Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche, *Wilhelm Niesel* (ed.), 2nd edition, Zollikon-Zürich 1938 (reprinted Zürich 1985); cf. also Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen in deutscher Übersetzung, *Paul Jacobs* (ed.), Neukirchen 1949.
- 15 The Constitution of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Part I: Book of Confessions, Philadelphia 1967; cf. also *Jack Rogers*, Presbyterian Creeds, a Guide to the Book of Confessions, Philadelphia 1985.
- 16 Nor, for that matter, do either *Schaff* or *Niesel*. This is not perhaps surprising, given the predominantly Western-ecumenical orientation of *Schaff* and *Niesel's* concern to stiffen

the Heidelberg Catechism; the Second Helvetic Confession; the Westminster Confession; the (Westminster) Shorter Catechism; the Theological Declaration of Barmen; and the United Presbyterian Church's own Confession of 1967. Also important in this context is *Thomas F. Torrance's* «The School of Faith»¹⁷, which makes available in one volume the most influential reformed catechisms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, together with an extended introduction which goes in more detail than most of the other collections mentioned do into the theology of the catechisms¹⁸.

It is clear from this selective list that a full analysis of the theology of the reformed confessions would have in the end to amount to nothing less than a full scale analysis of the entire history of reformed theology¹⁹. All I can attempt here is to pick out at least some elements which do appear to be distinctive and to reappear repeatedly in both older and more recent confessions, and which therefore are in some way connected with the continuity of reformed witness through the centuries.

1. It is an essential element in reformed belief, witness and worship that God rules over the world and its history, that the universe is not governed by chance or arbitrariness, but by divine providence, covenant and law. This conviction has two sides. First, God is in control of the world and guides it to the ends which his provi-

the spine of the German reformed churches in the confrontation with the Nazi ideology and the «German Christians» – which may in turn remind us that it is always worth asking what special academic or theological interest underlies and shapes any collection of reformed confessions. But, historically speaking, it does less than justice to the role played by reformed churches in Eastern Europe, particularly in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the Hungarian territory in Romania. – A further deficit nearer home could have been made good by the inclusion either of the French Confession of 1559 or the Belgic of 1561. These are markedly similar to each other in style and content but very different in structure from either the Scots or Second Helvetic Confession, and therefore offer a different model of a classical reformed confession.

¹⁷ *The School of Faith, the Catechisms of the Reformed Church*, *Thomas F. Torrance* (ed.), London and New York 1959.

¹⁸ See also *Creeks of the Churches, a Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, *John H. Leith* (ed.), Chicago and Garden City 1963; *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, *Arthur C. Cochrane* (ed.), edited with historical introductions, Philadelphia 1966.

¹⁹ This is no doubt one of the reasons why there is a pretty extensive literature dealing with individual confessions but – apart from collected editions such as those mentioned above – no major or detailed study of the entire history of reformed confessions. Attempts at a wider coverage – e.g. *C. G. McCrie*, *The Confessions of the Church of Scotland*, Edinburgh 1907 [hereinafter cited as: McCrie, Confessions], or, more recently, *Paul Jacobs*, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften in Grundzügen*, Neukirchen 1959 – remain extremely selective as compared with what is offered by *Schaff*, *Müller* or, for the twentieth century, *Vischer*. On the other hand, the vast literature on the history of reformed thought and theology does not as a rule concentrate on the reformed confessions. – The more recent study by *Jan Rohls*, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften, von Zürich bis Barmen, Göttingen* 1987, (UTB 1453), is therefore a useful step forward.

dence, goodness and mercy have ordained. We are neither the creatures of blind fate nor the products of accident, however deterministic or arbitrary the events that overtake us may appear. Second, even the evil that can and does occur in the world lies in God's hand and is used by him as an instrument of his glory and, in the end, for the good of his creation. Against all dualism, gnosticism, manichaeism and fatalism the reformed tradition affirms: the Lord reigns! A host of affirmations from older and newer reformed confessions could be quoted here; instead let me cite the metrical version of Psalm 93 as a reminder that reformed theology and worship alike were shaped from Calvin's time onward by the singing of the psalms²⁰:

The Lord doth reign, and clothed is he
With majesty most bright;
His works do show him clothed to be,
And girt about with might.

The world is also stablished,
That it cannot depart.
Thy throne is fixed of old, and thou
From everlasting art.

The floods, O Lord, have lifted up,
They lifted up their voice;
The floods have lifted up their waves,
And made a mighty noise.

But yet the Lord, that is on high,
Is more of might by far
Than noise of many waters is,
Or great sea-billows are.

Thy testimonies every one
In faithfulness excel;
And holiness for ever, Lord,
Thine house becometh well.

This may seem a hard saying in view of the suffering, pain, guilt, injustice and defeat that are part and parcel of everyday human experience. But it is not, biblically understood, a hard saying: rather a testimony of hope and a promise of final victory. Human life brings suffering and, at the end, death. It may seem pointless, aimless and worthless. The Gospel tells us otherwise: not, admittedly, that «God's

²⁰ «The Church Hymnary», 3rd edition, Oxford 1973, no. 140.

in his heaven and all's well with the world», but that because God is in his heaven, he, and not all evil which is really there in us and in the world, will have the last word. He will have the last word because he has already spoken it – spoken it in the eternal generation of the Son, spoken it in the creation of the world from nothing, spoken it in the incarnation, cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, spoken it in the sending of his Spirit. The destiny of our world and our universe is not to end with a bang or a whimper, to be snuffed out in despair and desolation, but to be consummated in a song of praise to the God who does not let go of the work of his hands, but is able to bring forth life from death:

And so, as we confess that God the Father created us when we were not, as his Son our Lord Jesus redeemed us when we were enemies to him, so also do we confess that the Holy Ghost does sanctify and regenerate us, without respect to any merit proceeding from us, be it before or after our regeneration. To put this even more plainly; as we willingly disclaim any honour and glory for our own creation and redemption, so do we willingly also for our regeneration and sanctification; for by ourselves we are not capable of thinking one good thought, but he who has begun the work in us alone continues us in it, to the praise and glory of his undeserved grace²¹.

These sentences from the Scots Confession of 1560 make clearer than most other representatives of the early reformed tradition the inner connexion and parallel between creation, reconciliation and redemption to which inter alia Col. 1.15-20 so impressively witnesses when it speaks of Christ as «the first-born of all creation... the firstborn from the dead». They supply the necessary corrective to the tendency of much early reformed theology to follow Calvin in distinguishing all too sharply between the knowledge of God the Creator and the knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, to the point where the doctrines of God, creation and sin, and with them those of providence and predestination, could be unfolded independently of the doctrine of Jesus Christ. This leads on to our next central theme of reformed confession.

2. The reformed conviction, testimony, and proclamation is that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father; in him the gracious goodwill of the Father for all mankind has been realised, established and made known. Just here is the place where classical, orthodox Calvinism went so badly wrong with its understanding of double predestination and its implication of «limited» or «definite» atonement, formulated especially sharply in the decrees of Dordt and the Westminster Confession. That tradition was right in discerning that God's gracious choice necessarily involves rejection; it was wrong in holding that that choice and rejection had to do with an eternal decree to elect some human beings and reject others. What it failed to see and to recognise is that God's decisive rejection of human sin took place once for all on the cross of Golgotha, that Jesus Christ died for all humanity

²¹ Scots Confession, 12, in the modern translation by *James Bulloch* (The Scots Confession, 1560, Edinburgh 1960, p. 67).

and that the reconciliation which he in his own person is holds good for all humankind in every age, past, present and future²².

This, by contrast to point 1. above, may seem at first sight a too easy saying, opening the way to the proclamation of «cheap grace» and the idea of the *apokatastasis panton*. But the accusation is unjustified. It is the message of the good favour of God to all in Jesus Christ that alone makes clear wherein human sin finally consists: it is above all the refusal to accept, recognise and live by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is arrogance, laziness and falsehood, leading respectively to fallenness, misery and damnation²³.

3. It belongs to the tradition of reformed witness that we are bound on the one hand to the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, on the other to the energising and illuminating power of the Holy Spirit of God. The word written and the Holy Spirit enabling are the twin poles, both binding us to God's revelation and at the same time setting us free to respond to it. The witness of the Scriptures accompanies and guides the life of the Christian community through the ages; the church of Jesus Christ is a church that lives by and from the Word of God in him to which the Scriptures witness. A church which is no longer interested in hearing the Scriptures ceases thereby to be a reformed church; a church in which preaching is understood simply as a rhetorical or liturgical exercise, merely using this or that word or phrase from the Bible as a springboard or coathanger, is in danger of cutting itself off from the source of its life. And there can be little doubt that some contemporary reformed churches, especially in the affluent West, are in danger of doing precisely that. At the same time, the hearing of the Word in Scripture is no slavish fundamentalism, no mere blinkered commitment to a «paper pope». It is a lively, engaged hearing that seeks to receive and discover the bearing of the biblical testimony on the present time and its direction for the future. Precisely for this reason is it a hearing that relies and depends upon the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, by whom the Scriptures were inspired and who alone can open their sense to us.

This path too, however, is beset by snares. One is the tendency, very apparent in the development of reformed theology in the age of orthodoxy, to unfold and insist upon a rather wooden notion of «inspiration», a notion more rationalist than biblical in origin. Another, equally well documented historically, is the tendency

²² The principle, somewhere formulated by James Orr, borrowing from Harnack, that «the history of dogma is the criticism of dogma» applies equally to the history of reformed theology. The doctrines of double predestination and limited atonement which the Synod of Dordt established as pivots of «Calvinism» met their most determined opposition within reformed theology itself, not least in Scotland in the nineteenth century: cf. *James B. Torrance*, *The Contribution of John McLeod Campbell to Scottish Theology*, in: *Scottish Journal of Theology* 26.3, 1973, pp. 295-311. – It was of course Karl Barth who went on radically to rework the doctrines of predestination and reconciliation christologically and so to correct and deepen the old tradition of reformed orthodoxy.

²³ Cf. *Karl Barth*, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1-3, *passim*.

to identify the doctrine of the Scriptures with the truths expressed in an official confessional document or with a particular conception of the proper structure of the church. One example of each of these last must suffice here. (1) In 1559 the French Confession insisted that the church of Jesus Christ must always be ordered according to the pattern which Christ himself appointed – and went on immediately to identify this order with the Genevan pattern of pastors, elders and deacons²⁴. Now, the Genevan pattern has a great deal to be said for it; it was one of Calvin's major contributions to the revitalising of church structure and function in the sixteenth century and has proved its strength through the centuries since. Combined with synodal organisation it has served well as the basis for the only real alternative to the patristic and medieval patterns perpetuated in other major confessional families. But it cannot properly be said to be the biblical pattern appointed and ordained by Christ himself, against which all other forms must be measured and found wanting. (2) Again, when Alexander Scott was on trial for heresy before the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1831 – the same Assembly which deposed John McLeod Campbell from the ministry for his teaching on universal atonement – Scott admitted that his views, which were similar to Campbell's, were contrary to the teaching of the Westminster Confession. «Mr. Scott undertook to show that wherein he differed from the symbol it differed from Scripture. But the court declined to listen to such a defence, and, acting on the declaration that he did not believe the whole doctrine of the Westminster standard, withdrew from him his license to preach the gospel»²⁵. Both these examples may serve to illustrate the dangers to which a strongly committed theological tradition can be exposed when it too quickly identifies its own standards of doctrine or order with the biblical teaching. Nevertheless the principle remains: a reformed church is a church that lives by hearing of the Word of God which became flesh in Jesus Christ, is witnessed in the Scriptures and ever and again communicates itself through the testimony and proclamation of the church.

4. The «reformed» reformers of the sixteenth century laid especial weight on the insistence that they were founding no new church but rather seeking to re-establish the authentic tradition of Christian faith, teaching and practice. They appealed with considerable learning to the church fathers, insisting (with good grounds) that more support was to be found there for their views and convictions than for the accreted traditions of the medieval western church. That is, they appealed to a continuity of belief and confession other than that represented by the contemporary ecclesiastical establishment. It is no accident that so many of the major reformers of that period came from a humanist background, though a sharp divide opened up between humanists and reformers on the matter of the freedom of the human will to discern and strive after what is pleasing to God. But the cry «ad

²⁴ French Confession, 29, in: *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, pp. 376f; the same claim is made in 2-3 of the 1561 Genevan *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* (in Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften*, p. 43) for the full four-fold pattern (including «les Docteurs»).

²⁵ McCrie, *Confessions*, p. 106.

fontes!» was the motto of the reformers too: they were convinced that they were doing nothing more or other than restoring the church to its proper state and constitution. Not adaptation to the conditions of their time lay in the forefront of their concern, but recovery of the original, authentic and permanent. And they were convinced that this recovery would bring with it the necessary light upon contemporary social, ethical and political responsibility as well.

By contrast, the world of today seems to many to be so different from the ancient world that no continuity of this kind can any longer obtain. Our world is governed and shaped by so many other mechanisms, impulses and energies that theological reflection alone seems inadequate to cope with it, and any idea that theological conviction can suffice to shape the lives of individuals or societies either naive or dangerously fanatical. We are faced today with the reality of massive military power in a fashion that no previous generation could even contemplate, let alone experience. We are also faced with the challenges of modern science and technology, with the problems of a juster distribution of resources, with the advances of medicine and the issues of euthanasia, gene technology and the propagation of human life under laboratory conditions. At least, we are faced with these in the affluent First World; in the reformed family as a whole we are also confronted with the fact that the greater part of the human race has little access to (and less chance of influencing) these scientific, technical and medical developments, but remains exposed to their consequences. The shaping of human life and of the quality of living conditions has become largely the concern of politics, trade and technology: does this leave any effective or positive role for theology?

Just such issues of our time can, however, serve to remind us that impulses from reformed theology, teaching and witness from the sixteenth century onwards played a decisive part both in enabling the rise of scientific and technological autonomy in the West and in shaping the structures of modern political democracy. Far more than the Lutheran reformation, the reformed movement stimulated a new, radical form of quest for truth and reality, which became in turn a main motor of Western civilisation. The search for objectivity in theological questioning went hand in hand with the search for objectivity in the understanding of nature; the concern for the glory of God fostered a new sensitivity to human dignity and human rights. That is the positive side of the balance. The negative is perhaps even better known: that these very advances have been accompanied by an enormous increase in the materially destructive potential of the human race. Precisely that makes it essential for reformed theology and reformed confession in the First, Second or Third World to retain in view what the old reformed tradition insisted: that the chief end of human life is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever; that we are set in the world to be responsible before God for our stewardship; that even our noblest aspirations and achievements are flawed. Society, politics, economics and science may and do change, and with them change the terms and conditions under which human life is lived; but we have the same human nature as our fore-

fathers. In this sense, concern for confessional continuity is neither a luxury nor a form of escapism but a necessary expression of responsibility in the world of today and tomorrow, however that world may be shaped and governed.

In conclusion I would offer one final thought. The classical reformed confessions of the sixteenth century were for the most part originally local confessions, yet local confessions with a universal vision. When a city, a nation, an area or a province was reformed, it did not as a rule simply take over a confession already promulgated elsewhere, but issued its own as a public manifesto claiming to express in its own way the same faith held by other churches reformed according to the Word of God. Such confessions were then also commonly accepted, recognised and used in other churches too, but that was a secondary step. In drawing up a confession or catechism, the aim was thus first to set out, as it were for internal use, the outline of the main points of the faith requiring affirmation; and second, to hold out this confession to the world at large, and to other reformed churches in particular, to be tested and weighed for its adequacy and authenticity. The classical sixteenth century confessions were thus, precisely in their local origins and character, part of a kind of international dialogue of testimony and testing. Today, too, reformed churches throughout the world should seek to express the faith as it bears upon and is apprehended in their situation – and to pay heed to each other as they do so.

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