

Calvin, Van Lodenstein and Barth: Three perspectives on the necessity of church reformation

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Introduction

A quick search on the internet reveals a plethora of reformed theologians, churches and organisations using the term *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Some regard it as important as other reformed adages such as *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia* and *sola fidei*. It is also clear that there

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are diverse opinions on what it might mean. Van Ruler (1965:29), with reference to *semper reformanda*, wrote that it is a deeply contestable slogan and that the church should rather pray ‘save us from another Luther!’ (Koffeman 2015:1of 5). Darrell Guder (2000) wrote:

The reformed tradition emphasizes that ‘the church once reformed is always in the process of being reformed according to the Word of God.’ The phrase *ecclesia reformata secundum verbi Dei semper reformanda* is used a great deal in North Atlantic Reformed circles these days, probably because of the crisis in which most of these churches find themselves. (p. 150)

He is very critical of churches in the United States of America (USA) that are continually restructuring and believes that it is actually church reformation.

This contribution looks at the question whether church reformation is necessary. This is done by looking at three texts from different periods. In all three one gets the feeling of crisis, of urgency and the need for church reformation but it is articulated differently, both theologically and practically. Firstly, this contribution examines the first section of John Calvin’s (Calvin [1543] 1867:457–534) *De necessitate reformandae ecclesiae* of 1543, that highlights the most important reasons why Calvin was convinced that the reformation of the church was necessary. Secondly, Jodocus van Lodenstein’s ([1672] 1739) *Beschouwinge van Zion*, and thirdly Karl Barth’s (1947) ‘*Die Botschaft von der freien Gnade Gottes*’ will be discussed. In conclusion, the necessity of church reformation from a contemporary perspective will be addressed.

■ John Calvin: *De necessitate reformandae ecclesiae*

The Fourth Imperial Diet of Speyer was called together on 20 February, 1544 by Emperor Charles V. Charles called the meeting because he was planning war against France. He needed the support of the Lutheran princes, many of them were members of the Schmalkaldic League. He received their support by granting them concessions and almost completely abandoning his Catholic position, disregarding the wishes of Pope Paul III. The pope was not impressed with the emperor’s soft approach towards the Lutherans.

Knowing that the 1544 Diet of Speyer would address church matters, Calvin used the opportunity to air his views on the necessity of church reformation. Towards the end of 1543, Calvin addressed an open letter to the emperor under the heading ‘*Supplex exhortatio ad invictiss. Caesarem Carolum Quintum et illustrissimos principes aliosque ordines*’, better known and published in *Opera Calvinii* under the heading ‘*De necessitate reformandae ecclesiae*’.⁹⁰ Calvin wrote the letter because Martin Bucer asked him to present the emperor with a defence of the reformation movement.

90. Calvin, J., [1543] 1867, ‘*De necessitate reformandae ecclesiae*’, in G. Baum, E. Cunitz & E. Reuss (eds.), *Ioannis Calvinii opera quae supersunt omnia*, vol. VI, Col. 457–534, C.A. Schwetsschke et Filium,

Calvin's open letter is an attempt to convince the Emperor of the weak position in which the church found itself, that it was in dire need of remedy and the Emperor had an important role to play in the process of reformation. With this in mind the text of the open letter is divided into three sections. Calvin ([1543] 1867) formulates it as follows:⁹¹

First, I must briefly enumerate the evils which compelled us to seek for remedies.

Secondly, I must show that the particular remedies which our people [*the reformers*] employed were apt and salutary. Lastly, I must make it plain that we were not at liberty any longer to delay putting forth our hand, inasmuch as the matter demanded instant amendment. (n.p.)

In this contribution only the first two sections are discussed, because it is well structured and the arguments presented are of utmost importance. In the third section Calvin focused on the urgency of church reformation in which he comes to the conclusion that church reformation is necessary, supported by some additional arguments. In this contribution, the focus is on sections one and two, which is sufficient to give us a clear view of Calvin's theological arguments and his understanding of church reformation.

The evils which beset the church

Calvin starts out by underlining the two main issues at stake: The *first* pertains to the mode in which God is duly worshipped, and, *secondly*, the source from which salvation is to be obtained.⁹² Of secondary importance, building upon the first two, are the sacraments and the form of church governance. Calvin defines the true worship as obedience and sanctification which necessarily include prayer. These are taught by the Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture and should be the basis of universal piety.

.....
 [footnote 90 continues...]

Brunsvigae. In this contribution it will be cited as OC VI with the column (Col.) number. The original Latin in footnotes will be translated in the text.

91. Calvin [OC VI Col.459] writes: '*Quanquam expediri hoc non potest, quin tria simul complectar. Nempe ut vitia breviter commemorem, quae nos ad quaerenda remedia impulerunt. Deinde, ut de remediis ipsis, quae a nostris hominibus sunt adhibita, quam apta fuerint et salutaria, disseram. Postremo ut planum faciam, quam non licuerit suspensa manu ulterius differre, quum res praesentem emendationem flagitare* [author's translation].'

92. Calvin [OC VI Col. 459] writes: '*Si quaeritur, quibus potissimum rebus stet christiana religio inter nos, suamque veritatem retineat, has duas non modo summum locum occupare certum est, sed reliquas etiam omnes parites, adeoque totam vim christianismi sub se comprehendere: ut rite colatur Deus, ut unde salus sibi petenda sit, noverint homines.*'

However, Calvin argues, worldwide it had become evident that God has been robbed of more than half of his glory as the sole source and teacher of true worship, by distributing divine qualities and functions among *the saints*.⁹³ Calvin argues that praying through any saint who strikes one's fancy, constitutes robbery. It robs Christ of his status as sole mediator and it robs the believer of the promises and blessings when praying through the true mediator. This becomes clear when it is observed that men worship statues and images with the same adoration they would approach God himself.⁹⁴

After denouncing the veneration of saints, Calvin turns to the deformation of the *ceremonies* through all sorts of Judaist, puerile and heathen influences. The Word of God is the sole norm to be used in discerning what true worship is or what is false and a deviation from what God requires. Divine worship, according to Calvin, has become nothing but mere corruption of God's will.⁹⁵ The artificial, fictitious and superfluous ceremonies are an abomination in the eyes of God.

Turning to the second main issue of Christian doctrine, Calvin explains that the *knowledge of the source of our salvation* has to pass through three stages.⁹⁶ The first is our knowledge of our own wretchedness; the second is a true knowledge of Christ who is our only priest who reconciled us with God; thirdly the solid faith and assurance that in Christ we possess eternal life. The threefold structure of our knowledge of salvation strongly reminds us of the structure of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), which we know used many Lutheran and Calvinist sources.

The knowledge of our salvation is fundamentally linked to the question of *original sin*. The reductionism evident in limiting original sin to bodily lusts, leads to two errors: Firstly, people believe by avoiding bodily lusts their works deserve more respect than those of Christ; secondly it leads to continual doubt of our own salvation. With reference to Romans 4:14 Calvin points out that these errors annihilate all confidence in the promises of God.⁹⁷

93. Calvin [OC VI Col. 461] writes: '*Verbo quidem, bonorum omnium gloriam concedunt Deo, sed re ipsa eum, vel dimidia, vel maiori parte spoliant: quum eius virtutes inter sanctos partiuntur.*'

94. Calvin [OC VI Col. 462] writes: '*Iam de adoratione quid dicam? Quidquid reverentiae exhibere volunt homines Deo, ad non id illi in statuis et imaginibus exhibent*'

95. Calvin [OC VI Col. 464] writes: '*Quum autem verbum Dei notam esse dixerimus, quae verum eius cultum a vitioso pravaque discernat, inde colligere promptum est, totam colendi Dei formam, quae hodie mundo est usitata, nihil quam meram esse corruptionem.*'

96. Calvin [OC VI Col. 464] writes: '*Alterum christianae doctrinae praecipuum membrum in eo posuimus, dum agnoscunt homines, ubinam salutem quaerere debeant. Porro salutis nostrae cognitio tres habet gradus.*'

97. Calvin [OC VI Col. 466] writes: '*Quorsum autem illa haesitatio, quam hostes nostri a suis discipulis requirunt nisi ut tota promissionum Dei fides evanescat? Ratiocinatur Paulus, evanuisse fidem, abolitas esse promissiones, si ex lege sit haereditas*' [Rm 4:14].

After discussing worship and the knowledge of salvation in principle, Calvin turns to *the sacraments*. He is of the opinion that ceremonies devised by men were ranked the same as the mysteries instituted by Christ. The seven sacraments are contrary to Scripture, as Christ instituted only two, the others rest on mere human authority.⁹⁸ What Christ commanded to be done, and in what order, is perfectly clear from Scripture. But in contempt of Christ, a theatrical exhibition replaced the Holy Supper, for there is little resemblance between the Roman Mass and the true supper of our Lord by turning it into a sacrificial rite. Furthermore: The priest separates himself from the congregation and ‘devours’ what is supposed to be celebrated and eaten by the congregation of believers. Another example: The faithful are made to pay for attending Mass, and in various districts it is openly advertised what the price of Mass would be, as in an open market.⁹⁹

In terms of the *ecclesial governance and offices*, Calvin is of the opinion that the offices of Roman bishops, priests and pastors for many years had no semblance to what the apostle Paul required of a true pastor, that is, the edification of the body of Christ through the proclamation of sound doctrine. One in a hundred bishops still regarded teaching as an important part of their office. This was mainly due to the perception that a bishopric is nothing more than a secular principality. Very little is seen of the spiritual governance under the headship of Christ or the kingdom of God. Even more, the practice of celibacy had turned into a horrifying ‘whoredom’ which is not concealed, but openly practiced.

In summary, Calvin described the ‘evils’ which threatened the very existence of the church as those pertaining to the true worship and sound doctrine which presented themselves plainly in the veneration of saints, corrupted ceremonies, the seven sacraments, ecclesial governance and a fundamental misunderstanding of original sin and salvation.

Remedies employed for the correction of evils

In his open letter, he draws Emperor Charles V’s attention to the fact that the only reason why they (the reformers) acted the way they did, was to benefit the church in some way

98. Calvin [OC VI Col. 467] writes: *‘Quantum ad sacramenta pertinet, primum eodem loco habita sunt mysteria a Christo instituta, et excogitatae humanitus caeremoniae. Septem enim sacramenta, sine alio discrimine, recepta fuerunt: quorum duo tantum mandaverat Christus, alia non nisi hominum autoritate fundata erant.’*

99. Calvin [OC VI Col. 469] writes: *‘Haec vero communis omnium profanatio, quod ad foedam nundinationem perinde sunt exposita, ac si non alio fine instituta forent, quam ut quaestui serviant. Neque vero eiusmodi est nundinatio, quae clam aut verecunde tractetur: sed palam exercetur, non secus atque in foro mercatorio. Scitur, quanti singulae missae in quaque regione veneant. Aliis etiam constitutum est suum pretium. Denique templa, si quis bene expendat, nihil a meritoriis tabernis differunt: et nullum est sacrorum genus, quod non illic prostet venale.’*

to ‘ameliorate in some degree the very miserable condition of the church.’¹⁰⁰ The first ‘remedy’ Calvin mentions, are the confessions the reformers presented to the authorities. The confessions give a clear exposition of true Christian doctrine and were a great service to people all over the world, because they stirred them from the slumber of ignorance. All controversies, Calvin makes clear:

[C]oncerning doctrine relate either to legitimate worship of God or to the ground of salvation. As to the former, unquestionably we do exhort men to worship God neither in a frigid nor a careless manner.¹⁰¹

Following the same structure as in the first section where Calvin discussed the evils which endangered the church, he explains the changes which took place in reformed worship, placing the emphasis on preaching:

In our churches, only God is adored in pious form without superstition; since his goodness, wisdom, power, truth, and other perfections are there preached more fully than anywhere else; since he is invoked with true faith in the name of Christ, his mercies celebrated both with heart and tongue, and men constantly urged to a simple and sincere obedience.¹⁰²

Preaching was the most powerful and important instrument by which the reformers sought to reform the church, by changing people’s understanding of the gospel and the way they lived *coram Deo*. True worship fostered true faith, the eradication of superstitious veneration of saints and relics which is idolatry. Instead of wandering perpetually in the labyrinth of human wisdom, people could now worship God in truth and in spirit.¹⁰³

Turning to prayer *per se*, Calvin points out that:

[T]here are three things which we have corrected. Discarding the intercession of saints, we have brought men back to Christ, that they might learn both to invoke the Father in his name, and trust in him as Mediator; and we have taught them to pray, first, with firm and solid

100. Calvin [OC VI Col. 473] writes: ‘*sed ut appareat, non alio spectasse nostra studia, nisi ut status ecclesiae ex pessimo saltern aliquanto melior fieret.*’

101. Calvin [OC VI Col. 674] writes: ‘*Atque ut redeamus ad illam ante a nobis positam divisionem: omnes, quae inter nos sunt de doctrina controversiae, vel ad legitimum Dei cultum, vel ad certam salutis nostrae fiduciam pertinent. Certe ad colendum Deum, neque frigide, neque negligenter hortamur homines.*’

102. Calvin [OC VI Col. 474–475] writes: ‘*Quum ergo adoretur in ecclesiis nostris unus Deus puro ritu, et absque ulla superstitione, quum eius bonitas, sapientia, potentia, veritas et reliquae virtutes uberius, quam alibi usquam praedicentur, quum vera fide invocetur in Christi nomine, quum celebrentur eius beneficia et animis et linguis, quum ad simplicem sinceramque eius obedientiam perpetuo revocentur homines.*’

103. Calvin [OC VI Col. 479] writes: ‘*quam simpliciter Deum colere in spiritu et veritate.*’

confidence, and, secondly, with understanding also, instead of continuing as formerly to mutter over confused prayers in an unknown tongue.¹⁰⁴

With reference to the apostle Paul (Rm 10:14) prayer should flow from faith which is built on the promises of God which we find in his Word. The Word of God is the foundation of all prayer. Such prayer, in the name of Christ as the only true mediator, has great power. It is clear from Calvin's arguments that true worship (like prayer in the name of Christ) flows from true doctrine (the knowledge of salvation, Christ as only mediator).

The question of language in worship: Calvin rejects the notion that it is an affront to God to address him in a vulgar tongue and not in Latin. It is also at this point that Calvin finds it necessary to attend to the phenomenon of glossolalia. He condemns this in the strongest terms, using the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians:

There seems, as I lately observed, something monstrous in this determination to hold converse with God in sounds which fall without meaning from the tongue. Even if God did not declare his displeasure, nature herself, without a monitor, rejects it. Besides, it is easy to infer from the whole teaching of scripture how deeply God abominates such an invention. (v. 14)¹⁰⁵

Still following the structure of the first section, Calvin turns to doctrine and the remedies the reformers had implemented. He starts out with a long discussion of original sin, free will, good works and Augustine's views and then turns to the question of justification through faith. The ground of our justification is that God reconciles us to himself, not based on our good works but solely through Christ alone. This is the clear and uniform doctrine of Scripture as witnessed by the law and the prophets (Rm 3:21). The fact that God looks at us as if we have no sin and adopts us as his children, is based solely on the salvific work of Christ and the grace of God (CO 6:480–487).

Moving on to the question of the sacraments (OC VI Col. 487), Calvin points out that the celebration of the sacraments was restructured in accordance with Scripture. This included reducing the number of sacraments to only two and removing superfluous and useless additions. The main issue, Calvin explains, are the questions of (1) the efficacy of the

104. Calvin [OC VI Col. 479–480] writes: '*In oratione tria correximus. Nam et sanctorum intercessione valere iussa homines ad Christum revocavimus: ut tum in illius nomine patrem invocare, tum eo mediatore niti discerent; et ipsos docuimus, primum cum splida firmaque fiducia, deinde etiam cum intelligentia orare: quum ante confusas preces lingua incognita demurmurent.*'

105. Calvin [OC VI Col. 482] writes: '*Hoc quidem iam portentis simile, ut nuper dixi, colloquium cum Deo habere velle inani linguae sonitu. Hoc etiam si sibi displicere Deus ipse non testetur, natura, sine alio monitore, respuit. Praeterea ex tota scripturae doctrina iudicare promptum est, quantopere talem fictionem abominetur Deus.*'

sacraments¹⁰⁶ and (2) whether the Lord's Supper should be regarded as a sacrificial rite. Contrary to scholastic theology, Calvin rejects the notion that the efficacy of the sacraments is to be found in the visible signs of the sacraments. The sacraments are effective through Christ alone. In other words: It is not about the visible bread or wine or water, but about the real body of Christ through which we receive salvation. He points out that the reformers remedied the situation by removing all ceremonial practices which would point to the Lord's Supper as a sacrificial rite and banishing the fiction of transubstantiation.¹⁰⁷ To this end, Calvin says, the people were carefully educated about the importance, efficacy, meaning and advantages of celebrating the sacraments. In short – proper catechesis. Participation in the sacraments should be based on sound faith and true knowledge of the source of our salvation.

In terms of church governance, the remedy instituted by the reformers was the strict requirement that every person called to ministry should also teach. The pastor is not an *officium*, rather a *ministerium*. Being called as a minister does not imply an important position but rather a life of dedication and service to God, his Word and his flock. Calvin rejects any form of privilege associated with the bishops. He also points out the strict requirements to be allowed for ministry, also contra the common spectacle of dirty, ignorant and uneducated priests who were supposed to live a life of celibacy, but didn't. Because Christ is the only head of the church, being a pastor could never be about privilege, power or financial gain (OC VI Col. 490–497). He also rejects confession as a cruel torture of the conscience and a practice which gave priests undue power over their flock. It is enough for the believers to gather in a Sunday service and publicly confess their sins as part of the liturgy.

Concluding remarks on Calvin's understanding of church reformation

In the last section of the open letter to Emperor Charles V, Calvin turns his attention to the emperor and the princes to consider the urgency of the matter. They had an important role to play, for the divisions had turned into violence. Calvin points out the potential of further conflict and pleads that the princes should not act too harshly without considering what had been presented to them. With reference to the example set by the just kings in the Old Testament, the princes should ensure that the proper and true worship and doctrine were to be maintained in their territories.

106. Calvin [OC VI Col. 488] writes: '*Præposteram quoque fiduciam tollere studuimus, quae in externa actione defixa in Christum minime respiciebat. Ita enim, tam in scholis quam in concionibus, signorum efficaciam extulerunt, ut homines ad Christum non dirigendo visibilibus elementis confidere docerent.*'

107. Calvin [OC VI Col. 489], writes: '*Ad transubstantiationis commentum, ad morem item custodiendi et gestandi panis damnandum, maior nos impulit necessitas.*'

In his open letter to the emperor Calvin explains the necessity of reforming the church in obedience to God. The reformation of the church was not only obedience to God, but a matter of urgency to inhibit further division and violence. But it is also clear that Calvin was of the opinion that the reformation of the church should be brought to a satisfactory conclusion. Once the church was free from errors in terms of doctrine and worship, it should reach some sort of equilibrium. In this the princes and emperor had an important role to play, as a matter of urgency.

The modern-day maxim *ecclesia semper reformanda* is strange to Calvin's understanding of church reformation. Michael Bush (2008:294) comes to the conclusion that Calvin used 'reformata' as an adjective to describe a church that is more or less free of liturgical and doctrinal error and used 'reformanda' participially to describe a task that must be done in situations where that freedom did not yet prevail. It is clear from Calvin's correspondence with the churches in England and Poland that he understood reformation as a process (see Bush 2008:296–298).

For Calvin the *ecclesia reformata* was not defined by moral perfection, as suggested by Zanchius (see Bush 2008:291–297). In his exegesis of Isaiah 1, Zanchius concludes that everything will be burned away which is not according to the Word of God (*secundum verbum Dei*). That requires reformation in worship (liturgy) as well as morals. He concludes that a church that still maintains some remnants of papism is not really *ecclesia reformata*, it still needs 'reforming' (*reformanda*).

Calvin, borrowing from Augustine, was quite aware of the fact that the church is not perfect, that it is a *corpus permixtum* and that we should never be too self-assured in our estimate of the visible church (Mudge 2008:613). However, sin does not detract from the fact that it is still the visible body of Christ. The marks of the true church are the pure preaching of the gospel in accordance with the Word of God. Wherever the gospel is preached truly, we find the church of Christ. As long as that does not happen, there still is a need for reformation. From this it is clear that Calvin would not agree with *semper reformanda*. At some stage the churches should agree on doctrine and how it manifests in liturgy.

■ Jodocus van Lodenstein: *Beschouwinge van Zion*

That church reformation was necessary, was also the view of one of the important figures of the *Nadere Reformatie* in the Netherlands, Jodocus van Lodenstein (1620–1677) in his book *Beschouwinge van Zion* (Van Lodenstein [1672] 1739).¹⁰⁸ He (Bush 2008:287) refers

108. Van Lodenstein, J., [1672] 1739, '*Beschouwinge van Zion: Ofte Aandagten en Opmerkingen Over den tegenwoordigen toestand van't Gereformeerde Christen Volk. Gestelt in eenige t' Zamenspraken, Gde druk, vermeerderd met een Voor-Berigt, Adrianus en Johannes Douci, s'Gravenhage.*' The copy used is in the Johannes à Lasco Library in Emden (Germany). In Bush (2008:286) the original date of publication is given as 1674.

to a 'learned man' who would prefer not to speak of a reformed church, but rather a reforming church (*de Gerform. kercke genoemt woude hebben niet Reformata of Gereformeert, maar Reformanda, of Reformeren*).

Graafland (1986:89–93) explains that Van Lodenstein used his *Beschouwinge van Zion* as a criticism of the Reformation a century earlier, as well as the 'deformation' of the church of his own time. On the one hand he regarded church reformation as a necessity (as Calvin). The Reformation during the 16th century was the start of a new and better era in the history of the church. His criticism was (contra Calvin) that it was limited to a reformation of doctrine and not also of Christian life (which was Zanchius' view). According to Van Lodenstein, the importance of good works was dismissed too easily (Graafland 1986:89). Many of the poems and theological treatises Van Lodenstein wrote reflect his deep-felt agony about the disobedience and lack of piety among so-called church people.

Van Lodenstein does not mention explicitly the growing influence of the Calvinist orthodoxy or the never-ending disputes about pure doctrine of the time, but it was obviously at the back of his mind. Van Lodenstein had an ambivalent view of the reformed confessions. He accepted reformed doctrine, especially the formulations of the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, but not so much the Canons of Dort. He became very critical of the influence of the growing rationalism evident in Calvinist orthodoxy. He calls it a 'horrible blindness of rational enlightenment' (*gruzame blindheid van redelike verlichten*) (Graafland 1986:91). What is also interesting in Van Lodenstein's understanding of doctrine, is that truth is not found in confessions which are the work of theologians, but in Christ himself. Truth cannot be reduced to exact formulations, truth is Jesus Christ himself.

Van Lodenstein ([1672] 1739:40–52) understood the reformation of the church as the work of the Holy Spirit (*Godsdienst wederom door Gods Geest geschieden zoude*). The work of the Holy Spirit is the author of all ecclesial reform. His criticism of the 'Reformed Christians' is that it became even worse than papism (Graafland 1986:93). Reformation had become a 'deformation'. For that exact reason, the continual reformation of the reformed church was unavoidable (Van Lodenstein [1672] 1739 *Beschouwinge van Zion II*, p. 65, 137). Van Lodenstein maintained the reformed principle of the unbreakable unity between Word and Spirit. There is no Word without Spirit and no Spirit without the Word. In this dynamic interaction between Word and Spirit the church will reform.

■ Karl Barth: *Die Botschaft von der freien Gnade Gottes*

After Van Lodenstein, the continuing reformation of the church more or less moved into the background (Bush 2008:288–289). It was only after World War II that the phrase

ecclesia semper reformanda became more prominent, especially through the Swiss reformed theologian, Karl Barth (1886–1968). During 1947 and 1948 several editions of his ‘*Die Botschaft von der freien Gnade Gottes*’ (see for instance Barth 1947, 1948), in which Barth reflected on the Sixth Article of the *Barmen Confession*. In this article, the *Barmen Confession* articulates its ecclesiology, namely the calling of the church to proclaim the free grace of God to all people. It also rejects the notion that the church exists through or is the result of human endeavour.

Karl Barth (1948:34) comes to the conclusion that the free grace of God is the principle on which the church is founded. From that principle flows its right and freedom to exist, to be church in the world as *ecclesia semper reformanda*. The grace of God frees the church to stand without fear (to be understood against the context of Nazi Germany) against all Christian and unchristian demons. The free grace of God makes it possible for the church to become the church God intended it to be. All the rest is of secondary importance: The rituals, the confessions and church order are all subjected to the principle of God’s free grace to all humanity. In this way, God delivers the church from all ‘*Steckenpferden und Steckköpfigkeiten*’ [personal hobbies and stubbornness] (Barth 1948:35). After 1947–1948, the expression was used in various ways and received prominence through its use by prominent theologians, *inter alia* Hans Küng who delivered by invitation of Barth a series of lectures at Basel University during 1959 on *ecclesia semper reformanda* (Bush 2008:290). Through Küng it also found its way to the Second Vatican Council and became part of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) Constitution (*Lumen Gentium* para. 8) as *ecclesia sancta et simul semper purificanda* (see Koffeman 2015:5 of 5). During this period, it also found its way to the USA by means of various publications.

In many of his publications, Barth preferred not to speak of ‘the reformed church’, but rather of ‘*durch Gottes Wort reformierte Kirche*’ (see Weinrich 2013:33). Barth was of the opinion that there is not a static ‘reformed church’, only a church that is being reformed through the Word of God. This is directly related to his threefold distinction of God’s Word, namely the living Word (Jesus Christ), the written Word (Scripture) and the proclaimed Word (preaching). Barth was convinced of the transforming power of the Word, as long as it is *God’s Word* and God remains the subject of revelation (Weinrich 2013:34).

On the 22nd July 1933, just before important church elections in Bonn, Karl Barth delivered a passionate plea not to jeopardise the freedom of the gospel by voting for a direction which would enslave the church to nationalistic ideals (Barth 1933:7). He points out that neither nature, history nor culture:

[M]acht die Kirche zur Kirche und nicht von daher ist die Kirche als Kirche zu verstehen. Evangelium heisst ja nicht: der Mensch für Gott!, sondern ganz und gar und allein: Gott für den Menschen. Will die Kirche Kirche sein und bleiben, dann muss sie zäh und eifersüchtig über dieser Verkündigung wachen als über ihrem Wesen [...]. (pp. 6–7)

If 'the church wants to be church' it has to protect the freedom of the gospel which proclaims Jesus Christ as the only head and king of the church.

We should understand what Barth had in mind. With the expression 'the church must be church' the first reference to 'church' has to do with the '*credo ecclesiam*', the church in which we believe. The second has to do with the church that manifests empirically. If there is a discrepancy between the visible and invisible church, it calls for reformation according to the Word of God (Barth 1933:10–11). In other words: The continued reformation of the church is a reformation according to the Word of God with the purpose to 'be church' in accordance with the gospel and not the sort of renewal (*Erneuerung*) which people and politicians are expecting.

The challenge facing the church is to 'be church' (Busch 2004:246–247) and to 'stay church' as the body of Christ, the community of the Spirit and the people of God (cf. Bender 2005). To be a church with integrity means 'to be church'; to make the invisible visible, to be what God meant it to be. Integrity implies a deep consciousness of the true nature of the church and continual reformation of the church to be what it is.

■ Conclusion: *Ecclesia semper reformanda*

The maxim '*ecclesia semper reformanda*' became very popular after World War II. It became a spontaneous 'rallying cry' (Koffeman 2015:1 of 5) for reformed churches during the last few decades. There is a growing consensus that churches are again in dire need of reformation, even fundamental transformation. Radical questions need to be asked: Are reformed principles still relevant after 500 years? If so, how could they be applied to new and challenging contexts?

At the beginning of the 21st century, it is not enough to think of church reformation only in terms of structural changes. Many churches in the world are going through changes, but mostly these are limited to structural changes with the intention to make churches and congregations financially sustainable. Examples of such efforts are for instance the reform processes taking place in regional churches of North Elbia, Middle Germany and Württemberg since the beginning of the 1990s. Stefanie Brauer-Noss, who did extensive research on these reform processes, comes to the conclusion that reform was almost exclusively focused on structural changes, or '*Prozessentwicklung*' (Brauer-Noss 2016:17). It resulted in a tension-filled relationship between structural processes of reform and a theological understanding of the church.

If the church is an earthly-historical form of existence of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, the most powerful witness to the world is the fact that the church exists and functions as church. If we understand the essential nature of the church, 'being church' is a mind-boggling enterprise. If, like Barth, we believe that the church is 'in its visible being a witness to its invisible being' it has far-reaching implications (Healy 2008:115).

The spontaneous use of the expression *ecclesia reformata semper reformata* by so many reformed theologians and churches is, to my mind, a contemporary and essential addition to the famous reformed principles of *solus Christus, sola fidei, sola gratia* and *sola scriptura*. The fact that such an expression could rise like a phoenix and find almost universal acceptance is an indication that after 500 years, there are signs of a renewed reformation, of an *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*.

■ Summary: Chapter 4

During 2017, churches with their roots in the 16th-century Reformation, will be celebrating the legacy of the Reformation. It affords theologians and churches the opportunity to reflect on the principles of the Reformation and its relevance at the start of the 21st century. This contribution reflects on the question of the necessity of church reformation, based on three texts from different periods in the history of the church. Firstly and primarily, Calvin's '*De necessitate reformandae ecclesiae*' of 1543 sheds light on the issues the 16th century reformers were faced with and why they believed the church needed reformation. Calvin had a very clear view on the necessity of church reformation, but that it should also come to some conclusion once the liturgy and doctrine are in order. The question of church reformation is then further discussed in the light of two other texts, one from Jodocus van Lodenstein ('*Beschouwinge van Zion*') and Karl Barth (1947, 1948) ('*Die Botschaft von der freien Gnade Gottes*'). All agree on the necessity of church reformation, but differ in terms of theological and practical implications. The contribution concludes with a few remarks on the modern maxim '*ecclesia semper reformanda*'.

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