

REFORMED THEOLOGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: CONFESSIONAL, CONTEXTUAL AND ECUMENICAL

S.A. Strauss¹

ABSTRACT

This article scrutinises two important, recently published books on the identity of Reformed theology. These books serve as a springboard for the formation of ideas concerning the way in which Reformed theology should be practised in the 21st century. The article tests the hypothesis that the correct connection and relationship between confession, context and ecumenicity guarantees the practising of meaningful, thorough and useful Reformed theology.

1. EXPLANATION

At the start of the recent millennium, the publication of two important volumes on the identity, the task and the future of Reformed Theology coincided with two international forums held by Reformed theologians, one in March 1999 in Heidelberg, Germany, and one in March 2001 in Stellenbosch, South Africa. Both books were published by the well-known publisher, William B. Eerdmans of Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A. The first book (1999) is titled *Toward the future of Reformed Theology. Tasks, topics, traditions*, and the second one (2003): *Reformed Theology. Identity and ecumenicity*.²

A number of prominent international theologians participated in these conversations and contributed to the two volumes. As there are no longer “canonical” Reformed systematic theologians, for example Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, G.C. Berkouwer, or (for some even) Karl Barth, it is important to familiarise oneself with some of the well-known contemporary authors who contributed to *RT1999*, namely Eberhard Busch

- 1 Prof. S.A. Strauss, Head: Department of Systematic Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State, P.O. Box 339, Bloemfontein 9300. E-mail: straussa.hum@mail.uovs.ac.za.
- 2 Compare the bibliography for full details. The books appear under the names of the editors Willis & Welker, and Alston & Welker, respectively. For the sake of convenience these books will hereafter be referred to as *RT1999* and *RT2003*.

(Germany), John de Gruchy (S.A.), John Hesselink (U.S.A.), Hans-Joachim Kraus (Germany), Jan Milic Lochman (Switzerland), Daniel Migliore (U.S.A.) and Jürgen Moltmann (Germany). Busch, Migliore and others also contributed to *RT2003*. In the second volume the following names catch the eye: Jan Rohls (Germany), Bruce McCormack (U.S.A.), Colin Gunton (England), David Fergusson (Scotland), A. van de Beek (The Netherlands), Dirk Smit (S.A.), and Milan Opocênsky (Czech Rep.). It appears that the editors did not succeed in collecting many contributions from Africa and Asia. There are, however, a few exceptions. It is highly unlikely that these volumes represent all types of Reformed theology in practice today. Nevertheless, the different points of view expressed in these volumes warrant a thorough and detailed study.

It is not feasible to give a summary of the articles in the volumes. Fortunately, the editors classified the research into sections, enabling one to recognise the most important issues currently researched by Reformed theologians. *RT1999* comprises three sections. Part 1, "Tasks and contexts", is a reflection on the identity of Reformed theology within divergent contexts in the West, Africa and the East. Part 2 deals with "Topics and transformations", which indicates that theologians are prepared to renew and transform Reformed theology to various degrees. In Part 3, "Traditions and practices", the prominent place John Calvin still occupies at present in Reformed theology is striking, despite the popularity of Karl Barth. *TR2003* consists of five sections. Part 1 deals with "Reformed identity in historical continuity and contextual awareness". In order to define the identity of Reformed theology, more than one chapter reflects on Reformed confessions. Part 2, "How to shape Reformed ecclesiology", focuses on the doctrine of the church. On the other hand, Part 3 highlights the doctrine of the Spirit: "Spirit and covenant: Reformed Pneumatology in very different contexts." Part 4 focuses on the ecumenical nature of Reformed theology: "Affirming and questioning Reformed doctrines in ecumenical conversations." In the concluding Part 5, "Ecumenicity and ethical profiles of Reformed theology: Catholicity and practical contextuality", some of the preceding themes are addressed, stressing the ethical consequences of the Reformed doctrine, in particular.

In order to understand the objectives of the books, one should bear in mind that the intention of the editors is more important than a su-

perfidial review of the contents. In the introduction to *RT1999*, the editors state their aims explicitly. They seek to promote,

within an ecumenical framework, the development of a Reformed theology to which men and women creatively contribute out of the most diverse cultural, historical, and social contexts (*RT1999*:ix).

But this “ecumenical openness” may not lead to ignoring the “distinctive contours and coherence” of Reformed theology (*RT1999*:x). They plead for a

theological realism that is challenged by its context and instructed by the Bible ... and that adopts a truly ecumenical ... tolerance (*RT1999*:xv).

This quotation provides the origin of the three themes of my subtitle: confessional, contextual and ecumenical. The editors of *RT2003* repeat the characteristic ecumenical nature of the Reformed tradition (*RT2003*:x). This includes a “contextual sensitivity” (*RT2003*:xii). According to the editors, Reformed theology was practised from the beginning in various circumstances (countries, cultures and ideologies). Despite these differences one could, however, always discern distinct shared interests, which are expressed in the confessions (*RT2003*:xiii). Once again the trio: confessional, contextual and ecumenical!

This article does not aim to give a detailed review of the two volumes. In that case each chapter should have been discussed and evaluated separately. Instead, these two books will be a springboard for the formation of ideas concerning the way in which Reformed theology should be practised in the 21st century. In order to reach my goal, I would like to scrutinise the two books in order to answer the question: how do Reformed theologians view systematic theology today? Which points of departure do they consider important, and how do they apply these principles? To my mind, these basic presuppositions surface when one reflects on the role played by confession, context and ecumenicity. These three themes are very topical, but I presume that this is the case perennially. Tell me your ideas on confession, context and ecumenicity, and I will tell you what your theology will look like! My hypothesis is as follows: if you understand the connection and relationship between confession, context and ecumenicity, if you are able to determine the balance between these three aspects, you will be well-equipped to practise meaningful, thorough and useful Reformed theology.

2. CONFSSIONAL

The Reformed confession, as a fundamental criterion for Reformed theology, is the most important aspect of the three mentioned above. It is a *sine qua non* for Reformed theology. Without being confessional, theology can perhaps be interesting, influential, topical, etc., but Reformed, never. For this reason I will pay more attention to this aspect.

Viewpoints on the confession are prominent in the two books being scrutinised. A close reading of these books indicates that there is unfortunately no agreement on the role of confessions in church and theology. In their introduction, the editors of *RT2003* (:xiii f.) mention that the Stellenbosch forum reflected on this theme, in particular. One of the obvious differences was the question

whether today we primarily need to read the scriptures in confessional modes of learning, taking account of the living word and the work of the Spirit; or whether today we primarily need obedience to the church and its confessions in order to overcome the threat of relativism.

Several authors emphasise that from the beginning the Reformed churches, by contrast to the Lutheran churches, had no closed confessional canon (Rohls 2003:35; Busch 1999:513). The plurality of Reformed confessions implies that the Reformed church can, and should, formulate new confessions for new circumstances. Gerrish (1999:12) mentions that each new generation should attempt to draft a new confession. Stroup (2003:266) explains that the Reformed confessions resemble the faces of consecutive generations in a family photo album:

They do not look alike ... They do not have in common an essence or single tenet, but similar contours and shapes — a certain shape of the nose, tilt of the head, gait of walk.

From a Reformed perspective, confessions dispose of “temporal and spatial relativity” (Rohls 2003:37). Therefore, new confessions should be drafted continually. Rohls appeals to Karl Barth for this viewpoint. Several authors also refer to the influential lecture by Barth in 1925, concerning “the desirability and possibility of a universal Reformed creed” (Ernst 2003:88; McCormack 2003:61), to which I will refer later.

In general, great appreciation is expressed for the many new Reformed confessions since Barmen (1934). Hunsinger (2003:314) enthusiastically praises the new Catechism of the PCUSA, although he has to

admit that it is not only “evangelical” but also “liberal” in some respects. The greater focus on horizontal phenomena, popular today, e.g. justice, peace and the integrity of the creation, in which Hunsinger rejoices, is cause for anxiety to Busch (1999:529). He fears that the current emphasis on practical issues may lead to our sawing off the confessional branch on which we are standing (Busch 1999:530)!

The reason for new confessions has its origin in the popular proverb *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. According to Weinrich (2003:414), confessions share in the church’s relativity. Therefore, the formulation of a confession remains an open process in the Reformed tradition, and this “principal openness” is connected to “a flexibility towards a specific contextuality”, as well as to a basic “ecumenical tradition” (Weinrich 2003:416f.).³

Other authors also refer to the contextual nature of confessions. Link (1999:260) even claims that the indissoluble relationship between confession and context implies that a confession can never function normatively in a context other than the one from which it originated. The well-known Moltmann (1999:120) remarks ingeniously: “Reformed theology is reforming theology”. Confessional writings are not “rigid formulas”, he states. They can merely be “guides for contemporary confessions, concerning matters of faith here and now” (:123). In his opinion there is an absolute correlation between text and context. When this is not understood, a kind of “confessionalism” results, as is the case with “Calvinism” or “neo-Calvinism” (:124). Even the modernistic Schleiermacher can be classified as “Reformed”, according to this contextual criterion — only because he retained a characteristic of Reformed professors: “the unity of preaching and teaching”, “the connection of pulpit and podium” (:130)! De Gruchy (1999:109) expands this contextual theology to its logical consequence when pleading for “a paradigm shift in Reformed symbolics”. The 20th century confessional movement must be taken further than Barmen (1934), the Presbyterian Confession (1967) and the Belhar Confession (1986). A “constructive Reformed theology of liberation needs to be developed”, he writes.

3 It is striking that Weinrich uses our three themes simultaneously, when he defines the essence of Reformed theology.

Being faithful to the Reformed tradition does not mean repeating past formulae, but discovering their power for today and, in the process, restating them in fresh and evocative terms (De Gruchy 1999:112).

The alterability of confessions is also related to the expression “Reformed tradition”. Seemingly Vischer regards the confessions as part of tradition:

The Reformed tradition emerged in essence from the 16th century, yet in the following centuries it continued to develop (Vischer 1999:266).

He also states that: “As a living tradition, the Reformed tradition will never be sealed off for ever” (:272). Van Dyk also supports such an open, developing concept of tradition. For this reason she can still associate the 19th century John McLeod Campbell — whose doctrine of atonement overtly contradicts the reformational confessions — with the “Reformed tradition” (Van Dyk 1999:231, 238). Opocênsky (2003: 385ff.) views the *processus confessionis* of the WARC of the past decade as part of the ongoing Reformed tradition. Apparently the traditional Reformed confession does not have any normative authority in such a dynamic view on tradition!

By contrast to this liberal perspective on the confessions, more conservative views are also included in the volumes. Busch (2003:23) rejects confessionalism, in which “the freedom of the Reformed confession” is ignored.⁴ But he also warns against an even greater temptation, viz. liberalism (:27), in which the Reformed legacy is only stored like in a museum. Conservative authors emphasise that the Reformed confession is indeed related to the creeds of the one holy catholic apostolic church (Willis 1999:183). Pasztor (1999:300) reminds us of the catholicity of the Reformed theology, and refers to Calvin who wanted to teach only “what has been confessed always and everywhere”. Torrance (1999:175) also draws the conclusion that the “substance of faith” of the Reformed confession is

the unalterable and ultimately indefinable core of the Christian and catholic faith which commands the universal assent of the church in all ages.

4 Busch implies that the exclusion of the Arminians by the Synod of Dort (1618-9) denotes such a confessionalism.

As a matter of fact such a catholic conception of the confession implies that the confession has normative authority. A good example of one who acknowledges this fact is Lochman (2003:284f.) who regards as directive the presentation of the providence of God in the Heidelberg Catechism, even for the 21st century. From Hesselink's contribution regarding the Dutch Reformed tradition in America, it is apparent that, for example, CRC theologians attach great value to the Reformed confessions (Hesselink 1999:434-6, 442).

I am of the opinion that McCormack's article in *RT2003* is one of the most substantial. According to him, a common confession was an outstanding characteristic of the Reformed churches of the 16th century. Therefore he regrets the fact that theology, the so-called Reformed theology, has become almost totally "confessionless" since the 19th century (McCormack 2003:49). This does not only concern so-called liberal theologians, but also well-known Reformed theologians such as Torrance, Gunton and others. They prefer to base their theology on the ecumenical creeds of the early church, but definitely not on the confessions of the Reformation. By doing so, they reveal their idealistic ecclesiology — as if only the ecumenical creeds could contain the catholic Christian truth, not their own Reformed confessions as well (:51f.). According to McCormack (:53), we are presently confronted with confessionalism from the right, confessionlessness from the left, and an orthodox group in the centre (with their idealistic ecclesiology). He recommends that we should once again heed Karl Barth's opinion on the authority and nature of confessions (:54ff.). Barth expects theologians to be loyal to the church, which also includes a recognition of the authority of the confession. Simultaneously this loyalty does not exclude a critical attitude towards the confession. According to Barth, the church (and her confession) only has "temporal, relative and formal" authority (:57).⁵

- 5 Busch and Migliore hold the same dialectical position. Busch (1999:514) mentions a "fluid relationship" between the Reformed Church and her confession. Therefore the confession is binding "not *because* but *in so far* as it corresponds to Scripture." Migliore (2003:145) concludes from the *semper reformanda* principle that in the Reformed tradition "communion in faith and its confessional expression require both faithfulness and openness".

Before commenting further on the views regarding the confessional character of the church, the other two aspects deserve brief attention.

3. CONTEXTUAL

In both *RT1999* and *RT2003* the concept “contextual” is mentioned in the table of contents, even in the headings of the main sections, e.g. “tasks and contexts”, “contextual awareness”, “different contexts” and “practical contextuality”. This is an indication of the importance of the contextual nature of the Reformed theology for the editors, and probably for the other contributors as well. The editors (*RT2003*:xii) observe the existence of “a strong commonality . . . not only in basic Christian beliefs but also in a high contextual sensitivity,” among Reformed theologians, despite their differences.

The term contextuality appears often in the paragraph on the confessionalism of the Reformed theology. This aspect is responsible for the view held by some theologians that confessions ought to be changed continually. Consequently, it implies that each generation should formulate a new confession (Weinrich). Others are of the opinion that confessions are contextual to such an extent that it is impossible to heed to a confession from a different context. It has lost its normative authority (Link, Moltmann). De Gruchy claims that the current political and social context (oppression!) inevitably leads to the total transformation of the traditional Reformed theology into what he describes as a “constructive Reformed liberation theology”.

The term “contextual” is employed in more than one sense in the books under discussion. On the one hand, authors such as Moltmann and De Gruchy⁶ find good reason in the ever changing context to transform the Reformed theology radically. Contextuality, for them, refers to the political and social circumstances of a specific society. Botman (2003:375) supports this view and attaches such great importance to the context that it, so to say, becomes a second norm next to the Bible:

By its essence, Reformed theology will always be faced with a revision, reforming, or liberating critical approach to itself in light of the Word and the context.

6 For details compare paragraph 2.

Van Dyk (2003:225ff.) regards the contextualisation of theology as a crucial principle. The guidelines concerning a contextual theology in North America, which she recommends, allude to the *Zeitgeist* dominating the American culture. This *Zeitgeist* must apparently also dominate theology. This contextualism is, however, not generally accepted. Welker (1999:137) is of the opinion that Reformed theology today finds itself in a crisis because it seems to be

at the mercy of the shifting *Zeitgeist* ... Reformed theology, exposing itself to continual renewal, seemed to a particular degree to fall victim to the cultural stress of innovation. Where it entered into that stress, it seemed to lose its profile. But when it opposed that stress, it seemed to betray its typical mentality and spiritual attitude.

Welker (:140ff.) only envisages a return to the fundamental attitude of the Reformation, which basically consists of an openness to the renewing power of the Word of God.

On the other hand, the term “context” is used in a neutral, ethnological and cultural sense. The following examples can be mentioned: Watanabe (1999), Song (1999), Bik (1999), and Wahba (1999) emphasise, though with different degrees of success, how the same fundamental principles of Reformed theology must address different topical themes in different languages and cultures. In this process the Reformed presuppositions do not change; only the focus is shifted. Apparently some contributions in the third part of *TR2003* (:157ff.) have a similar objective: “Reformed Pneumatology in very different contexts”. A theologian such as M.Y. Kim (2003:170ff.) can be found guilty of excesses in this regard. He tries to design a Pneumatology that transcends the weak points of both the Reformed and the Pentecostal Pneumatology! Thus he not only changes the cultural context (Eastern instead of Western), but also the principles of the paradigm (“ecumenical” instead of confessional-Reformed).

The concept “ecumenical” leads us into a discussion of the third characteristic of Reformed theology.

4. ECUMENICAL

The essence of Reformed theology cannot be defined sufficiently with concepts such as “confessional” and “contextual” without considering “ecumenical”. In this regard Ernst (2003:88, 89, 91) mentions, consecutively, that Reformed identity is expressed in Reformed confessions, which function in a specific *context*, with an *ecumenical* dynamic. Willis (1999:183, 190) also asserts that the church displays her *ecumenicity* insofar as she is loyal to her *confession*, and also insofar as she (re-)interprets the latter in diverse *contexts*.

Several authors in the two books under discussion focus pertinently on the meaning of the concept “ecumenical” for Reformed theology. The Hungarian Pasztor emphasises the catholicity of the Reformed theology. In this regard he refers to the Heidelberg Catechism’s teaching on the holy catholic church (Pasztor 1999:24). Without using the term “ecumenical”, this is exactly what he implies — the Reformed belief in ecumenicity. His Eastern European colleague, Lochman, expresses himself explicitly concerning the ecumenical significance of the Czech Reformation. Bearing this in mind, he presumes, may help the Reformed church

to keep the ecumenical horizon of its Reformed identity open for voices that share its confessional insights, but not in a narrow confessionalist sense (Lochman 1999:407).

This implies that ecumenical does not contradict confession, but indeed confessionalism.

Other authors also support this point of view. Ernst observes a relationship between Reformed identity and the unity of the church, which we confess in the Apostolicum. The latter protects the former against “confessionalism or introverted denominationalism” (Ernst 2003:93). A *particular* Reformed church confesses the truth given to the *universal* church (:90). Stated differently: in the Reformed confession we do not confess “some kind of *Reformed* faith, but the *biblical* and *catholic* Christian faith” (:90). In order to maintain the Reformed identity and the unity of the church, we must remember that the *ecclesia reformata* never intended to teach “special themes”, but to present, in her existence, the *ecclesia catholica* (:95). The ecumenical task of the church “is not to strive for a uniform and homogeneous Christianity”,

but to represent “as Reformed churches the *one* and *catholic* church” (:96). Y.H. Kim (2003:14) also finds the “ecumenicity of Reformed theology” in the fact that it proclaims the “universal truth and value” of God’s Word, by contrast to the current postmodern relativism.

Busch (2003:25) regards the Heidelberg Catechism, due to its trinitarian structure, as “a document of true ecumenical thinking”. He also stresses the fact that the Reformed do not confess in their confessions “their denominational distinctiveness”, but rather “in their concrete location and with their own understanding, they confess a universal church” (:26). Thus, Reformed thinking is

broad, ecumenical, but at the same time it is convinced that the one holy church always is found first in the visible, concrete congregation (:32).

Therefore the Reformed are sceptical about a tendency in the ecumenical movement of

command-centers that establish themselves above the congregational level, which then treat the congregation as a mere branch and remove from it a mature sense of responsibility and co-determination (:32).

The books under discussion also contain different points of view on this subject. Rohls (2003:38) points to the ecumenical effect which he calls the “plurality and diversity of the Reformed tradition”. Consequently, ecumenicity should have the following meaning for the Reformed: “the acceptance of different confessional and theological traditions as legitimate expressions of Christian faith”. Rohls expands on this relativising tendency. According to him, ecumenical talks should not be restricted to Christian churches, “but ... include talks with non-Christians religions” (:40). In such dialogues it is the task of Reformed theology to prove that “Christianity can be regarded as the highest form of religion” (:41)! Without explicit use of the word “ecumenical”, Johnson’s contribution is a perfect example of this type of ecumenical theology. He propagates “a holistic appreciation for the task of theology as simultaneously catholic, orthodox, evangelical and reformed” (Johnson 2003:67). According to him, we are not called to repeat the timeless essence of the Reformed tradition. Consequently, the confessional themes (*sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*) should be “modulated into a different key than which they sounded for

our sixteenth-century forebears". We are indeed confronted by a totally different context: "a vastly new social, political, and cultural situation" (Johnson 2003:81). It can be concluded that the ecumenicity and the contextuality are so highly esteemed that confessionality is practically ignored.

Unique Reformed beliefs are insufficient for some theologians. They should therefore be balanced by a "deliberate ecumenism" (Hunsinger 2003:314, regarding the new Presbyterian Catechism, which is not only "evangelical", but also "liberal"). McCormack (2003:63) is fiercely opposed to this kind of ecumenism:

Genuine universality cannot be purchased by seeking to be "generically Christian". Where this takes place, our desire is to emphasize only the lowest common denominator of what we share, doctrinally, with all other Christian bodies ...

Other theologians deem it important that Reformed theology should make known its own unique accents in the ecumenical debate. Smit (2003:233) regards the significance of the law of God for public life as the specific contribution of the Reformed theology. Fackre (2003: 277f.) holds a similar opinion. He is convinced of the Reformed idea of "a public sanctification", by contrast to the Lutheran "privatization of Christian faith".

5. ASSIMILATION

I prefer the term "assimilation" in the dictionary sense of "thinking about new information to use it". We should now ascertain whether the two publications provide guidelines for Reformed theology for the 21st century, and if so whether they are worth following.

There is no doubt that Reformed theology should be rooted in the confession. Unfortunately, the books reveal too many differences of opinion concerning the role confessions should play. Reformed theology hovers too often between the two extremes of confessionalism (absolutising the confession) and indifferentism (relativising or even ignoring the confession). This uncertainty will only be clarified by a thorough reflection on the origin, nature, objective and authority of confessions. This article does not allow me time and space for such a venture, but

the following should be borne in mind:⁷ It is a Biblical command that the church should confess her faith. The Bible provides indications of fixed confessional formulae, albeit in embryonic form. For this reason the early church meticulously explained and protected, by her ecumenical creeds, the catholic Christian faith. The Reformational confessions are indeed quantitatively more extended, but qualitatively of the same calibre as the creeds. What is more, the Reformed confessions present no new doctrine as far as contents are concerned. Their only objective was to confess and confirm anew the catholic doctrine of the true church of all ages in new circumstances, by contrast to new heresies. In this sense the Reformed confession is the umbilical cord that binds us to the catholic Christian church. If we sever this bond, we become ecclesiastically aborted and we are reduced to a false church or sect (cf. Belgic Conf. 29).

Confessions have authority in the Reformed church, although it is a derived authority. Only Scripture is *norma normans* (a norming norm); the confession is *norma normata* (a normed norm). We accept the confession *quia* (because) it corresponds to Scripture, *donec* (until) the opposite has been proved in the church by means of a petition (*gravamen*). To my mind, using in this regard the term *quatenus* (insofar as) — like Busch — opens the door too widely for a voluntary interpretation of the confessions. Confessions are not on the same level as the Bible; they are deeply inferior (H. Bavinck). Therefore the confession is in principle always alterable. We adhere to the Protestant principle that no human writing, no matter how holy their authors may have been, can be put “above the truth of God, for truth is above anything else” (Belgic Conf. 7). When confessions are revised, not only the topicality, but also the continuity with the Bible and the catholic confession should be taken into account.

The books under discussion give ample examples of a liberal and more conservative approach to the confession. I prefer the latter. The obsession with inevitable new confessions for new contexts by some of the authors (e.g., Moltmann, De Gruchy) offends me. Such a contextualistic approach allows the *Zeitgeist* too important a role in theology. In this case theology, although still termed “Reformed”, starts to

7 Cf. my essay on the confessional identity of the Dutch Reformed Church (1998). This is unfortunately only available in my mother tongue, Afrikaans.

resemble the popular so-called genitive theologies of our time: theology of liberation, etc. A confessional-Reformed theology, on the other hand, will always remain critical of each, in my own words, “chameleon-theology”.

The prevailing fashion of substituting confession with tradition is disturbing. My opinion is that tradition encompasses more than merely confession. Not all theologians in the Reformed tradition supported the Reformed confession faithfully. For this reason, I do not have to accept everything in the Reformed tradition, for example Reformed scholasticism or Karl Barth’s dialectics. Confession and theology are not on the same level. Confession deals with my deepest beliefs, based on God’s revealed Word; it’s an issue of life or death. Theology, on the other hand, is a human attempt to understand, by making use of fallible scientific theories, what we believe. Therefore, it is the confession, not the tradition, that is normative for the Reformed theology — also for the 21st century. This does not mean that contemporary Reformed theology should only repeat and interpret the confessions. That is indeed confessionalism. It rather means that Reformed theologians and their theology should be prepared to be tested in the light of the Reformed confession. Even when theologians occupy themselves with scientific theology, they cannot and may not break away from their pre-scientific faith, that is the confession.

Our analysis of the term “contextual” led to the conclusion that it is used in two different ways. On the one hand, we find those for whom context is apparently just as important as confession (e.g., Botman, Van Dyk). Reformed theology should continually accommodate the current *Zeitgeist*. I cannot identify with this type of contextual theology, which I call contextualism. This approach is epistemologically related to historicism (that everything is changeable) and postmodernism (that everything is relative). This cannot be supported by Christians who believe in the Bible.

On the other hand, there are theologians who favour the acknowledgement of the context, but only in an ethnological and cultural sense. For them contextual theology does not imply the acceptance of new principles, but a different application of the same principles. They do not wish to change the paradigm of Reformed theology, but only shift

the focus. Reformed theology in an Eastern or African context will most probably display different accents than in Western theology. I can support this type of contextual theology, in principle.

The contextualisation of the gospel is a complex issue on which fundamental questions can be raised, which have not yet been addressed satisfactorily. Some of these are:⁸ Why should we be concerned about the problem of contextualisation at all? What are the Biblical reasons for the importance of the cultural configuration of Christianity? Does any constant norm or criterion exist, by whose application we could distinguish between good and bad forms of contextualisation?

It is beyond the scope of this article to answer such questions. However, contextual theology will remain an item on our agenda for a considerable time in the new century. As long as Reformed theologians regard their confession (and its content, the Bible!) as the normative criterion, they can associate themselves boldly with the variety of cultural contexts of our global village. This will enable them to enthusiastically take part in the exciting project of practising healthy contextual theology.

As far as “ecumenicity” is concerned, the question can be raised whether Reformed theology can be defined in terms of this concept. Is confessional (a specific issue) and ecumenical (a universal issue) not a *contradictio in terminis*? The same question can be asked about contextual (local) and ecumenical (general). The answer wholly depends on the definition of “ecumenical”. If ecumenical is equated with catholic, there is no tension between the two concepts. I support the view of theologians such as Pasztor and Busch, who state that Reformed means being catholic. Theologians in the 16th century did not intend to found a new church; they were merely interested in re-forming the existing (catholic) church. Therefore, authors such as Guido de Brès (author of the Belgic Confession) confessed exactly the same faith as Athanasius, for example concerning the trinity of God and the two natures of Christ. Various authors rightly emphasise that we, the Reformed, do not confess our own special ideas, but the catholic Christian faith.

8 I attempted to answer these questions in my research report on Reformed theology in Africa (2002).

In this regard it can be recommended that the confessional aspect in Reformed theology should be balanced with the ecumenical. This protects us from confessionalism and introverted denominationalism (Ernst). But if this “balancing” should imply that the Reformed confession is, in itself, insufficient and should therefore be complemented by the ecumenical, it becomes hazardous. Then we fall victim to a holistic type of ecumenicism, in which the unique Reformed contribution is relativised — definitely not to the benefit of ecumenical theology. If we may only be “generally Christian”, emphasising only the lowest common denominator of what we believe (McCormack), ecumenicity has become a monster, which devours confessionality.

Danger lurks in an ecumenistic ecclesiology: an approach in which the ecumenical body becomes a type of super church, with the local congregations as dependent branches. The same applies to an ecumenistic theology. By contrast, true ecumenical theology is enriched by the unique contributions of the Reformed.

My opening hypothesis was: a balanced relationship between confession, context and ecumenics will give rise to a healthy Reformed theology. It can now be stated that this hypothesis is true. In order to be Reformed, our theology should be based on confession. But we also need the ecumenical horizon, as protection against confessionalism. And our ecumenical awareness should be bound to our confessional points of departure. If not, we risk propagating a holistic ecumenicism. Similarly, a contextual theology is recommended, but a confessional bond will prevent us from biased contextualism.

The Lord calls us to practise a fully Reformed theology in the 21st century: theology which is confessional, contextual and ecumenical.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALSTON W M & WELKER M (EDS.)
2003. *Reformed Theology. Identity and ecumenicity*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- BIK E ZA
1999. The challenge to Reformed theology: a perspective from Myanmar. *RT1999*: 75-86.
- BOTMAN H R
2003. A cry for life in a global economic era. *RT2003*:375-84.
- BUSCH E
1999. The closeness of the distant: Reformed confessions after 1945. *RT1999*: 512-31.
2003. Reformed strength in its denominational weakness. *RT2003*:20-33.
- DE GRUCHY J
1999. Toward a Reformed theology of liberation: a retrieval of Reformed symbols in the struggle for justice. *RT1999*:103-19.
- ERNST M
2003. We believe in one holy and catholic church ...: Reformed identity and the unity of the church. *RT2003*:85-96.
- FACKRE G
2003. Sovereignty and sanctification: Reformed accents in ecumenics. *RT2003*: 271-80.
- GERRISH B
1999. Tradition in the modern world: the Reformed habit of mind. *RT1999*:3-20.
- HESSELINK J
1999. Some distinctive contributions of the Dutch–American Reformed tradition. *RT1999*:421-43.
- HUNSINGER G
2003. Social witness in generous orthodoxy: the New Presbyterian ‘Study Catechism’. *RT2003*:311-35.
- JOHNSON W S
2003. Theology and the church’s mission: Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, and Reformed. *RT2003*:65-81.
- KIM M Y
2003. Reformed pneumatology and Pentecostal pneumatology. *RT2003*:170-89.
2003. The identity of Reformed theology and its ecumenicity in the twenty-first century: Reformed theology as transformational cultural theology. *RT2003*:3-19.

LINK C

1999. The *Notae Ecclesiae*: a Reformed perspective. *RT1999*:239-61.

LOCHMAN J M

1999. Radical and Reformed: the ecumenical contribution of the Czech Reformation. *RT1999*:406-20.

2003. Reconsidering the doctrine of providence. *RT2003*:281-93.

MCCORMACK B L

2003. The end of Reformed theology? The voice of Karl Barth in the doctrinal chaos of the present. *RT2003*:46-64.

MIGLIORE D L

2003. The communion of the triune God: towards a trinitarian ecclesiology in Reformed perspective. *RT2003*:140-54.

OPOCËNSKY M

2003. *Processus Confessionis*. *RT2003*:385-97.

PASZTOR J

1999. The catholicity of Reformed theology. *RT1999*:21-38.

ROHLS J

2003. Reformed theology — past and future. *RT2003*:34-45.

SMIT D

2003. Can we still be Reformed? Questions from a South African Perspective. *RT2003*:233-53.

SONG C-S

1999. Christian theology: toward an Asian reconstruction. *RT1999*:58-74.

STRAUSS S A

1998. Die kofessionele identiteit van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (The confessional identity of the Dutch Reformed Church). In: F. Snyman (red.), *Is die NG Kerk nog die NG Kerk?* (Wellington: Hugenote), pp. 32-43.

2002. From Bloemfontein to Nairobi: Reformed theology in Africa. In: A.J.G. van der Borgh, D. van Keulen, M.E. Brinkman (eds.), *Faith and Ethnicity. Vol. 1, Studies in Reformed Theology* (Zoetermeer: Meinema), pp. 244-55.

STROUP G W

2003. Reformed identity in an ecumenical world. *RT2003*:257-70.

TORRANCE T

1999. The substance of faith. *RT1999*:167-77.

VAN DYK L

1999. Toward a new typology of Reformed doctrines of atonement. *RT1999*: 225-38.

2003. A proposal for pedagogical strategies in theological education in the Reformed tradition. *RT2003*:223-32.

VISCHER L

1999. The church — mother of the believers. *RT1999*:262-82.

WAHBA W

1999. The ecumenical responsibility of Reformed theology: the case of Egypt. *RT1999*:87-102.

WATANABE N

1999. Reformed theology in East and West. *RT1999*:39-57.

WEINRICH M

2003. The openness and worldliness of the church. *RT2003*:412-34.

WELKER M

1999. Travail and mission: theology reformed according to God's Word at the beginning of the third millennium. *RT1999*:136-52.

WILLIS D

1999. The ecumenical future of Reformed theology. *RT1999*:178-91.

WILLIS D & WELKER M (EDS.)

1999. *Toward the future of Reformed Theology. Tasks, topics, traditions*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.

Keywords

Systematic Theology

Reformed Theology

Confessions

Context

Ecumenics

Trefwoorde

Dogmatiek

Gereformeerde teologie

Konfessies

Konteks

Ekumene