

# Back to the Future: Inspiration from the (Radical) Reformation

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## Introduction

Celebrating 500 Year Reformation in 2017 is a way of what I like to call going ‘back to the future’. As William Faulkner wrote: ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past’.<sup>1</sup> Without knowing, understanding and appreciating where we come from,<sup>2</sup> we will not be able to find our way forward wisely, accurately and fruitfully. We need roots to bear fruit!

Now of course it is absolutely impossible to present the Reformation heritage in 25 minutes, especially since *the* Reformation heritage does not exist. Nowadays we talk about the European Reformations<sup>3</sup> and we are well aware that there were and are not only geographical and political differences between for example Germany, Switzerland, Moravia and England, but also deep theological differences on, for example, the sacraments, the relation to the state, election, free will, Christology and of course ecclesiology. And then within all these differences we find the Baptists not always on the same side, for it will be very easy to find Baptists who still favour Luther over the other Reformers, and others Calvin, Zwingli, Hubmaier, Bucer, Sattler or one of the Puritan fathers. Our legacy is quite mixed so to say, or, maybe better said, quite rich.

So since the heritage is so broad and time is limited, I had to make my choices and decided to focus on three different legacies of the Reformations that I think can challenge us anew in our context today and I have formulated them in what we are called to. It is a bit random, but at the same time I think it does make sense. We are called to be respectively God-centered, Bible-centered and Church-centered.

## 1. We are called to be God-centered

‘It all starts with God’. That’s the title of the first chapter of Rick Warren’s bestseller *The Purpose Driven Life*, and the first sentence of that chapter is ‘It’s not about you’.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter he makes it very clear that if you want to know the purpose of life, you must begin with God. We are all born ‘*by his purpose and for his purpose*’. This gives the book a surprising counter-cultural force, which is important and I think necessary nowadays. Eugene Peterson, in his introduction to Genesis in *The Message* does something similar in his own straightforward language as he writes: ‘First, God. God is the subject of life. God is foundational for living. If we don’t have a sense of the primacy of God, we will never get it

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<sup>1</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1950), 92.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Our past is sedimented in our present, and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, as long as we can’t do justice to where we come from’. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Malden: Blackwell Publ., 2010<sup>1996</sup>).

<sup>4</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life. What on earth am I here for?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 17.

right, get life right, get our lives right. Not God at the margins; not God as an option; not God on the weekends. God at center and circumference; God first and last; God, God, God'.<sup>5</sup>

The Reformations emerged in pre-modern times and in these times it was self-evident to understand life as created by and destined for the glory of God. As later the Westminster Larger Catechism so beautifully articulated in its first question and answer: 'What is the chief and highest end of man? Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and to fully enjoy him forever'.<sup>6</sup>

I think we need a renewal of this focus on God 'at center and circumference'. One might say with some good reasons that related to Luther's famous question 'how do I get a gracious God' the Reformations unintentionally advanced privatization and even secularisation,<sup>7</sup> it is still a fact that with Luther the emphasis was on *God*, while we now live in a time where people would ask 'how do I get a gracious God', or more obvious 'how do I get a nice God, a caring God, an affirming God'. While our culture became and becomes more and more anthropocentric (*I think so I am*), the focus in our churches and in our faith experiences tends to become anthropocentric as well. The so-called 'turn to the subject' has affected us deeply and has removed God from the center, mainly unconsciously I think, but still.

Let me give you two examples. I don't know how about in your churches, but when I hear testimonies of baptismal candidates, it occurs to me that these are mainly very personal narratives about very personal experiences and about 'feeling at home' in this particular church. Sometimes God or Christ are nearly mentioned. And although I see and understand the power of these personal narratives, I do believe they need some deconstruction to become narratives that really connect to the story of the life, the teaching, the crucifixion and the resurrection of the One in whose name they are about to be baptized.

The second example – more or less in the same line - concerns our worship. People more and more choose a church, not because of its doctrine, but because of its worship; that must feel good and do us good. The pitfall is that worship becomes an instrument that brings us joy and good feelings and we become the subject of it, instead of God. As a Dutch theologian already wrote in 1972 about church services: 'Eventual people wanted to be edified, later they wanted to be enlightened and now they want to be amused'.<sup>8</sup>

But the gospel is not amusement. Yes, it is full of joy, and peace, and love, but these all are fruits of the way of the cross. Remember how the early Anabaptists (Müntzer, Grebel, Denck, and especially Hans Hut) talked about the 'sweet' and the 'bitter' Christ. From the last one most people turn away, for the 'sweet' Christ is what men want. But the 'sweet' Christ can only be experienced after one has tasted the 'bitter' Christ.<sup>9</sup> There *is* a difference between self-acceptance and self-denial. There *is* a difference between an anthropocentric and a theocentric faith.

## 2. We are called to be Bible-centered

At his trial at Worms in 1521 Luther finished his defence with the famous words 'I am bound by the Scriptures (...) and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message // Remix. The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Spring: NavPress, 2003), 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003<sup>1958</sup>), 129.

<sup>7</sup> Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation. How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> A.A. van Ruler, *Waarom zou ik naar de kerk gaan?* (Nijkerk 1972), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Klaassen, "Hans Hut and Thomas Muntzer" in *Baptist Quarterly* 19.5 (1962), 223.

retract anything'.<sup>10</sup> We see this with all the reformers – magisterial and radical – : the Bible as the Word of God is the final authority and all Christians have the right to interpret the Bible for themselves.

Alister McGrath calls this Christianity's dangerous idea,<sup>11</sup> since it opened the door to a wide diversity of exegesis and huge differences in views and convictions. 'Have not all heretics the same pretence, to plead the Scriptures in their own defence?' (as the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet John Dryden wrote).<sup>12</sup> Even a firm conviction on for example the infallibility or inerrancy of the Scriptures does not solve this problem, for, as McGrath says, 'it is perfectly possible for an inerrant text to be interpreted incorrectly'.<sup>13</sup>

So what is needed first of all if that we:

a. *know* the Bible. One of my huge worries nowadays is the rapid growing Bible-illiteracy in society as well as in our churches and even among our theological students. We need to find ways to bring the Bible back in the lives of our church members and our baptismal candidates. They need not only be immersed in water, but also be immersed in Scripture. It's fine that everyone has the right to interpret the Bible, but first of all you need to know what it is all about that you are going to interpret!

But even if we know the whole Bible by heart, we need to, secondly:

b. read it *together*. While we do agree that every believer has the right to interpret the Bible for him- or herself, it is not the individual believer that on its own decides about the rightness or wrongness of an interpretation. Just as when two or three prophets speak, the others have the obligation to weigh what is said,<sup>14</sup> so our individual interpretations should be brought into conversation with the whole community, for it is only as a community that we discern the mind of Christ. And I do not only mean the community of the local church, but also on the level of our Unions and on the level of the church of all times and all places.

Therefore we thirdly need to:

c. listen longer and repeatedly afresh to the Scriptures. We live in fastfood-times and if we want to know something, we want to find it by just two or three clicks at Wikipedia or something like that. But when it comes to God's Word we need to dig deeper and listen longer. Let's not conclude too fast, which usually means too superficial or too much in accordance with what we ourselves already thought. The pitfall is then to put our thoughts first into Scripture and then take them out of it. That is not *exegesis*, but *eiseesis*.

The outcome of our Scripture reading is not always comforting, it is many times disturbing because the Bible can be very subversive. Remember what Paul said about the aim of the inspired Scriptures: they are useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training and for equipment (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Scripture not only speaks *to* our heart, but also *against* it! Think of Luther who called Scripture our adversary.

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<sup>10</sup> Carter Lindberg (ed.), *The European Reformations Sourcebook* (Malden: Blackwell Publ., 2000), 43.

<sup>11</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 209.

<sup>13</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 221.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:29.

In one of his earlier works, *New tasks for a renewed church* (1992), Tom Wright writes – in this case about the gospels but I think it is valid for the whole Bible - that ‘there is always *more* to reflect on and *more* to discover and that this many times challenges our safe assumptions and our comfortable compromises’.<sup>15</sup>

And that is why it is extremely important that when we read the Scriptures, we fourthly:

d. remain open for new and even reversed insights. We find this attitude with the Anabaptists as well as with the Separatists and the early Baptists. For example in Conrad Grebel’s famous letter to Thomas Müntzer on 5 september 1524,<sup>16</sup> where he closes by typically saying ‘whatever we have not understood correctly, inform and instruct us’.<sup>17</sup>

The same we see in the closing part of the ‘London Confession’, 1646, where it says: ‘Also we confess that we know but in part, and that we are ignorant of many things which we desire and seek to know; and if any shall do us that friendly part to show us from the word of God that we see not, we shall have cause to be thankful to God and them’.<sup>18</sup>

This elsewhere called ‘further light’ is the firm belief that – in the words ascribed to John Robinson – ‘the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word’, or in the covenantal words of 1607 (in Scrooby and Gainsborough) about ‘God’s ways, known and to be made known’.

These people opened the Word of God expecting to discover, or maybe better to receive, old and new treasures. Being a Baptist means being part of a continuing conversation about anything that crosses our path, ‘in season or out of season’ (2 Tim. 4:2). If we are not willing to reconsider and search the Scriptures anew with openness but just stick to the slogan ‘this has been our viewpoint and it will remain our viewpoint’, then tradition rules over God’s Word. Let us have the courage to always reopen it.

### **3. We are called to be Church-centered**

This might come to you as a surprise, I don’t know. Church-centered is not a word to expect nowadays; most people would prefer Kingdom-centered or Mission-centered.

But I choose this one, first of all because in the time of the Reformations it was all about the renewal or even the restauration of the church. And secondly I do believe that the church is mission as Shane so beautifully demonstrated yesterday morning, and that it is the high calling of the church to seek and pray for the Kingdom. But in the meantime we are the church and we are called to be the body of Christ in this world ‘until He comes’. So more than ever in this ‘secular age’ we are called to be the church of Jesus Christ as a witness to the world. And rethinking what that means is our challenging call.

In all of our continent the church is rapidly decreasing. And of course it is encouraging to see that in other parts of the world it is the other way around and at some spots in Europe it might even be the other way around, but that still should not blind us for the fact that the figures in general are dramatic. The question is whether we will be able to reinvent a way of being church that will

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<sup>15</sup> Tom Wright, *Nieuwe taken voor de kerk van nu* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1996), 232, my translation.

<sup>16</sup> Called by Walter Klaassen ‘the charter of the free church’ in *Anabaptism*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Was wir nicht recht verstanden haben, darüber unterrichte und belehre uns’. Heinold Fast, *Der linke Flügel der Reformation* (Bremen: Carl Schünemann Verlag, 1962), 23.

<sup>18</sup> In: William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969<sup>1959</sup>), 149.

speak to the heart of our culture and its people. Of course I have no roadmap for that, but let me point to two directions.

First of all let's remind ourselves that we are part of a reformed movement that is typified by the wellknown words *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (a reformed church is always to be reformed),<sup>19</sup> referring to 'the Protestant position that the church must continually re-examine itself, reconsider its doctrines, and be prepared to accept change, in order to conform more closely to orthodox Christian belief as revealed in the Bible' (Leo Koffeman).<sup>20</sup>

In the same way Alister McGrath finishes his book 'Christianity's Dangerous Idea': 'It is of the essence of Protestantism to re-examine and renew itself, responding to its environment, on the one hand, and its own reading of the Bible, on the other hand. (...) Protestantism possesses a unique and innate capacity for innovation, renewal, and reform, based on its own internal resources. The future of Protestantism lies precisely in Protestantism being what Protestantism actually is'.<sup>21</sup>

After what I said about Further Light, I don't have to add that if this counts for Protestantism, it counts the more for Baptist churches. Let us be open for renewal and change and let us not be afraid to sacrifice for that!

This by the way does not mean that everything that's 'old' belongs to the past and everything that's new should be welcomed in advance. A constant moving along with any new trend or hype, is not so much a strength as well as a sign of superficial and even cheap behaviour. Maybe you know the joke about two orthodox theologians who visited an evangelical conference. One of them needed to go to the bathroom during one of the sessions and asked the other one when he came back 'did I miss anything' and the answer was, 'no, it was all new'. Renewal and change can also mean going back to the sources, to the roots and 'reinvent' ourselves from there.

But I talked about sacrifices. I think these are the more necessary when it comes to my second direction that points towards the catholicity of the church, by which I mean our communion with the church of all times and of all places.

One of the shadowsides of the Reformations, maybe *the* shadowside, is the fragmentation it created, lowering the doorstep (or threshold) for separation, because, as McGrath quite friendly frames 'Everyone meant well – but they certainly did not mean the same thing'.<sup>22</sup> This 'congregational inflation', still McGrath, 'unlashed a Darwinian process of competition and survival'.<sup>23</sup>

This I'm afraid still continuing Darwinian process, weakens our witness very much. Last week at a meeting of Protestants and Roman-Catholics in the Netherlands, the Roman-Catholic bishop de Korte gave two reasons why he – with all his sincere appreciation for the Reformation – could not be a Protestant, mentioning first the underestimation of the sacraments and secondly the many splits, and I quote: 'For an outsider it is incomprehensible that here in the Netherlands we have more than ten churches that call themselves reformed.

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<sup>19</sup> Or more accurate *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est secundum verbum Dei* (the reformed Church must be always reforming according to the Word of God). Although none of the Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century ever mentioned it and the historical root of it is unclear (the first one who ever mentioned it was probably the Dutch Jodocus van Lodenstein, a representative of the Dutch Second Reformation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century), it especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – mainly due to Karl Barth – became a motto of the Protestant Reformation.

<sup>20</sup> L.J. Koffeman, "'Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda'" Church renewal from a Reformed perspective', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71.3 (2015), consulted on <http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/2875/html>, d.d. 26-9-2016.

<sup>21</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 277, 278.

<sup>22</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 254, 255.

For a roman-catholic these repetitive schisms are amazing and in light of the calling to unity highly serious and sad'.<sup>24</sup>

But it's not only the outsider that points his finger at us in this regard. In June I visited the 17<sup>th</sup> Believers Church Conference in Nova Scotia, Canada, and the theme was 'The Tendency Towards Separation', where we studied 'the patterns of "come-outerism" and "prima-donnism"', the last one sometimes causing the first. The Mennonite historian John Roth spoke about 'the narcism of minor differences' and suggested that it might have to do with the DNA of our beginnings.

Walter Klaassen in his book 'Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant' says that at first side radical for the Anabaptists had to do with going back to the sources, the roots of Christianity, the primitive church in the NT. 'But the use of *radical* with respect to Anabaptists goes deeper than that. They were radical not simply because they were more biblicistic, but also because through really listening to the Bible, they developed a thoroughgoing, radical, valid criticism of some of the basic religious assumptions of their times'.<sup>25</sup>

My question is whether in light of our post-Christendom time, the hour has not come to reconsider our basic religious *separatist* assumptions. 'The times they are a changin'', not only in the sixties, but certainly now 500 years after the Reformations. What was the 'command for the hour' in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – for example separation – does not have to be the 'command for the hour' in 2016. The context has changed, lots of our and their theology has changed and we are facing many new challenges.

So the real radical(!) question now is 'What would Jesus deconstruct'? This is the title of a very intriguing little book by John Caputo, continuing on Sheldon's famous book *What Would Jesus Do* from 1896, helping us to understand what he calls the 'hermeneutic of the Kingdom'.<sup>26</sup>

I take it as an invitation to sincerely look at our present churchly assumptions, organizations, systems, and ask ourselves what Jesus would deconstruct to bring us closer to the one body that can speak anew to this world. And yes, this will mean sacrificing some of our preferences, some of our cherished traditions, even some of our good and valuable treasures. But isn't sacrifice the heart of the gospel?

My predecessor as rector of the Dutch Baptist Seminary, Jannes Reiling, called years ago all the churches to what he called a *kenosis* to make room for the Holy Spirit on behalf of the renewal and the unity of the church.<sup>27</sup>

From Philippians 2 that talks about the *kenosis* of our Lord Jesus Christ, we learn that the divinity lies in the emptying of divinity. So maybe the real 'churchianity' lies in the emptying of the church. Every church should be willing to lose everything for the sake of the gospel.

'There will be no unity, unless we as Lutheran, reformed or orthodox (and Baptist I add) are prepared to die in the hope to be resurrected in His one and only church' (J.C. Hoekendijk).<sup>28</sup> Barth writes in his *Church Dogmatics*: 'Kirche ist katholisch oder sie ist nicht Kirche' (The Church is Catholic or she is not Church).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Nederlands Dagblad*, 21-9-2016 (my translation).

<sup>25</sup> Klaassen, *Anabaptism*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 33.

<sup>27</sup> J. Reiling, *Gemeenschap der heiligen: Over de gemeente van Jezus Christus naar het Nieuwe Testament* (Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1964), 152.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Ton van Eijk, "Het Protestantisme moet blijven", *Kerk en Theologie* 55.4 (2004), 308.

<sup>29</sup> KD IV,1, 784.

To be faithful to the Reformations every church is called to a continuing renewal and deconstruction – *metanoia* – on its journey towards the Kingdom, for the church – and also our church – is still on the way to become what it is.

One of the much used images of the church since Vatican II is the church as the pilgrim people of God. We are pilgrims, and being a pilgrim means two things: we are still on our way, we haven't yet arrived. But secondly, there is a destination, there is something ahead of us.

Let's be God-centered, let's be Bible-centered, let's be Church-centered, for the sake of the Kingdom.