

Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity: Ideas for the Twenty-First Century

Shirley J. Roels (Editor)

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One of the most persistent questions facing global evangelism over the last century has been on the relationship between the proclamation of the gospel in words and in deeds. This vexed linkage between word and deed is nothing new to Christianity, of course, but it has taken new shape in the modern context of global Christianity. This volume is a collection of essays arising directly out of and reflecting upon a global missions conference held at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the summer of 2010. Beyond the subject matter itself, the significance of this conference stems from its proximity to an immediately subsequent event—also held at Calvin College—that included many of the same participants. This latter gathering was the Uniting General Council of the newly formed World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), a global ecumenical group formed out of two smaller ecumenical bodies. The WCRC and its predecessors have long struggled with the question of how the Christian faith relates to cultural engagement, conversion, evangelism, and advocacy. As Shirley J. Roels, editor of the present volume, notes, “Christian activism needs theological thinking about the intersection of living, learning, and acting in the world. Such thinking is a strength of historical Reformed Christianity, and when many Christians are embracing a full gospel mandate, there is a renewed opportunity to weave ideas and actions together.”

By “full gospel mandate,” Roels means a characteristically Reformed, particularly neo-Calvinist, understanding of the implications of God’s sovereignty. That is, as Paul J. Visser, a Dutch pastor and chairman of the Foundation for the Promoting of Reformed Missiology and Ecumenics, puts it, “the biblical message penetrates all spheres of life to redirect them toward the will of God. Therefore, a Reformed view of mission should have a great impact on society. Inevitably it has a comprehensive character in trying to bring one’s entire life to the lordship of Christ; and this comprehensive nature can have a worldwide perspective.” Inevitably, this idea of applying the gospel’s transformative power to “all realms” involves traditionally “secular” institutions and arenas, such as politics, economics, media, arts, and education. As Richard J. Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, observes, there are characteristically Reformed doctrinal emphases that address soteriological questions. However, the Reformed faith is about more than just doctrines of predestination, justification, and depravity. Rather, says Mouw, the Reformed tradition “has always insisted that having the grace we receive from God must also move us to an active obedience and to a way of Christian living that has a fairly broad scope.”

There are various perspectives—some more provisional, others more doctrinaire—present in the various essays in this collection. I focus here on themes relating to economics and how this sphere of life has implications for the Reformed concept of the *missio Dei*. One of the themes that appears throughout a number of the essays is the value of giving priority to local contexts and values. That is, in accord with the social principle of sub-

subsidiarity, for instance, Christians are to engage in missional activity with sensitivity to cultural mores, practices, and institutions that may, on first (or even second or third) look seem quite foreign and incongruous. Picking up on Mouw's emphasis on characteristically Reformed social (rather than doctrinal) institutions, Karin Maag argues for some very practical and contextual applications of Reformed emphases in the realms of education, worship, church governance, and church discipline. Janel Curry's essay captures this sentiment by arguing for partnership rather than triumphalism: "Those from the developed world should come and partner with Christian brothers and sisters who are already working on the ground. Otherwise, not knowing the local context, we spend resources working with people who are unfaithful. Local groups know who is in need and who will bring results." Likewise, David Lim explicitly invokes the principle of subsidiarity in the context of arguing for the "democratization" of Christian involvement "in a decentralized system that maximizes each individual's contribution to society." As Jerry Pillay, the first president of the WCRC, says in an interview in the book, the focus of ecumenism itself is shifting from the large, transnational bodies to individual levels and local communities: "True ecumenism takes place in a local congregation." Drawing from the subtitle of the volume, one of the "ideas" for the twenty-first century to be taken from and applied to Reformed mission is subsidiarity, decentrism, or localism.

The Reformed ecumenical movement's point of departure for engaging economic issues has been, since 2004, a document known as the Accra Confession, which denounces the "ideology" of "neoliberal economic globalization," condemning it as an idolatrous expression of "empire," or "the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests." As one might expect, references to the Accra document are sprinkled liberally throughout the essays. Frequently the Accra statement is alluded to positively, as in the case of Visser, who describes it as "a fruit of spiritual life and worship, from personal obedience to the Lord and Christ-centered compassion for other people."

The confession itself is taken up in more detail in two particular essays, Curry's previously mentioned, "Cross-Boundary Faith: The Universal and the Contextual," and Roland Hoksbergen's, "The Global Economy, Injustice, and the Church: On Being Reformed in Today's World." Both Curry and Hoksbergen are on the faculty at Calvin College. Curry's essay begins by emphasizing the basic framework of the Accra Confession, "one of the major divides in the world and the church—the contextual divide between those who stand in places of economic power and those who stand in positions of extreme vulnerability." For Curry, the Accra Confession represents "the voice of those who feel powerless, in places where cultural and social systems reinforce the experience of colonialism and lead to the use of free markets that benefit the few. It resonates with their experience of power being found in systems that privilege a small group with a great chasm existing between the governing structures and community, resulting in little accountability." Realizing that these experiences and attitudes are not universally held across the Reformed world, Curry's conclusion for the Accra Confession is that it should be recognized as coming from "a particular context," and that "we would do better to listen and learn about contexts and

perspectives rather than focus on the use of particular terms that elicit different meanings and emotions across contexts.”

Hoksbergen, by contrast, takes the Accra Confession on its own terms, as a response to the *processus confessionis* (process of confession) and in its own words as a “decision of faith commitment.” Hoksbergen’s analysis is lucid and straightforward. Acknowledging the negative interpretive framework of neoliberal empire operative in the Accra statement, Hoksbergen notes that “there are social scientists who analyze world affairs this way, but there are also many who see things very differently. For example, there are likely more books that trumpet market solutions to global poverty than there are books that find markets to be its root cause.” The tone and stance of the Accra document relative to globalization and market economies in general are quite unbalanced, given this diversity of opinion. “Whereas every reference to markets in the AC is negative,” writes Hoksbergen, “these scholars of the global economy are much more positive, finding that people are poor not because of what markets have done to them.” The conclusion about the place of the Accra Confession for Hoksbergen is that it is “a document that powerfully identifies the concerns of the church for global economic and ecological justice, but that is suspect in its analysis of the global economy.” For these reasons, “the analysis in the AC should be studied and taken seriously, but it should not be confessed.”

The overall dynamic tension between faith and works that sets the context for this volume on the future of Reformed missions underscores the necessary conversation that must occur in these Reformed and broader Christian communities about discipleship and social justice. For ecumenical officials such as Pillay, the institutional church has a clear and definite responsibility to address particular public “policies and strategies” as part of the church’s “prophetic role.” This is the approach that the Accra Confession represents, for instance. However, what also must be present in these discussions is a different view, which Hoksbergen expresses, in which “the institutional church should preach on justice in economic life, but should refrain from prescribing trade policies.” For Reformed ideas about mission and ecumenical social witness to have currency for the twenty-first century, it is absolutely critical not only to have these conversations but also to have the right answers about the respective roles of the church as an institution and organism. This slim volume represents an important contribution to this ongoing effort.

—Jordan J. Ballor
Acton Institute