

BEING REFORMED IN BABEL
Christian Humanism and Being Reformed in Today's World

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Like the elephant the title for my presentation today was designed by a committee. As such it represents a compromise between those who wanted me to speak on Christian Humanism and those who are interested in my thoughts on being Reformed in today's world. Yet it is a happy compromise because there is a historical connection between Christian Humanism and Reformed Identity and both are relevant for being Christian and being the Church in today's world. Yet, undoubtedly, each part of the sub-title begs several obvious and serious questions:

What is Christian humanism and how does it differ from secular humanism? Is it possible to be both a Christian and a humanist, or is this simply an oxymoron as some of my secular colleagues tell me? What if any is the connection between Christian humanism and Reformed Christianity, given the fact that the one presumably has a more positive view of human nature, potential and achievement, and the other traditionally affirms original sin and human depravity?

What does it mean to be Reformed seeing that there are many denominations that claim the title yet disagree, sometimes strongly, with each other? And given the fact that Reformed Christians exist in many different cultural contexts and social locations? Is being Reformed the same as being Calvinist, and if not what is the relationship? There are, clearly, many species in the Reformed genus, but what distinguishes them from other forms of being Christian in today's world, and do the differences really matter?

How are we to understand "today's world?" Are we to view the world through the eyes of post-modern theory, through the eyes of our most favoured newscaster, or the preconceived notions that shape our national identity? Given its complexity, its rapidly changing character, and the differing and conflicting analyses, what chance is there that we can say anything helpful that is not superficial, subject to contradiction and distorted by our varying perspectives?

Plunging in where angels fear to tread, let us at begin by at least trying to understand today's world, and doing so from a perspective that would gladden the hearts of Reformed theologians since the time of Calvin who, in turn, drew heavily on St. Augustine, St. Paul and the great Hebrew prophets before them. Today's world like yesterdays bears all the tragic trademarks of human sin – greed, corruption, violence, and general moral decay. Starting at this point will, hopefully, allay the fears of those who might think that my version of Christian humanism has a too optimistic a view of the world and human nature, and too little sense of God's judgment and grace. But it is also a realistic perspective that few secular analysts would contest. With this in mind, I have relegated the title assigned me for this lecture to a sub-title and renamed it "Being Reformed in Babel" for reasons that will soon become plain.

Revisiting Babel

My wife and I are part of a Christian community that lives together on a farm called Volmoed in the Hemel en Aarde (Heaven and Earth) Valley near Hermanus about 120 kms south east of Cape Town. Volmoed (“full of courage and hope”) is a retreat center linked to the Community of the Cross of Nails associated with Coventry Cathedral. Its mission is to provide hospitality for those who are working for reconciliation, justice and healing in society. Some people speak of Volmoed as “God’s place,” a little piece of paradise in today’s world. But towering over our valley of vineyards and olive groves is a mountain which early Moravian missionaries named “Babilonstoring” or the “Tower of Babel.” This is a daily reminder of the counterpoint to our concern for justice and reconciliation, hope and healing, for Babel in the biblical story represents the final stage in the saga of human and social collapse that began with our primordial parents’ disobedience to the will of God.

The truth of that ancient myth of Babel has been regularly demonstrated in the course of human history, and many have revisited the story to ponder its message. Human arrogance and self-interest (“let us make a name for ourselves”) that ignores morality and justice leads inevitably to divine judgment (“let us confuse their language” Genesis 11⁴⁻⁸). The cities, empires and civilizations we build, and which many assume will last indefinitely, sow the seeds of their own destruction. New world orders arise with great promise, but sooner or later they begin to falter and eventually collapse in disarray and disorder. St. Augustine, reflecting on the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, gave classic account of this conviction in his *City of God*, and Calvin later viewed history from the same perspective. We do well to keep it in mind as we consider today’s world, especially when tempted to believe that progress is inevitable and that our nations, empires and world orders will endure for a thousand years.

Globalization was heralded not long ago as holding out new hope and promise for humanity. But many observers, some formerly true believers, are no longer so sure. “The last year,” wrote John Ralston Saul in 2005, “has seen an acceleration of the agony of Globalization – an acceleration far greater than I could have imagined. Abruptly it is not uncommon for well-known experts to lament or boast that it is over or slowing or in deep trouble.” Many of our hopes for a new and transformed world order have been dashed. To the contrary, we are, to mention but some of the symptoms, deeply enmeshed in a vicious cycle of acts of terror and counter acts of war, an alarmingly widening of gap between rich and poor, and an environment that is showing signs of terminal stress and possible collapse. On a smaller scale, we in South Africa are aware that the high expectations we had after the demise of apartheid (another intended white utopia built to last for ever), have been tempered by the realities of a fallen world.

While Babel represents the global scene in its totality, it is comprised of many local societies that, like South Africa, are increasingly linked together and contribute to the whole in different ways and at varying pace. No one has documented this more eloquently than Jared Diamond in his starkly titled book *Collapse*, the subtitle of which sums up the argument: “How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed.”

For Diamond, all is not doom and gloom. There are good news stories of success, and there are steps we can take as communities and individuals to prevent collapse. But the possibility and tragedy of societal demise and environmental disintegration are nonetheless omnipresent global realities. And though the factors that lead to collapse, whether of towns and cities, nations and regions, empires and civilizations, are multiple and often seem beyond our control, we humans are ultimately responsible because of the decisions we make, and too often we make the wrong ones.

Niall Ferguson in his book *The War of the World*, which documents the consequences of the First World War for the rest of the twentieth century, concludes on a very sober note. We are, he declares, “our own worst enemies.” He continues:

We shall avoid another century of conflict only if we understand the forces that caused the last one – the dark forces that conjure up ethnic conflict and imperial rivalry out of economic crisis, and in doing so negate our common humanity. They are forces that stir within us still.

Neither Augustine nor Calvin, neither Reinhold Niebuhr nor Karl Barth, could have described original sin any better. But note, in anticipation of our examination of Christian humanism, Ferguson’s comment that the dark satanic forces that plague our world “negate our common humanity.” For the problem at that first mythical Babel was not the desire to express a common humanity as some fundamentalists argue, but arrogance and the abuse of power that thwarted the attempt to build a moral human community and brought about its collapse.

Shortly after agreeing to give this lecture I went to see the prize-winning film entitled “Babel” (2006). It is a story of four families, two of which, the Moroccan and the Mexican, are poor and powerless, the other two, the one from Japan and the other the United States, are by comparison, wealthy and privileged. In a previous time before globalization had speeded up cultural interaction, their lives would, in all probability have remained separate from each other, at least at a personal level. But through a series of events, triggered off by the pastimes and wants of the privileged, and the desperate needs of the poor, their lives are inextricably bound together. As the events unfold, the viewer watches in horrified anticipation, for tragedy looms large from the beginning.

Brilliantly directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, Babel is about more than an obvious clash of cultures or civilizations that characterize our world, and has done for centuries. It is about the contradictions inherent in the situation, and the ambiguous consequences that result from our choices or lack of them. Tourism can bring benefits to a poor country, but it can also have destructive consequences. Providing work and a home for illegal migrants from Mexico, and many other countries, offers them a better life even in serving the privileged, but it is full of uncertainty and danger, of cultural alienation, and can end in despair or worse.

The privileged are not exempt from life-threatening problems. They all have their own pain to bear. The couple from California is desperately trying to deal with the cot death of a child; the Japanese father and daughter are struggling to come to terms with a mother’s suicide, congenital deafness and alienation from each other. Their involvement in the drama is largely the result of trying to deal with such pain, trying to drown their tears whether through tourism or sexual gratification. The pain of the poor is different. It has to do with their poverty, their lack of resources and access to power. They are trapped by the circumstances of their birth; for them there is no way out. But, ironically, the disintegration of their lives is a result of gaining access to symbols of power and privilege, a gun and a motorcar. All, whether rich or poor, are trapped in a web created both by circumstances beyond their control, and by their own decisions, not all wise.

What is clear, more so than before because we now have the analytical tools and the information – and the insights of a movie director -- on which to base our understanding, is the extent to which access to resources and power makes the difference between life and death. In some senses we are all victims, but

without this access some victims always remain so, and others though life-threatened are airlifted out of danger and nursed back to health. Some families are reunited because of it; others are devastated for lack of it. The truth is, in a world of enormous resources and plenty, the poor are not only always with us but generally getting poorer, and their access to health care, education and food is often worse now than before. And to compound the problem, the leaders of the wealthy nations continue to make promises and commitments, such as the Millennium Goals that they fail to keep, thus raising hopes and dashing them with unseemly regularity. Meanwhile far more is spent on weapons and war than the comparatively meager amount allotted to alleviating poverty, disease, and working for justice and peace. The bondage of political will has never been so much in evidence. So where do we as Reformed Christians stand in today's world, we who recognize its tragic character and yet yearn for its redemption?

Locating Ourselves in Babel

In analyzing movie it is important for us to locate ourselves in the Babel, otherwise our attempt to define our Reformed identity will remain an ideal construct unrelated to reality. So I ask you to reflect with me on what sociologists call our "social location," though I cannot do more than speak for myself. The truth is I am immensely privileged and wealthy in comparison with the vast majority of the world's population. Living in South Africa I am reminded of this day by day. Materially I lack for little; I have good health insurance and a good pension, and am able to travel, pursue my passion for woodwork, eat out more or less when I choose and do much else beside. This has serious consequences for understanding my Christian identity and vocation, for I do so from a position of privilege compared not only to the vast majority of my neighbours but also the vast majority of other Christians who live in lands torn apart by conflict and degraded by poverty. In other words, when I speak of my Christian or Reformed identity I need to acknowledge my privileges and find a way to deal with them. In doing so, I must not only take responsibility for my own personal failures but also for my contribution to the collapse of Babel. As Reformed Christians, our confession of faith always begins with a confession sin.

There is another message that comes through loudly and clearly in "Babel," another dimension of global reality and especially the division of the world into the privileged and the poor, and impinges on our social location. We usually think of the developed world as providing aid to the developing and poor nations, as though the latter had nothing to offer. Yet in the film, and in my experience and that of many others, the wounded tourist's life is saved by a wise old peasant woman and a rural barefoot doctor, though in the end still needing specialized treatment in a well equipped hospital. The same couple and their privileged children likewise are dependent on their illegal Mexican domestic worker, whose love for the children is as great as it is for her own son. There is, despite poverty and lack of privilege, a remarkable warmth in relationships, a caring and compassion, and a willingness to help without receiving payment or reward, that is too often missing amongst the privileged. We do not have to romanticize poverty to recognize that this is so. Money, power and control of resources do not solve all our problems, and those with a great deal of it are sometimes the most miserable and often the less generous. Is it not true that much of our concern for the poor, or for developing nations, arises out of a sense of guilt, an awareness that our privileged position has, in some way, been at the cost of others?

I am increasingly unhappy with the division of the world into the "developed" and the "developing nations," and with the way in which the media of the developed world continually portrays the other. In what sense are the developed nations developed? Certainly in terms of wealth, science and technology

and the fruits of modernity; but is not a great deal of this the result of colonial and imperial exploitation on a massive scale, and have not the developed nations been the creators of weapons of mass destruction and leaders in the degradation of the environment? And is there not a spiritual hunger and emptiness in the developed world which belies that designation, if by developed we mean nations that have acquired wisdom and achieved greatness? And are not the so-called “developing nations,” despite all their own seemingly chronic failures, nonetheless rich in cultural assets and resources both natural and human, and well endowed when it comes to wisdom, humanity, creativity and the gift of hospitality? And would they not be in a far better position today if it were not for unfair global trade practices, and economic imbalances that drain away so many doctors, nurses, and other skilled professionals to meet the needs of the developed world to the severe cost of the countries from which they come and where they were trained at great expense?

A vast and increasing number of younger people in the “developing nations” of the world, and especially but not only in the Muslim Middle East, have a deep sense of disillusionment with the promises of globalism, and a great deal of anger towards the West for reasons such as these. For them, globalism signals religious, cultural and economic domination by a decadent Christian West that has sold its soul to secularism and kept them in poverty. Thus the litany of crusades and inquisitions in the name of Christ continues to haunt us, as does the connection made between Christianity (not least Reformed Christianity) and slavery, colonization, racism and apartheid.

But as we well know, religious fundamentalism and militancy is not confined to Islam, it is deeply entrenched in other religions, not least Christianity. Like Muslim militancy Christian fundamentalism is equally a response to Western secularism. Triumphant in its assertion of Christian absolutism, such fundamentalism promotes the coming of Armageddon and the establishment of a Christian millennial utopia even if it means a nuclear holocaust.

At the same time there are many people today, not least in the West, who have renounced the Christian faith in which they, or at least their parents were nurtured because they no longer wish to identify with its historical legacy or with the fundamentalism that has now become so dominant. And, understandably they draw out the inference that the God Christianity proclaims must be a delusion. So many members of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa have given up on Christianity because of the way in which their church supported apartheid. Some of them embracing other forms of Christianity, but others simply drifting beyond religious commitment into secularism. This is the context in which I now want us to consider Christian humanism which, I believe, is a strong antidote to both Christian fundamentalism and the secularism that pervades Babel.

Christian Humanists in Babel

Christian humanism has a long history, predating the Renaissance and what we now refer to as “secular humanism.” But the term is usually applied first of all to those in the 16th century such as Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Reformer Zwingli, who embraced its scholarship and values. Calvin himself was profoundly influenced by humanist scholarship, and in some respects may be numbered amongst the Christian humanists. Indeed, Christian humanism was in many ways the midwife of the Reformed tradition.

In more recent times the term Christian humanist and the values it represents has been espoused by several distinguished Catholic theologians and now again by some of us who are Protestant. What unites Christian humanists is the conviction that in Christ God embraced humanity and sought to restore its dignity in all its fullness. It is *Christian* humanism, because it is founded on faith in Jesus Christ as the truly human being, and it is Christian *humanism* for precisely the same reason. On this basis Christian humanism asserts the dignity of being human, and therefore of every human being. This is not a new fad; this is biblical faith and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

From this perspective our being Christian is not our primary identity; being human is. We are human beings before we are Christians, and we belong to the human race before we belong to the Christian Church. If that be so, it is even more true that we are human beings before we are American or South African. God did not create us British or German or Japanese, he created us men and women in his image, and Christ did not come to make us Christians or Americans, but to redeem and restore our humanity as sons and daughters of God. Whatever else our Christian identity is about, whether through baptism, confession or denominational allegiance, it is ultimately about our common humanity and therefore our solidarity with all of humanity both in suffering and in hope.

But the next affirmation is a critical corollary. Our identity as Christians is not unimportant, quite the contrary. It is precisely because of our Christian commitment that we recognize our shared humanity with the rest of the planet, and not just with our fellow human beings but with the environment within which we live. In other words, being Christian is not of lesser significance for us, something we can simply put aside; being Christian determines the way in which we see the world, the way in which we relate to others, especially those different from us, the way in which act, and therefore the values we espouse. We may be human beings before we are Christians, but because we are Christians we have accepted the responsibility of becoming human beings who are being conformed to the One who, for us, is the truly human one, Jesus Christ. This means that we cannot escape from the Babel and its contradictions and hide in some spiritual sphere untouched by human struggle and pain, or wrap ourselves into some cocoon woven by individual self-interest and protected by privilege. Neither fundamentalism nor secularism is an option for us.

On the contrary, our identity as Christians is constructed as we relate to the world and other people, and especially to people who are different from us whether by ethnic background, religion or class. It is in relationship to “the other” that we discover who we are; not in ways that lead to alienation, confusion and conflict, but rather in ways that build a common sense of humanity and serve the common good. After all, is not the church meant to be a sign of the new humanity in which all people can find a home rather than an enclave that excludes others on grounds that have nothing to do with the gospel and the embrace of Christ?

Christian humanism does, however, provide further guidelines for us in constructing our Christian identity as citizens of this world who are committed to following Jesus Christ; guidelines that enable us to avoid bad religion on the one hand, and the equally bad acids of secularism on the other. So let me suggest what Christian humanism means for us who accept our common humanity in the name of Christ and seek to be his disciples in the world:

- Christian humanists have always insisted on the importance of education, not simply to obtain skills but to acquire wisdom.

- Christian humanists have always respected difference, yet they have been equally committed to seeking and standing for the truth.
- Christian humanists have always been committed to the wellbeing of their country, but they have been critical patriots, placing justice above national interests.
- Christian humanists have always encouraged human creativity and cherished beauty.
- Christian humanists have always been concerned to ensure that scientific and technological development serve the common good.

All of these, I believe, are important for us in reconstructing our Reformed identity a world imperiled by foolish decisions, blighted by xenophobia and political spin, overwhelmed by images of ugliness, and threatened by the very technologies that we have created for our benefit.

Earlier I referred to the fact that Christian humanism was the midwife of the Reformation and more specifically that associated with Zwingli and Calvin.

My basic thesis in linking the Reformed tradition with Christian humanism today builds on this historic connection. When the Reformed tradition loses touch with its humanist origins and fails to maintain the creative tension between them, then it moves towards fundamentalism and moralism both of which have been responsible for the image of Calvinism as rigidly dogmatic, narrow-minded, and hypocritical. Literature is full of allusions to a Calvinism that either kept its followers in bondage to fundamentalism or alienated them from Christianity altogether. Christian humanism, the dynamism that spawned the youthful Reformation, keeps the Reformed tradition vibrant and open to the renewing and creative power of Word and Spirit and, in doing so, keeps it firmly located in the struggle to transform Babel so that it becomes a human community of justice and peace rather than a world of confusion in danger of collapse.

Being Reformed in Babel

As Reformed Christians we draw on the Christian heritage as a whole. Yet our understanding of that heritage has been shaped in considerable measure by the 16th century Reformation, and most notably by the endeavours of John Calvin and, lest he be forgotten, not a little by Ulrich Zwingli whose reforms in Zurich have also influenced us greatly. Yet, however much we are indebted to the 16th century Reformation in Switzerland and subsequent developments in Scotland, Holland and elsewhere, we do not lived in that era. So we have to consider what it means to be Reformed today in our own historical, social and cultural context, whether in North America, Europe, Africa, Asia or Latin America. We also cannot ignore the advances in scholarship, including biblical and theological enquiry, as well as historical and ecumenical experience, that separate us from previous generations of Reformed Christians, even though we can still learn much from them. And, as I have intimated, neither can we reconstruct our identity as Reformed Christians today unless we take seriously the insights of Christian humanism whether we adopt that term or not.

Calvin's most creative contribution to the legacy in which we stand was a book and a city. The book was his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in which he provided a commentary on Holy Scripture and reformulated the doctrines of the Christian faith on that basis. The city was Geneva, but it could well be modern Babel, in which Calvin sought to reform the Church as a community of faithful believers rather

than an hierarchical institution, and remodel society so that it reflected better God's rule of justice and peace. These two contributions have left an indelible mark on the Reformed tradition, the first placing a premium on the Bible and providing the hermeneutical perspectives for interpreting it; the second, in insisting that our Christian vocation and that of the church requires active engagement in the affairs of the world, the "theatre of God's glory."

Having said this we must acknowledge that not all Reformed Christians and churches understand Calvin's legacy in the same way, and the divisions and schisms that have marked the Reformed tradition, virtually from the beginning, are evidence that this is so. All of us are fully aware of this because we experience the tension within our own churches and, even within ourselves, between the conservative and the more liberal, progressive or Christian humanist. The truth is, we are all somewhere on the same spectrum, even if at opposite ends, and we can all claim in some measure to be faithful to the tradition, even if differently so.

I respect the Reformed tradition enough to recognize the importance of being faithful to it; yet in respecting the tradition I believe that at its best it is a liberating and transforming tradition. After all, the Swiss Reformers did not set out to create a new tradition, but to renew the Church through listening again to the Spirit speaking afresh through the Word. This being so, a Reformed Church is a listening Church, a Church that is silent before the Word before it speaks that Word to the world and to itself. The danger of Reformed Churches themselves becoming encrusted in their own traditions and institutions led to the conviction that the Church is only the Church as it is continually in the process of reformation. In doing so we neither decry nor overly exalt tradition, but rather recognize that the Lord "has yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word" as the Puritan Pilgrim Father, John Robinson put it. The Reformed tradition should not be calcified in the past, but should rather be an ongoing project that listens to the Word speaking today. Therein lies the progressive and transforming impulse of being Reformed.

Being Reformed has often meant being fiercely Protestant and therefore in a polemical relation to other traditions. This has long been the case in Northern Ireland, and it was equally the case in South Africa during the years of apartheid. There is undoubtedly support in the tradition for defining being Reformed over against being papist, for after all was this not Calvin's own position? Yet I doubt whether any of us define ourselves as Reformed in such a polemical and un-ecumenical way today. After all, being Reformed is not sectarian, but a way of being the Catholic Church and it is therefore ecumenical in principle. For Calvin and his colleagues, the term "catholic" was always held in high esteem to describe the Church and what it meant to be Christian. They were not engaged in starting a new denomination but in reforming the Catholic Church on the basis of the gospel and therefore deeply concerned, as were the Christian humanists, to maintain the unity of the Church even though they failed to do so.

The reformation of the Church, based in Calvin's mind on the Bible and the primitive Church, required a certain type of church order, discipline and structure that would overcome the abuses of hierarchical authority. Being Reformed thus meant, and means, espousing a representative form of church government designed to control the use of power. Perhaps it is this understanding of ecclesial polity that binds most Reformed Christians together, and it is one that has much merit. Yet could it not also be, as the poet John Milton declared, that at times "new presbyter is but old priest writ large." In other words, while our church order is designed to curb the abuse of power do we not at times use it to our own

advantage rather than for the sake of the renewal and mission of the church in the world? Being Reformed, I submit, has too often been identified with defending a particular church structure and order, however true and good, rather than with being an inclusive Christian community serving the world.

Being Reformed has to do with a certain freedom that finds expression, for example, in the way we worship. Traditionally we have not been bound to follow liturgical texts in the same way as the Orthodox, Catholic or Episcopalians. Yet, at least in Europe and the West, our way of worship has often become as traditional as any other, lacking freedom and creativity, or not very different from other forms of Protestantism, thus lacking anything distinctive. Moreover, our tradition of infrequent celebrations of Holy Communion has not only been unfaithful to Calvin's own insistence on a weekly celebration of the sacrament together with the preaching of the Word, but has led to a diet of worship that is often far too cerebral (though not in much of Africa!) and lacking in aesthetic sensitivity, in short, to the loss of the sacramental character of Christian life and worship. Fortunately we have, in recent times, learnt much and been enriched greatly through ecumenical engagement, with the result that we are often far more ecumenical hybrids when it comes to spirituality and worship.

Being Reformed has often been identified with a particularly moralistic understanding of Christianity, notably in John Knox's Scotland which he sought to make a second Geneva. Keeping the Sabbath, keeping your hands off someone else's cattle, kilt and wife, and keeping away from taverns and theatres, were its trademarks. I fear, that few of us would measure up to such codes of behaviour, and would probably not be much better at keeping the Ten Commandments or living according to the Sermon on the Mount than Methodists, Baptists or Greek Orthodox. Yet the "third use of the Law" as Calvin called it, is part of our tradition. As such we reject cheap grace and insist that being Christian requires of us faithful discipleship in all areas of life. The problem is that the Reformed tradition has too often degenerated into a moralistic and censorious sect, and as such the subject of many a caricature along with "gloomy Calvin" as George Eliot described him.

But what is undeniably true, is that our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord requires that a Reformed Church be a prophetic Church. Throughout the history of our tradition, the Reformed Church has been most authentically so when it has challenged the dehumanizing values that dominate our culture and threaten the well-being of the world. And it has been most unreformed when it has succumbed to those values, and failed to speak the truth to those in power. As Reformed Christians we are committed to the struggle for human dignity and rights, we are committed to working for economic policies that are just, we accept responsibility as stewards of this earth in which we live, and we are concerned about every aspect of our respective cultures within which life either flourishes or decays. We may live in Babel, but we try not to let Babel squeeze us into its mould.

Last, but by no means least, being Reformed has traditionally meant affirming a specific theological or confessional position that ensures that the Word is faithfully proclaimed and the sacraments truly administered. To be Reformed from this perspective, has meant accepting, amongst others, that the Heidelberg Catechism, the Westminster Confession, and for some, the decrees of the Synod of Dort, contain all Christian truth. Confessions of faith are certainly important indicators of what it has meant, and continues to mean to be Reformed, and there are undoubtedly Reformed Christians today for whom the Westminster Confession and the Canons of Dort remain the last word. But while we certainly recognize that sin pervades all of life and stands under God's judgment, do we really believe in total depravity? While we acknowledge that we do not merit God's love, do we really believe that God's

salvation is limited to an elect and the rest are damned? And while we accept the authority of the Bible, do any of us regard it as infallible? In maintaining these, the Reformed tradition spawned fundamentalism and too often sided with reactionary causes.

Our understanding of being Reformed today must surely draw on our confessional heritage, but we constantly reformulate and restate what that is in relation to the struggles and issues of our day, both theological and social. So we acknowledge the Barmen Declaration as an authentic witness to Jesus Christ against Nazi tyranny, just as we in South Africa acknowledge the Belhar Confession as an authentic witness to Jesus Christ against apartheid. In such ways we express our commitment to confess Christ faithfully within the context of today's world.

The gospel as we understand it is not a set of timeless propositions, however true, but the joyful good news of Jesus Christ who is always the same, yet forever fresh, liberating, reconciling and transforming. God's covenant with humankind and the earth is a redemptive and inclusive covenant in which God's grace rather than God's judgment has the final word. "Jesus Christ" declares your Confession of 1967 is "God with man (humanity)." (9.07) And, by inference, God is not only "with humanity" but in Christ God is, as Karl Barth insisted, "for humanity." This, I believe, is why we our Reformed identity is deeply rooted in our Christian humanist origins.

As Christians we live in the light of the resurrection, and for that reason we turn their backs on cynicism about humanity and live as agents of hope. We may not believe that "man is the measure of all things" but we do believe that humanity within the broader context of the world as a whole, has a God-given dignity. We therefore welcome and foster every sign of hope for our world amidst its contradictions, but we do not ultimately put our faith in new world orders and messianic visions of utopia, anymore than we believe that technological advance itself will save the world. Our faith is in the much more hidden reality of a new age heralded by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that enables us to live in hope. We certainly acknowledge the sinfulness of humanity, but we believe more strongly in the redemptive power of God and the dignity of humanity; we certainly recognize the injustice, oppression and inhumanity of our world and our own part in them, but we believe more strongly in the ultimate triumph of justice, freedom, and love. In that hope we seek to be Christians, Reformed Christians, amidst the global contradictions of our time.