

The Idea of Reform¹

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Has there ever been a time in history when change, radical and comprehensive change, has been called for so loudly, insistently and continually? The most important question is *exactly what mode* of change are we going to choose in order to renew the old, the worn, and the wrong.

The intention of this chapter is to provide only a reconnaissance. The main points to be looked at are the following:

- *A systematic comparison* of the concept of reformation and other concepts of renewal.
- *A historical reconnaissance* of the origin, the meaning and the development of the concept of reformation as a mode of change.

1. Reformation Compared with Other Concepts of Renewal

In order to clarify the uncertainty about what *reformation* or *reformational* means I have done two things: In the first place, in order to bring to the fore the uniqueness of the idea of reformation more clearly, I have *systematically* compared it with other views about renewal. In the second place, I have turned to the history of Christendom in order to determine in *historical* terms where exactly the idea of reformation has had its origin and what it looked like originally. My intention has been to determine to what extent my systematic insights could be enriched and enlarged through the historical material. I have also, in both cases (both systematic and historical) concentrated on the deeper religious *foundations* of the concept of reformation, and not so much on its politico-social *effects*. That will be dealt with in the third section of this chapter.

It is not so easy to determine our own identity as reformationally minded thinkers among other competing concepts of renewal, because there are both similarities and differences.

On the one hand our point of view shares just enough with other forms of renewal to be mistaken, by one or the other of them, as 'kindred spirits', or even (by those with evil intent) as collaborators with their enemy (for example, 'evolution'). On the other hand I am convinced that we also differ so clearly that we may never equal our vision with any of

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them. Subsequently we would like, even if very cursorily, to determine, as accurately as possible what the differences and similarities are in order to close this section with a definition in which we attempt to capture the uniqueness of the concept of reformation.

1.1 Change is Not Necessarily Renewal

Mere change, adjustment or simple becoming is not yet renewal. Renewal is a special kind of change which is characterized, amongst others, by the following: (a) it stresses the new, (b) there is a specific relationship between the new and the old or the foregoing, and (c) the stress is on the renewed establishment of clear criteria, principles or norms from the past which also still have to be valid in the present. Reformation holds such a vision of renewal. It should be clearly distinguished, however, from other concepts of renewal, such as

- the historical-deterministic;
- the vitalist-anthropocentric; and
- the perfectionist-utopian

Note: the names which have been chosen here for each of the three main types are provisional. One could argue, for example, that a utopian concept of renewal such as the revolutionary one is deterministic, because according to such a vision the future is not open, but has already been determined in advance.

Let us look briefly at each of them.

1.2 Historical-Deterministic Views of Renewal

I would like to mention three examples of this.

According to the concept of *eternal repetition* (which is already present in the Greeks and again in the previous century in Friedrich Nietzsche), similar circumstances and events recur unavoidably in the history of the cosmos and of man in a cyclical fashion. (This implies that history is not a line but a spiral.)

Closely related to this concept there are the views of certain historians that each period in history, and also history as a whole (cf. for example o. Spengler's *Die Untergang des Abendlandes - The Decline of the West*) consist of at least three phases (which man cannot change at all), viz. growth, flowering and decline.

A third example of historical determinism, to my mind, is the *traditionalist* or *repristinatory* approach according to which renewal can only come about in the present by letting the past revive. The beautiful ideals of the past have to be 'dreamed anew'. The best tonic for the present is conversion to the past.

What are the similarities between this view and a reformational view? We agree with the idea that the past can never be totally eradicated. There are good things from previous periods which may not only be retained, but should be conserved as a precious heritage.

We differ, however, because each tradition - however good, antique or orthodox - also has a share in evil and cannot be retained unchanged for eternity. Human history is also not a cyclical matter. (When Christ, in Rev. 22:13 says that 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, Beginning and the End', He does not imply that the end is equal to the beginning, but that *He* is the beginning and the end.) Human history therefore may not be seen in accordance with cosmological or biological concepts of growth - flowering - decline. (If one wanted to talk in terms of images from nature, it might be better to talk of the time of *harvest* than the period of *autumn* (J. Huizinga) of the Middle Ages - or perhaps it is even better to use H.A. Oberman's 'cradle theory' - each period serves as a cradle for the subsequent one. The dying of one period is always accompanied by the painful birth of the new one.) And in the final instance a specific period from history cannot be repeated at will - the clock of history cannot be turned back.

1.3 Vitalist-Anthropocentric Visions of Renewal

Here too I would like to mention three examples.

The first is the vision of the *Renaissance* (of *renasci* = to be reborn, to grow again). This period in the 15th and 16th centuries does not any longer need Christendom to act as midwife in the process of giving life to a new dispensation. Long before Christendom the Classical (Greek and Roman) period had proved what man is capable of. Renaissance man therefore rejects the intellectual compromise of the Middle Ages between pagan Ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity and reverts to the Classics (although not slavishly) as an injection by means of which man can renew himself out of his own strength.

A second vision which could be categorized in this section is *revivalism* (from $\alpha\gamma\beta\omega\zeta$ = revival and *revivare* = to revive). Note that I am not dealing here with the *Biblical idea* of true revival, but with the false concept of some (definitely unreformed) Christians who think they can, as it were on order, produce revivals from their own power for

church and Christendom.

A third theory of renewal which might fit in here is that of *challenge and response* - among others, Pragmatism and the historian A. Toynbee.

It should already be clear to you, however, that we cannot accept any one of these concepts of renewal. Man cannot renew himself and his environment purely from his own strength, and history, furthermore, is not simply a matter of challenge and response, because sin is more than a simple challenge.

1.4 Perfectionist-Utopian Renewal Concepts

I can here think of four examples: the idea of progress, evolutionism, revolutionism and millennialism.

The concept of *progress* (strongly held in the previous century) is optimistic about an ongoing, comprehensive, unstoppable progress, especially as a result of modern scientific-technological development. Man is approaching a wonderful new age!

Let us look in some more detail at the *revolutionary manner of renewal*, seeing that it is at present especially topical in many countries of the world. Reformational thinkers agree with the revolutionaries that the obsolete, archaic and decadent should immediately be tackled. We differ, however, in terms of origin, aims, methods and results.

Revolution has its *origin* within the secular, unbiblical mode of thought. (For that reason I hesitate as a Christian to use the word 'revolutionary', and, for example, as does W.F. Graham (1978) to call Calvin a 'constructive revolutionary' or to speak of 'revolution' in the case of the Puritans. Or were the Puritans in England, the Huguenots in France, the Guises in Holland, the Covenanters in Scotland and the Pilgrim Fathers in the USA in actual fact revolutionary reformers?) Reformation (and this will be clearly indicated in the subsequent section) is not only at least 2 000 years older than the concept of revolution, but has its origin in the infallible revelation of God Himself.

The *purpose* of revolution is through their strategy of renewal, to create a paradise on this earth. Reformation is much more modest and realistic, seeing that it knows from Scripture that paradise will not be regained through human efforts. The evil heart of man will also remain like that in a 'new' dispensation brought about by human effort - even through violence. Just like the old it will never be able to be fully good or correct. A

Christian is not a utopian thinker!

As regards the *methods*, revolution aims at attaining its goal rapidly. It is precisely because of the acknowledgement of the fact that man has been corrupted by sin that reformation is a slow and arduous process.

Because revolution and reformation have different visions on the past and the present, their methods of change also differ. Revolutionaries wish to destroy the old, totally replace it, because they believe that the existing reality is irretrievably bad. Reformational thinkers have a view of history which makes them realize that it is impossible to cut the umbilical cord with the past irrevocably. For that reason they do not seek *destruction*, but wish to attain a new future by means of *renewal*. Reformation never means something totally new - it is only God who can create something absolutely new.

The original biological concept of *evolution* soon develops into an evolutionist total vision of life. The new era of superman is coming. We simply have to be patient, seeing that it took so many million years to reach our present phase of development. Renewal cannot take place overnight. Development takes place in the right direction of its own volition anyway.

Revolutionary thinkers are in much more of a hurry. They strive for an immediate, total, radical, definite renewal of society - if necessary, with violence. The existing order is bad right through, and should be eliminated without further ado. As against this, the new system will be perfect, without a flaw.

Among Christians too we find *perfectionist ideas* at an early stage (for example, Joachim of Fiore, who died in 1202). These ideas include the millennium, a period during which a state approaching perfection will prevail on earth.

Our view of all these perfectionist-utopian visions is that we have to cling to both the indelible imperfection of this dispensation and the radical renewal as a result of God's grace. (God guides history towards *his* future - better than all human efforts.) In our vision of history we have to cling to the fact that no person or system - however old or new - can be 100% free from sin.

The concept of *progress* of the nineteenth century has proved in our century to have been a mirage. More schools have not simply obviated the need for prisons!

And as regards the *evolutional*, *mode of renewal* (still popular in South Africa too), we agree that renewal has to occur within the context of historical continuity. (The sixteenth century Reformation, for example, was characterized by both its late Medieval and early modern character.) With a revolutionary, abrupt upheaval something is always lost. (Naturally the good should be basis for the continuity, and not the bad.)

We differ from the evolutionary thinkers, too, however (and in this regard we are closer to the revolutionary) because they have lead in their shoes, are not in a hurry to reform, usually the time is not considered to be ripe for action -while the time is always over-ripe for change of that which is wrong.

Because reformation does not simply want to *invert* but to *convert*, it goes much *deeper* than revolution. Reformation of the heart lies at the heart of reformation!

And it is precisely because reformation begins with the deepest core of humanity - without ending there! - and knows that human hearts cannot be renewed by means of force, that it does not believe in violence as a method of renewal.

The simple yet profound parables of Christ indicate the way for the reformer as against the methods used by the revolutionary and the reactionary: invisible like yeast - and not with 'necklaces'² or Alsation dogs; quiet like light - and not with petrol bombs and armoured vehicles; seemingly powerless and tiny like a mustard seed - not with AK47 or R4 guns.

Finally, the *results* of revolution and reformation will also differ. Because revolution is primarily a negative reaction against the existing order, it cannot easily give life to the positive. It usually only leads to further decline or a subsequent revolution. This road of renewal becomes a cul-de-sac. Reformation, however, remains an open road, because in the first place it is not *against* something, but *for* new obedience to God. Such a positive attitude is the road of hope leading to true renewal - in spite of all the trouble, the disappointments and failures, one will try again and again.

To recapitulate: reformation-minded people are not *stagnant traditionalists*, also not *leaden-footed evolutionists*, still less *fire-starting revolutionists*, but they are *hopeful light-bearers*.

² A method of punishing so-called sell-outs siding with the present regime in South Africa.

1.5 Conclusion

Our conclusions at the end of the comparison between the different concepts of renewal are the following: Reformation does have similarities with, but finally no true equals among other concepts of renewal since pre-Christian times and up to today. It is a unique, specifically Christian vision, rooted in the only true religion of renewal, which is the Biblical one. The concept of reformation has also left clear tracks throughout history, even though man has not always been able to discern them. (In the subsequent section we will trace some of these beacons on the road to support this preliminary statement.)

In order to pull the strings together somewhat, I would like to offer a tentative description of what I think constitutes reformation (this definition will have to be tested against what follows):

A reformational life is (1) the deliberate (2) fearless (3) positive effort (4) of Christians (5) in deep dependence on God and (6) in accordance with Biblical guidelines (7) without ceasing (8) to improve the relatively good further (9) to combat evil in all its manifestations and (10) to strive for the (11) total (12) and integral (13) renewal (14) of the individual and (15) society.

In order not to fall into total hopelessness about the impotence of the Calvinist-reformational tradition in my country, let us return to the origins to see how the idea of reformation (of the social life too) shaped in Scripture and among the early Christians. Let us pray that the unpolluted water of the source which we are imbibing here give us new inspiration for the future. (I deliberately use the word 'unpolluted', because I had already indicated, ten years ago, that the Christian-National from which Calvinism had assumed in South Africa was not unpolluted, authentic Biblical-reformational thinking.)

2. The Idea of Reformation in the New Testament, the Patristic Period, the Middle Ages and the Sixteenth Century Reformation - Some Landmarks

The end of the systematic section of this paper was signalled by a preliminary definition of what reformation really entails. The intention with this subsequent historical section is to see to what extent, enriched by the history of Christendom, we can expand, supplement or

even adjust our definition. Perhaps our pilgrimage *ad fontes* also helps us to learn something more concrete about the strategy of reformational thought.

2.1 New Testament Perspectives

Well-known Biblical concepts of renewal, such as, for example, *rebirth*, *conversion*, *confession of guilt* and *sanctification* are closely related although not identical with the idea of reformation. They are the deep religious roots, the starting points or foundations of the Christian concept of reformation.

Reformation without *regeneration* is impossible. South Africa was the first country to progress so far in medical terms that Dr. Chris Barnard could perform a heart transplant on an almost dying patient. But what does it help if many South Africans have not yet received a spiritual heart transplant? Rebirth means a new heart, which has the implication that people have to begin to live anew in a personal relationship to Christ and should also feel involved in the needs of their fellowmen, regardless of race or language. Whoever hopes for sociopolitical renewal without a new, reborn heart, builds his reformational efforts on quicksands.

The same is true of *conversion*. (One could call conversion and reformation the inside and the outside of the same issue.) Reformation without an awareness of sin and confession of guilt is excluded. And sanctification one could simply call ongoing, daily conversion.

The two most general words for ‘new’ in the New Testament have an interesting difference in meaning. The Greek word *kainoos* indicates the totally new, totally different, what has not been before, and what has been effected by the saving death of Christ. (For example, new man, earth, heaven, name, hymn, creation, Jerusalem.) Through Him creation is freed of the old and released into the new. The word *neos* more often carries the connotation of a new beginning in time, a renewal of the old (*palaios*). One could therefore say that the former word has a more qualitative and the latter word a more temporal meaning. The New Testament (and especially Paul) use both (and their derivations) to indicate the fundamental and comprehensive renewal of man.

Usually the two concepts are supplied with the prefix *ana* (= again) for example, *anakainosis*, *ananeosis* = renewal (the same as the Latin *renovatio*). Other words (with prefixes) which are also important in this regard are *anaplaßein* and *metamorfoosis* = reformation, transformation (the same as the Latin *reformatio*) and *apokatastasis* = recovery (the same as the Latin *restitutio*, *restauratio*).

But even together with the prefix *ana-* (or *re-* in Latin) the element of the new still remains

the dominant, and not the retrospective element suggested by the prefix. At the same time the novelty is understood as similarity of the new state of being with the perfect, original state of being. Reformation therefore has the double connotation of newness and original goodness. In *reformare* the *forma* means that something has been newly shaped to form and firmness. And the prefix *re* (back/again) indicates the foregoing norm or model according to which the formation of the new occurs. Reformation presupposes brokenness or sinfulness, and therefore indicates the retrieval of an original perfection with a view to an improvement of even the original. (At the same time reformation has, apart from this protological, also an eschatological dimension: it is not mere repetition but also expectation of God's perfecting of the future.)

I would very much like to do an exegesis of the five best-known renewal texts. But as a result of the lack of time this will not be possible, so that I only quote them: Rom. 12,2; 2 Cor. 3,18; Eph. 4,22-24; Col. 3,9.10 and Ti. 3,5. From all these texts together we find the following basic thoughts: The believer has an ongoing task to break away from the old (sinful) person and to be renewed towards his original being an image of God. Our Example in this is Christ (*the Image of God*), and this is made possible by way of our rebirth through the Holy Spirit. The purpose of the renewal is to get to know God's will again and to obey it.

This Biblical concept of reformation of man towards or according to the image of God had become the inspiration of the early Christian reformatory idea which we are going to look at briefly. The Pauline doctrine of man's renewal in Christ made a strong impression on the Church Fathers of the first centuries after Christ. One could even say that the idea of *reformatio* or *renovatio ad imaginem Dei* was the central concept in Patristic thought. Reformation to them was renewal. And renewal, according to them, could not be detached from the basic idea of recreation in the image of God. They noted the core of the Christian faith: not a religion of the old, the status quo, but a marvellous faith in the new, an ongoing renewal of creation.

2.2 The Greek (Eastern) Church Fathers

G.B. Ladner (*The Idea of Reform. Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers*) finds three basic concepts in the Greek fathers which outline their concept of reformation: the retrieval of man's being an image of God, the return to paradise, and the representation of the divine kingdom on earth. The man who has found his lost image again, and thus also the lost state of paradise, is also once again the representative of God's kingdom on earth. Only once he is *imago Dei* again, can man be a reformer!

Reformation is therefore, for them, a return to the high position which man had to relinquish in Paradise. And this is not a purely archaeological or eschatological idea, because reformation has to take place in this world. Although not yet so strongly developed, the idea of the Greek fathers about reformation is not purely individualistic. They already see something of the link between personal renewal and social reformation. Yet in the Eastern Church there is still too much stress on the mystical concept of renewal towards the image of God as assimilation with God (making man divine), the vision of God by the individual purified soul, and the resultant regaining of paradise. The ascetic *vita contemplativa* is still far too important for them than the *vita activa* (for example, care for the poor, the sick, strangers) which emerges more strongly in the Western Church.

2.3 The Latin (Western) Church Fathers

Two clear differences of the Western Church with the Eastern are therefore the following: 1. the social character of reformation emerges far more clearly in the West, and 2. the West does not remain stuck at the restorative or retrospective meaning of reformation (reformation does not have such a strong temporal meaning with them), but the prospective also emerges. In Tertullian, for example, we find the concept of *melius reformare* or *reformatio in melius*, that, is, reformation towards something better. (Because the criterion is not habit - truth is more important than tradition.) From the various writings one gets the clear impression that reformation is more connected with the idea of progression than of regression.

2.4 Development During the Middle Ages

During the Patristic period the Biblical reformatory concept of renewal towards the image of God was extended to the reformation of the individual Christian and the Christian communities in the monasteries. It was also the case in Gregory the Great (Pope from 590-604), who used the concepts *refonnare* and *renovare* –to indicate the personal reformation of the Christian through the mercy of the Holy Spirit as well as of the Christian groups (such as monks), but not of the church as a whole.

Gregory VII (Pope from 1073-1085) used the same words to indicate the reformation of the church itself. According to him the deformation of the church assumed such proportions that the whole hierarchical structure of the church had to be reformed to protect personal renewal and to save Christian society.

A third step followed when Innocentius III (Pope from 1198-1216) stated the necessity of reformation not only for the individuals or the monastic communities and the church, but for the whole of *Christianitas*, that is, for politico-socioeconomic life as well.

From the Patristic period to the Middle Ages there is therefore a clear line of development: from reformation of the individual Christian to the reformation of the whole *corpus Christianum*.

Seeing that we are moving into better-known terrain now, I am providing only a few flashes of information about Calvin. With the aid of F.L. Battles' computerized concordance of Calvin's *Institutes* (1559) I have gone to specific parts of the *Institutes* from the starting point of words such as *refonnatio*, *renovatio*, *reparatio* and *regeneratio* and their corresponding verbs. (Cf. especially *ICR* 1,15,4; 11,3,1; 11,3,7; 11,5,15; 111,3,9; 111,11,6; 111,17,5 and IV,15,5). The similarity between Calvin and the basic ideas of the Church fathers, especially Augustine, was striking. The well-known Pauline renewal texts also emerge again.

Calvin puts the stress strongly on the deepest religious roots of reformation (Reformation of the heart is the heart of reformation!).

In the first place *repentance* is needed. And the two sides of true repentance are the dying of the old and the rebirth of the new. The beginning of *rebirth* (regeneration) is therefore situated in the self-crucifixion of sinful man.

And the purpose of repentance and rebirth is to restore in us the *image of God*, which had been affected and almost obliterated by Adam's transgression. In no less than four of the few references from the *Institutes* mentioned above Calvin states that reformation means the reformation or renewal or reinstatement of God's image in us (*in renovatione imaginis Dei*). Together with Paul (2 Cor. 4:4) he interprets the being image of God as true justice and holiness.

After the forgiveness of sin and the granting of righteousness in Christ we are thus reformed to a new life through the mercy of the Holy Spirit. The whole of the soul (will and intellect) should be reformed. Calvin also stresses the fact that the renewal comes from the will of God and not from us.

If one reads only his *Institutes* one could well think that Calvin believed only in personal reformation. This is not the case, however. We know from history, and many

careful studies during the past two decades have confirmed this, that this centrally-religious renewal of man was a powerful dynamo which changed the whole society of the Alpine city of Geneva. Calvin was not only the reformer of individual and church, but also of the socio-economic-political life of the time.

2.6 Conclusion

From the brief survey of the first 1500 years of the history of Christendom interesting facts have emerged, for example the simple fact (which Protestants often do not know) that the sixteenth century Reformation was not the only reformation in history!

The quick dip into history also helps us to return to our provisional definition (cf. 1.5) and to see whether history confirms it, and can perhaps also enrich it. I would like to direct attention to four points, which are not included in our provisional definition and which might be worked out in more detail:

In the first place, the exact *relationship between the old and the new* in the process of reformation. It has emerged that the change which reformation envisages is not only a temporal (of the present back to the past) but a qualitative change. Stated differently, the element of the ‘again’/ ‘back’ (reformare), the retrospective or restorative, is not the most important, but rather the new or prospective is more important.

In the second place we learn more about the *religious core of reformation*. It emerges that the first step on the road of reformation is not what you do to the world around you or for God, but what you do to yourself and what is done for you (through God). Repentance and conversion are painful processes, but reformation cannot begin without them. And I think that we can definitely learn something of importance for our own country here. Reformation means that you first have to kill the sin within yourself before you can relive.

Thirdly there is also a bright shaft of light shining through the whole history of the Christian concept of reformation. This is the idea of *reformation towards being image of God* through the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, to be able to know the will of God (in creation and in Scripture) and to live accordingly. (It is a pity that there is no time to work out more fully this rich Biblical concept of man as image of God.)

In the fourth place we learn from history something about the *strategy/strategies of reformation*. It seems that there is no fixed recipe.

At times it is necessary first to concentrate on individual, personal reformation and then finally to come to a wider social context. (In Luther the reformer developed in the folds of a monk's habit. His reformation was born out of a lonely personal struggle in a monk's cell.) At times exactly the opposite is needed: start with the terrible social injustice and work through to the individual. (In Zwingli the reformer was born in a humanist's toga, and even in soldier's uniform. His reformation was born in the midst of demanding work in a congregation, in the politico-social unrest of the day, and even on a battlefield.)

We have also seen from history that even asceticism can be a strategy for move within society, and at times both actions are needed simultaneously.

It would also seem that - because one can never give attention to everything at the same time - that a reformer has to have a keen sense of which parts of the sinful world offer the greatest seduction or threat, and then combat this or sometimes even flee from it.

2.7 Final Definition

Our provisional definition (1.5) can therefore be enriched with at least three points, while two existing points can be extended further (Naturally this still remains provisional.) I repeat the definition, and I italicize what is being added:

Reformation is the

1 deliberate

2 fearless

3 positive willingness

4 of Christians

5 *with real repentance, acknowledgement of guilt and humility*

6 and in deep dependence on God

7 according to Biblical guidelines *of renewal towards the image of God through the Holy*

Spirit to know God's will and to live in accordance with it

8 and with creative cognizance of the good from the past,

9 without ceasing,

10 to improve the relatively good further,

11 to combat evil in all its manifestations, *that is individually and structurally*, and so

12 to strive for and effect the radical,

13 total,

14 and integral

15 renewal

16 of individual

17 and society,

18 *in accordance with strategies which will counter the issues of the day in the most effective manner.*

Reformational, you will have come to realize, apart from being a *historical* concept, is also a *critical* concept. It does not in the first place force us to test others, but to face the mirror and to see whether what I myself am doing is reformational or not.