

What does the reformational Movement Mean to You?

A Historical Movement with a Unique Vision

by Al Wolters

We can illustrate the reformational understanding of biblical religion by comparing creation to the rightful domain of a sovereign king. By man's fall into sin, this domain has been invaded by an alien usurper who subjects the king's realm to slavery. By the death and resurrection of the king's Son, the usurper has been decisively defeated, and the Son now leads his liberated followers in effecting the complete reclamation of the king's possessions, even though the enemy still exercises considerable control in the territory he has occupied.

This vision of the biblical drama is in a sense common to all of orthodox Christianity, be it Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinistic or Anabaptist. To use a more traditional formulation favoured by Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, all these traditions of historic Christianity are agreed that "the Father reconciles His created but fallen world through the death of His Son, and recreates it by His Spirit into a Kingdom of God." Now what is distinctive about the Calvinistic tradition (and this is the tradition in which the reformational movement stands) is that it understands all the basic words in this formulation ("reconciles," "created," "fallen," "world," "recreates," "Kingdom of God") in an all-embracing and cosmic sense, whereas the other traditions tend in one way or another to restrict the scope of their significance to one 'realm', thus setting up various two-realm (nature/ grace, sacred/ secular) dualisms.

In the reformational vision, therefore, *all* of life and reality, being subject to creational ordinances and norms, is part of the created order. Creation thus includes not only mountains and bears and galaxies, but also technology and art, the state and the family, economic and emotional life, scholarship and politics. It includes all dimensions of our personal life, and all sectors of culture and society. Since all of these are subject to divine norms, they are creational, and are therefore also essentially *good*.

But just as creation is understood in this all-embracing sense, so the antithesis between sin (man's fall and its effects) and grace (God's reconciliation, recreation and Kingdom) is seen to be cosmic in its significance. The power of sin lays claim to *all* of God's good creation, seeking to enslave and pervert it; the power of grace is stronger in Jesus Christ, and also lays claim to the *whole* creation, seeking to liberate and restore it. The vision of the reformational movement is therefore to press the claims of Christ in every area of creational life (in politics and art, in labour relations and emotional life, in technology and scholarship) and to do this by searching out and respecting the creational norms which

hold for these areas.

The historical movement which was inspired by this vision of the Kingship of Christ has its roots in the revival of Calvinism in nineteenth-century Holland, and is linked with the names of such prominent Dutch Calvinists as Groen van Prinsterer, Kuyper, Bavinck, Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. It was the historian and parliamentarian Groen who saw clearly that Christians must not choose between the irreligious principles of the French Revolution (which denied all creational normativity in the corrupt feudal society of the *Ancien Regime*, and consequently endeavoured to overthrow the existing order entirely and to reconstruct society on the basis of autonomous rationality) and the principles of reactionary Conservatism (which identified the pre-revolutionary regime with the divine social order, and sought to restore this order with all its inequities). Against both revolution and reaction he advocated *reformation*: a policy of social and political renewal which recognizes both the creational normativity and the sinful distortion in human society, and attempts on the basis of the former to work toward the removal of the latter. Accordingly, the christian political party which he founded (for he was convinced that politics belongs to man's creational life and thus to Christ's Kingdom) called itself not only "anti-revolutionary" but also "christian-historical," emphasizing the positive task of christian renewal on the basis of normative historical givens.

It was Groen's political successor Abraham Kuyper, later to become Prime Minister of Holland, who first clearly formulated the reformational understanding of creational ordinances and the religious antithesis, and became the pioneer and undisputed leader of the reformational movement. We need mention only his formulation of the principle of sphere-sovereignty, which based the principial limitation of all human institutional authority on the creation order, and his recognition that the religious antithesis makes for fundamentally "two kinds of scholarship." Kuyper led the movement which sought to put these principles into practice, perhaps best symbolized by the founding of the Free University in 1880, but also involving a christian labour movement; christian newspapers, christian day schools as well as christian politics.

Kuyper's reformational vision received its most lucid, scholarly and balanced formulation in the work of his younger contemporary and successor as dogmatic theologian at the Free University, Herman Bavinck. For him this vision is summed up in the principle that "grace restores nature" (i.e. that salvation means the restoration of creation), the dominant and fundamental motif in Bavinck's thought, both in his theology and in his later works on psychology, pedagogy and philosophy. It fell to Bavinck's pupil Vollenhoven and the latter's close friend and brother-in-law Dooyeweerd to elaborate a comprehensive philosophical system based on both the ordinantial understanding of reality (reflected in the word "cosmonomic") and the recognition of the religious antithesis in all human life and

culture, including philosophy and scholarship.

As a historical movement, which has been transplanted largely by immigration into the English-speaking world, the family of reformational organizations and publications retains much that links them to their Dutch roots. Yet the genius of the movement is clearly not Dutch, any more than Marxism is German or Christianity Jewish. This is most evident in the fact that some of the most prominent figures in the reformational world in North America come from quite different ethnic backgrounds - most notably Dr. H. Evan Runner of Calvin College. It is the task of the movement in Canada and the United States (and beyond) to proceed in a christian historical fashion — building on the normative elements of the Dutch tradition and making them fruitful for new times and places.

In my own opinion the reformational tradition has primarily a *vision* to offer to ecumenical Christendom today — a vision and a century's worth of tradition in trying imperfectly to work this vision out, both in scholarship and christian action. If I am right, then the distinctiveness of this vision is defined by the two themes of *creational ordinances* and *religious antithesis*, both taken in the most far-reaching sense possible. It is my conviction that the reformational vision offers the only biblically tenable alternative to its two great adversaries: firstly the historicism of secular humanism, which relativizes all structural and religious differences, and ultimately leads to nihilism, and secondly the two-realm scheme of traditional Christendom, which restricts the scope of religion and thus falls prey to some form of secular humanism in the nonreligious realm.

Al Wolters is Senior Member in History of Philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto.