

PARC – Who Are We?

Towards a Theological Vision for the South African Presbyterian and Reformed Church

Introduction

Every denomination, church network, or large parachurch organisation tends to have a particular ministry “culture” or “feel”. Sometimes churches or groups that have almost identical statements of faith can end up looking quite different from each other in their worship expressions and ministry emphases. Whether we like it or not, the South African Presbyterian and Reformed Church (hereafter PARC) will likely develop a dominant ministry culture. In some organisations the ministry culture is arrived at organically, usually through the expanding ministries of influential leaders. In other organisations the ministry culture arises, out of sheer necessity, in response to a specific missionary concern. Occasionally however, certain groups are afforded the time and opportunity to thoughtfully envision what sort of an organisation they might become. This document is a humble attempt to paint a picture of the kind of denomination we hope to be in the future, God-willing.

Our newly formed denomination finds itself in a particular place at a particular time, and we have a responsibility to tentatively, humbly, and reflectively map out a theological vision for the kind of church we want to be. This document is an attempt to answer the question: “What does a faithful restatement of the gospel – within the bounds of confessional Presbyterianism – with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in our country at this moment in history, look like?”¹

In answer to that question, we are committed to 1) Being winsomely orthodox, 2) Being intentionally missional, and 3) Being reflectively historical.

Winsomely Orthodox

We are a denomination with an unbreakable commitment to a high view of Scripture and to the ongoing validity of the Westminster Standards as a faithful articulation of the theology of the Bible. As the constitution of our founding congregation, Grace Presbyterian Church, states,

“the supreme authority in all matters of faith and life are the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments which we believe are the inspired and inerrant Word of God. By way of definition and summary of our faith we adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith with its Larger and Shorter Catechisms.”²

¹ We are indebted to the concept of “theological vision” popularized by Timothy Keller in his book *Centre Church*.

² p.4 see section 3, “Standard of Faith”

We locate ourselves firmly within the bounds of classical Reformed orthodoxy. In many ways our denomination is birthed out of our lament at the decline of Reformed orthodoxy in mainline Presbyterian and Reformed churches in our country. Our commitment to this theological orthodoxy is fundamental to our existence and we aim to guard it by all means possible. As a result, we require our church officers to subscribe to our confessional standards in order to be ordained or appointed to office³.

We have great concerns about theological drift towards progressive or liberal theology that we perceive in certain movements and individual leaders within the South African church. Unorthodox theology is an offense to God and deeply destructive for churches and the faith of individuals. Christ's word to the seven churches in Revelation reminds us that the fight for orthodoxy will always be necessary. That being said, our experience in the broadly reformed world, and the experiences of many others, testify to the reality that often our broader tribe has fought for orthodoxy at the expense of love⁴, gentleness⁵, patience⁶, humility and sympathy⁷. There are certainly horrible caricatures of Reformed Theology and much straw-manning that takes place in debate between theological traditions, but there is also much within our own tradition that is grievously lamentable. What saddens us most is how ferocious and volatile disagreement often is between people within the Reformed tradition. People with the same confessional statements sometimes save their most savage critiques for each other. We grieve the lack of an irenic spirit that is so often evident.

Our theological disagreements – particularly when we have common confessional commitments – ought to be incredibly careful and measured. Paul reminds us to not “entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.”⁸ His point is not only to set up a procedure by which errant elders might be brought to task but to remind us how careful we are to be before entertaining accusations of error. We live in a time when throwing around theological slurs on social media gets you acclaim in particular tribes, but such a practice should be repulsive to a winsome, biblically informed orthodoxy.

We are not always going to agree with each other, but so long as our disagreement is within the bounds of the Reformed tradition, we ought to do our level best to be gentle and charitable in our disagreement. We should be especially slow to be suspicious of fellow ministers whose ministry practice differs from our own and refrain from jumping to conclusions about said person's orthodoxy as a result.

³ We require our officers to adhere to good faith subscription of the standards. “Good faith” subscription is distinct from “strict” or “full” subscription in that it allows certain exceptions if they are not ruled by the Presbytery to be out of accord with the fundamentals of the system of doctrine.

⁴ 1 Timothy 4:5

⁵ Philippians 4:5

⁶ 2 Timothy 4:2

⁷ 1 Peter 3:8

⁸ 1 Timothy 5:19

When the Larger Catechism unpacks the duties of the 9th Commandment, we gain a masterful vision of the sort of conduct that should inform and govern our disagreements:

“The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbour, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbours; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocency; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging tale-bearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requireth; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.”⁹

We long to be a denomination that is known for robust orthodoxy repeatedly communicated in a winsome, gentle, and charitable manner. May we be known for simultaneously out-truthing the untruthful and out-loving the unloving.

Intentionally Missional

The undeniable testimony of the early chapters of the book of Acts is that the Word of God is a growing word¹⁰. As Christians we are called to sing the praises of God in front of a watching world. The rationale for such “evangelistic worship” is that “all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.”¹¹ God desires that many would be saved¹² and we ought to mirror that desire.

In the broader reformed and evangelical circles of South Africa one would be hard pressed to find a minister who doesn’t believe that evangelism and the growth of the church is critical. Many long to see more fruit in this area, yet despite intellectual convictions and even heartfelt desires, many do not order their ministries towards growth and multiplication. Some refuse to ask hard introspective questions about their effectiveness in evangelism, or lack thereof, in the prevailing culture. Others fail to prioritise growth and multiplication in the way they structure their budgets and apportion resources. Too often multiplication and church planting happen merely as the result of organic expansion or dissatisfaction with existing churches and leadership. Very rarely is missional growth strategized, planned, and implemented outside of the natural growth trajectories of existing ministries.

⁹ WLC Q. 144

¹⁰ Acts 6:7, 12:24

¹¹ In Psalm 96:1-6 the assembly worship God in front of the nations on the basis of monotheism. God alone is God and therefore he calls all to worship him. The Psalms consistently offer this as the basis for the mission of the Old Testament people of God.

¹² 1 Timothy 2:4, see also Jonah 4:11

The overwhelming pattern has been to grow and multiply in areas where the church already has existing members and ready-made core teams, with little strategic planning or concern. As a result, most of the church planting we have witnessed in South Africa, over the last two decades, has taken place in more affluent suburbs and around well-resourced churches. We are concerned that very few plants are strategically conducted in unfashionable, yet needy and heavily populated neighbourhoods, particularly in our large metros. While organic multiplication is important it lacks the strategic nature of mission we find in someone like the apostle Paul. Eckhard Schnabel writes, “Geographical movement from city to city, from region to region, and from province to province was a principal element of missionary work in the first century.”¹³ There is a deliberate design and strategy in Paul’s urban missiology. He is very deliberate and intentional in preaching the gospel to the Gentiles.

We cannot hope to meet the challenge of our rapidly secularizing cities through the occasional planting of a church in the adjoining neighbourhood. We need to be intentional. We need to identify “gospel priority areas”¹⁴, recruit planters and evangelists, raise funds, recruit partners and core teams, and send people to engage these areas with the gospel of Christ. We need to be creative in our planting approaches, being sensitive to the diversity that exists across numerous neighbourhoods in our cities. We need to structure our own churches, and equip our people, to constantly be having a missionary encounter with the surrounding culture¹⁵. We need to generously and sacrificially make finances and resources a major priority in the structuring of our budgets. We long to see a denomination where being intentionally missional is part of our DNA.

Reflectively Historical

Ours is a faith that is rooted in history. This is particularly true of the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. One of the key ways in which we do theology is by building upon and engaging with the Reformed Tradition. We don’t believe in a form of narrow biblicism that ignores the historical interpretive community from which we descend. Perhaps the most obvious expression of this is our commitment to confessionalism and doing theology within the bounds of the Westminster Standards. Remaining historically rooted guards us against error and it should also produce a level of interpretive humility, whereby we are not seeking to constantly re-invent the theological wheel through novel readings of Scripture. There is a comfort and assurance that comes from inhabiting a defined theological tradition. Our prayer is that our denomination will continue to drink deeply from the historical wells that have birthed us, regularly demonstrating the ongoing validity and applicability of classical Reformed Theology.

¹³ Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies, and Methods (IVP 2008), p.35

¹⁴ Gospel priority areas is a term that initially originated in missional church literature pertaining to particularly secular and under churching areas in the UK and Europe.

¹⁵ See especially Timothy Keller’s article “Evangelistic Worship”
<https://redeemercitycity.com/articles-stories/evangelistic-worship>

When we acknowledge our history however, we need to acknowledge more than the theological formulations of 16th and 17th century Europe. We also need to acknowledge that we minister in a place that has a history – and more specifically has something of a chequered history in its engagement with Reformed Theology. We need to acknowledge that in this country Reformed Theology has been misapplied to sanction racial segregation, formalize apartheid, and bring misery and suffering to the majority of our people. We need to acknowledge that alongside the arrival of Reformed Theology through the Dutch Colonialists there was also an arrival of a particular form racial hatred and oppression – and often these two realities worked in league with each other. We need to lament the historic racial segregation of Reformed churches¹⁶. We need to acknowledge the limitations, and sometimes outright theological or moral errors of our forebears¹⁷. We need to acknowledge the strain this history has placed upon current race relations within churches. We cannot hope to build an authentically South African denomination without an honest assessment of our history.

But more than acknowledgement, we desire to work hard at demonstrating how the very best of the Reformed Tradition speaks to and corrects our historical missteps – particularly in the area of racial segregation and injustice. Our historical tradition is rich, and it has within it the resources to address our conflicted national history and its ongoing effects. We long to be a denomination that has this dual reflection upon history so that we might see a truly South African Presbyterian Church emerge.

Conclusion

We are extremely hopeful and excited for the future of our small movement. We are hopeful and excited because we truly believe that a winsomely orthodox, intentionally missional, and reflectively historical group of churches can make a significant impact and bring much glory to God in our needy country. We are hopeful and excited by the different people the Lord is busy assembling to build this church. We prayerfully commit to working together, with a spirit of unity, to advance the glorious cause of Christ's kingdom through the development of this new denomination. The words of Psalm 133 describe the spirit we hope this document will produce among our ministers and leaders:

¹⁶ We need to lament the ruling of the 1857 Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church that declared: "The Synod regards it as desirable and Scriptural that our members from among the heathen should be taken up and incorporated in our existing congregations, wherever that can be done; but where this rule, because of the weakness of some, should stand in the way of the advancement of Christ's cause among the heathen, the congregations raised up, or to be raised up, from the heathen, shall enjoy their Christian rights in a separate building or institution."

¹⁷ See for example James Eglinton's work on Abraham Kuyper's mixed record on race, https://brill.com/view/journals/jrt/11/1-2/article-p65_5.xml or J. Gresham Machen's racist views that brought him into conflict with B.B. Warfield <https://timothyisaiahcho.medium.com/j-gresham-machen-warfields-views-are-black-republicanism-f44fa49c7bff>.

*How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!*

*It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.*

*It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.*

*For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore¹⁸.*

For the glory of Christ and his precious bride, the church.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'S. Murray', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Stephen Murray (Moderator)

On behalf of PARC

06/10/2021

¹⁸ Psalm 133:1-3