

The *semper reformanda* principle under scrutiny in a South African context: A case study of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa

**Author:**Graham A. Duncan¹ **Affiliation:**¹Department of Church History and Church Polity, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Graham Duncan,
graham.duncan@up.ac.za**Dates:**

Received: 13 Jan. 2019

Accepted: 20 Aug. 2019

Published: 24 Oct. 2019

How to cite this article:Duncan, G.A., 2019, 'The *semper reformanda* principle under scrutiny in a South African context: A case study of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40(1), a1966. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v40i1.1966>**Copyright:**© 2019. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The *semper reformanda* [always reforming] principle has been fundamentally ignored by the Reforming tradition since it was conceptualised. The growing cadre of those who support a fundamentalist disposition believes in the durability (perdurance) of the tradition in the form in which they promote it, although little of this is traceable to the Reformations or its promoters. They, unlike their 16th-century Reforming predecessors, are stuck in a literalistic mode of thinking which seeks to preserve and promote a static timeless faith which is applicable in all contexts for all time. Their literalism enables them to evade and avoid in-depth study of the text, the context and the contemporary context. This form of interpretation has taken root in Africa. It is challenged by the dynamic processes of contextualisation and inculturation whereby the gospel is incarnated in each context it encounters as it has done from the beginning of the Christian church. This article engages with primary sources of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) and the Fellowship of Concerned Christians in the broader contexts of the human sexuality debate and theological education as it investigates the ahistorical/static and dynamic/fluid theological views that inform contemporary thinking.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article is interdisciplinary in the sense that it transcends the theological disciplines of Church History, Church Polity, Dogmatics, Practical Theology, African Theology and Missiology. The topic indicates the relevance of an inter-disciplinary approach in order to produce an inclusive, integrated and well-rounded approach within the broad field of hermeneutics.

Keywords: fundamentalism; Fellowship of Concerned Christians Fundamentalism; inculturation; *semper reformanda*; Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa.

Introduction

A personal disclaimer as reflected in the words of Corey (2017) is:

For those of us who were raised in Christianity, growing up we were often taught the importance of developing a 'biblical' worldview and living 'biblically ... It's as if the term 'biblical' is some code-word that signifies rightness, correctness, or purity, in a way that nothing else can. It's as if there is no higher authority, that the 'name above all names' to distinguish right from wrong, is 'biblical'. Now, don't mistake what I'm about to say – I am a Christian. A committed, devoted Christian ... I'm not interested in having a 'biblical worldview' or even in following the Bible. This isn't to say I don't love the Bible; I do. I believe the Bible is 'inspired' and 'useful' just as the New Testament claims. It's just that the Christian life is not about developing a 'biblical' worldview or following the Bible – the Christian life is all about *Jesus*. And, I have to be honest: those two things don't always align in harmony. When Jesus encountered the biblical scholars of his time, he did not commend them and then send them away so they could focus on following it. He actually rebuked them and told them that even though they knew the Bible backwards and forwards, they had missed the entire point of it all: following him. (pp. 1–3)

These sentiments that demonstrate a fluid developmental faith led me to reflect on the concept *semper reformanda*. This concept will be investigated from a historical perspective using the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (UPCSA) as a reflective focus. This article engages with the primary sources of the UPCSA and the Fellowship of Concerned Christians in the broader contexts of the human sexuality debate and theological education as it investigates the 'ahistorical versus static', 'dynamic versus fluid' theological views that inform contemporary thinking.

Semper reformanda

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbi Dei: 'The church is reformed and always [in need of] being reformed according to the Word of God'. The verb is passive: the church is not

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

'always reforming' but is 'always being reformed' by the Spirit of God through the Word. Although the Reformers themselves did not use this slogan, it is clearly consistent with their aspirations.

The phrase *semper reformanda* first appeared in 1674 in a devotional by Jodocus van Lodenstein during the Dutch Second Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*). Van Lodenstein promoted the idea that the Reformation reformed the doctrine of the church and also the lives and practices of God's people. His focus was on personal piety, not doctrinal progressivism. There are three significant points regarding the saying. Firstly, the original phrase presumes doctrinal stability; then, it refers to the church 'always being reformed'; and, finally, it is always being reformed according to the Word of God. Hence, it is fluid and dynamic. It refers to the conviction of certain Reformed Protestant theologians that the church must continually re-examine itself in order to maintain its purity of doctrine and practice (Mahlmann 2010:382–441). In its original context, *semper reformanda* was not about a future-oriented faith for the watchword of the Reformers was 'Back to the sources!' (*ad fontes*). As Horton (2008:123) puts it, the Reformers 'wanted to recover something that had been lost, not to follow the winds of a rising modernity'. If the church can never stand still, it is because it always needs re-orientation according to the Word that is over us (Horton 2008:125). *Semper reformanda* is not about constant fluctuations but about solid foundations. It is about radical adherence to the Holy Scriptures, no matter the cost to ourselves, our traditions or our own fallible sense of cultural relevance. If Christians want to change the church's sexual ethics, so be it, but we should not co-opt and distort the Reformers or their predecessors in the Early church in so doing. The only Reformation worth promoting and praying for is that which leads us deeper into our Bibles and not distance ourselves from scripture.

History of the issue

In the 16th century, John Calvin was under no illusion that the Reformation had reached its goal in his lifetime – or that it would achieve it in a foreseeable future:

Christ 'loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish' (Ephesians 5:25–27). Nevertheless, it is true, that the Lord is daily smoothing its wrinkles and wiping away its spots. Hence it follows that its holiness is not yet perfect. Such, then, is the holiness of the Church: it makes daily progress, but is not yet perfect; it daily advances, but as yet has not reached the goal. (Calvin's Institutes 4.1.17)

God's people are en route to the kingdom; it is a work in progress. What is evident is that the Reformation destroyed the concept of a *theologia perennis* (Congdon 2016:37). On matters relating to Christian liberty, and liberty of conscience, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1645:Chapter XX) states:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing,

contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also. (p. II)

However, there is a clear role for conscience as is evident in the Declaratory Articles of the Church of Scotland which allows for (Weatherhead 1997):

... liberty of opinion in points which do not enter into the substance of the Faith without defining the substance of the Faith, but it is clear that this must be found in Scripture, as interpreted by the Church, and in the [Westminster] Confession, and in the Confession interpreted in the light of Scripture. (p. 20)

All of this testifies to the existence of a dynamic faith tradition which has been taken up by churches of the Reformation, including those in South Africa.

The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa confession of faith

Within the UPCS (2007), formed in 1999, the *Westminster Confession* adopted by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (RPCSA) and the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa's (PCSA almost identical 'Articles of the Faith' along with its 'Preamble' and 'Appendices' (PCSA 1987:83–90) were eschewed as subordinate standards. It adopted a comprehensive 31 page *Confession of Faith* in 2007 (UPCSA 2007). In Section 6 on 'The revelation of redemption: Revelation, Scripture, Preaching and Personal Witness', ample space is allowed for the *semper reformanda* principle to operate. For example, it states (UPCSA 2007):

Christ reveals himself to us through the witness that Holy Scripture bears to him, and through the witness that the church bears to him on the basis of Scripture. Thus Christ speaks through Scripture, preaching and personal witness in the power of the Spirit, where and when he chooses ...

Scripture is ... the sufficient and unique Word of God written and the final rule of faith and life. (§6.5)

The Scriptures are inspired by the same God who accepted the constraints of the incarnation. Thus though inspired by the Spirit, the Scriptures are at the same time fully human documents ... the word of God is accommodated to our understanding in the human words of Scripture and addresses us through these words. (§6.9)

The status of the Word of God is not static but dynamic. Section §6.5 of the *Confession of Faith* has a footnote that states:

In adopting the confession, the UPCS recognises that its members have different (for some, overlapping) views on the relation between the Word of God and Scripture:

1. Some fully identify the Word of God with Scripture, regarding it as verbally inspired and infallible.
2. Some distinguish between the Word of God and Scripture as its inspired and normative but fallible human record and witness.
3. Some emphasise that the Word of God is strictly Jesus Christ, the living Word, and see Scripture as the

normative and authoritative witness to Christ that by the power of the Spirit becomes and is the Word of God in bearing such witness (Jn 5:39f., II Cor 3–4,6).

All, however, confess that Jesus Christ is the living word of God and that the Scriptures are inspired by God and have unique authority.

This is a characteristic of a 'broad church' which recoils from the principle of a confessional church that demands conformity to a narrow hermeneutic, normally conservative evangelical, literalistic or fundamentalist. However, groups such as these exist within 'broad churches', which in South Africa include the churches of European origin (CEOs). One such group exists within the UPCSА. It is of recent origin and exhibits characteristics of exclusivity which are in contradiction to the 'broad church' principle of the UPCSА, which incorporates a 'broad' variety of theological interpretations and spiritualities. The Fellowship of Confessing Presbyterians (FCP) had its origin in the unhappiness and concern of conservative evangelical ministers who believe that the UPCSА has been captive for too long to liberal theology and its proponents.

Recent developments

The FCP claims that:

The Protestant Church is a Confessing Church. From the very beginning the Reformers gathered around commonly held articles of faith. They bound themselves around these in oaths said before God and the Church. For many years now Protestant Churches have seen the erosion of confessional standards. Many have become uncomfortable with this trend. Some have even departed the Church. Some have remained. To leave the Church is a serious matter. This group is for those who choose to remain. (Facebook, 22 September 2017)

No indication is given regarding the details of 'the erosion of doctrinal standards'. The UPCSА (2007:2.4, 4–31) *Confession of Faith* would suggest otherwise. The FCP fails to distinguish between 'commonly held articles of faith' and scriptural hermeneutics. Their methodology is proof-texting – selecting and extracting texts from their source without reference to source, origin or context. This is the form of the majority of their Facebook posts, which for the large part have no comment appended. Then, there is a lack of theological understanding for it is not only texts that are abused but also approaches such as 'decolonisation':

'Christianity in South Africa needs to be decolonised'. This is a call at this time in our life as Christians in South Africa. I find the word 'decolonise' challenging. That Christianity came with the colonisation of Southern Africa is a given. What this decolonisation will look like seems to this old traditionalist a very different matter. I wonder if we are using the right word here? I have been giving this some thought to this and I feel the need to suggest words like integrate, share, reconcile, sanctify, equip, reach out, love and yes, repentance for where there is sin there must always be repentance. And the history of our country is and remains a litany of sin. (Facebook, CM, 01 November 2016)

This reveals that CM is not clear about what decolonisation is and then proceeds to fashion it within his own conceptual capacity and interest domain:

I was not at Assembly, but what a lot of GA post-mortem breast-beating to try to reassert who has the moral high ground. The witness of the Carpenter, the fishermen, the tax collector, the stray Pharisee and Gentile doctor, the Carpenter's brothers and the Easter women is our high ground, or Christianity is mythical vanity. (Facebook, AR, 18 July 2016)

This posits a rather exclusive claim to the possession of scriptural characters and one form of 'truth' that leaves little space for engagement, dialogue or hospitality, such as is characteristic within the UPCSА. One such controversial issue in the UPCSА relates to human sexuality.

Human sexuality

What is of concern is the inflexible exclusive approach towards others within the same denomination, particularly in the domain of human sexuality:

Among a majority of commissioners was staged a noisy 'brexit' on civil unions. A minority of 40+ year elitism – 'we have superior professorships – doctorates – higher degrees than you', 'we are more money superior congregation commissioners than you', 'we are more politically correct lobby commissioners than you' – also broke love and unity by its arrogant 'you are supposed to love your big brother elite but you're being unlovely and not unifying around what your elite demands'. That it just slicker 'unlovely and non-unifying' patronising. (Facebook, AR, 18 July 2016)

Here we note the emergence of an anti-intellectualism that is a characteristic of the FCP. Anti-intellectualism facilitates the avoidance of deep meaningful engagement with both the text and the context. The FCP complains of a failure of love, yet it demonstrates the same failure. This is manifested most clearly in the same-gender issue.

Homophobia often raises its ugly head under the guise of genuine concern and avoiding the issue. A vicious attack was made on the Convener of the UPCSА's committee on human sexuality when he presented its report on the floor of the General Assembly in 2016 – a report which proposed a more inclusive approach to those who are homosexual. And the Moderator designate of the General Assembly of the UPCSА responded:

I phoned XY today to express my dismay that he had been treated so poorly and with such cruelty at the Assembly and that there had been applause when he said that he was resigning from the committee that reduced him to tears. No matter how strongly we feel about issues, we must treat one another with respect and dignity and grace. (Facebook, PLP, 13 July 2016)

The challenge of human sexuality and same-gender marriage and union has vexed all mainline churches in recent years. This issue had its origin in the UPCSА in 2004 and in subsequent events which culminated in 'charges laid (and dismissed) in 2015 against two of our ministers for conducting and blessing same-sex weddings' (UPCSА 2016:388). An appendix to the 2016 report on human sexuality attempted to find space for differing views in the face of a potential division in the denomination. The Appendix 1 *Christian Ethics and same sex unions* demonstrated how the committee employed

the *semper reformanda* principle as its interpretive lens taking account of the ecumenical perspective of other churches' struggle with the issue both within South Africa and further afield. The appendix refers historically to changing views from the '12th and 13th centuries' and to 'Recent Dialogue' (UPCSA 2016:389). Furthermore, it is increasingly recognised that questions regarding homosexuality must be viewed from the perspective of human and civil rights and not merely that of personal ethics (UPCSA 2016:391). It quotes Dr Frits Gaum who reminds us that (UPCSA 2016):

The Bible does not talk about inborn homosexuality as we know it today ... [it] condemns gay relationships where they are promiscuous and idolatrous and the same with heterosexual relationships. The Bible never mentions gay bonds for life as in love and marriage but does not condemn [them] either. (p. 391)

The appendix reflects the changed attitudes towards a number of issues that were accepted in earlier periods – slavery, SA apartheid, polygamy, celibacy and divorce. It stresses:

[T]he distinction between individual conscience and beliefs on the one hand and the socio-legal enforcement of those beliefs on all of society applies in this area [homosexual relations] as well. (UPCSA 2016:392)

The appendix continues (UPCSA 2016):

To some extent the church's understanding of how that Word [of God] applies to this area has changed, in the same way as, historically, it has changed in other areas. Such change has come partly through a re-interrogation of the key scriptural texts in a way that is careful to *distinguish* between what Scripture actually says and cultural perceptions and assumptions that often profoundly determine people's beliefs about right and wrong and so how they interpret Scripture. (p. 392)

The appendix reminded the denomination that the *Confession of Faith* of the UPCSA allows for drawing a distinction between the Bible and the Word of God (UPCSA 2007:§6.9, 2016:394). Furthermore, it cannot just be assumed as the inspiration of Scripture:

Scripture is not an evenly inspired book; it does not evenly reveal God's truth and God's will throughout (Matt 5:21–48). Thus they [many orthodox Christians] do not accept that the Bible itself is inerrant. ... we make the *lex talionis* (Ex 21:23–25; Lev 24:19f.; Deut 19:21) equally God's Word with the command of Jesus to forgive our enemies, counter to the *lex talionis* (Matt 5:38–48) (UPCSA 2016:394) [*Lex talionis*: the principle or law of retaliation that a punishment inflicted should correspond in degree and kind to the offense of the wrongdoer, as an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; retributive justice]. (UPCSA 2016:394)

Jesus is clearly indicating that there is no one hermeneutic for legal interpretation which can be applied equally in all situations. Jesus' ethic was situational and contextual to the extent that shocked the Jewish authorities and challenged their legalistic assumptions.

Here we encounter the problem of lifting texts out of their source text (proof texting) without any reference to the original context or to the life, witness, teaching and ministry of Jesus and as if that are still binding on them today.

With regard to the Levitical commands, the appendix states that (UPCSA 2016):

Christians, however, recognise that the ceremonial, or ritual laws and prohibitions of the Old Testament are not binding on them today. The same applies to ceremonial *rationales* of any laws on the Old Testament. Thus Lev. 18:22, 29f. and 20:13 are rendered non-binding on Christians because these texts provide a specific rationale that does not hold for Christians. Jesus in any case had quite different ideas to Leviticus about what defiles. (See Matt 15:10–20) (p. 395)

Jesus saw his mission in terms of fulfilling or completing the Law and the prophets, not of undermining them: 'You have heard that our forefathers were told ... But what I tell you is this ...' (Mt 5:17–21; Ballard 2011):

In Judaism there is a history of interpretation – *midrash* – which seeks to uncover the deeper meaning of Scripture and its import for living in the present. From this Rabbinic tradition there emerged the *Mishnah* (the oral teaching) and the *Talmud*, which combines the *Mishnah* with further discussions on the *Mishnah*, called the *Gamara*. For Scripture to keep its relevance in later and often radically different circumstances there has to be a process of reflection. (p. 166)

This is what the 17th century *Westminster Confession of Faith* (XIX.iii) says: '[a]ll which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the new testament'. What is clear is that while a fundamentalist interpretation remains static, the *Confession* adopts a *semper reformanda* approach, as did Jesus himself in his approach to Jewish tradition and teaching. We must remember that what we now refer to as homosexual relations are not what is referred to in the proof texts normally quoted. Furthermore, fundamentalists are quick to assert that as the UPCSA is a transnational church, it cannot sanction same-gender unions as they are contrary to the law (UPCSA 2016:43). However, they do not cite South African law which permits these same unions. There is a serious lack of consistency here. These interpreters also need to account for their use of non-biblical criteria when they claim scripture as their absolute norm.

The Presbytery of eGoli (UPCSA 2016) reminded the 2016 General Assembly that it had committed:

[T]o continued engagement, study and prayer over this contentious issue (homosexuality) because any decision on homosexuality cannot be divorced from the whole area of human sexuality and there therefore needs to be a basic consistency in the way sexual ethics are applied to all sexual relationships. (p. 42)

Again, this suggests a *semper reformanda* approach based in a dynamic view of scripture. The presbytery's concern was that the UPCSA should not take any action that would divide the denomination (UPCSA 2016:43). A counter-motion from the Presbytery of the Western Cape proposed that ministers be 'not permitted by the denomination to officiate at the civil unions of same sex couples or to perform a blessing service for the civil union of same sex couples' (UPCSA 2016:43). This view was upheld by the General Assembly. It is likely to be challenged in the future.

Theological education

Then in 2013, the current policy on theological education came in for critique on the value of adopting colleges with a confessional basis for their training programmes which is not supported by the UPCSAs:

The UPCSAs need new balance in its academic training paradigm. If we need a Fellowship of Confessing Presbyterians, if such 'brexit' actions need adequately to be addressed to restore a fractured balance of love and unity and peace – then we also need an evangelical college or faculty historically upholding the Carpenter, the fishermen, the tax collector, the stray Pharisee and Gentile doctor, the Carpenter's brothers and the Easter women. UP, US, UNISA and TEEC are not cutting through the fog of 'myth' paradigm, and are unlikely to any time soon. (Facebook, Rod Adamson, 18 July 2016)

None of these statements were then or since supported by evidence. The FCP seems to have forgotten that the Reforming tradition is thoroughly based in a strong academic tradition historically. One contemporary indication of this is the continued use of 16th-century academic dress by ministers. Like the issue of dress, the FCP appears to have adopted an ahistorical hermeneutic to defend its position which is akin to fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism

Modern Christian fundamentalism arose from American millenarian sects of the 19th century and has become associated with reaction against social and political liberalism and rejection of the theory of evolution.

The FCP offers an example of its fundamentalistic approach through a trenchant critique of liberal theology:

It can be said that so called liberals are in practice not at all liberal. A true liberal is able to hold various theological views in balance with an openness to views that differ from their own. Some pride themselves in that they belong to the UPCSAs which is a denomination with varied and divergent spirituality and theological views. ... For decades now the ministry committee has ensured that only certain universities' qualifications are acceptable for licenced ministry. Universities that is, where liberal theology is taught. Evangelical schools are frowned upon. The evangelical reformed voice in the UPCSAs is not strong when for so long impressionable student minds have been mentored to not adhere to sound doctrine. Some coming through the path set by mincom [Ministry Committee] have been hammered to forge them into the mold of liberal theology by adding courses and modules of study to their existing studies.

In recent months I also had to begin re-evaluating the barren liberal education I received and change my own stance on inter alia systematic theology to confirm again to well grounded scripture based reformed theology. Realising many set books on my shelf is [sic] indeed for information only and if need be can in due course be dumped. Slowly replacing my reference books with new ones, even re-educating myself in some areas. My final thought is, will the UPCSAs be able to hold diversity and divergent theology together in one church when some theological views no longer remain true to the Bible and confessions of the church? (Facebook, Brian J van Niekerk, 03 July 2016)

The author admits that the UPCSAs is a denomination with varied and divergent spirituality and theological views. However, his subsequent comments demonstrate that he does not accept or support this view. He operates from a very narrow definition of 'evangelical'. He notes how 'true liberals' exhibit a broadmindedness, while assuming the theological liberals do not. He does not realise that theological liberalism is 'a valid Theological perspective within Systematic Theology and is used within mainstream Theological debate to help understand Holy Scripture and Doctrine' (UPCSAs 2017:283).

Furthermore, he assumes that theological education has not changed since he underwent training. This is simply not possible within the post-1994 educational dispensation where, under the supervision of the Council for Higher Education, all educational institutions are required to revise their qualifications regularly and account for lack of progress in this regard. In this context, the author has been involved in curricular development at the university and evaluation at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Theological Education in recent years. Again, there appears to be a desire for a theological education where there is no freedom to develop and hold 'various theological views in balance with an openness to views that differ from their own' which is the true purpose of a university. It is a poor reflection on a church which wishes to constrain theological discussion and allow its candidates to formulate their own theological opinions.

This is problematic for fundamentalists whose adherence to the principle of the plenary inspiration of scripture and verbal inerrancy leads them to (Trible 1985):

[S]ay that the preserve cannot be altered; it must be maintained intact. 'Scripture is fixed; you must not change the text. You cannot make it say what it does not say'. This apodictic protest initiates a second theological reflection. A fixed unchangeable text is neither possible nor desirable. For better or worse, be it conscious or unconscious the text is always being changed. Although translators and interpreters readily acknowledge this truth at some levels, they resist its validity at others. Nevertheless, theological warrant for changing the text lies at the heart of scripture and faith – the name of the Holy One. (p. 148)

David Congdon (2016:32) in his discussion of Christian universalism draws a helpful distinction between historical (dynamic evolving, contingent, spatiotemporally located, socially constructed, political and open to ongoing criticism and interrogation) and metaphysical (timeless essences underneath the contingencies and complexities on the surface of history, a historical interpretation denies that there is anything behind or beneath the historical that could stabilise and secure human existence in advance) consciousness. Fundamentalism emerged as a response to modernity. Congdon (2016:34) promotes the idea that 'Today's culture wars are simply the long death rattle of an antiquated version of Christianity trying to maintain some vestige of metaphysical security'.

From a Roman Catholic perspective, Richard Rohr (2018) comments that:

The narrow, rational/literal/historical approach largely creates an antiquarian society that prefers to look backward instead of forward. In my experience, it creates transactional religion much more than transformational spirituality. It idealizes individual conformity and group belonging over love, service, or actual change of heart. (p. 44)

Rohr elucidates the main issue here. Rigid application of a fundamentalistic hermeneutic does not lead to an enlarged, life transforming spirituality. He queries the value of the substance of scripture in its 'original' form as he challenges the doctrine of inerrancy (Rohr 2018):

Literalism was discredited from the beginning of the New Testament through the inclusion of four Gospel accounts of the same Jesus event, which differ in many ways. Which is the 'inerrant' one? (p. 45)

This has serious implications for our responses to a gospel in which the fundamentalists leave no space for contradiction and paradox that are common to human life, such as that was obvious during the Reformation period. A further message from the FCP states:

Dear Confessing Presbyterians in Southern Africa. The Executive Commission of the UPCSA meets next week in Harare. Please pray for the Commission as it deals with all the business ... We also pray that those attending will be diligent in their participation and that the true Reformed faith once delivered to the saints will be upheld. May Christ Himself reside over the proceedings as all present seek the mind of Christ. We are living in confusing times. May God the Holy Spirit break through the mists of our confusion and shine the light of truth clearly and brilliantly. Soli Deo Gloria! (Facebook, CM, 07 July 2017)

Rohr (2019a) has placed the issue in historical context and pointed out that:

Unknown to many post-Reformation Christians, early centuries of Christianity – through authoritative teachers like Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, and Gregory the Great – encouraged as many as seven 'senses' of Scripture. The literal, historical, allegorical, moral, symbolic, eschatological (the trajectory of history and growth), and 'primordial' or archetypal (commonly agreed-upon symbolism) levels of a text were often given serious weight among scholars. These levels were ... presumed to be normative by those who heard them.

... After both the Reformation and the Enlightenment, Western Europeans reduced our ways of knowing to *one* for all practical purposes – the supposedly rational/literal/historical. We have largely compacted and limited the Bible to this single sense for several centuries now. (p. 1)

This has led to a constriction of the meaning and potential impact of scripture. Consequently (Rohr 2019a):

[T]hat something supposedly literally happened in one exact way, in one moment of time, does not, of itself, transfer the experience to *now, me, or us*. I believe that such transference is the transformative function of any spiritual text. (p. 1)

Rohr (2019b:1) asserts that Jesus' own approach to scripture was not as 'pure' as the fundamentalists project. Yet, this is not to aver that it had no formative impact on his life and

witness both in relation to God and to his contemporaries. The opposite was true. He was selective in what he chose as his agenda items to be used in pursuing his mission:

Jesus appears to ignore most of his own Bible, yet it clearly formed his whole consciousness. That is the paradox. If we look at what he ignores, it includes any passages – of which there are many – that appear to legitimate violence, imperialism, exclusion, purity and dietary laws. Jesus is a *biblically formed non-Bible quoter* who gets the deeper stream, the spirit, the trajectory of his Jewish history and never settles for mere surface readings. (Rohr 2019b:1)

Jesus was no crude literalist, yet the scriptures constituted the content, essence and the truth of his faith formation. He was grounded in and avoided the surface meaning of his scriptures and gave them his own stamp of authenticity and integrity: 'you have heard it said of old ... but I say unto you ...' (cf. Mt 5:17–21).

It is anachronistic to continually have recourse to the Reformation, the early church or any other historical period, as if it sets the standard of belief for all time. Its insights and reforms were also part of the *semper reformanda* process. There is a world of difference between the scholarship of the 16th century and 19th century fundamentalism, despite them being promoted as being synonymous with one another. Calvin himself had a broad-based education in humanism and the humanities which included philosophy, logic, law, religion and theology (Mullett 2011:4–14; UPCSA 2015):

He encountered the historical-critical method while studying law and extended this method into other areas of his studies as well. Calvin placed strong emphasis on a comprehensive education for all religious and community leaders. He considered grammar, logic, rhetoric, mathematics, geometry and music to be core curriculum. (p. 296)

In his book title, De Gruchy (2009: Front cover and title page) correctly describes *John Calvin: Christian humanist, evangelical reformer*. So, Calvin does not serve the fundamentalistic purpose at all well. The same is true of his Scottish colleague, John Knox (Duncan 2017:85–993).

The Reformers were not simply fundamentalists; they were realists developing, applying and inculturating their theology contextually in a violence-ridden context of opposition to their beliefs. Theirs was a life struggle which lasted well into the 17th century and only ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 which brought the Thirty Years War to an end. Its impact was to destroy Europe culturally, socially, economically, politically and religiously. It is not authentic Christianity to live and witness in a time warp. What is authentic and constant is the dynamic presence and action of the Holy Spirit.

There is, however, another issue here – that of name-calling or labelling which is related to deviance (Malina & Neyrey 1991:100) and is a matter of perception and judgement which is believed '*to jeopardize the interests and social standing of persons who negatively label the behaviour and the condition*' (Malina & Neyrey 1991:100, italics in original). This is the

process in which the labellers, or agents of censure, promote their counter-ideology against those who are perceived (Van Eck 1993:201) as the opposition, that is, fundamentalists against radical or liberal theologians. In this case, it is of interest that the conservatives call their opponents 'liberals' but never use the name 'fundamentalists' with reference to themselves.

The fundamentalists promote their cause by a call to return to the simple truth of the faith by means of a reading of the plain language of scripture. They assume that their approach does not need to or seek to interpret scripture but present it as it is. If this is the case, what is the basis of their preaching ministry devoid of interpretation? The straightforward reading of the word would then be sufficient for understanding. But this must be challenged because (Rohr 2019a):

Almost all of Jesus' parables begin with the same phrase: 'The Reign of God is like ...'. Jesus fully knows he is speaking in metaphor, simile, story, and symbol. But in recent centuries, many Christians have not granted him that freedom, and thus we miss or avoid many of his major messages. (p. 1)

The FCP is at odds with developments within the UPCSAs, their own denomination. The General Assembly in 2018 (UPCSA 2018) agreed that the criteria for theological education should be *inter alia*:

An Ecumenical approach

... This would help our students for the ministry to learn in an ecumenical community how to deal with the divided, deprived, and corrupt contexts, in which many new ministers find themselves working including poverty, HIV/AIDS, and the steady increase of secularization and decline of mainline churches ...

African/Black Worldview

[T]o understand and articulate who they are as Africans. What black writers are saying theologically is important for us to be able to identify what our Reformed voice is today and the way in which we should continue reforming today.

Contextualisation

The curriculum needs not only to address our African contexts more seriously, but also to cater for other contexts, e.g. urban and rural ministry, poverty and sustainability, pastoral and counselling practices, as well as liberational womanist, feminist and eco-theological contributions. Courses should also cater for the relationship between Christianity and culture and for these to be evaluated. (p. 493)

The direction of theological education is clearly seen as a development (*semper reformanda*) rather than adherence to traditional western models, towards inculturated models which encourage interpretations broader than the literalistic model of conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists.

The FCP focuses on abortion, the restoration of Israel, same-gender issues in various forms and all well-beloved concerns

of the 'righteous right'. They constitute a group who do not engage with those who do not accept their views; they tend towards intolerance and suffer from a lack of focus. What is evident is that they have no interest in social justice issues. The theoretical framework of this group is fundamentalism which is a form of religion, especially Islam or Protestant Christianity that upholds belief in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture. This creed of verbal inerrancy has a history that is recent and has become a parasite on Reformed theology.

Critique of fundamentalism

Forsyth (2017), a Scottish Presbyterian theologian, offers a significant critique of fundamentalism:

Firstly, the transmission of scripture is influenced by the prevalent culture in the initial drafting of the books of the Canon [of scripture], Secondly, it is influenced by the cultural context in which those engaged in mission have previously acquired faith themselves, and its affect upon their appreciation, and application to their surroundings of the meaning of Scripture. Thirdly, there are the contrary cultural contexts of the recipient in the process of transmission, meaning that the way in which the recipient comprehends a transmitted Gospel message is crucial. (p. 216)

Hence, any form of the presentation of the Gospel message can never be complete. It is in constant flux. Bosch (1991) refers to a 'tentative and continuing process':

The relationship between the Christian message and culture is a creative and dynamic one, and full of surprises. There is no eternal theology, no *theologia perennis* which may play the referee over 'local theologies'. In the past, western theology arrogated to itself the right to be such an arbitrator in respect to Third-World theologies. It implicitly viewed itself as fully indigenized, inculturated, a finished product. We are beginning to realise that this was inappropriate, that Western theologies (Plural!) – just as much as all the others – were theologies in the making, theologies in the *process* of being contextualized and indigenized. (p. 435)

The time of the dominance of the West as the determinant of theological normativity has passed. We have moved far beyond that, even into the domain of the 'interculturation of theologies' or 'exchange of theologies' (Bosch 1991:456). This is truly the principle of *semper reformanda* at work in living contexts. However, Bosch (1991:489) offers an important caveat here. All who are involved in mission, in the transmission of the gospel, must do so in a spirit of '*bold humility – or a humble boldness*'. This is a crucial disposition which might help eliminate much of the aggression and strident militancy evident in divergent approaches.

In all that has been outlined above, there appears to be a lack of integrity. The issue of human sexuality is a symptom rather than a cause of dissension. This also applies to the matter of theological education. Honesty requires that we name the cause and that is conflict regarding the authority of scripture. The battle lines are drawn between 'liberal' and other theological interpretations which are expressed as conservative evangelical, fundamentalist and literal which are all based to a degree on the verbal inspiration of scripture. The term 'liberal' is an umbrella misnomer for all other forms of interpretation,

including radical, postcolonial, feminist, womanist, liberation, black and political hermeneutics which are engaged in study of the ancient and cultural contemporary contexts of biblical writings. It has to be noted that these tensions are not peculiar to the UPCSA: 'theological polarisation between so called liberals, and conservative evangelicals has increased in some churches' (Wingate 2011:19).

The UPCSA upholds the *semper reformanda principle* in its understanding of contextuality (UPCSA 2015):

Throughout history, all religious beliefs and practices emerged from and became part of daily life within particular cultural contexts. An appreciation for the historical and social contexts within which biblical texts and supplemental commentaries arose brings deeper understanding to the human 'journey of faith' from creation to present day. Placing a theological work within the contexts of a community's struggle to understand its world, God's nature, their relationship to God and their proper response to being 'people of God' allows also for [a] better understanding of the many factors that have inspired leaders and theologies throughout history.

This process continues today as we struggle with the same issues in our rapidly changing world and social contexts. (p. 296)

The specific contribution of this approach is the grounding of our understanding of scripture in its original context in order that it may become relevant in ours. What was locally relevant in the 1st century CE has become globally relevant for all time.

A way forward

Forsyth (2017:227) offers a possible resolution to the tensions through the principle and process of 'glocalisation' which he describes as the global in conversation with the local, the 'indigenizing principle' in conversation with the 'pilgrim principle' (Andrew Walls 1996:8–9) as a 'universalizing factor'. And here is the possibility of mutual benefit: 'That may entail a "creation of networks" which might "critically test" the faith of each other – thus one heaven and earth for a diverse and pluriform humanity' (Forsyth 2017:227). The promotion of a 'prophetic dialogue which Forsyth describes as "the spirituality of inculturation" in "reverence for the other"' can provide a significant means of achieving a critical solidarity of purpose. This is by no means an easy challenge, but it is one which finds expression in the model of 'integration without assimilation' which Wingate (2011:15–16) has adopted from the work of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom (2007). The Christian community is analogous to a home where (Wingate 2011):

[E]ach is valued for their own sake, and each needs the other. No-one possesses the home, all possess it together. There is a common narrative which all own, and they suffer or rejoice together. But each person in the home is valued for their own sake. (p. 15)

This is often forgotten within the Christian community that there is 'one Lord ... one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all and in all' (Eph 4:6) and that our mission is the reconciliation of all with one another and with God.

Conclusion

The *semper reformanda* principle has been fundamentally ignored by the Reforming tradition since its inception. The growing cadre of those who support an anti-intellectual fundamentalist position believe in the tenacity of the tradition which they promote, though little of this is traceable to the Reformations or their promoters. Fundamentalists unlike their 16th-century Reforming predecessors are stuck in a literalistic mode of thinking which seeks to preserve and promote a static timeless faith that is applicable in all contexts for all time. Their literalism enables them to evade and avoid in-depth study of the text, the context and the contemporary context. This form of interpretation has taken root in Africa through missionary endeavours. However, it is challenged by the dynamic process of inculturation where the gospel is incarnated in each context it encounters as it has done from the beginning of the Christian church. In all this, the laity have a vital role to play here in many ways but not least if they demonstrate a lack of captivity to theological ideologies, their unconditional acceptance of others and self-offering.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

Authors' contributions

G.A.D. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Allen, R., 1962, *Missionary methods: St Paul's or ours*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Aquila Report, sa, *Semper reformanda*, viewed 08 November 2016, from <https://theaquilareport.com/semper-reformanda/>.
- Ballard, P., 2011, 'The scriptures in the church and pastoral practice', in D.E. Singh & B. Farr (eds.), *Christianity and education: Shaping Christian thinking in context*, pp. 157–169, Regnum, Oxford.
- Bosch, D.J., 1991, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in the theology of mission*, Orbis, New York.

- Brown, T., 2006, 'Introduction', in T. Brown (ed.), *Other voices, other worlds*, pp. 1–6, Darton, Longman & Todd, London.
- Congdon, D.W., 2016, *The God who saves: A dogmatic sketch*, Cascade, Eugene, OR.
- Corey, B.L., 2017 (September 19), *I'm a Christian, but I'm not interested in living 'Biblically'*, viewed 22 September 2017, from <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/>.
- Cox, J.T., 1976, *Practice and procedure of the Church of Scotland*, Committee on General Administration, the Church of Scotland, Edinburgh.
- De Gruchy, J.W., 2009, *John Calvin: Christian humanist, evangelical reformer*, Lux Verbi, Wellington.
- Duncan, G.A., 2017, 'John Knox and education', *HTS Teologiese Studies* 73(3), 85–93. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4346>
- Forsyth, A., 2017, *Mission by the people: Re-discovering the dynamic missiology of Tom Allan and his Scottish contemporaries*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR.
- Goldingay, J., s.a., *James Barr on fundamentalism*, viewed 10 November 2017, from https://churchsociety.org/docs/churchman/091/Cman_091_4_Goldingay.pdf.
- Grigor, J.C., s.a., *A tool for Christians*, Church of Scotland Social Responsibility Committee, Edinburgh.
- Horton, M., 2016, *Semper reformanda*, viewed 08 November 2016, from <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/semper-reformanda/>.
- Horton, M.S., 2008, *People and place: A covenant ecclesiology*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY.
- Kim, S. & Kim, K., 2016, *Christianity as a world religion: An introduction*, 2nd edn., Bloomsbury, London.
- Mahlmann, T., 2010, "Ecclesia semper reformanda". Eine historische Aufarbeitung. Neue Bearbeitung', in T. Johansson, R. Kolb, J.A. Steiger (Hrsg.), *Hermeneutica Sacra. Studien zur Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift im 16. und 17. pp. 382–441*, Jahrhundert, Berlin, New York.
- Malina, B.J. & Neyrey, J.H., 1991, 'Conflict in Luke-Acts: Labelling and deviance theory', in B.J. Malina & J.H. Neyrey, *Honor and shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal values of the Mediterranean world*, pp. 97–124, Hendrikson Publishers, Peabody, MA.
- Mullett, M.A., 2011, *John Calvin*, Routledge, London.
- Oxford Dictionary, s.a., *Fundamentalism*, viewed 22 September 2017, from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fundamentalism>.
- Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa's (PCSA), 1987, *The manual of law and procedure of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa*, PCSA, Johannesburg.
- Rohr, R., 2019a, *Jesus and the Bible: Many ways of knowing*, viewed 08 January 2019, from <https://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/169A8D38378205F82540EF23F30FEDED/A451910A4F474A84405DC10595964AA8>, adapted from Rohr, R., 2018, *What do we do with the Bible?*, CAC Publishing, Albuquerque, NM, pp. 9–12, 14–15.
- Rohr, R., 2019b, *Jesus and the Bible: Jesus' hermeneutic*, viewed 09 January 2019, from <https://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/169A8D38378205F82540EF23F30FEDED/A451910A4F474A84405DC10595964AA8>, adapted from Rohr, R., 2018, *What do we do with the Bible?*, CAC Publishing, Albuquerque, NM, pp. 44–46.
- Sacks, J., 2007, *The home we build together*, Continuum, London.
- Trible, P., 1985, 'Postscript: Jottings on the journey', in L.M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist interpretation of the Bible*, Westminster Press, Louisville, KY, pp. 147–149.
- Turaki, Y., 2006, 'Homosexuality', in T. Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible commentary*, p. 1355, Zondervan, Nairobi.
- Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA), 2007, *The manual of faith and order of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa*, UPCSA, Johannesburg.
- Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA), 2015, *Proceedings and decisions of the executive commission*, UPCSA, Johannesburg.
- Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA), 2016, *Papers for the 12th General Assembly*, UPCSA, Johannesburg.
- Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA), 2017, *Papers for the 12th General Assembly*, UPCSA, Johannesburg.
- Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA), 2018, *Supplementary papers for the 12th General Assembly*, UPCSA, Johannesburg.
- Van Eck, E., 1993, 'Galilee and Jerusalem in Mark's story of Jesus: A narratological and social scientific interpretation', PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.
- Walls, A.F., 1996, *The missionary movement in Christian history: Studies in the transmission of faith*, Orbis, New York.
- Weatherhead, J.L. (ed.), 1997, *The constitution and laws of the Church of Scotland*, Board of Practice and Procedure, Church of Scotland, Edinburgh.
- Westminster Divines, 1645, *Westminster Confession of Faith*, viewed 16 November 2017, from https://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/.
- Wingate, A., 2011, 'Issues in Christian dialogue with Muslims in European context', in M.N. Behera (ed.), *Interfaith relations after one hundred years: Christian mission among other faiths*, pp. 14–29, Regnum, Oxford.