


The significance of social justice and *diakonia* in the Reformed tradition

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The Reformed tradition, emerging in the 16th-century Reformation, consists of a variety of sources that often lead to complex and differing views about beliefs, doctrines and ethics. However, this tradition and theology have always stressed the significance of social justice and *diakonia* as important aspects of faith and ministry, even though its great sense of diversity has often nuanced and stressed different levels of understanding and engagement of social justice. This article aims to show that social justice and *diakonia* are integral to Reformed tradition and practice. Using mainly the methodologies of literature review and contextuality (the author's context), this article establishes that social justice is grounded in the history, theology, spirituality, confessions and polity of the Reformed faith. The latter aspects are also contained in the notion that to be Reformed is to be ecumenical. In this sense, Reformed tradition is concerned about the whole world and all creation.

Contribution: The diverse and complex nature of Reformed tradition and theology often creates a sense of confusion on how Reformed Christians understand social justice and *diakonia*. This article offers a significant contribution to establishing that social justice is an integral aspect of Reformed tradition. By firmly grounding social justice in the history, theology, spirituality, confessions and polity of the Reformed faith, the author makes a significant contribution to a debate that has pervaded Reformed churches over many centuries.

Keywords: Reformed; theology; social justice; *diakonia*; ecumenical; spirituality; confessions; church.

Introduction

The Reformed tradition is in essence about change and transformation. The 16th-century Protestant Reformation embraced a number of quite distinct, yet overlapping, areas of human activity: the reform of both the morals and structures of church and society, new approaches to political issues, shifts in economic thinking, the renewal of Christian spirituality and the reform of Christian doctrine (McGrath 2012). Although the Reformation started within the church, it was inevitable that it would impact society at large, and it did, with wide-ranging effects on social, political, economic and religious changes.

This article aims to show that social justice and *diakonia* is a grounded aspect of being Reformed. To be Reformed is to be ecumenical, which implies that all creation, people and places in the world are part of the 'household' of God's sovereign rule, and therefore, everything that happens in the world matters to God; especially, the poor, needy, neglected and oppressed in society are special to God. Thus, social justice is an imperative in the Reformed tradition grounded in Reformed history, theology, polity and practice. This is what this article attempts to show.

Social justice is grounded in Reformed history

Martin Luther and John Calvin, though with different understandings, are both known to have changed the course of history in very radical and significant ways. Although their interest primarily stemmed from their intent to reform the church, it ultimately led to the 'reforming' of the world in which they lived. Their contributions to reform the Church inevitably led to political, social and economic changes as well. This can be seen in the work they did in Geneva and Wittenberg, largely impacting most of Europe and beyond.

The origins of the Reformed church lie with developments within the Swiss Confederation. Whereas the Lutheran Reformation had its origins primarily in an academic context in Germany,

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the Reformed church owed its origins more to a series of attempts to reform the morals and worship of the church according to a more biblical pattern (McGrath 2012). The term 'Calvinism' (John Calvin) is often used to refer to the religious ideas of the Reformed church. Using this term is now generally discouraged because Reformed theology draws from a variety of sources other than Calvin himself. In fact, it is generally agreed that Calvin's ideas were modified subtly by his successors, and they have evolved into something new.

Both Luther's and Calvin's ideas ultimately extended beyond their local domain and reached out to places in England, the Netherlands, Scotland and France, and today it has also grown beyond these countries, impacting Latin America, the Global South and other parts of the world. For example, John Witte Jr. noted how Calvin's teachings on authority and liberty, duties and rights and church and state had influenced many Protestant lands. He states that as a result of its adaptability, this 'rendered early modern Calvinism one of the driving engines of Western constitutionalism' (Witte 2007:2). According to Witte (2007):

[A] number of our bedrock Western understandings of civil and political rights, social and confessional pluralism, federalism and social contract, and more owe a great deal to Calvinist theological and political reforms. (p. 3)

Calvin's influence also found its way into Africa and other parts of the world. It would be true to say that Calvin's teaching, whether rightly or wrongly, impacted political, economic and social systems and structures. For example, Smit (2009), a Reformed theologian from South Africa, notes the impact of Reformed tradition and theology in South Africa:

[A]partheid an oppressive system of racial classification, exclusion and injustice, a system partly born within Reformed worship and the Lord's Supper and also built on an apartheid ecclesiology and on biblical and theological justification provided by the Reformed tradition and community. (n.p.)

The same can be said for the many colonised countries in Africa and across the globe. In South Africa, though, Black Reformed Theologians have brought a new understanding of Reformed tradition and, using the narrative of social justice in Reformed theology, have declared apartheid a heresy (see e.g. Boesak 1984).

With such a wide global impact, the Reformation, as we understand it today, is very diverse, complex and broad, encompassing a vast volume of encounters and experiences. In this sense, the Reformation includes many churches, countries and movements, and all of these experiences, including the Martin Luther Reformation, are part and parcel to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the Reformation.

It is important to note that Reformed theology is not merely articulated in a particular set of doctrines or denominations

but in a comprehensive 'life-system'. Speaking about Calvinism, Abraham Kuyper made this point as early as 1898:

[Calvinism] is rooted in a form of religion which was peculiarly its own, and from this specific religious consciousness there was developed first a peculiar theology, then a special church-order, and then a given form for political and social life, for the interpretation of the moral and world-order, for the relation between nature and grace, between Christianity and the world, between church and state, and finally for art and science. (p. 9)

While much has changed since Kuyper's time, what can be appreciated is his attempt to relate Christian faith and theology to the world in which he lived: its philosophy, art, science and politics. It is this connection that made Reformation theology a potent social force within the political struggle of 16th- and 17th-century Europe and created a new 'type of humanity' (Troeltsch 1956), not only of God's providence in history but also of its own calling to participate in the shaping of that history. Although controversial, there is no doubt that Calvinism, as an 'ideology of transition' (Walzer 1965), contributed significantly to social movements that managed to turn a theology of evangelical salvation into a programme of political transformation. This is not to say that its influence was all good; it certainly influenced 'Americanism' (Troeltsch 1956) and sanctified apartheid in South Africa.

Social justice is central to Reformed theology

As stated above, the Reformed family consists of a great variety of Christian communities coming from incredibly diverse backgrounds, communities, cultures, races, geographical locations, languages and experiences. This inevitably allows for differences of views, perspectives and even theological beliefs. Consequently, the Reformed tradition has been used by some as a tool against social transformation and by others as a positive call to work towards justice and social transformation.¹

Although many Reformed churches have moved towards the justice imperative in the Scriptures, there is still the debate of priority for some. For example, within evangelical Protestantism in America, there is the prevalent divide between those who emphasise the church's responsibility to proclaim a gospel of individual conversion (salvation) and those who focus on advocating for social justice.² The trend is to emphasise one aspect over the other. However, most Reformed Christians, at least in Africa, accept that you cannot proclaim the gospel without engaging the mission of Jesus Christ in proclaiming 'good news to the poor and setting the captives free' (Jn 4:18). The poor in this context are the

1.This can be seen, for example, in South Africa, where I live. The Dutch Reformed Church used the Reformation tradition to justify apartheid (separate development based on race, which led to the oppression of the majority black population in South Africa).

2.This is not only in America but in most parts of the world where Reformed tradition is found. Many Reformed Christians struggle with the notion of social justice, equating it to a 'political' gospel.

spiritually and materially poor, not one or the other. Therefore, individual salvation and justice are inextricably linked to each other, like two sides of a coin.

The imperative for social justice is quite solidly deduced from Reformed theological understandings. I shall not venture into exhaustive theological concepts or doctrines in Reformed theology but now seek to merely unpack some theological teachings in the Reformed tradition to show the significance it attributes to social justice. I will conclude this section by showing how social justice and *diakonia* are embedded in some Reformed Confessions.

The social justice imperative in Reformed theology is grounded in the very nature and understanding of God. Concepts such as God the Creator, the Judge, the Saviour and the Lord all speak to the just nature of God and the call to assert justice. According to the Bible, God is the Creator of heaven and earth. God created the physical-material world and the human person as a physical-material being, and God saw that his creation was 'very good' (Gn 1:31). God willed and affirmed the human person's physical needs and pleasures (Gn 2:9) as well as his or her spiritual welfare, the human life here and now in 'this world' as well as life 'in eternity'. In Jesus Christ, the Creator God again put his stamp of approval on the earthly physical life of human beings by himself becoming a flesh and blood man among people on Earth. As such, God is concerned about the physical and material welfare of human beings and how these are sustained in the secular social structures that influence and determine this welfare. Thus, through his prophets, God periodically warned his people that proper religious observances are not enough. He demanded social, political and economic justice for the poor, the exploited, the defenceless, the weak, the alien (Is 1:10–17; Jr 6:13–21, 7:1–27; Am 5:21–27).

In his ministry, Jesus showed concern for sick bodies and minds as well as for sick souls. When asked whether he was the 'one to come' from God, Jesus pointed to his ministry (Mt 11) on Earth:

[T]he blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. (v. 5f.)

Jesus' coming means also a social-political revolution (Lk 1:51f.). He called his followers to care for the physical and material needs of people: the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned (Mt 25:35f.).

Reformed Christians believe that if we are to be faithful to the calling of Jesus, then we have to be concerned also with social and political institutions and structures that help create or correct the conditions under which people suffer and are in need. This is precisely what the Reformers did in the 16th-century Reformation and Reformed Christians have been doing ever since (whether well or not is another question). The basis for Christian involvement is not so much

to be concerned with political parties and ideologies, social programs and causes, economic systems and policies as such but to bear witness to a just and righteous God and to uphold the biblical validation that creatures are made in God's own image. Most Reformed Christians therefore find it an obligation to champion the rights of the poor and oppressed and to challenge and resist unjust laws and policies which oppress and dehumanise human beings.

God as Judge, similarly, speaks to the social justice imperative for Reformed Christians. The God in the Bible judges sinful people. He condemns sin in order to help and save and to restore right relationships with Godself and other people with themselves. Sin in the Bible is not restricted to individual immorality and unbelief. The Old Testament prophets make it clear that some of the deadliest sins are false nationalism and militarism, unjust economic and judicial systems and the pride and exclusive arrogance of both religious and civil communities. Both Jesus and Paul (Ac 21:27f) exposed and denounced the social sinfulness of the people by social action. This is an indication that we cannot speak and act against sinfulness of people and call for repentance without speaking and acting in a social and political context. We cannot just call for individual repentance without simultaneously resisting and changing sinful structures and systems. This clearly is the call of liberation and black theologies, a call and commitment to eradicate oppressive and sinful structures and to assert the significance of social justice as a necessary agenda of the church in promoting God's justice in the world.

God as Saviour speaks of God's love for the world (Jn 3:16). This reconciling, renewing, unconditional and costly love is an imperative to social justice. The love of God moves us to heal, transform, reconcile and unite a world broken by sin, suffering and injustices. God's love compels us to work towards the new earth and the new heaven in which the Lord reigns. The social justice imperative is embedded in God's love for all people and creation.

The Bible tells us that as God is Creator, Judge and Saviour, God is also Lord. The key principles of Reformed theology can be seen in the five *solas*: *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola gloria* and *sola Christus*. I shall now show briefly how some of these *solas* are pivotal in appreciating the significance of social justice in the Reformed tradition. As my task is restricted to the latter, I will not undertake a full explanation of these Reformed principles.

Sola gloria* and *Sola Christus

Sola gloria speaks of the sovereignty of God. Important in the Bible is the lordship of Jesus Christ. He is not only Lord in the 'hearts of believers' or of the church or where people make him Lord. Jesus is Lord of the whole world – including specifically the political authorities and powers of the world (Mt 28:18, Eph 1:21, Rv 17:24). Most Reformed Christians thus do not see Christ as the prisoner of the church but the Lord of the world. Therefore, in their work for social, political,

and economic justice in the world, they recognise that they do not work alone; instead, they join the Lord who is already there at work before them. Such an involvement, then, is both an inescapable necessity and a great privilege.

John Calvin's theology took the believer's responsibility in the world more seriously than Luther. His view on the *sovereignty of God* gave rise to the idea of mission as 'extending the reign of Christ' both by inward spiritual renewal of individuals and by transforming the face of the Earth through filling it with 'the knowledge of the Lord'.

This particular view led Calvin into bringing about social transformation in Geneva. It stressed the point of *covenantal theology* and belaboured the fact that God covenants with all human beings, and they are part of the human chain. Calvin employed the traditional organic metaphor for society (as found in Ac 2:42ff.), in which, as he wrote, no member has 'power for itself nor applies it to its own private use, but each pours it out to the fellow members'; what chiefly matters is 'the common advantage of the whole body' (*Inst.*, 111, vii, 5). Occasionally he identified this community with the whole human race. 'All people', he could maintain, 'are bound together as a sacred chain [...] which [...] should be embraced in one feeling of love' (Commentary Ac 13:36; *Inst.*, 11, viii, 55).

Consequently, it is not surprising that Calvin, like Luther, showed a particular concern for the poor that resulted in his attempt to transform his society, especially in Geneva. He concerned himself with the issues of commerce and economic justice. His theology was not disembodied, divorced from the realities of life where labourers and employers are often at odds over economic matters. Calvin realised that because of the nature of humanity and the sinfulness of all of our institutions, our endeavours are to some extent motivated by self-interest, pride and greed. Yet his is a 'world-affirming theology' in the sense that he sought to apply the gospel to all of life. For him, that meant seeking the guidance of scripture for the problems besetting humanity, particularly those besetting the citizens of Geneva.

For example, Luther formulated new social policies to deal with major economic and social change. Luther and his colleague Karlstadt made provision in Wittenberg for the city council to provide low-interest loans for workers, subsidies for education and training for the children of poor and taxes to support the poor – all designed to prevent as well as alleviate poverty. In five years, they changed the theory and practice of poor relief which had been established by centuries of ecclesiastical tradition. They were convinced that fundamental human rights of equality, freedom and brotherly love had their source in the Christian faith. However, Luther also believed that this task of social change was essentially a task for the secular ruler and kingdom to carry out (see Pillay 2002). This was the birth of the two 'kingdoms' theory. Luther introduced two authorities (i.e. 'kingdoms'): spiritual and civil justice and order. Both are ordained by God as forces to combat the empire of Satan. Christians are subject to both authorities – firstly, however, to the spiritual authority

– and because they are subject to both authorities, Christians cannot live exclusively in either the spiritual 'kingdom' or the civil 'kingdom'. This theory strengthened the separation of state and church. Although Calvin drew a distinction between state and church, he believed that the function of the state was to serve the divine purpose of God.

Given the dynamics of a world in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and the numbers of people living in poverty and hunger continues to increase, it is important for Reformed theology to make a clear commitment of standing with the poor and oppressed in the world. We need to shift from a 'window-dressing' theological approach to an in-depth involvement with the plight of the poor (Pillay 2002). We need to ask whether our theological positions are life-enhancing and life-affirming; do they follow the Bible in sociohistoric precision? In essence, do they contribute to liberation and justice? These are the continued debates among Reformed theologians and Christians.

Reformed spirituality

The understanding of the sovereignty of God in Reformed theology also shapes the concept of Reformed spirituality. Spirituality is the pattern by which we shape our lives in response to our experiences of God as a very real presence in and around us (Rice 1991). To be spiritual is to take seriously our consciousness of God's presence and to live in such a way that the presence of God is central in all that we do. Such spirituality turns towards the world, not away from it. It gives attention to the threats of life and embraces the need for justice. Rice (1991) points out that it is this belief that:

[T]he Reformed tradition has produced people who are deeply concerned with matters of the interior life of the individual and, at the same time, with involvement in the affairs of the world. It has become a mark of the people called 'Reformed' that they are active in the life of society [...]. (p. 152)

Reformed spirituality thus ought to be geared towards equipping life-giving transformative engagement in the world. It is a spirituality that is built in community and builds community. Thus, any piety is suspect that appears to be content with a personal relationship with Jesus and which shuns or belittles the horizontal dimension of discipleship. Any spirituality that advocates a withdrawal from what is going on in the world is contrary to Christ's spirit. This is precisely what the Reformers taught.

Allan Boesak, no doubt, is a great proponent of this view of connecting faith and spirituality with the transformation of society. For him, it was clear that Jesus Christ is Lord of all areas of life, and this conviction undergirded his theological labour and his personal piety (Dibeela, Lenka-Bula & Vellem 2014:36.). Hence, for Boesak, Jesus and politics were not a strange combination but a necessary one if we are to truly live out the gospel and declare the lordship of Jesus Christ. It was this firm belief that, as a Reformed theologian and pastor, enabled him to put his own life at risk by opposing apartheid and struggling against injustice

and dehumanisation in South Africa. Boesak's book *Comfort and Protest* (Boesak 1987) recounts and reflects his prophetic calling and ministry in these areas.

This concept of spirituality aligns well with the African concept of *ubuntu* which says that 'I am because of you. I belong, therefore I am'. This concept of community is what shapes spirituality and life. For the African, life is not compartmentalised but integrated into a holistic experience in which culture, politics, economics, religion and the Earth are all deeply interconnected. Spirituality is not divorced from the realities of life. This essential teaching of the Reformation on Christian spirituality has a great sense of resonance within the African context. It is thus expected that public theology and witness should be an accepted responsibility of the Christian church. Unlike the Western world, where secularisation seems to be the growing influence, in the Global South spirituality is still seen as an integral part of life. It is thus not surprising that the Global South is or is becoming the new centre of Christianity. Reformed theology and spirituality provide the basis for social justice and *diakonia*. Smit (2007:382), in describing Reformed theology as public theology, states: 'For Reformed Christians, the world we live in, the society we live in, these political and economic realities we live in, are matters of faith'.

Sola scriptura

At the heart of the Reformation was the quest to return to the Bible. The idea of *sola scriptura*, 'by Scripture alone', became one of the great slogans of the Reformers as they sought to bring the practices and beliefs of the church back into line with those of the golden age of Christianity. According to McGrath (2012), if the doctrine of justification by faith alone was the material principle of the Reformation, the principle of *sola scriptura* was its formal principle. If the Reformers dethroned the pope, they enthroned Scripture.

Mainstream Reformers had no difficulty with the notion of a 'traditional interpretation' of the Bible. For example, Calvin asserted that the institutions and regulations of both church and state were required to be grounded in Scripture. Zwingli stated that 'the foundation of our religion is the written word, the Scriptures of God'. Heinrich Bullinger stated that the authority of Scripture was absolute and autonomous: 'Because it is the Word of God, the holy biblical Scripture has adequate standing and credibility in itself and of itself' (McGrath 2012). Such views indicate the consistently high view of Scripture adopted by the Reformers. It represents a major point of continuity with medieval theology.

The difference between the Reformers and medieval theology at this point concerns how Scripture is *defined* and *interpreted*, rather than the *status* that it is given. Calvin argues that the Scriptures are to be regarded 'as having sprung from Heaven' and as the medium through which 'the living words of God' are heard (Peel 2002:14). Calvin claimed that the Scripture

was essentially sufficient according to belief and practice because it contains all that is ultimately worth knowing, namely God's saving love in Jesus Christ. For Calvin, the Christological rather than the literal meaning of 'Word' was central to his theology (Peel 2002:15).

The well-known Reformed theologian in South Africa John W. De Gruchy argues that 'Calvin's primary consideration was the witness of the Word and the Spirit to God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ', and he goes on to affirm that this became for Calvin 'the chief basis upon which he interpreted the whole of Scripture ... the way Scripture interpreted itself' (De Gruchy 1991:55). Smit (2009) points out Calvin's great emphasis on scripture and impact on life in the following comment:

For Calvin, Holy Scripture is the ultimate norm, also with regard to the formation of human life in community and society. For Calvin, natural law is indeed important for civil justice and public order, but ultimately all our social institutions should also be subjected to the critique of the Word of God. (p. 3)

Karl Barth, similarly, placed great emphasis on the Bible as the sign of the ultimate authority, the triune God. Scripture is the authoritative source of what is normative in Christianity. For Barth, 'in Scripture we are confronted with the very Word of God' (Barth 1956 in Peel, 18). Yet Barth held a paradoxical view in stating that the words of the Bible and the word of God, at one and the same time, are both distinct and united. Barth, like Calvin, refers to the 'miracle' work of the Holy Spirit: 'By Him, it became Holy Scripture, by Him and only by Him it speaks as such' (Barth 1956:538). It is apparent that when the Reformers asserted their doctrine of *sola scriptura*, they wanted Jesus Christ to be known and acknowledged as Lord of the church.

The proclamation of the lordship, for the Reformers, went beyond that of the church. In this sense, text and context become important. Schleiermacher pointed out that while the Bible is central to Christian witness, it must consider contemporary experience. He asserted that the Reformation is not simply an event in the past but upholds an important principle: the Church is forever to be reformed after the standard of Christ and in the light of new and changed circumstances (in Peel 2002:16).

Hodgson (1994), a revisionary theologian, takes this further, stating that:

[T]heology requires a continual process of interpretation that constructs new visions of Christian faith and practice from resources provided by scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in the contemporary cultural challenges. (p. XI)

Hodgson differs from Calvin and Barth in that he does not see Scripture as the *formal norm* but one of several resources to be used in theology: the Bible, tradition, other religious traditions, cultural history and theology, cultural context and religious experience (Hodgson 1994:28). In this sense, the 'gospel' is seen as 'liberation' (Hodgson 1994:29). This view largely impacts Reformed theology in light of

contemporary challenges in various liberation struggles, debates on human sexuality, the ecological crisis, dialogue with other faiths and ideologies. It is this interpretation of Scripture in a changing world that becomes a crucial element for understanding the significance of social justice in Reformed theology.

While most Reformed Christians assert the authority of Scripture, some are more inclined to question *how* scripture is interpreted. Reformed Christians have had a mixed approach to understanding and interpreting Scripture. Peel (2002) summarises this well when he points out how Reformed Christians have legitimised doctrine and witness that we now see as sub-Christian:

From apartheid and racism to slavery and sexism, from burning scientists at the stake to driving indigenous people off their lands, from ruthlessly raping the natural world to justifying minors working twelve hours per day in mines, the scale of misery, abuse and inhumanity which has been perpetuated by biblical authorisation has beggared belief. (p. 13)

It is a stark reminder that the Reformation can not only be discussed in terms of its ecclesial meaning but also in its relation to culture as a whole. The issue of context and biblical interpretation becomes a serious matter of importance. The Bible is a central document of Western civilisation, not only as the source of Christian ideas but also as an influence on education and culture. The Bible became the tool for colonisation and Western imperialism. Today, Reformed Christians, especially in the Global South, are seriously challenging these as they question the 'hermeneutical lens' that is used in interpreting Scripture. Furthermore, the critical question is, 'who is interpreting Scripture and for whom?'

It is important to note that the ideological equation of the Bible with the word of God has been seriously challenged by many scholars. Maluleke (1996), for example, states the following:

[I] propose that the equation of the Bible with the 'Word of God' is not only naïve but it is a dangerous form of naïveté. Furthermore, I propose that this equation has been and will continue to be more debilitating for Black African theologies than any of the dangers highlighted by Bediako, Sanneh and Mugambi (1995) combined. The equation of colonialism with Christianity if and where it has occurred, has done far less harm to Black and African theologies than the equation of the Bible with the Word of God. (n.p.)

The above points establish that Reformed theology itself needs renewal and transformation in the area of further understanding *sola scriptura*; the focus is not only on *what* the interpretation is but, more significantly, on *who* is interpreting. The Reformed faith has the obligation of protecting the text from being co-opted by the powerful and the elite and thereby giving vent and expression to the 'voice' of the poor, marginalised and oppressed masses. How do the latter groups inform biblical interpretation? How can this become a source for renewal and transformation?

In the context of the Global South, critical biblical interpretation and application of Scripture have become the norm. While Reformed theology and tradition have taught us to do this, contextual realities aligned to the quest for justice and peace have taken it even further. The rise of liberation, black and African theologies has helped shed new light on biblical interpretation and understanding today. This makes Reformed theology keep reforming, an essential principle of the Reformation.

Sola fide

Essential to the Reformation is the doctrine of justification by faith alone: *sola fide*. Again, it is not my intention to focus on the theological debates of the doctrine of justification by faith. My task is to briefly show how the Reformed understanding of 'faith alone' provides us a solid theological undergirding for social justice and *diakonia* (Pillay 2021).

Luther and Calvin generally held the same view about the doctrine of faith. For both Reformers, the meaning of faith involved three assertions: (1) the *origin* of faith is located in the initiating action of God and not human will; (2) the *content* of faith is primarily divine activity and only secondarily our appropriation of it; and (3) the *effect* of faith is therefore the actualisation of saving grace (McKelway 1999:206).

While Luther linked faith to work, he denied that faith was a 'work'. He maintained that '[h]aving been justified by grace [...] we then do good works, yes, [but] Christ himself does all in us'. Luther (Althaus 1966) sees faith as a divine work:

[T]rust in our own work, on *any* basis, destroys faith and the entire Christ. For it is Christ alone who counts and I must confess this [...] by saying: since Christ does it, I must not do it. (p. 225)

Luther saw faith as the activity of God in the Christian.

While Calvin agreed with Luther about faith as the divine work of God, he placed more stress on the human side of faith. Where Luther saw faith as a single phenomenon, that is, God's work and human response, Calvin posited two kinds of faith. Firstly, faith is the means of the divine act of justification, and secondly, faith is the human response to grace. In distinguishing the *fides divina* from the *fides actualis*, Calvin could, without intruding upon the priority of God's action, assign to faith definite doctrinal and moral responsibilities for its fulfilment. Calvin thus emphasised the presence of works in faith, not as a cause nor as an effect but as a necessary and inescapable *accompaniment* (eds. Willis & Welker 1999:211). Calvin expresses a double meaning of faith that accompanies his views of justification. On the one hand, he insists that faith is a work of God, which 'alone' justifies. On the other hand, he dedicates a large portion of his discussion of faith in book 3 of his *Institutes* to faith as human knowledge and action (Calvin, *Inst.* 3.6–10). For Calvin, this all comes together in Christ. It is the unity of Christ with us that allows Calvin to place such importance upon the actualisation of faith in good works (eds. Willis & Welker 1999:212).

Barth (1933:38) establishes faith as both a divine and a human act. The action of God and the action of human beings are two different things – yet the two things are not a contradiction but belong together. If the Son makes us free, we are free indeed (Jn 8:36). It is our faith and freedom in Christ that prompts us to ‘free’ people from injustices, dehumanisation and sinful practises.

Reformed liberation theologians call for theological *praxis*. Theology is change and action to bring about God’s will to create a world of love, peace and justice. One’s faith in God must be expressed in the ‘hatred and detestation of the things which are contrary to God’ (Heppe 1978:533). This must prompt Christians to work with God in bringing about God’s justice in the world. Most Reformed Christians see this as part of their responsibility and are therefore actively opposed to oppressive socio-economic and political structures and policies that dehumanise and destroy God’s people. They realise that they have to participate with God in bringing God’s kingdom (reign) on earth so that all may have the fullness of life. Faith in God is much more than just an individual matter, it has communal responsibilities. Peel (2002) captures this well:

[T]heology must attend faith, rather than be perceived as opposed to it. Faith is our way of living before God in the world. It involves placing our whole trust in God for our ultimate well-being, but it carries with it a knowledge of a practical kind [...] Only a thoughtful faith will satisfy the mission imperative; only a well-worked-out theology will stand up in our sophisticated world. (pp. 10–11)

The basic tenet of Protestantism was the doctrine that human beings were justified by faith rather than by works. Each person had to search his or her own heart to discover whether acts stemmed from a pure heart and faith in God (see Pillay 2017, 2021). Unfortunately, the new theological focus on individual faith was to strongly influence the economic views of the new middle-class artisans and small merchants. Such people felt quite genuinely and strongly that their economic practices, though they might conflict with the traditional law of the old church, were not offensive to God. On the contrary, they glorified God.

The new doctrines stressed the necessity of doing well at one’s earthly calling as the best way to please God and emphasised diligence and hard work. These doctrines subsequently led to the spiritualising of economic processes and the belief that ‘God instituted the market and exchange’ (see Pillay 2002). This emphasis, however, sadly took the Christian focus away from the general concern for the community and the obligation to the poor. It gave acceptance to the liberal paradigm of poverty as backwardness, stressing that the poor should be enabled to reach their full potential.

Although this view on poverty has been seriously debated and challenged over the years, we still need to assess how the Reformation relates to imperial capitalism (Preston 1979) and to the male means–end rationality in science, technology

and individualistic calculating mentality (Duchrow & Jochum-Bortfield 2015). How this view of *sola fide* stands in need of renewal and reformation is a question Reformed Christians must continue to engage, especially when it is used to support economic systems that oppresses others.

Sola gratia

At the centre of Reformed theology is the message of *sola gratia* (Pillay 2021). It reminds us that grace alone is the source and sustenance of our salvation. God’s provision of saving, sustaining and glorifying grace is the golden thread uniting all Christian scripture and enabling all Christian faithfulness. This means all works honouring God – including our personal sanctification, our love for neighbours and enemies, our zeal for world mission, our free offer of the gospel, our warnings of judgement, our promises of eternity, our mercy toward the poor and oppressed, our stewardship of God’s world, our battles against Satan, our prayer for God’s blessing and our work towards Christ’s coming – all find proper motivation and enablement in love for Christ. Of course, this can be misused to use grace to excuse sin, but the principles of grace revealed in all Scripture are the fuel of personal holiness and spiritual revival for those led by the Spirit.

Thus, Reformed Christians believe that presenting the doctrines of grace in a warm and embracing way is not to obscure holy boldness but to encourage compassion and humility in the face of God’s sovereign mercy to all he loves from every tribe, language, people and nation. As the kindness of God has led to repentance and renewal among us, we must be committed to a manner and ministry that reflects God’s grace to others (cf. Rm 2:4; 1 Pt 3:15). We must be on guard that the grace message that God has brought to us (or our particular expression of it) does not become a jewel that we admire and adore for the joy it brings us rather than for the hope it offers the world.

Reformed Christians are struggling today to understand and exemplify God’s grace in the light of the new emerging world experiences impinging on the role of women in society, issues of human sexuality, religious intolerance and violence, racism, xenophobia, tribalism, the refugee situation, etc. How do we express grace and hospitality to differing views, theological beliefs and human experiences? All of these impress upon us the need for renewal and transformation as we seek to build inclusive communities, embrace diversity and foster better relationships with people of other faiths. These are realities that Reformed Christians grapple with today, and unfortunately, we are seeing fragmentation and disunity at its worst. How does the concept of grace foster Christian unity rather than perpetuate divisions? The Reformed understanding of grace is an essential teaching that should enable us to cross boundaries and barriers of cultural, racial, economic and religious divides (see Pillay 2017, 2021). The holding together of unity and justice in Reformed theology is becoming more necessary to address a broken and struggling world.

Reformed confessions

The Reformed tradition is known for addressing issues of social justice in critical and controversial confessional statements. It has the tendency to produce new confessional statements of faith when it assumes the historical demands on the Church to speak out. Smit (2009) reflecting on Karl Barth's 10 characteristics of a Reformed confession puts it together:

A Reformed confession of faith is the (8) spontaneously and publicly formulated (7) presentation (4) to the Christian church in general of a (5) provisionally (3) ranted insight from (1) the revelation of God in Jesus Christ (2) attested to in Holy Scripture alone (10) by a geographically circumscribed Christian fellowship which, (6) until further notice, (9) authoritatively defines its character to outsiders and which, until further action, gives direction to its own doctrine and life. (p. 312)

In short, a Reformed confession is a call to Christians in a particular (*abnormal*) context to declare the lordship of Jesus Christ, such as in the context of struggle, suffering and oppression. The confession is spontaneously and publicly formulated, not decreed from above. It is confessed by the believers, the congregation and the marketplace (see Smit for a full explanation of Reformed confessions, Smit 2009:312–315). The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (now called the World Communion of Reformed Churches) gives a description of such a *status confessionis* (Opocensky 1997 in Smit 2009):

Any declaration of a *status confessionis* stems from the conviction that the integrity of the gospel is in danger. It is a call from error into truth. It demands of the church a clear, unequivocal decision for the truth of the gospel, and identifies the opposed opinion, teaching or practice as heretical [...]. The declaration of a *status confessionis* within one particular situation is, at the same time, addressed to all churches, calling them to concur in the act of confessing. (p. 301)

Some good examples of Reformed confessions are the Barmen Declaration (1934), Belhar Confession (1987), Accra Confession (2004, cf. Pillay 2018), among others. The Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934), for example, speaks out against German National-Socialism and its pervasive influence in all areas of society including the Church. It is a call to the church to stand up for truth and not say one thing and do the opposite. It is a call to hear, trust and obey Jesus Christ alone.

Another example is the Belhar Confession³ (1986), crafted by the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, speaks out against racism, inequalities and injustices in South Africa. It calls the church to propagate and stand up for unity, restorative justice and reconciliation (see De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2004). For Allan Boesak, the issue of justice is crucial; it is part and parcel of the Christian gospel. In fact, it is the declaration of the lordship of Jesus Christ. Whenever Christians speak out and act against injustice, inequality and the dehumanisation of the human being, they serve as the ambassadors and servants of Christ.

3. For the historical background to the Belhar Confession (see eds. Plaatjies-Van Huffel & Vosloo 2013). For a comparison between the Barmen and Belhar Confessions, see Smit (2009:325–336).

Boesak singles out The Belhar Confession (1987) in this respect where it states:

[I]n a world filled with injustice and enmity God in a special way is the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged [...] that the church as God's possession is called to stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged. (p. 7)

Boesak (2005) points out that this Confession helps us to:

[F]irstly *stand up* (and be counted) for the poor and the destitute, and secondly to stand where God stands. Not just in front of, in protection, but alongside, in solidarity of struggle. Not in mere sympathy but in *identification with*. The church must do that not because it is obsessed with the poor but as the possession of God, in whom its grounds of being, its identity is found' (p. 200).

The Accra Confession (2004), adopted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 2004, focusing theology on 'covenanting and caring for the earth', is another significant example of a Reformed Confession. It outlined and prophetically engaged the issues of economic justice, gender justice and ecojustice in the world. It has rightfully pointed us to these matters and prompted us to respond to the unjust realities of life. It also offers a critique of the Empire and explores its damaging effects in the globalised world. Boesak has offered valuable theological reflection on Empire and establishes that the Christian church today is facing 'a new Rome' (Boesak & Hansen 2009:59–72). Consequently, he states that the church is called to resist all these new forms of idolatry, for they have moral, political, economic and theological consequences. Boesak has unceasingly offered a solid critique on the concept of power from a justice perspective.

All of these Confessions mentioned above make it abundantly clear that you cannot talk about God without talking about justice, because God is a God of justice. When you say Jesus, you say justice, and when you say justice you say Jesus. The two are inseparable. Thus, Reformed confessions play a vital role in addressing social injustices.

Social justice is in the heart of Reformed polity and structure

The significant emphasis on social justice in the Reformed tradition is not only reflected in its history, theology, spirituality and confessions but also in the polity and offices in Reformed churches. The office of deacon is a unique and divine calling within Reformed churches. It is among other offices that usually cause some degree of confusion in Reformed churches today. There are essentially three recognised offices in Reformed churches: The *ministerial* office focuses on the prophetic exposition of God's will in Christ for salvation. The office of *deacon* focuses in a priestly way on blessing those in need. The office of *elder* represents Christ's royal authority in ruling and caring for the church.

There are many misconceptions on the job of deacons. Sometimes people think of deacons as spiritual administrators

in charge of operational and maintenance aspect of the church budget, material property, repairs and caring for the needs of people. Some stress the latter and see deacons as mainly providing social services. If we understand the Apostle Paul correctly, deacon is emphatically an office of service and mercy in the church. They are responsible for the collection and distribution of money in the church, coupled with the major task of taking care of the poor.

Calvin saw the task of the deacons was to collect the revenues of the church and to distribute them partly to the ministers and partly for the support of the poor. Calvin's (*Inst.*, 3) sentiments are expressed thus:

But the deacons have the treasures of the Church to dispense, that is to say, such as are wholly dedicated to God, and ought not in any wise to be applied to profane uses ... For the goods of the Church ought to be applied no other, but to the use of the Church, that is to say, to find the ministers, to find the school masters, which serve to preserve the seed of the Church, and such other like things, and especially to *find the poor*. (p. 100)

Clearly, the task of the deacon is to care for the poor, needy, widows and the vulnerable in the church and community. Over the years, the focus on the poor and injustices in the world has evolved into a move from merely caring for the needs of the poor to championing social justice in the world. The focus is on *diakonia*, which has an expanded notion of asserting the rights and justice of the poor, oppressed and needy. This certainly impacts our understanding of the offices in the church today. Before I explain the latter, I propose to share some insight into understanding the evolving dynamics of *diakonia* to illustrate its development in most Reformed churches today.

In essence, the transition in (re)-understanding *diakonia* can be seen from the movement on social responsibility for the needy and poor in the early church as a responsibility emerging out of the '*gospel of love and charity*' which included almsgiving and care for widows, orphans, slaves, travellers, the sick, the imprisoned, and the poor (Von Harnack 1967:147–198). Driven by the love of Jesus, believers went out and expressed their love for the neighbour. The early disciples showed true mercy and compassion. Peter, who had no silver or gold on his person, gave a crippled beggar what he did have: the gift of health (Ac 3:6). Tabitha (Dorcas) is cited as an early disciple 'full of good works and acts of charity' (Ac 9:36). *Diakonia* in the early church was limited to the practice of love, charity and mercy.

The medieval period was built on the system of feudal hierarchy. The church advocated a moral code sometimes called the Christian corporate ethic, reflecting the fact that all of society was considered a single entity or corporation (Hunt & Sherman 1981:6). This led to a strong *paternalistic obligation* towards the common people, the poor and the general welfare of society. However, as Henry points out, the Benedictine Rule had been 'one of the most effective linkages of justice, unity and the renewal the church has ever

known' (Henry 1983:271–281). The Benedictine monastery indeed became a 'school for the Lord's service' and was to have a profound influence in the centuries to follow.

The monastic movement, from its inception, has been concerned not only with the spiritual side of life but also with its social and economic components. *Ora et labora* was the motto of the Benedictine Order, and it also inspired many other communities. During the Middle Ages, the church was deeply concerned about economic matters, not only on the theological level but also on the operational one. Hospices, orphanages and philanthropic work were supported by income generated through economic activities. However, most of these were done through the monasteries. Julio De Santa Ana points out that it was the monasteries that chose to radically eradicate poverty (De Santa Ana 1979:62). The monks saw as their gospel responsibility the need to be involved in the transformation of society. While the church in the medieval period took seriously its responsibility to the poor, it did not really seek to restructure society. Instead it took the poor and struggling people into the monasteries and cared for them there. This was to change with the coming of the Reformation.

With the Reformation came a fundamental theological shift in the understanding of the church's involvement in society, especially in relation to the poor. As Lindberg (Quoted in Sider 1981) points out:

Luther's theological position consists essentially of the conviction that Salvation is not the process or goal of life, but rather its presupposition [...]. Since righteousness before God is by faith alone and salvation is the source rather than the goal of life, it becomes difficult to rationalise the plight of the poor as a peculiar form of blessedness. There is no salvific value in being poor or in giving alms. Thus, when the Reformers turned to the reform of poor relief and social policy, they had a new theological foundation for their work [...]. They de-ideologised the medieval approach to the poor which had obscured the problem of poverty. (p. 20)

Luther's theological position was to influence his care and concern for the poor. The result was the formulation of new social policies to deal with major economic and social change. Luther and his colleague Karlstadt made provision in Wittenberg for the city council to provide low-interest loans for workers, subsidies for education and training for the children of the poor, taxes to support the poor – all designed to prevent as well as alleviate poverty (Sider 1981:22). In five years, they changed the theory and practice of poor relief which had been established by centuries of ecclesiastical tradition. They were convinced that fundamental human rights of equality, freedom and brotherly love had their source in the Christian faith.

Similarly, Calvin's program for dealing with the problems of his own age was based on his conception of God as '*legislateur et roy*' [ruler] of the universe. It was crucial for him 'that God governs us' (Bouwisma 1988:192). 'When our Lord Jesus Christ appeared', (Sermon No. 45 on Dt 426–427) declared:

[H]e acquired possession of the whole world; and his kingdom was extended from one end of it to another, especially with the proclamation of the Gospel [...]. God has consecrated the entire earth through the precious blood of his Son to the end that we may inhabit it and live under his reign. (n.p.)

This meant that religious reform pointed also to the reform of the secular realm.

Thus Calvin, like Luther, expressed a particular concern for the poor. He believed that it was the Christian's responsibility to address the concerns of the poor and needy. He stressed that money and goods ought to circulate in human society to the welfare of all. Humanity in solidarity one with another would participate in contributing according to one's vocation to the good of all. He maintained that the church teaches and acts to promote equality and restore human solidarity. It helps people to put their property to use of all.

Consequently, Calvin as a theologian and pastor became involved in everyday matters as diverse as the high cost of dying, hospitals, sumptuary laws and the regulation of business and industry and the question of wages (Olson 1989:13). Calvin and Farel instituted the first free public education for both sexes. Beyond the welfare system and education, the work of Calvin and the pastors reached out to suggestions for railings to protect children on stairs and balconies. Fires and chimneys were regulated, and efforts were made to clean the town and for street repair. Regulation of prices for the necessities of life was an accepted principle of the early Reformation in Geneva (McKim 1984:301).

The Reformers generally advocated an involvement with the world (although not all of them, for example, the Anabaptists). However, unlike in the Middle Ages, they went a step further in the attempt to transform society.⁴ Their theology in many ways encouraged the transformation and development of the community. And this they engaged as they influenced social and economic policies of the government of the day (Stivers 1993:33–48).

It is a clear indication that Christian mission and *diakonia* started to broaden its terrain and impact in transforming people, communities and society. It is thus not surprising that some 'secular interpretations' tend to discount the importance of the religious element in the Reformation. They simply state that Luther, Calvin, Knox, Zwingli and others are products of their socio-economic and political backgrounds and circumstances (Van der Walt 1991). There can be no doubt that other factors played a role, but the religious one cannot be ignored. The Reformation movement did not only renew and change the church, leaving the world uninformed. This movement intervened dramatically in the lives of all and brought about radical changes in the social,

4. Some have said that 16th-century reforms were the beginning of a new era. Others feel they were a product of cumulative changes in social welfare in the late medieval era. Still others have attributed changes in social welfare to the Renaissance and particularly to interested humanists or to better business practices during the Renaissance. Some also attribute the changes in social welfare to the Protestant Reformation (Olson 1989:22).

political and economic aspects of a new developing world. It gave rise to a new epoch in the history of humankind. And all through this time, there were small groups of Christians who kept to the task of transforming the lives of the poor. It is thus not surprising that one of the theological miracles of the late 20th century is the rediscovery of the biblical witness to God's particular concern for the poor and oppressed. This became the major focus of the ecumenical church, in particular, and remains so.

For example, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) Executive in August 1981 worked on a draft study on issues such as the catholicity of the church, confession and the act of confessing, worship, power and wealth, racism and the theological basis of human rights. At the Ottawa General Council in 1982 (WARC 1982), WARC called on its member churches to bear witness in a world where powers and principalities are constantly defying the purpose of God and the lordship of Christ. The following ways in which churches could do so were suggested:

- responsible participation in the power structures of the world with the aim of making them more humane and more just
- an alternative witness in the life of the church but on behalf of society as a whole, which refers to a simpler Christian lifestyle that goes against consumerism and greed
- expressing obedience to God by taking political responsibility through active resistance to unjust power structures.

It is clear from the above that for Reformed churches, *diakonia* meant much more than charity and relief, which means the transformation of society, communities and the world at large. It called for involvement and partnerships with organisations and movements seeking to create a better world for all creation.

Drawing from the above, it would be true to say that the changing understanding of *diakonia*⁵ impacts the Reformed understanding of deacons. The ministry of service and mercy is broadened to include the transformation of church and society. Reformed churches are called and tasked to share in the struggle for justice and peace in the world. Hence, Reformed churches, though not all,⁶ were quite involved in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa (see Plaatjies-Van Huffel & Vosloo 2013). Most of these Reformed churches are today talking about relational ecclesiology and mission and transformative ecumenism, all of which embraces the need for social justice and *diakonia*.

5. The broader definition of *diakonia* does not only embrace the notion of development but also expands into global solidarity, engagement and transformation. The ecumenical church has impressed upon us the need to shift from an *ecclesiocentric* to an *oikocentric* perspective of *diakonia* that leads to a more modest claim about our task in the world. The mission and diaconal praxis of the church is to be a sign and action addressing the groaning universe. The biblical understanding of the kingdom or reign of God gives credibility to the interconnectedness and interdependence of a single-world society (Pillay 2021).

6. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa was instrumental in justifying apartheid, although it later came to declare apartheid a heresy.

The social justice and *diakonia* imperative in Reformed churches are no longer narrowed down to the office of deacons. It is generally accepted that all offices in most Reformed churches, ministers, deacons and elders are all intended to exercise social justice and *diakonia* ministries in the quest for justice and peace in the world. Thus, it is not surprising that many Reformed churches have either done away with elders or deacons or joined both to perform the same function of overseeing the spiritual and temporal (social welfare) aspects of the church. This further establishes the significance of social justice and *diakonia* in Reformed tradition and churches.

Conclusion

The Reformed tradition has always understood that the God of compassionate justice calls the church to follow, to practise, to live and to embody the same compassionate justice in the world – to stand up for truth, to champion the rights of the poor and oppressed and to proclaim the reign of God in the world. Although Reformed Christians have differed, and still do, as to how they may go about it, they cannot deny that social justice and *diakonia* are an essential calling rooted in Reformed history, theology, spirituality, confessions, church polity and practical ministries. In our world and society so full of injustice and enmity, the call to Reformed churches and Christians to stand up for justice, to build a better world for all people and creation and to faithfully proclaim the love, justice and reign of God is an even greater task!

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