

INTRODUCTION

A. T. B. McGowan

Although the Reformation took place in the sixteenth century, it is important to understand that this was the beginning of something and not the end. The Reformed churches affirmed the need to be *semper reformanda* (always reforming). Unfortunately, this commitment to continuing reformation has not been faithfully and consistently maintained over the centuries. At one end of the theological spectrum, some have invoked *semper reformanda* in order to justify abandoning the core of Reformation theology and departing from received orthodoxy. At the other end of the spectrum, some have forgotten about *semper reformanda* in their progress towards a rigid confessionalism, giving the impression that the final codification of truth has already taken place and that there is no further need for reformation. Between these two extremes, there is a vital task to be performed by the church in every generation; namely, to subject its beliefs and practices to the renewed scrutiny of Holy Scripture. In doing so, the church must restate the truth of Scripture in ways that faithfully communicate the gospel, advance the mission of the church and address the issues that men, women and children are facing day by day as they seek to follow Christ and witness to him. To be engaged constantly in this process of reforming is important for a number of reasons:

1. *God speaks today.* If we believe that God lives and speaks today, then we must always be listening and reforming. Some evangelicals have made the mistake of sinking into an unfortunate biblicism which at times gives the

impression that God, having given us the Scriptures, is no longer required (nor indeed expected) to speak today. A proper understanding of the relationship between Scripture and revelation will expect God to continue to speak, by his Spirit, through his Word. If we believe this, then we shall continue to search the Scriptures and will, in our theology, take account of what we learn.

2. *Theologians make mistakes!* Theology is written by human beings and human beings make mistakes. As evangelicals, we have often been good at pointing out the mistakes of others but bad at admitting mistakes ourselves. Do we really imagine that we have all of the truth? A study of church history and of the history of theology is a good cure for any such confident assertion. One has only to trace the doctrine of the Trinity or Christology through the early centuries of the church to see the various steps (forward and back) before the church came to a settled mind on these great doctrines. Even to trace the development of trinitarian theology in the Latin west from Tertullian to Augustine demonstrates a number of false moves and wrong turns. Can we really imagine that all theological issues are now settled once and for all?

3. *New issues require new thinking.* The sixteenth-century Reformation and the theology that developed from it was a movement rather than a completed event. For example, John Calvin lived and died prior to the debates about Arminianism, Amyraldianism and limited atonement. Those who followed Calvin developed his theology in various ways. Very often they asked different questions because they were dealing with issues to which he was a stranger. Sometimes the theological development within the movement was in line with his thinking, a natural development. At other times, his followers have taken the view that he was mistaken or had not gone far enough.

In our twenty-first century we face many complex issues, which earlier generations have not been required to face and it will not do merely to restate old ideas in the old familiar words and try to hide away from the modern world. It simply is not an option to create little communities of people who attempt to live as people did in earlier centuries, using seventeenth-century language and seventeenth-century Bibles and circling the wagons against the outside world. Apart from anything else, we do our children a serious disservice if we fail to address the issues that present the most serious challenges to their remaining in our churches.

What are we to say about cloning, about various forms of genetic engineering, about globalization and about world poverty? How are we to maintain the uniqueness of Christ in the face of pluralism? How are we to affirm truth in a postmodern world, which is committed to relativism? How can we stand firm for Christ against a plethora of religions and philosophies in a politically

correct world, where it may soon be illegal to deny categorically the truth claims of other religions?

As a student in the early 1980s, I was hugely impressed and influenced by Francis Schaeffer. Here was a man who tried to engage with the world in which he was living. He examined the work of the philosophers, politicians, novelists, artists and others who had rejected Christianity and he tried hard to understand them properly. In doing so, he pointed out their presuppositions and ultimately the problems and inadequacies in their thought. That is the kind of work we must be doing in our generation.

4. *Scripture must have priority over Confessions.* One way in which we can be ‘always reforming’ is to review and rewrite our Confessions. Have you ever considered it astonishing that the Confessions to which most twenty-first-century denominations swear allegiance are those of the seventeenth century? In my view, the authors of those Confessions would be horrified to think that we had not updated them to deal with modern theological problems and heresies. The main concerns of those Confessions were the errors of late medieval Catholicism. For the past 150 years, the main opponent of evangelical Christianity has been liberal theology. That type of theology is more or less dead now but it has been replaced by many others, such as feminist and post-modern theologies, and none of them is dealt with in the Confessions and Catechisms we use in our churches.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am happy to affirm my belief in the core theology of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (which is the Confession of Faith of my church, the Church of Scotland), but I also believe that it is time for new Confessions, which speak to the issues of today. The *Scots Confession* filled a significant role in my country from 1560 until 1647. It was then replaced, not because it was found to be wrong but because many issues had arisen in the interim period with which the *Scots Confession* did not deal. Similarly, today, we need new Confessions that will hold to the central theological affirmations of the old Confessions but which will apply that theology to the issues of today.

The key point, of course, is that Confessions must never take priority over Scripture. There is, in many evangelical circles, an unfortunate and increasing tendency to put tradition (in the form of Confessions) on a par with Scripture, an error that evangelicals often impute to Catholic theologians. In certain circles, to suggest that the Westminster Divines made mistakes is almost tantamount to heresy! A *semper reformanda* approach is vital if we are to avoid giving Confessions priority over Scripture. The great Reformed Confessions of the seventeenth century were undoubtedly a high point of the movement, involving a certain codification of the stage the tradition had then reached. Unfortunately, many still try to make decisions in respect of modern

theological controversies by asking what the Westminster Divines said on the matter, instead of asking what the Scripture says. This has often led to priority being given to Confession rather than Scripture in settling debates.

5. *The right of private judgment.* In the work of *semper reformanda* there must be trust and a certain respect for the right of private judgment. In other words, if the church is going to take reformation seriously, we must encourage people to think ‘out of the box’. Sometimes a scholar, in studying the Scriptures, may discover a theme that is new and perhaps needs exploration. Someone might decide to challenge a long-held and well-established doctrine and suggest that we must view the matter in a different light. Scholars must have the freedom to do this, within the constraints of the faith of the church.

In some circles today, when anyone seeks to explore a new idea or restate an old one in new words, there is an immediate rush to judgment. Often this approach amounts to theological bullying and oppression, leading to a situation where scholars do not feel free to go where they believe God through his Word is leading them, for fear that they will be declared heretics before they have even had time to explore the matter properly. In some situations, people run to the church courts and demand an ecclesiastical ‘trial’, where the more sensible approach would be to take a good long time to think and pray and study God’s Word. Sometimes the pressure is more subtle, with younger scholars being advised to avoid certain issues or certain positions ‘for the sake of their career’. This is a deeply regrettable and unfortunate situation. Evangelical scholars must have the courage of their convictions and be prepared to challenge (where necessary) the Creeds, Confessions and practices of the churches.

Having presented the arguments in favour of taking a *semper reformanda* approach, however, let me now indicate the parameters within which this should take place.

1. *Theology is the servant of Scripture.* One of the key marks of evangelical theology is a commitment to the authority of Scripture. Although I am arguing that theologians should challenge, question, reform and rethink established theological perspectives, this must be done on the basis of Scripture. Nothing I have said should be taken to imply that some external authority, secular presupposition, autonomous reason or anti-supernaturalist world-view can be the basis for proper theological reflection and statement. We must be centred upon God speaking to us through his Word.

2. *Theology takes place in the context of the church.* Theology can never be anything other than the theology of the church. When Karl Barth restarted his theological work, after an initial publication, he changed the title from *Christian Dogmatics* to *Church Dogmatics*. That was a vital move. The only theology worthy of the name is church theology, theology carried out in the context of a wor-

shipping community. The notion of a ‘freelance theologian’ is simply a contradiction in terms.

3. *Theology did not begin with us.* There must be a careful balance in our approach to the theme of ‘always reforming’. On the one hand, there must be respect for the tradition but, on the other hand, we must avoid total submission to it. One should always think very carefully before departing from something the entire church has held to for many centuries, while at the same time one must remember that no Creed or Council or Colloquy is necessarily the final word. It is very easy to become an iconoclast and to make one’s name by casually dismissing doctrines to which the church has given universal consent for centuries – many a PhD was thus made! On the other hand, it is equally easy to be paralysed by the fear of what others might think should we dare to challenge even one line of Nicaea or Chalcedon.

4. *The manner of semper reformanda.* Above all, it is important that we engage in the process of *semper reformanda* in a proper spirit and manner. There are personal qualities that ought to be seen in every theologian. The Scriptures tell us that when we disagree with our brothers and sisters we should do so graciously, gently, with a prayerful concern for the weaker brother, regarding others as better than ourselves. We should have regard to our own weaknesses, prejudices and inadequacy and seek to avoid pride, dissension and a contentious spirit. Why is it that so often in theological controversy people seem to be angry? It is dreadfully simple to dress up our own arrogance and pride in the guise of ‘defending the cause of the gospel’. Rather, under the authority of God, speaking by Word and Spirit, the theologian should engage both subject and colleagues with intellectual rigour (there is no excuse for carelessness or laziness) and a prayerful spirit. There should be a real exhibition of kindness and love towards others, especially those with whom we disagree. If we engage in the theological enterprise in this way, it will be for our own good and for the good of the church.

The task ahead

This book, then, is an exercise in *semper reformanda*. Each contributor was asked to take a different theme, doctrine or subject area within the discipline of systematic theology. The task was then to assess the current state of scholarship in that area, before indicating areas where further work, development, restatement or clarification is required. For example, do we need to restate a doctrine that is in danger of being neglected or denied? Or is there a need to revisit a doctrine and look again at its formulation, where perhaps as evangelicals we may

have been working with a weak or inadequate expression of the truth? Are there areas that have not been properly tackled and where much more work needs to be done? Are there areas where we simply have to hold up our hands and admit that we have been quite wrong?

The contributors are all scholars whose background is within the Reformed tradition, albeit from a range of denominations and nationalities. It is to be hoped, however, that what we have to say will be broadly of interest to anyone with an interest in systematic theology. Overall, the book is intended to make a positive contribution to evangelical scholarship, by helping to identify problems, dangers and exciting new possibilities. Above all, we want to help set an agenda for future work and scholarship.

Given this remit, it should be clear that there are several things that we are not trying to do. First, we are not trying to provide a definitive statement of each doctrine covered in these chapters. Rather, we are engaged in some exploration. Second, we are not trying to cover every doctrine that might be found in a volume of systematic theology. There are many topics that are not covered and that we would like to have explored, were it not for the overall constraints upon the size of this volume. What we have done is to explore a number of doctrines and themes, some of which have been at the heart of recent theological debates in evangelical theology. If the book is felt to have been useful, there is scope for other subjects to be given a similar treatment. It should also be noted that the order of chapters is not crucial. Rather than cluster all of the methodological and programmatic chapters at the beginning before moving on to the various doctrinal chapters, I have chosen to inter-mingle them.

Let me conclude by thanking all of the contributors for their willingness to participate in this volume and for their kindness in getting manuscripts to me in good time. May I also thank John Frame for agreeing to write the preface and Phil Duce of IVP for encouraging me to take on this project in the first place.