

“Hope for even the most wretched”? On remembering the Reformation

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Abstract

Commemorating the Reformation, the paper reflects on the distinction (by Assmann and Welker) between forms of cultural memory, some weaker, more fluid and fading, and some stronger, longer lasting, with the potential of suddenly becoming alive again, providing new orientation and inspiration. One particular fragment of the Protestant tradition that became alive during late 20th century South African theological discourses is pursued as illustration, namely the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck’s claim that election is a source of inexpressibly great comfort since it promises hope for even the most wretched. The paper shows how these forms of cultural memory may inspire new generations to reclaim what they regard as the heart of their tradition against dominant historical understandings; can form new histories of interpretation finding new expressions of embodiment, different from anything past; and may surprise and even shock those standing in the tradition, offering a rich new surplus of possibilities.

Key words

Herman Bavinck; Allan Boesak; Russel Botman; Reformed doctrine of election; cultural memory

1. On remembering

In his account of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu remembers how

1 This was the text of Smit’s retirement lecture at Stellenbosch University, on 11 October 2017, during the 500 year Commemoration of the Reformation in Stellenbosch. He is now the Rimmer and Ruth de Vries Professor of Reformed Theology and Public Life at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, but also still serves as Extraordinary Professor of Systematic Theology, Stellenbosch.

he became increasingly aware how relevant theology is for the whole of life.² After all, what we love, trust and hope for, matters, for our lives, for our public life together and for the world we share. Yet, how does it matter?

Michael Welker – the Reformed systematic theologian from Heidelberg – often reflected with colleagues on the question how shared traditions matter. They developed distinctions between different forms of memory, some weaker, more fluid, even fading, but some stronger, longer lasting, with the potential of suddenly becoming alive again, providing new perspective and orientation, new motivation and inspiration in new circumstances.³ This is how living traditions matter and become relevant again, albeit in new and sometimes unexpected, even shocking ways. Welker describes this as “necessarily restless memory,” memory which “continually calls forth new interpretations without losing its centring.”⁴ These new interpretations appeal to the tradition and often claim that they explain what the heart of the tradition had always been about, but in actual fact these appeals to the tradition may bring new insight and new relevance and power. It is as if a truly living tradition is restless, ever renewing itself by transforming itself.

We all know such experiences. We all belong to communities of interpretation, sharing ways of seeing the world, and we all stand in traditions of interpretation, receiving convictions and values from those before and around us, finding our own way in the world helped by these memories. Sometimes, fragments of these traditions may suddenly come to life. They may suddenly make sense, cast new light, change our

2 Desmond M Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Johannesburg: Rider, 1999, 73 but he repeatedly returns to the same theme.

3 He often referred to the work of his Heidelberg colleague in Egyptology, Jan Assmann, for example *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis, München: C H Beck, 1992*, and “Was ist das ‘kulturelle Gedächtnis?’” in *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, München: C H Beck, 2000, 11–44. On the basis of these theoretical discussions, Welker could therefore claim, in his systematic-theological work, that “this memory is a cultural power that transforms the world,” *What Happens in Holy Communion?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, 132. In his inaugural lecture in Stellenbosch, Robert Vosloo also made use of these theories on memory and tradition, particularly the work of Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, München: C H Beck, 2006. See Robert R Vosloo, *Time in Our Time: On Theology and Future-Oriented Memory*, Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2015.

4 Michael Welker, “Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today?” *Harvard Theological Review* 95/2, 2002, 145–146; also Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* 127–129.

perspectives, move us, challenge us, and even transform us. We all know such experiences – and that is how faith and theology matters. Sometimes, such fragments may remind us of roots and histories and figures and events of long ago that become alive and meaningful again in our present. Such insights may become new histories of reception, creating their own new traditions. They may surprise us, by claiming riches from our tradition of which we had been unaware. They may even shock us, revealing to us how unfaithful and far removed we have grown from the traditions in which we claim that we are standing. They may perhaps open up a reservoir of new meanings, a surplus of potential for the future which we do not yet fully understand ourselves. These are all ways in which faith and theology matters.

This is, of course, also what happened during the times which we now call the Reformation.

New generations of believers appealed to what they claimed were the heart of the tradition and they claimed that against the historical forms of the tradition in their own times. Their new interpretations in turn formed new histories of reception and took on new forms of embodiment and life, in many ways radically different from anything in the past. These new histories of interpretation would themselves again and again become alive again, orientating, moving, inspiring, and in this process they would often surprise, often shock, often lead to a rich new surplus of possibilities. This is the way in which the Reformation remains a living tradition for many, the way in which its faith and theology matters.

Hopefully it is allowed in a retirement lecture to call to mind one particular fragment of the tradition that came to life in my own biography, and how it made sense to me, often surprising, even disturbing, often open to the future and rich with potential beyond my own comprehension, and how this conviction was affirmed to me again and again, by many different voices.⁵ My account is therefore not an argument, but simply a series of

5 One specific example could be the reception history of the clause about Pontius Pilate in the early creeds, on which I reflected in an essay honouring Michael Welker, see Dirk J Smit, “‘Under Pontius Pilate’ – on Living Cultural Memory and Christian Confession”, in *Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today? Pathways to Contemporary Christology*, Andreas Schuele & Günther Thomas, eds, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 19–49. For several other fragments of the tradition and how they were appropriated in

personal recollections, of random memories of figures and moments which, at least to my mind, all contributed to witness to the same fragment of the tradition.

2. On remembering 1976

In 1976, I was a final year in the Stellenbosch Faculty of Theology, then all-white, in an all-male and all-Dutch Reformed class, when apartheid South Africa exploded with the Soweto uprising and the protests that spread like wildfire, from campuses to the streets. Engaged in a thesis for the Licentiate in Theology, I was studying the Dutch systematic theologian from the early 20th century, Herman Bavinck.⁶

In his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, discussing the doctrine of God, Bavinck focuses on election, in his tradition the very heart of the Reformation, by contrasting this teaching with Pelagianism. In order to appreciate his argument, it is necessary to quote at length.⁷

“Both for unbelievers and believers,” Bavinck writes, “the doctrine of election is a source of inexpressibly great comfort.” He is deliberately polemical. The claim of Pelagianism is precisely that election leads to anxiety and fear, to the very opposite of “inexpressibly great comfort.” Bavinck continues, substantiating his surprising claim, “If it (salvation, well-being, flourishing, our comfort) were based on justice and merit, all would be lost. But now that election operates according to grace, there is hope even for the most wretched.” This is his claim, for him the good news of God’s free and gracious election. Now – suddenly, surprisingly – there is hope even for the most wretched.

the Reformation and specifically in some strands of the Reformed tradition, see the collections of my essays edited by respectively Robert Vosloo and Len Hansen, *Essays on Being Reformed. Collected Essays 3*, Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009, and *Opstelle oor Gereformeerd-wees Vandag. Versamelde Opstelle 4*, Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2013.

6 See Dirk J Smit, *Waarheid en Verifikasie by Herman Bavinck. 'n Uiteensetting van die Waarheids- en Verifikasie Problematiek met Besondere Verwysing na Herman Bavinck*, unpublished, Stellenbosch University, 1976.

7 In the original Dutch, Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek. Tweede Deel*, Kampen: Kok, 1967, 365–366. It is here quoted from the English translation, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 2*, translated by John Vriend and edited by John Bolt, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004, 402.

“If work and reward were the standard of admission into the kingdom of heaven,” he continues, “its gates would be opened for no one. Or if Pelagius’s doctrine were the standard, and the virtuous were chosen because of their virtue, and Pharisees because of their righteousness, wretched publicans would be shut out. Pelagianism has no pity.” Again, these words directly contradict the Pelagian accusation that election has no pity, but is hard and merciless, cruel and terrifying. The exact opposite applies, argues Bavinck, Pelagianism has no pity, since it makes our salvation dependent upon ourselves and our virtue and achievement, while election is merciful, bringing hope even for the most wretched.

“To believe in and to confess election,” Bavinck proceeds, “is to recognize even the most unworthy and degraded human being as a creature of God and an object of his eternal love.” This is both the ground and the consequence of the doctrine of election – for Bavinck, therefore, of the central message of the Reformation – that we may and indeed should recognize even the most unworthy and degraded human beings as creatures of God and objects of God’s eternal love. The almost direct allusions to Calvin cannot be overlooked. Calvin also described those whom we regard as the most unworthy and degraded of human beings and then argued that God gave us two things to recognize in them, namely God’s own glorious image and our own flesh.

“The purpose of election is not – as it is so often proclaimed – to turn off the many,” says Bavinck, “but to invite all to participate in the riches of God’s grace in Christ.” Then he draws remarkable conclusions. “No one therefore has a right to believe that he or she is lost, for everyone is sincerely and urgently called to believe in Christ with a view to salvation,” he says. “No one can actually believe it, for one’s own life and all that makes it enjoyable is proof that God takes no delight in one’s death,” he says. “No one really believes it, for that would be hell on earth,” he says. No, there is hope even for the most wretched, and therefore we may not, cannot, and do not believe that anyone is lost and not the object of God’s eternal love – this is true even and precisely of the most wretched in our eyes. Election is thus a source of comfort and confidence, he says, since it assures us that “the salvation of human beings is firmly established in the gracious and omnipotent good pleasure of God.”

Remarkably, this argument occurs in a section with the heading “On Earth as it is in Heaven.”⁸ Although Bavinck does not spell out any practical consequences for the Christian life, it is not far-fetched to assume that he would have been aware of them. His argument obviously has implications for how we look at others, see and regard strangers, recognize in one another objects of God’s eternal love and therefore also objects of our love. His argument challenges us to talk to and about others in such ways that they never lose hope, never become wretched in their own eyes, never begin to doubt that they are objects of God’s eternal love and therefore also accepted by us.

Remembering these words during those dark times of 1976 in apartheid South Africa one could almost imagine that this is what Paul had in mind writing to the Romans, and what Luther saw that day in the tower of his house in Wittenberg when he discovered God’s saving justice for the first time in Romans 1:16–17.⁹

God’s justice is not an attribute of God, Luther discovered to his own surprise and overwhelming joy, but rather God’s action, it is what God does, namely that God justifies whoever God chooses to justify. God justifies first the Jew, yes, but also the Greek, and then all those described in chapters 2 to 3, all those without the law and without any virtue and claim, even the most wretched in our reckoning, yes, even God’s enemies.

For *this* reason, there is hope even for the most wretched.

8 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics. Volume 2*, Part III, “God’s Will on Earth as it is in Heaven,” 337–405.

9 In Luther’s own words during his later years, looking back at this foundational experience – foundational for his own spiritual life but also for the Reformation – when he was still young, “I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God’, because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust ... Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him ... Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. The passage of Paul became to me a gate of heaven ...,” quoted in James D G Dunn & Alan M Suggate, *The Justice of God. A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, 7.

One could suddenly see how this surprising insight into God's free and sovereign grace in Romans 1:16–17 leads to the justification by faith alone in chapters 3 to 5, to the undeserved grace of wretched lives made new in chapters 6 to 8, to the doxological praise on this free grace of chapters 9 to 11, and to the everyday lives that now, through the life-giving Spirit, embody this free grace in chapters 12 to 15,¹⁰ culminating in the moving appeal of Romans 15:7 that we should accept one another as Christ has accepted us, to the glory of this God.¹¹ After all, when we accept one another in this way, we are doing what the justifying God has done in God's free and sovereign grace.¹²

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- 10 In the early 1970s, Bible study played a major role in the spiritual and theological development of many of us as students, see my essay "On belonging. Doing theology together", *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, ed. Darren C Marks, Burlington: Ashgate, 153–162. In the circles of the (Afrikaans-speaking) Student Christian Movement some of us would study Romans intensely, I vividly remember weekends and whole weeks during short holidays when students (including friends like Coenie Burger, Elna Mouton, Francois Wessels, Leon Fouche, and others) would study and discuss the letter as a whole and specifically concentrate on the structure and thrust of the whole Romans. In this process, the theological commentary by Willem D Jonker, *Die Brief aan die Romeine*, Kaapstad: NGKU, 1969, was popular and helpful.
- 11 When the International Bonhoeffer Society met in Cape Town in 1996, I was asked to write an essay in preparation on "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and 'The Other,' accept one another, therefore (Rom 15:7)," *JTSA*, December 1995, No 93, 3–16. Bonhoeffer commented on these words in the wedding sermon which he sent from the prison cell. In November 1989 I therefore already used Romans 15:7 for the wedding sermon when Russel and Beryl Botman were married, since this was the time during which he was working on his doctoral dissertation on Bonhoeffer's ideas on discipleship and transformation.
- 12 It is remarkable how popular Romans has become in the circles of what today is known as Political Theology. Several of the important representatives of this contemporary movement in political philosophy have written extensively on the Letter to the Romans, including commentaries, for example Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005 and Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. The Jewish scholar Jacob Taubes directly engaged the legal scholar Carl Schmitt (who triggered much of today's Political Theology with his influential monograph with the same title, *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, translated by George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) in his lectures on Romans called *The Political Theology of Paul*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. For this widespread philosophical and political usage of Paul today, see for example Douglas Harink, ed, *Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision*, Eugene: Cascade, 2010, John Milbank, Slavoj Zizek & Creston Davis, *Paul's New Moment. Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010, John D Caputo & Linda M Alcoff, *St Paul Among the Philosophers*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009 and Ward Blanton & Hent de Vries, eds, *Paul and the Philosophers*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

One could suddenly understand that there is hope for the most wretched in our eyes, not only in heaven but also on earth, because of God's free grace that accepts us all as we are and moves us to accept one another and all others as they are, irrespective of how wretched they may seem in our eyes, all together objects of the eternal love of the Triune God. One could suddenly appreciate that this conviction is at the heart of the tradition in which we stand and to which we belong.

3. On remembering similar voices

Whenever a fragment from the tradition becomes alive like this, other voices may suddenly seem to affirm this understanding, all kinds of other witnesses may seem to support and further strengthen this new interpretation.

This was also the case for me. So many voices, so many witnesses, all seemed to affirm what I thought I heard from Bavinck and then recognized back in Luther and further back in Paul.

Was this not the same tradition that inspired Archbishop Tutu when he so movingly claimed that the most vicious, indeed the most blasphemous aspect of apartheid was for him not the great suffering it caused its victims, but the fact that it could make a child of God doubt that he or she is a child of God?¹³

Were these not the same convictions which inspired Willie Jonker writing on election in his *Uit Vrye Guns Alleen*?¹⁴ He argued that this doctrine only functions in a doxological context, as praise, born in wonder and gratitude, for God's free grace in Christ and through the Spirit.¹⁵ Election is the mystery and foundation of the good news of the gospel, for the Reformed

13 I read it the first time in Desmond M Tutu, "Christianity and Apartheid," in *Apartheid is a Heresy*, John W de Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds, Cape Town: David Philip, 1983, 46–47. Over the years, Tutu would however repeat and develop the claim in different ways, see for example in *No Future without Forgiveness*, 155.

14 Willem D Jonker, *Uit Vrye Guns alleen. Oor Uitverkiesing en Verbond*, Pretoria: NGKB, 1988.

15 In the introduction, which he called, in his deliberately archaic and poetic way, and alluding to words from Totius' versification of the Psalms, "Uit vrye guns alleen, uit ewige meedoë," *Uit Vrye Guns Alleen*, 13–18.

tradition the central message of the Bible and the heart of the church. After all, Jonker quoted these exact words of Bavinck in full as motto for his study.¹⁶

Were these not the same convictions which Jonker himself recognized in a poem by N P van Wyk Louw which so deeply moved him? In 1962, he was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Congregation of Johannesburg when they celebrated their 75th year. They asked Van Wyk Louw for a poem for the festive occasion. Louw produced a passionate depiction of God's free grace bringing hope to the most wretched of this world, to those not living in white palaces, but outside the gates, "skawagters vol strooi en stof: kras manne wat in skerms woon en ruik na bok en rook en mof," hope to strangers in suffering and need, hope in our "benoude vlees", our fearful flesh.¹⁷

Later, in his memories called *Selfs die kerk kan verander*, Jonker would quote the poem in full, as so often before, and comment that Van Wyk Louw understood so well that the church, and also their congregation, was for the wretched of the city, the *ellendiges*, using Bavinck's word. According to him, Van Wyk Louw understood already then what the Confession of Belhar would confess much later, namely that God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged, and calls God's church

16 Jonker deliberately used the long quote from Bavinck on a separate page in front of the book, as summary and motto, *Uit Vrye Guns Alleen*, 11.

17 It reads in full: "Nie in die wit paleise nie/wou Hy (uit soewereine Wil)/tot ons soort staat gebore word;/ maar, waar die Kuise en die Arme stil/en buite die hotel se poort/ verniet loseer het in die stal,/het Hy, Visarendjie van God,/in ons benoude vlees geval.// Die eerste oë wat Hom sien,/was skawagters vol strooi en stof;/kras manne wat in skerms woon/en ruik na bok en rook en mof;/ná baie dwaal en baie soek/- en selfs digby Herodes vra! -/ kom eindelijk die Wyses tóg/met goud en wierook agterna.//Hy het sy eerste kern gekies/nie uit geleerdes in die Skrif/of dié wat hande en borde was/met koue voorgeskrewe drif;/maar vissers en 'n tollenaar/die 't Hy geroep met sagte groet:/ manne met harde hande en sweet/en eelte, en 'n oop gemoed.//En toe Hy sy groot net uit laat gooi/regs van die boot en links en regs,/het Hy ingesleep: 'n vreemde prooi -/'n visvangs soos die óú Wet slegs/in skaam vermoede kon vermoed -:/melaats, besete, ryk of klein;/sondaars van elke kleur en geur;/maar in Sy glimlag, skielik: rein," N P Van Wyk Louw, written on Ascension Day 1962, "Hoe Christus sy Kerk op Aarde (en in ons Stad) Gestig het," *Vyf-en-sewentig Jaar*, Johannesburg: Nederduitse Gereformeerde Gemeente Johannesburg, 1962, 6–7.

to follow in this, and Jonker wondered how many members of their congregation at the time understood the meaning of the poem.¹⁸

Was this not the heart of the Reformed tradition to which Allan Boesak appealed so often whenever he appealed to Calvin against Calvin, to Kuiper against Kuiper, to the Confessio Belgica article 37 against article 36, to the Reformed confessions against their misuse in the history of Reformed churches?¹⁹ Was this not the hope for the hopeless that Boesak has been claiming and proclaiming continuously, in so many sermons and speeches, letters and lectures, papers and prayers, over so many years?²⁰ Is this not still the theme of his recent study called *Dare We Speak of Hope?*, when he concludes with a meditation on the words of Isaiah 42:1–4 on the Servant who will bring forth justice to the nations without breaking a bruised reed or quenching a dimly burning wick?²¹

Was this not the understanding of the Reformation that led to Russel Botman's controversial position that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches should not subscribe to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches, unless a

18 “Op ’n middag het hy in alle beskeidenheid die feesgedig by die pastorie kom afgee, en dit met ’n paar verduidelikings aan my vorgelees. Ek het dit reeds by die eerste aanhoor aangryp end gevind, maar soos met al Louw se gedigte, vind jy algaande steeds meer daarin ... Wat vir my opvallend was, was die teologiese insig daaragter. Uit die gemeentegeskiedenis was dit vir hom duidelik dat die Braamfontein waar die eerste Afrikaners hulle in Johannesburg gevestig het, ’n plek *vol armoede en ellende* was. Daár het die kerk aan die Rand sy ontstaan gehad, nie in die rykmansbuurte nie ... Louw het daarmee ’n fundamentele aspek van die evangelie na vore gebring: dat dit vir God *in sy verkiesende liefde juis om die ellendiges, die sondaars, die armes en die lydendes gaan* ... In ons land sou dit later neerslag vind in die uitspraak van die Belhar-belydenis dat God as God van geregtigheid op ’n besondere manier die God van die noodlydendes, armes en veronregtes is. Dit bly vir my merkwaardig dat Louw dit reeds destyds gesien en op die gemeente van Braamfontein van toepassing gemaak het. Ek weet nie hoeveel van ons gemeentede die reikwydte van die gedig gesnap het nie” (my italics; *ellendiges* is the exact term that Bavinck also uses), Willie Jonker, *Selfs die Kerk Kan Verander*, Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 1998, 50–52.

19 See for example Allan A Boesak, *Running with Horses. Reflections of an Accidental Politician*, Cape Town: Joho! 2009, 21–47; also his *Black and Reformed. Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984.

20 For the same way in which he is still doing it, see for example Allan A Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid: The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance*, New York: Macmillan Palgrave, 2015.

21 Allan A Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching For a Language of Life in Faith and Politics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, 175–182.

concern for justice could become part of any such declaration? He spoke at the time as chair of the Roman Catholic-Reformed dialogue, representing the Reformed tradition. He explicitly appealed to Reformed figures like John Calvin, Karl Barth and John de Gruchy, making the point that the connection between justification and justice “is not recent, but rooted in our Reformed tradition.” It would be a scandal, he said at the time, “to people who are dying daily of poverty, violence and oppression when we postpone discussion on the relationship between justification and justice, treating the latter as merely a matter of ethical application ... (it) would be a betrayal of everything that Christianity has learned about justification after Auschwitz and apartheid.”²²

Were these claims not, albeit in different words, the consequences of Bavinck’s claim about hope even for the most wretched? Suddenly, I thought I heard similar voices from so many sides.

I heard it in the legal scholar John Witte’s persuasive account of the Reformation as *A Reformation of rights*, as a historical movement which recognized and protected human dignity in ever deepening ways.²³ I heard it in the passionate writings of the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, showing that John Calvin was the first to argue that our love of justice is born not in obedience to God’s will, but in our longing not to hurt, injure and wrong the objects of God’s love, because we do not want to wound God’s own compassionate heart.²⁴ I heard it in Lekula (Mpo) Ntoane’s

22 In fact, he claimed that this connection is a central doctrinal one for these Reformed theologians, since justice is not merely an ethical consequence and the proper human response to the gospel of justification, but both justification and justice are integral to God’s own actions of saving justice, of liberating grace, and since God does not treat us like rocks and stones, we are made part of this life of renewal and transformation, by God’s life-giving Spirit, through grace, H Russel Botman, “Should the Reformed Join In?,” *Reformed World* 52/1, 2002, 12–17.

23 John Witte, Jr, *The Reformation of Rights. Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Witte’s account is in the form of a remarkable historical narrative, consisting of successive episodes (Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, England, North America) showing how the Reformed tradition step by step broadened and deepened its application of the notions of dignity and rights.

24 Wolterstorff played an influential role in the way many of us at the time understood the Reformed faith and tradition. Ironically, he himself developed his own interest in issues of justice (or in his terminology: issues of rights and wrongs) during an experience in South Africa, in Potchefstroom, when white Reformed theologians failed to hear what

dissertation in which he critiqued South African versions of Calvinism in the name of what he called *A Cry for Life*.²⁵ I heard it when I began to understand that the Heidelberg Catechism does not speak about sin but about misery, alienation, *ellende*, wretchedness (originally: *von des Menschen Elend; hominis de miseria*) – and how crucial this distinction is.²⁶ I heard it in an email that JFF (Jaap) Durand sent me from critical care in hospital, just after surgery for life-threatening conditions, in which he explained how his own theological convictions developed, saying that he became increasingly under the impression of God’s freedom to love and act sovereignly in history.²⁷ I heard it in what the former Rector of the University of the Western Cape Jakes Gerwel wrote about the Stellenbosch philosopher Johannes Degenaar. During a consultation on “The Church and Nationalism” during those dark days of conflict, Degenaar commented on how a black participant responded to a white person saying that, if he talks like that, it makes him lose all hope. Both Degenaar and Gerwel argued that what we needed was a grammar for life together, a way of

black participants during a conference were saying about their experiences of injustice, see his account in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Journey Toward Justice. Personal Encounters in the Global South*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013. One particular essay that was for many helpful and inspiring was Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Wounds of God: Calvin’s Theology of Social Injustice,” *The Reformed Journal*, 37/6, 1987, 14–22 (reprinted in *Hearing the Call. Liturgy, Justice, Church, and World*, Mark R Gornik & Gregory Thompson, eds, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011, 114–132).

- 25 L R Lekula Ntoane, *A Cry for Life. An Interpretation of ‘Calvinism’ and Calvin*, Kampen: Kok, 1983.
- 26 For an account of this interpretation, see my contribution to the 2013 commemoration of the Heidelberg Catechism in Stellenbosch, Dirk J Smit, “Vervreemding en Gawe – Sleutelmotiewe in die Heidelbergse Kategismus?,” *NGTT* 54 (1 & 2), 2013, 173–188; for a similar argument, see Michael Welker’s contribution to the same event “What profit is the Reign of Christ to us? The Heidelberg Catechism and its Potential for the Future,” *Acta Theologica*, 2014 Supplement 20, 280–292, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v20i1.185>.
- 27 In a contribution in a *Festschrift* for Durand I argued that his life and theological work were both characterized by the remarkable way in which he took history seriously, and I speculated about possible influences behind this aspect of his thought. When he suffered life-threatening illness and underwent surgery, he sent a carefully argued message of several pages from the hospital, immediately after he recovered from the surgery, to explain where the influences originated. It is an unpublished, personal letter, but for my original contribution, see Dirk J Smit, “In die geskiedenis ingegaan”, in *Discerning God’s Justice in Church, Society and Academy. Festschrift for JFF Durand*, Ernst Conradie & Christo Lombard, eds, Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2009, 131–166.

speaking about others and to others that would never make them lose hope.²⁸

I was reminded of the need for such a comfort when I read the descriptions by the Polish social commentator Zygmunt Bauman of our world as a world that conspires against trust, that makes people feel unwanted and unwelcome, wretched and hopeless, a world filled with moral blindness and indifference, a world that excludes, alienates and marginalises strangers.²⁹

It was therefore an inspiring moment when, in words similar to Bavinck's, Russel Botman spoke about hope for the hopeless in his inaugural lecture in Stellenbosch³⁰ and again later, when as Vice-Chancellor he invited the whole University to commit knowledge and research to a project of hope for the wretched and hopeless,³¹ to help achieve the global millennial goals for those suffering denial and violation of their dignity in so many forms of hopelessness.

When the Theology Faculty responded to this invitation, they appealed explicitly to their Reformation heritage in Calvin's well-known *ubi cognoscitur Deus etiam colitur humanitas*, wherever God is known, there humanity flourishes. For the faculty, this implied that, wherever the loving grace of God is truly known, human beings will also be accepted in such

28 Degenaar used this expression repeatedly, remembers Gerwel, to illustrate “dat die vorm van ons diskoers die aard van ons saam-bestaan raak.” This is what he learnt from Degenaar, says Gerwel, “Om aan te hou praat, redelik te praat, selfs waar die drif en die daad dreig om die woord te verswelg ... Om elke gespreksgenoot ernstig op te neem, na sy woord te luister, en hom steeds as mens-spreker te respekteer.” Therefore Gerwel concludes by arguing for “die noodsaak daarvan om volhardend te bly werk aan die skepping van daardie grammatika van saamleef in geregtigheid,” see G J (Jakes) Gerwel, “Die grammatika van saamleef,” in *In gesprek: Opstelle vir Johan Degenaar*, André du Toit, red, Stellenbosch: Voorbrand-Publikasies, 1986, 126–127.

29 See for example Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008 and Zygmunt Bauman & Leonidas Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013.

30 H Russel Botman, *The End of Hope or New Horizon of Hope? An Outreach of Those in Africa Who Dare to Hope*, Inaugural Address, February 2001, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University (reprinted in *NGTT* 43 (1&2), 2002, 22–31).

31 H Russel Botman, “A Multi-Cultural University with a Pedagogy of Hope for Africa,” Speech on the Occasion of his Installation, 2007, unpublished, but available on several websites.

ways that they are cultivated and cared for and allowed to flourish, even and precisely the most wretched in our own eyes.³²

4. On remembering surprises

Sometimes, of course, we may not be prepared for such new ways of re-interpreting our own past. Sometimes, we may be protected from such surprises by our conventional and innocent and harmless ways of standing in our tradition, too accustomed to its liberating message, too immune to its transformative power, our memories cold and uninspiring and lifeless. Sometimes, this may also be true of the Reformation, of Luther’s joyful and Calvin’s grateful discoveries of hope for even the most wretched.

Sometimes, however, the “necessarily restless memory” may suddenly become alive again, and fragments may surprise us. God’s free grace and election has often had such an effect. Was this not why James asked his readers, who privileged the rich and humiliated the poor, with obvious surprise, whether they no longer remembered that God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith (2:1–13)? Was this not behind Kierkegaard’s remark of cynical surprise, when the bishop announced to the royal family, several rows with members of the Danish Academy of Science, many bankers, lawyers, judges, wealthy merchants, ‘dear brothers and sisters, behold, God has chosen you for himself, you, the despised and rejected of the earth (1 Cor 1:28),’ – “and no one laughs”?³³

Sometimes, leading theologians in the tradition expressed similar surprise.

32 “Dis moontlik om te argumenteer dat *alle Christelike teologie* ten diepste op die bevordering van *menswaardigheid* gerig is – of behoort te wees. In invloedryke teologiese tradisies geld die motto dat die eer van God in die welwese van die mens geleë is; soos in die beroemde samevatting van die 2e eeuse Irenaeus van Lyon, *gloria Dei, vivens homo*, die eer van God is die lewe van die mens; of in Calvyn se bekende spreuk *ubi cognoscitur Deus, etiam colitur humanitas*, waar God geken word, word wat menslik is geëer, gedien, opgebou, gekweek (’n sleutelmotief vir teoloë soos Karl Barth, die 20ste eeuse belydende kerktradisie, en ook ’n vorige Stellenbosse dosent en dekaan, Willie Jonker),” in “Fokus op die bevordering van menswaardigheid,” unpublished draft report of the Theology Faculty to the Stellenbosch Strategic Plan, February 2008.

33 See for example James Kiefer’s humorous recollection of Kierkegaard’s description of the scene in the Cathedral in his “Soren Kierkegaard,” available at http://satucket.com/lectionary/soren_kierkegaard.htm. For Kierkegaard’s own words in “The Moment,” see Bruce H Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 476.

When Karl Barth discussed the miracles of Jesus in his doctrine of reconciliation, he asked with surprise how Protestantism could possibly have had such a one-sided view of human need and therefore of grace and salvation, that it completely overlooked God's free and gracious compassion revealed in Jesus Christ for creatures suffering under the powers of death, caught in the misery caused by violence and injustice, oppression and fear, evil and shame, poverty and pain, caught in the depths of all hopelessness and wretchedness?³⁴

When Oepke Noordmans discussed the state of Protestantism after the Second World War, he wrote a meditation called "Zondaar en Bedelaar," expressing similar surprise. He juxtaposed Jesus' parables about the Pharisee and the publican and the rich man and Lazarus and asked how it had been possible for the church to take the one seriously, but not the other, to become a church of sinners but not of beggars? Was the church, in fact, preaching the whole gospel, he wondered, or were they preventing many from entering the gates of grace? God was teaching the church the gospel in new and surprising ways, he said. The church was faced with radically new challenges because of what God was revealing to them in these dark times. Wretchedness has many faces, Noordmans said, and grace and hope and salvation also. Protestantism should learn that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus also belongs in the gospel. Protestantism should not fail to see the many faces of wretchedness. Protestantism had to remember that there is more in the gospel than what we have already heard and received, said Noordmans.³⁵

34 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1967, 233. For discussion, see Dirk J Smit, "Paradigms of Radical Grace", *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa*, Charles Villa-Vicencio, ed, Cape Town: David Philip, 1988, 17–44; also Dirk J Smit, "On Learning to See? A Reformed Perspective on the Church and the Poor," in *Suffering, Poverty, and HIV-AIDS: International Practical Theological Perspectives*, Pamela Couture and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, eds, Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 2003, 55–70.

35 It provided the key to a series of meditations over several years, it became the title of the first published volume of these meditations, and it became the opening essay in *Volume 8* of his *Verzamelde Werken*, the volume with his collected meditations. He showed movingly how the church has succeeded in reading these two parables in two completely different ways, relating much easier to the sins (*zonden*) of the publican than to the wounds (*wonden*) of Lazarus, he said. Does Lazarus not believe with his sores, with his total misery, with his wretchedness? See Oepke Noordmans, *Verzamelde Werken* 8, Kampen: Kok, 1980, 15–25. In Karel Blei, *Oepke Noordmans. Theologian of the Holy*

When the Theological Declaration of Barmen was commemorated after fifty years, Jürgen Moltmann discussed the sixth thesis, that the church is to proclaim the gospel of free grace “to all people,” and asked who these “all people” were? For him, it implied a rejection of the German Christians and their *volk* and only referred to *volk* in the way it is used in the Gospels, as people of the land, the poor and oppressed of the world. The good news was only for them, he said. When Barmen was commemorated after seventy years, Michael Welker disagreed, and argued that for Barmen “all people” precisely meant all people. After all, Karl Barth, the main author, in 1946 already explained that thesis six referred to what Romans 1:1 calls “the gospel of God.” God is free grace, said Barth, and the message of free grace is joyful news and hope for all, even the most wretched – as surprising as this may sometimes sound.³⁶

When the (then) Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1982 in Belhar confessed that the Biblical God has revealed Godself as in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that the church is called to follow God in this, standing by people in any form of need, witnessing against and striving against any form of injustice, many were

Spirit, translated by Allan J Janssen, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013, 152–156, there are some sections from this meditation available in English. It may be worthwhile quoting some of his original words, to hear Noordmans’ own voice: “De beide gelijkenissen ... zijn allebei heel bekend. Maar de eerste, die van de zondaar, was onder de christenen veel actueler geworden dan die van de bedelaar ... Het lijkt wel of God daarin verandering willen brengen. Hij heeft aan de gelijkenis uit Lukas 16 een toepasselijkheid gegeven, die velen onzer tot mystieke ervaringen bracht. De lichamelijke nood bleek in veel nauwer verband te staan met de zaligheid, dan wij meenden ... Gaan de zonden van de tollenaar ons dan nie meer aan dan de wonden van Lazarus? ... Zou de kerk, zo vragen wij ons af, het volle Evangelie hebben gepredikt? Heeft zij ook te weinig aandacht besteed aan de Lazarussen en te veel aan de tollenaars? Moet de bedelaar precies op dezelfde wijze zalig worden als de zondaar? Weert de kerk door haar methodisme niet velen van de hemelpoort? ... Lazarus gelooft met zijn zweren, met zijn totale ellende ... Natuurlijk is hij ook een zondaar, maar daarover spreekt Jezus bij hem niet. Zijn armoede en ellende brengen hem in de hemel. De lichamelijke noden staan in de evangeliën in onmiddellijk verband met de komst van het Koninkrijk. Dat dit ook in de wereld het geval is, leert God ons heden ten dage op allerlei wijzen ... Naast de tollenaar vroeg God aandacht voor Lazarus. Naast de zondaar voor de bedelaar ... (E)r is tweeërlei ellende ... Het zijn twee zijden van dezelfde prediking van het Koninkrijk ... Daarom moeten wij deze dingen in de bijbel en in het Evangelie laten staan! ... God heeft ons leven bewogen op een verbijsterende wijze ... Er is in het Evangelie nog meer dan de kerk zich daaruit heeft toegeëigend.”

36 For these references to Moltmann and Barth and for his own discussion, see Michael Welker, “Die freie Gnade Gottes in Jesus Christus und der Auftrag der Kirche.” Die VI. Barmer These: 1934 –1984 – 2004, *epd-Dokumentation* 29, 2004, 9–18.

again surprised, because of the different way in which they had always understood the tradition.³⁷

5. On remembering shocks

Sometimes, however, we do not only find such new readings surprising, we may even find them shocking. They may challenge us, upset us, and disturb us. They may confront us in ways that we find difficult to deal with – all of this belongs to standing in a living tradition, and is integral to processes of reformation and transformation.

After all, who are the wretched in our eyes?

The Jewish cultural critic Walter Benjamin argued that there should always remain some hope for the victims of history, those who died without ever experiencing any justice or delivery, for they are the most wretched. They no longer have any opportunity to become vindicated, to be respected, included, and accepted – or do they? This is why, for Benjamin, hope lies in remembrance, in remembering the promises of the Messiah. His colleague Max Horkheimer objected and said that Benjamin was now doing theology – and Benjamin seemed to agree, acknowledging that these most painful questions of history can only be faced “by enlisting the services of theology.”³⁸ This debate, shocking to many, led the scholar Helmut Peukert to ask what kind of theology would be able to practice – what he called – anamnestic solidarity, solidarity of memory, in which even the victims of history would be remembered, in some form of hope for justification and justice?³⁹

37 The Reformed theologian Jaap Durand described this rich and joyful message by speaking of the paradigm of grace. God’s free grace has many faces and comes in many forms, it brings joy and well-being and promise and salvation in many different ways in many different forms of misery and need, from the sinner to the beggar and to many others in between, it is a message of hope even for the most wretched, whether we may find that surprising, or not. Durand uses this expression in the second edition of his study on the doctrine of God, *Die Lewende God*, Pretoria: NGKB, 1986, 109–110.

38 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken, 1977, 253–264. The reference is to his first thesis. For a discussion of some implications of Benjamin’s essay, see Dirk J Smit, “Teses oor geskiedenis? – Oor onreg, oordeel en eskatologie,” *NGTT* 2013, Vol 54 (3 & 4), 120–129.

39 Helmut Peukert, *Wissenschaftstheorie – Handlungstheorie – Fundamentale Theologie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978 (translated as by James Bohman, *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology: Toward a Theology of Communicative Action*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

For who are the wretched in our eyes?

When the Reformed world community met in Accra in 2004, they also faced this question and had what was for many a shocking experience. In their pastoral letter sent to member churches after the assembly they gave account of the mood during the meeting. One day the delegates visited the infamous slave castle of Elmina. They saw the dungeon where hundreds of thousands were kept in chains before they were separated, fathers, mothers, children, and sent on the slave ships to unknown destinations, perhaps to die. Right above them was the hall where the sailors, officers and slave owners ate, but also worshipped. They could still read inscriptions from the Psalms on the wooden doors, in Dutch, perhaps from Reformed ancestors, proclaiming that the Lord is their salvation. They could imagine the cries of the captives underneath the floor, filled with fear and death, while above them worship was taking place. How could our forebears do this, was the initial response of many, how could they not hear, how could they not see? Gradually, however, they became aware that the same might be true of us. We may also be involved, complicit, in views and attitudes, practices and structures that prevent us from hearing the cries and seeing the suffering. One day future generations may also ask about us how it was possible not to see what was happening in and to our world. Perhaps we, too, may be more wretched than we are aware of?⁴⁰

For who are the wretched in our eyes?

In 2012, I was invited to speak in Basel at the launch of a new edition of Karl Barth's smaller early writings, leading up to his epoch-making *Letter to the Romans*.⁴¹ The main speaker was Martin Walser, the celebrated

40 The pastoral letter was published in the *Reformed World* dedicated to papers and decisions from the Accra Meeting, *Reformed World*, Vol. 54 (3–4), 2004, 181–184. Similar arguments could of course be made by framing the question in terms of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 2004 (original 1961). He took his title taken from the first lines of "The Internationale," the 19th century anthem of the left. Today's widespread decolonization discourses sometimes indeed seem to suggest the radical reversal of roles, so that those who have been complicit in colonialism (and imperialism) may from another perspective also be regarded as the wretched of the earth.

41 Karl Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921* (mit Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt† hrsg. von Hans-Anton Drewes [Gesamtausgabe, Abt. III], TVZ, Zürich 2012), the lectures during the symposium were published as Georg Pfeleiderer & Harald

German novelist and public intellectual. He had just recently published his controversial book on justification, *Über Rechtfertigung – eine Versuchung*. Our deepest human need, Walser claims, is to be justified. It is the unspoken longing that motivates and moves us – but in vain. We spend our lives in failed attempts to justify ourselves. We try to justify ourselves in our own eyes, in the eyes of others, in the judgment of the world, but the nagging fear that we are wretched haunts us. Culture fails us, he says, art fails us, literature fails us, everyone fails us, because they all deny that we suffer this need. They all only serve to strengthen the *Status Anxiety* that so dominates the spirit of our time, the insatiable desire to be accepted and affirmed and justified – in the words of the popular philosopher Alain de Botton.⁴² Only the faith tradition, Walser argues – mentioning Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Barth – has the courage to proclaim what we truly need, the grace that justifies. It is a remarkable argument, revealing and moving, although shocking to many, from someone who does not regard himself as a person of faith.⁴³

Still, is this shocking reversal of the roles – so that those, who view others as wretched and think of themselves as not in need of justification, suddenly find that they may be the truly wretched, in need of justification – not precisely Paul’s point in Romans? Was this not his message to those who regarded themselves as moral and religious, and not wretched? Was this not what the young Luther discovered in the tower? Was this not what he meant when he scribbled his last written words on his death-bed, *wir sind Bettler, hoc est verum*, we all are beggars, this is the truth?⁴⁴

Matern, Hg., *Theologie im Umbruch der Moderne. Karl Barths frühe Dialektische Theologie*, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2014.

- 42 Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety*, London: Penguin, 2004. Although he does not use the term justification, he describes the spirit of status anxiety in ways that are similar to the human condition which Walser analyses. “A worry, so pernicious as to be capable of ruining extended stretches of our lives, that we are in danger of failing to conform to the ideals of success laid down by our society and that we may as a result be stripped of dignity and respect,” 3–4.
- 43 Martin Walser, *Über Rechtfertigung – eine Versuchung*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2012. From the extensive literature, see only the essays in *Umgang mit Unsäglichem, Martin Walser und die Rechtfertigungsfrage*, Zürich: Institut für Hermeneutik und Religionsphilosophie, 2014.
- 44 Martin Luther, WA 48, 421.

6. On remembering the surplus

This was indeed what Archbishop Tutu meant when he explained how relevant theology is, for the whole of life. So frequently were they in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission appalled at the depth of human depravity to which human beings could sink, he said, that most of them were tempted to say that those who committed such deeds were monsters, because the deeds were monstrous, but theology prevented them. Theology reminded them that, however diabolical the acts, they did not turn the perpetrators into demons, theology reminded them to discern between act and person, and to remain filled with compassion for persons. The point, he said, is that if perpetrators were to be despaired of as monsters and demons, then they were no longer responsible as moral agents and, more importantly, that would mean that all hope would have been abandoned of their being able to change. Theology, he said, reminded them that even the wretched remain children of God with the possibility to repent and to change. With God, we may never think that it is too late. We may never give up on anyone, he said in his typical way, because our God is one who has a particularly soft spot for those in sin, for “the scum and the dregs and those on the fringes.”⁴⁵

No future without forgiveness means no hope without justification, but since there *is* justification there *is* hope for even the most wretched – from the wretched of the earth and the victims of history to the wretched weaved into complicity in the webs of empire and colonization, oppression and injustice, greed and exclusion, corruption and violence, moral blindness and indifference.

Remembering this tradition matters, since these promises can make a difference, can make reformation and transformation possible – also in public life in our societies and in our global world.⁴⁶ Living traditions have

45 Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 73–77. Significantly, Tutu dedicated the book “to the women and the ‘little people’ of South Africa.” It is instructive how Tutu also speaks about the central role of Romans in his own thought. He calls Romans 5:8 his special favorite text (“Whilst we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”) and says that he has only one sermon, “I preached my only sermon – that God loves us freely as an act of grace, that we do not have to impress God in order for God to love us as reward,” 146.

46 For reflection on the importance of such compassion for public life and for the law, see Dirk J Smit, “Justice as/and Compassion? On the Good Samaritan and

a surplus of potential and significance. They are restless, they keep calling forth new interpretations without losing their centring, said Michael Welker.

What I began to hear in 1976, reading Bavinck, was perhaps far removed from what he himself consciously meant at the time,⁴⁷ but for me this was what he was saying, and through his words, what the tradition, Calvin and Luther and Paul, were saying.⁴⁸

Political Theology,” in *Retrieving Compassion: Global Ethics, Human Dignity and the Compassionate God*, Julie Claassen & Frits de Lange, eds, Eugene: Wipf & Stock (forthcoming).

- 47 In the spirit of John Bolt’s informative study on Bavinck’s understanding of the Christian life, it is fairly obvious that Bavinck in his time would not personally share these views, in fact, his convictions on social ills and his views of South Africa, according to a sermon which he delivered in Kampen with President Kruger also present in the church (on June 30, 1901), clearly all seem to go in other directions, but one should of course, in order to be fair, understand historical figures against the background of their own circumstances, see John Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life. Following Jesus in Faithful Service*, Wheaton: Crossway, 2015, especially 205–251. Thus, in an interesting essay demonstrating this kind of sensitivity, called “Wipe Out Lines of Division (Not Distinctions)”: Bennie Keet, Neo-Calvinism and the Struggle against Apartheid,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 11(1–2), 2017, 81–98, the Dutch church historian George Harinck recently argued that B B (Bennie) Keet, one of the first and major Reformed voiced in South Africa critical of apartheid, got all his theological arguments against apartheid from Bavinck’s theology, under whom he did his doctoral dissertation (on Troeltsch). According to Harinck, other students of Bavinck also became well-known critics of apartheid (like J J Buskes and J H Bavinck). Keet in turn became the professor of apartheid critic C F (Beyers) Naude and of Jaap Durand, and Jaap Durand did his first doctorate with J H Bavinck. The reception history of fragments of the tradition is clearly less linear and more dramatic than one may expect, illustrating Welker’s argument about the “necessarily restless memory” that can “call forth new interpretations without losing its centering.”
- 48 This would often make it necessary to acknowledge that our interpretations of the tradition were not the only and by far not even the dominant ones, see for example my acknowledgement that our Calvin was a contested Calvin in “Views on Calvin’s ethics from a South African perspective,” *Reformed World*, 2009, 57/4, 306–344, also at http://www.sek-feps.ch/media/pdf/themen/calvin09/Smit_Calvinethics_Southafrica.pdf; my acknowledgement that our Barth was not everyone’s Barth, “Dogmatics after ‘Barth’? South African Challenges,” in *Dogmatics after Barth: Facing Challenges in Church, Society and the Academy*, Günther Thomas, Rinse H Reeling Brouwer, Bruce McCormack, eds, 2012, Leipzig: Create Space, 3–14.; and my acknowledgement that our appropriation of the *Confessio Belgica* was not the popular one taken for granted in apartheid South Africa, “The *Confessio Belgica* as Liberating Truth Today?,” in *The Belgic Confession at 450*, Peter J Tomson et al., eds., 2012, (Analecta Bruxellensia 15) Maastricht, Shaker Media, 77–88. One could perhaps add our “Bavinck” is probably also not fully the Bavinck of historical scholarship – this insight is at the heart of how living traditions function.

Similarly, future generations will hopefully find orientation and draw implications from the ways in which we remember this tradition that we cannot yet foresee. Accepting one another as objects of the eternal love of God, in the way that Jesus Christ also accepted us, may perhaps in future lead to comfort and hope for even the most wretched in ways which we may not yet even imagine,⁴⁹ to ethical implications far beyond whatever we may understand today,⁵⁰ to ecclesiological convictions and practices that we are still unable to appreciate and share and embody.⁵¹

This is the very nature of living traditions. This restlessness, this surplus may help us to remember that the Reformation is not yet over, perhaps it has scarcely begun. Without losing our centring in our own tradition, we

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- 49 On the challenge to build trust in our common world today, see Dirk J Smit, “Welcoming Children? – On Building Cultures of Trust,” *Welcoming Africa’s Children: Theological and Ministry Perspectives*, Gert Breed & Jan Grobbelaar, eds, 2016, AOSIS, Cape Town, 1–14, <http://www.dx.doi.org.10.4102/aosis.2016.waccs13.01>
- 50 Contemporary evolutionary ethics offers instructive insight in the gradual development and increasing sophistication of altruism. For ethical reflection in our time it obviously remains a fundamental challenge to learn to find ever new ways of living together with others and their otherness, see for example the fascinating study by Terry Eagleton, *Trouble With Strangers: A Study of Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2009. For different ways of taking the other seriously, including the wretched in our own eyes, see Dirk J Smit, 2017 “Living with Strangers? On Constructing Ethical Discourses”, Christopher Lilley & Daniel J Pedersen, eds., *Human Origins and the Image of God: Essays in Honor of J. Wentzel van Huyssteen*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017, 273–313.
- 51 One could argue that, not only in the circles of the Dutch Reformed churches in Southern Africa, but generally in churches in the circles of the Reformation, there is still much to discover about being the one church of Jesus Christ in the world. In the worldwide ecumenical dialogue of several years between the Lutheran World Federation and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (formerly WARC) the acknowledgement has grown that Reformation churches suffer from an ecclesiological deficit, often making it easy to underestimate the importance of unity and communion, of belonging and inclusion, of solidarity and sharing, and possible to exclude others, mostly on so-called non-theological grounds but justifying that with theological arguments. These dialogues led to the report *Communion: On Being the Church. Report of the Lutheran-Reformed Joint Commission between the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)*, 2006–2012, and on the basis of that report the joint “Wittenberg Witness” was signed by the Lutheran and Reformed ecumenical bodies, in Wittenberg on July 5, 2017, as part of the commemoration of the Reformation after 500 years, as a common commitment to overcome past exclusions and alienation, see <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/gc2017-wittenbergwitness.pdf>.

may indeed dream a different world together,⁵² we may receive and enjoy the imagination and creativity of tomorrow's children.⁵³

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- 52 See the joint declaration and liturgy called “Dreaming a Different World Together,” in the report of an inter-disciplinary task-group of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the Evangelical Reformed Church Germany, Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann and Charles Amjad-Ali, eds, *Dreaming a different world*, Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2010, 80–81. This final report was the result of a long process. In Kitwe, Zambia, the Southern Africa Alliance of Reformed Churches made a declaration on global injustice and ecological destruction, appealing amongst others to Calvin and *Belhar*, when Russel Botman was still their President. At the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Debrecen, Hungary, this appeal from Kitwe, together with other impulses, led to the declaration of a *processus confessionis*, calling on all member churches to consider whether their involvement in economy and ecology was not a matter involving their faith tradition too. At the General Council in Accra, Ghana, this process of self-examination and discernment, in turn, led to the so-called *Accra Confession* or Accra Declaration. The joint process between the two German and South African Reformed churches was an attempt to consider together what the implications of this Declaration could be for the Reformed tradition and communities.
- 53 The Reformed pastor, theologian and public intellectual Russel Botman was a living illustration of this kind of creative and visionary imagination, see Dirk J Smit, *The First Russel Botman Memorial Lecture*, 19 October 2015, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2015 (reprinted as “‘Making History for the Coming Generation’ – On the Theological Logic of Russel Botman’s Commitment to Transformation”, *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, Vol 1/No 2, 2015, 607–632, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2015.v1n2.a29>). Botman was partly influenced by the work of the Brazilian Reformed theologian Rubem Alves, *Tomorrow’s Child. Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture*, New York: Harper & Row, 1972, see Dirk J Smit, “On the Reception of Bonhoeffer – A Case Study of South-South Dialogue,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 2016, Vol 2, No 1, 2016, 89–107 DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2016.v2n1.a05>. On the importance of imagination in the tradition, see my sermon during the licensing of theological candidates of URCSA and the DRC, SA Gestig Congregation, Belhar, 27 November 2016 (available at <https://kaapkerk.co.za/gesamentlike-legitimasie-27-nov-2016/>), as well as my essay on imagination in the life and work of several prominent South African theologians, “‘Because they saw that the child was beautiful’ – reimagining imagination and hope,” Marcia Bunge (ed), *The Child in Constructive Theologies: Themes from the Global Church* (forthcoming).