

Re-imagining the Faith: A Theological Pilgrimage

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Introductory Reflections for the Articles Page

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At my retirement in 2004, Christ Community Church was exceedingly gracious in so many ways, one of which was to collect a number of my sermons and publish them under the title *Re-Imagining the Faith*. I could not have named it as well; it succinctly expressed the story of my thirty-seven years as pastor of that congregation. It was at the First Reformed Church of Spring Lake, Michigan, that I was ordained to the Christian ministry on June 30, 1960. From 1960, just out of seminary, to 1964 I served that Spring Lake congregation. During those four years I was in no way seeking to re-imagine the Christian faith; in fact, I would have been threatened by the thought. My understanding of Christian faith was orthodox, evangelical in the Reformed tradition as conveyed by the Dutch Reformed Church rooted in the Netherlands and brought to this country in the nineteenth century emigration from the Netherlands.

It was, however, in those four years through pastoral experience that my orthodoxy was being tested. That whole story is critical to my theological pilgrimage, but I won't go into it here, except to say that a move to a very conservative, evangelical Reformed congregation in New Jersey [in 1964] only accentuated my struggle, which was really about the view and authority of Scripture. I left New Jersey for the Netherlands to pursue post-graduate studies. I was indeed fortunate to be received and accepted by Professor Dr. Hendrikus Berkhof, Professor of Dogmatics at Leiden University. As I was leaving his study after my first appointment with him in the early Spring of 1967, I saw a piece of paper pinned on a drape, on which was written:

*Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.*

In those lines by Alfred Lord Tennyson I knew I had found my teacher and my task. My little system had had its day; I longed to find the Sacred Mystery toward whom my little system, now broken, had pointed.

Though I had earned a Master of Divinity and a Master of Theology following my BA from Hope College, I was about to embark for the first time in my life on an intellectual and spiritual quest with an open mind and heart – seeking truth wherever it might lead me. For the first time in my life I began with questions rather than answers to be proven and confirmed. It was a liberating moment; finally I was ready to learn.

Lest I be misunderstood, my failure to gain an education, to learn, was not the fault of the institutions from which I attained degrees, nor the teachers who taught me. To be sure, a denominational seminary has not the task to lead students to new visions of the faith but rather to teach the faith system, the confessional foundation of the church that supports it and governs it. That being said, I must confess the problem was mine. All my energy and intellectual gifts were committed to learning and then teaching evangelical Reformed faith. The last word had been spoken; now it was my calling to proclaim and teach it. And I was deadly serious about it.

But no longer. After my little system began to break in those seven years of pastoral ministry, I knew I had to begin again to see if indeed I could come to new insight and understanding that would enable me still to be a Christian minister with a message in which I could passionately believe and proclaim.

The fact that at my retirement a book of my sermons was published with the title *Re-Imagining the Faith* is the finest tribute I could receive, witnessing to the journey that began in the late 60's under the guidance of Professor Berkhof and that continued all the years after my return to the Spring Lake congregation in 1971. Through all those years I was about re-imagining the faith and, even in retirement, the journey continues.

As I look back over my ministry that continued in Spring Lake following my four-year European sojourn, I realize that what I essentially gained was an ability to think theologically, to think critically. No longer was there a set confessional system of theological propositions to be explained and defended. I was full of wondering, of questioning, of questing for a deeper understanding of biblical faith in the context of contemporary culture.

My new posture found expression in preaching and teaching but it was with the birth of the journal *Perspectives, a Journal of Reformed Thought* in 1986 that I began to articulate that new posture on central theological/biblical themes.

My first article was on the theology of Robert Schuller as I will describe below. But from then on I addressed some critical themes that reflected my own groping for a new understanding of biblical faith.

As I was working on the thread of those pieces I received a note from Professor Dr. Hendrik Hart who had begun reading the articles I had given him. In response to questions he raised, I gave some background about my experience in the RCA. Our correspondence I include here:

Email from Hendrik Hart, November 20, 2012:

... I'm reading Dick's articles in *Perspectives*. I was entirely unprepared for them because Dick keeps saying that he was a latecomer in moving beyond conservatism. But the first piece, from 1987, digs into the God-Jesus-male cluster with a vengeance. And so it is with most of the pieces. They are radical in choice of topic, position and approach. They

are not mealy-mouthed either. The language is clear, direct, and hard-hitting. I would have thought that, early in the game, the pastoral side might emerge, knowing how upset conservatives might be. Not so. So where's the conservatism? The only evidence for Dick's pleading a late start in getting beyond conservatism is that the style of argument has not been touched by the then rising postmodern spirit. But that took time for all of us.

OK, if I'm near the mark with this, how would you characterize where you were in 1987, Dick? What readings or experiences would have spawned those articles and how did you expect they would be perceived? By your congregation, by your classis, by *Perspectives* readers?

I am curious because, if I go by my own memories, I think there was a mixture of urgency and naiveté. In 1983 I wrote "Must I Believe in God as Father?" in *The Banner*. It was a soapbox piece and the editor and I had previously discussed at length how this should be done. I think I wrote very carefully, so I was fully unprepared for the storm of invective that broke over me, as well as for the complete silence of supporters. Only now (right now!) does it occur to me that the problem may well not have been the piece as such (it was about praying to God as Mother), but the heading. Why did I not see that 30 years ago? So, if you can, tell us something about why you may have written things possibly unaware of how they would be perceived or of how you would endanger yourself. Did you know you were taking risks?

Reply from Richard Rhem:

Henk, great to hear from you and I am pleased you are reading the articles. It so happens that I have spent over a week gathering my writings over the years of my ministry post Netherlands. (I have a few more for you, especially two pieces that appeared in *The Reformed Review*, Western Seminary's journal. In 1972 I gave a lecture at Western which was published in *The Reformed Review* – "A Theological Conception of Reality as History – Some Aspects of the Thinking of Wolfhart Pannenberg." Then in 1986 I wrote in a [tribute] for Gene Osterhaven – "Theological Method: The Search for a New Paradigm in a Pluralistic Age" – which dealt with Küng's paradigm change in connection with Tracy and referring to Gadamer, etc. Those three pieces were received quite well.

Then the RCA founded *Perspectives*. I just found the first editorial by Rev. Dr. James Van Hoeven – first editor and major figure behind the project. (That he was brother-in-law to Ed Mulder, General Secretary, got the Journal underway.) Jim wanted me on the board of editors and immediately asked that I write about Schuller's new reformation. I had been inspired by Bob Schuller upon my return from the Netherlands - my leadership people felt, having been out of the country for four years, I needed such exposure. It worked. Within four months of beginning again in Spring Lake, the First Reformed Church became Christ Community and a second service in the morning was added (and eventually a third). About 28 of our people attended Schuller's Institute for Successful Church Leadership. But Bob Schuller was under fire for his book *New Reformation* and being too easy on sin!! Therefore Jim Van Hoeven thought I should do an article on Schuller. It was quite well received. You ask about whether I wrote with awareness of reaction from the church. I'm sure I was naive but, according to Jim's first editorial, this new journal's purpose was to "engage issues that reformed Christians meet in personal, ecclesiastical, and societal life." It also aimed to be in conversations that "help shape the identity and mission of the Reformed Church in America."

Jim continues, “If in the process, *Perspectives* can enable a community of scholars to be formed – women and men from within the church who bridge race, region, and discipline, who enjoy the give and take of thoughtful discourse, and who do not mind if their Sundays sometimes get pretty rough [an allusion to a Mark Twain quote with which he opened] – this enterprise will have fulfilled its expectations.”

The editorial moves to a quote from Robert Bly: “Certainty lives on either side of the border, but truth lives on the border.” Jim continues, “The editors of *Perspectives* will push themselves and the church toward that border, theologically. This means, on the one hand, *Perspectives* will affirm and deepen the richness of the Reformed tradition. Tradition tells us who we are, gives us a definition, a point from which to set our course, and reminds us ‘we belong...to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.’ And yet truth lives on the border. The danger of too much tradition is that it turns a good thing into idolatry. The church’s faith and life must always be creative. ...holding to the tradition, being creative, living on the border is part of what it means to be Reformed, according to the Word of God.”

That was January, 1986, the first issue. *Perspectives* was initially sent free of charge to ministers, members of boards and agencies, elders on request. It was to engage the leadership of the RCA in creative conversation. I really believed that, naive as I was...

It is coincidental that you raise the questions my writings raised as your brother Peter has asked me to write an overview of the thread that runs through my articles to introduce them on a Web site of an archive of my work. I have begun writing after sorting through piles of files. That piece will answer some of your questions, but let me respond to your questions regarding my being a late bloomer. Throughout my education I was trying to reinforce the faith structure of my childhood. I never challenged or raised a question. Yet, beneath my sturdy dogmatism, there was an insecurity: I wondered if the faith/church would survive – not because it wasn’t God’s truth but because the darkness arrayed against the light was formidable. A pastoral experience in Spring Lake showed me that an inerrant, infallible Bible wasn’t enough. During my last year there, the Covenant Life curriculum from the RCA/Presbyterians came out. I taught the foundation papers in Spring Lake and then introduced the curriculum to the New Jersey congregation. It created an uproar from a few who felt it was weak on Scripture [long story]. For me – finally owning my own questions – it was very helpful. I knew I would have to spend years bringing that congregation around or make good on my desire to go to the Netherlands for postgrad work. Berkhof accepted me and proved a great mentor and friend. Thus began my first real education because finally I was open to the quest.

But, Henk, I was 32! Four years in Leiden and my return to Spring Lake where I began to preach out of the reservoir of the Leiden years.

This I knew: the orthodox view of Scripture was the bottleneck. I felt a real freedom to explore in that marvelous community. I taught Berkhof’s *Christian Faith*, Küng’s *On Being a Christian* and *Does God Exist?* Coming from a serious study of Pannenberg, I was ready for Küng whom I came to appreciate deeply. I mentioned my writings/lectures in *The Reformed Review* in 1972 and 1986. These were about the theological method. But, as I wrote earlier, it was *Perspectives* that gave me the occasion to address issues before the church. Yes, I was naive, but I was also totally free in bringing to expression

what I had been thinking about. Now I was 51, Henk: no youngster, but just finding my voice. I was blessed with a congregation that allowed me to “think out loud”. That was my preaching style and it was a safe and honest place. Thus when *Perspectives* came along I expressed myself quite honestly. The “Habit of God’s Heart” piece I knew was treading on dangerous terrain, but I tried to be careful, wondering but also being honest about my hope that God’s grace was universal.

As time moved on I got the assignments that were controversial because I was a pastor in a safe place. I think there was only one other pastor on the board of *Perspectives*. The rest were professors at colleges or the seminaries and were reluctant to take on the themes I tackled.

So, my conservatism in the traditional form ended when I left for Leiden in 1967. From there I had to begin again. I consumed book after book. Berkhof would say, “You must begin to write,” but I said, “I just found six more footnotes leading to a dozen more books!”

Trying to answer your questions: by 1987 I had been engaged in serious theological reading/thinking for 20 years. *Perspectives* gave me the opportunity to bring to expression all I had been thinking/teaching/preaching about. I felt safe and confident and thus put myself on the line. *Perspectives* was not the *Church Herald*, read by RCA lay folk. *The Banner* was something else. You wrote in a very much more conservative context to a well-informed readership in the bastion of Calvinist orthodoxy.

As for “the silence of supporters,” I know that well. When my Grace article appeared, I was teaching homiletics at Western. A colleague also on the board of editors, present and participating in the discussion about the theme, in favor of my writing...but when the storm rose, in a faculty meeting asked, “Why did you feel you had to write that piece?” He also, I’m told, said if I had changed six words there would have been no problem.

I must say, Henk, it never occurred to me that I would get into trouble. My congregation was solidly supportive and I had fine collegial relationships with the RCA leadership and I honestly felt I was being a positive influence for good in the RCA. In the end it was not RCA leadership but young, threatened pastors in the Muskegon Classis that spelled my demise in the RCA. It is all quite a story.

And now to return to the thread of my articles. My second *Perspectives* piece was entitled “Karl Barth: Preaching and Theological Renewal.” I set forth Barth’s own experience of preaching and the high regard he had for the preaching moment – very inspiring.

But then, in a series of articles, I addressed contemporary issues in the Church and my own deepening grasp of those issues.

February 1987, pp. 4-6: “An Accident of the Incarnation.” The issue was the male domination of the church. I argued that the maleness of the Incarnation was an “accident,” not of the essence of God’s revelation in human flesh.

In the January 1988 issue, I wrote a piece, “Purgatory Revisited.” Hans Küng at the University of Michigan in the Fall of 1983 lectured on questions surrounding death,

heaven, hell and the future, subsequently published under the title *Eternal Life*. Küng got me to thinking. I suspect it was a beginning step toward the hope of universal grace.

In the September 1988, issue I brought to full expression my hope and growing conviction that God's grace would finally bring all God's children home. The piece, entitled "The Habits of God's Heart", elicited major responses from RCA ministers and the public readership – positive and negative, the latter predominant.

In the April 1991, issue I became even bolder. I wrote of my growing conviction that my faith community, the community of Reformed faith issuing from Calvin's Geneva by way of the Netherlands had never come to terms with the Enlightenment - the place of critical rationality and historical consciousness in the understanding of the Christian credal tradition as espoused by the Reformed community in this country. It was Hendrikus Berkhof's *Two Hundred Years of Theology* that made me aware that the community of which I was a part "was not even engaged in the struggle." The article was entitled "Sleeping Through a Revolution."

As one can well imagine, I got some serious response, including from my beloved theology professor, Dr. Eugene Osterhaven – who treated me gently however.

Someone challenged me on biblical grounds, on my use of Scripture. That drove me on to my next piece, "The Book That Binds Us" in the December 1992, issue. My bold contention was that the Bible is being misused. It is being asked to function in a way it can no longer be expected to function, a way it was never intended to function.

In the March 1993, issue I returned to the theme of "An Accident of the Incarnation" with a focus on God language. I wrote in collaboration with my colleague, Colette Volkema De Nooyer, who did the major work.

In the May 1995 issue, I "completed" as it were the thread I was weaving with an article "Interreligious Dialogue – What is Required of Us?" I had recognized long since that the orthodox understanding of Jesus' death as atonement blocked openness to the other in interfaith discussion. In this piece I gave that full expression. The article concluded:

My intention is not to advocate Hick or Ogden or any other thinker who is addressing the matter of interreligious dialogue. Rather, I wish to point to the necessity of honestly drawing out the consequences of the recognition that human grasp of the truth develops, evolves, and needs ongoing assessment and adjustment – and sometimes conceptions need to be rejected. By use of historical imagination, the originating experience that gave rise to a theological formulation needs to be recovered in order to express the same reality differently, in order to make the experience available in a totally different cultural context.

Rather than seeing this as a burden, a cause for fear and defensiveness, it should be seen as an exciting challenge. Is not such a pursuit of the truth to love God with mind as well as heart? And is not the recognition that every biblical and theological expression is marked by the human and historical limitations that adhere to all human thought the

reason there is need for continual reformation? To be Reformed is not to be in possession of a set of timeless and eternal truths but, rather, to refuse to absolutize any human arrangement or formulation. It is not to be saddled with a set of truths that were once new, innovative, and destabilizing of the established order of the sixteenth century, or the first century. It is an approach, a spirit, a posture that is open to new knowledge, fresh insight, and cumulative human experience within historical development.

The church has managed to spend the century in a state of schizophrenia, pursuing research in the academy and sharing the results in the lecture hall, while the liturgy, prayers, hymns, and sermons have given little evidence of the honest engagement with insights of the modern period.

My mentor, Hendrikus Berkhof, claimed the only heresy was to make the gospel boring. I would add another – the heresy of orthodoxy, the evidence of a failure of nerve and lack of trust in the living God. It is the heresy of an inordinate lust for certitude that seeks premature closure, the shutting down of the quest for truth and growth of knowledge in the magnificent and mysterious cosmos by the creatures whom the Creator calls to consciousness and embraces in a Grace that pervades the unfolding cosmic process.