

A *Kairos* Moment? Why I Think This Is a Great Time to be a Reformed Christian

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I know that there are some who may feel differently, but I really do think this is a great time to be a Reformed Christian. The reason I say this is because I, for one, am very optimistic about some of the opportunities now open to us as Reformed Christians, especially in the area of church planting and the furthering of the Reformed witness in the North American context. You may recall that in a recent article in this publication [July 1999], I suggested that it would take yet another article to explain what I meant by this *Kairos* moment. So the esteemed editor of *Christian Renewal*, John VanDyke, asked me to write this follow-up article. I am only too happy to do so and I hope that my own thinking in this regard is of some encouragement to you.

Let me say from the outset that I am not a prophet, merely an interested observer of the North American church scene. I don't claim to have the mind of Christ in this matter. I am not one to "strategize" or follow current trends as interpreted by George Barna and other such prognosticators. God's eternal decree remains a mystery until revealed in human history, so I don't claim to know the future. It is my duty to be faithful to my calling and let God grant the increase as he sees fit. Success is God's business, being faithful is mine.

It must also be stated that I am not thinking about a larger eschatological vision when I speak of being optimistic. I am not postmillennial. I do not believe that we are on the dawn of a golden age of Christianity in which all the nations will turn to Christ and secular culture will be transformed by the gospel, though, in the providence of God, this may be the case. As an amillennial Christian, I am thinking about these matters in a different sense, specifically, Christ advancing his kingdom through word and sacrament, in such a way that those blinded by the god of this world will never see nor understand. For the gospel is foolishness and a stumbling block to those apart from Christ, but to those of us who are being saved, it is the very power of God. I guess what I am trying to say is that I'm very optimistic about God's kingdom, but hold out little hope for the kingdom of man.

Furthermore, as a Reformed Christian, I am fully aware that our distinctive doctrines of God's sovereignty in salvation, our stress upon the doctrine of total depravity, our emphasis upon word and sacrament, along with our belief that the Lordship of Christ extends to all areas of life, will prevent our viewpoint from ever being the majority report within the Christian church. It is naive to think that all of a sudden, huge numbers of professing Christians will leave their non-Reformed churches and suddenly come to ours. And barring a dramatic work of the Holy Spirit, we should not expect huge numbers of non-Christians to suddenly awaken to the truths of the Christian faith. In an age of spirituality, ecumenism, and indifference to matters of sin and grace, many churches choose to respond by offering a diet of "church lite," as the hard teachings which characterize so much of biblical and Reformed Christianity will remain an offence to the vast majority of our contemporaries. Despite all of this, I remain optimistic. Why?

With these important qualifications out of the way, let me get to the point of this essay. It is my

humble opinion that we as Reformed Christians find ourselves at a *Kairos* moment of sorts—a unique and perhaps even temporary window of opportunity to advance the cause of Reformed Christianity. Let me explain what I mean by this *Kairos* moment and then leave you with a challenge—“are we as Reformed Christians willing to take advantage of the opportunities now before us?”

Reasons for Optimism

Why is this a *Kairos* moment for Reformed Christians? There are a number of reasons for Reformed Christians to be optimistic, but the most important has to do with the gospel itself. If you have watched what has been going on in American evangelicalism of late, you know that many evangelicals find it increasingly difficult to define the gospel. Historically, the evangelical movement has been very eclectic, drawing deeply from revivalist, Anabaptist, charismatic, premillennial and fundamentalist thought, in addition to a professed allegiance to the five *solas* of the Reformation [Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, glory to God alone]. Church historians, who watch the evangelical movement closely, have pointed out that a major shift has taken place over the last generation in which evangelicals no longer seek to define themselves by a core of commonly-held evangelical doctrines, but instead by a common “born again” experience.

This shift explains why many evangelicals now seek to find common ground with Roman Catholics—evidenced by the recent *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* debacle, in which the “gospel” was defined so that both Roman Catholics and evangelicals could agree about it—and why social causes and political activism have largely replaced the long-standing evangelical concern to defend the doctrinal integrity of historic Protestant theology against groups like the Roman Catholic Church. A couple of examples come to mind—Clark Pinnock has pulled the evangelical movement towards universalism in his book *A Wideness in God’s Mercy* [Zondervan, 1992], and Stanley Grenz has argued in his widely used theology text, *Theology for the Community of God* [Broadman and Holman, 1994] that evangelical theology is now a matter of consensus within the community of the faithful, rather than a matter of thinking God’s thoughts after him. There are many other examples we could mention, but these will suffice.

The result of this shift is that evangelicals are increasingly willing to talk about the gospel as a way to live (ethics), rather than as a particular message which must be believed (doctrine). This has profound ramifications. Since Roman Catholics claim to be “born again,” and, no doubt, there are many who are, despite the Roman Church’s anathematizing of Paul’s gospel of justification *sola fide* in the Canons and Decrees of the *Council of Trent*, by focusing upon a “born again” experience instead of the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, there is now little to separate Catholics from Protestants. If Roman Catholics are “born again,” why not cooperate with them in world evangelism and social causes? Though the external form of their religion may differ, why even bother to evangelize Roman Catholics since they have much the same experience of God that evangelicals do?

Our theology, or lack thereof, defines the church’s mission. Biblically defined, the gospel

excludes people who do not embrace it—Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and no one else [John 14:6]. Broadly re-defined, this new gospel can be made to be much more inclusive, since, it can be argued, there are many ways to find Jesus outside of Christianity. If doctrine is no longer at the core of the evangelical movement, why not create so-called worship services to attract other doctrinally disinterested people? Is it not better to include the greatest number of people, rather than exclude people who may disagree about fine points of doctrine? In pragmatic America, are not results more important than precision?

How then, we must ask, can we fulfill our obligation to be ministers of reconciliation if we don't know what such reconciliation entails? How can we believe that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation and proclaim this good news to our neighbors, if we are not really sure what the gospel is? How can we say with Paul, “may we never boast, except in the cross of Christ,” [Gal. 6:14] if we take the position of Paul's opponents, the Judaizers, and instead choose to boast about the number of converts we make, rather than concerning ourselves with being faithful to the message revealed to us by Christ himself through his apostles? Is it no wonder that American evangelicalism is in such a state of decline? What a tragic thing that so many of today's “evangelicals” are not very clear about “the evangel.”

But this is precisely why as a Reformed Christian, I am optimistic, and why I think that this is a great time to advance the cause of the Reformed faith. In the midst of so much confusion and continuous redefinition of the Christian message, the Reformed confessions and catechisms—the *Three Forms of Unity* and the *Westminster Standards*—are very clear about the biblical gospel. While evangelicals struggle to find their way, we as Reformed Christians have clear and reliable guides as to what the Scriptures teach about the gospel, how it is that the Holy God accepts repentant sinners through faith in his son. The Reformed confessions effectively summarize what the Bible teaches, so that instead of constant redefinition, repackaging, and compromise so as not to offend those who find our message offensive, we can say with great confidence, “thus saith the Lord ”

This is important for two reasons. First, it is far easier to reach our non-Christian neighbors with the gospel if we know what the gospel is. We know that the gospel is the message of Christ crucified and risen [1 Cor. 15:1-8], that God seeks sinners [John 12:32] and that God himself creates faith through the hearing of the gospel [Romans 10:17]. The message of Christ crucified is the message which gives life to dead bones. We need not trust in humanly-devised techniques, sales pitches or other forms of manipulation to get people to “make a decision for Christ.” We trust in the power of God to raise the dead and create faith. Since we of all people, should be clear about the gospel being the means by which God creates faith, the only question which remains for us as Reformed Christians, is whether or not we are actually willing to take that message to our non-Christian neighbors, friends and family.

But there is a second matter to consider as well. Not only is clarity about the gospel an essential basis for evangelism, the lack of clarity about the gospel in evangelicalism opens up a new mission field of sorts. Indeed, there are many devout Christian people in evangelical and mainline Protestant churches who still take the Scriptures seriously and who, because of this increasing confusion and malaise in their own churches, are taking a serious look for the first

time at Reformed Christianity—something they might not do otherwise. Thus if we, as Reformed Christians, are clear about what we believe and willing to take the time to explain and demonstrate our doctrines from the Scriptures, many people will be willing to listen. We might get a hearing from a new audience in ways in which would have been unthinkable a generation or so ago.

That we are getting such a hearing is evident through the success of those ministries who have taken the Reformed faith out into the marketplace of ideas. R. C. Sproul's *Ligonier Ministries* produces a very popular radio show, has a successful conference ministry and R. C.'s books are always a matter of discussion in the evangelical world. My own compatriot, Michael Horton's work with the *White Horse Inn* radio program has shown that in many circles, evangelicals are listening to the conversation. The success of a number of Reformed radio programs and growing interest in publications such as *Modern Reformation* magazine, is an indication that evangelicals are very much interested in Reformed theology. Of course, there are many others doing much the same work. And people are listening, in large measure, because Reformed Christians tend to know what they believe and why they believe it—something evangelicals are not hearing from their own leaders.

Here, then, is the challenge. If this is not an incentive to plant Reformed churches outside of traditional Reformed enclaves, as well as a motive to invigorate established congregations to reach out to these people, I don't know what is. Imagine, by being faithful to our own beloved Reformed faith and not trying to do a poor imitation of evangelicals, removing or downplaying our Reformed distinctives, we might actually attract countless new people to our churches. What a revolutionary concept.

Another reason why I think this is a *Kairos* moment for the Reformed tradition has to do with the Reformed doctrine of providence giving comfort and assurance that God is still in control of human history. This is especially important in an age driven by conspiracy theories, tabloid journalism and end-times speculation of the worst kind. One only need to glance through the "Prophecy Section" in your local Christian Bookstore to see how dominant a theme this is in the evangelicalism. "Rapture" novels dominant national best-seller lists, achieving that high-point of publishing success, prominent display in airport bookstalls. But such fame is fleeting.

Now don't get me wrong, I too long for the coming of Christ. But if our blessed savior does not return on December 31, 1999 at 11:59 PM and 59 seconds—to which time zone, I wonder?—the hopes of many will, no doubt, be dashed. Yes, Y2K will come and go, and then what? It strikes me that Peter warns the church about scoffers who will come in the last days saying, "where is this coming that he promised? [2 Peter 3:3-4]" It is sad that we give the scoffers so much ammunition with all of our speculation about the very things the Scriptures tell us not to speculate about.

As a Reformed Christian, I believe that Jesus Christ will come in his own due time. The date of his return is a mystery to me though I long for it with everything in me. In the meantime, however, I know that Jesus Christ will reign until his enemies become a footstool for his feet [1 Corinthians 15:25]. I know that Jesus is Lord of history and that he continues to work all things

according to the council of his will. Perhaps people may finally listen to us and our saner approach to eschatological matters, after being burned by all of the sensational predictions of calamity and global turmoil. Many evangelicals think we Reformed are boring and have nothing to offer but “dead orthodoxy.” But the man who eats expensive chocolate for dinner every night soon becomes malnourished and it is not long before a diet of meat and potatoes sounds pretty good

There is yet one more reason for optimism. This has to do with the by-product of so much recent discussion about parenting and family life, especially among evangelicals. For years, James Dobson and others have “focused on the family,” and there is now a tremendous interest on the part of young families and Christian home-schoolers in classical Christian education and parenting, from a distinctly biblical perspective, instead of trusting in secularist experiments given us by the likes of Benjamin Spock. Biblical parenting seems at the top of many a person’s list of important issues these days. This is a good thing,

But I am not optimistic about the Reformed faith solely because parents are seeking a better way to parent. I am optimistic because seeking a better way to parent will often times lead to people thinking about the basic theology of the family, and this, of course, inevitably takes us to a discussion of the covenants. A resurgence of classical Reformed covenant theology has important ramifications and creates great opportunities for Reformed churches. For one thing, if you embrace classical covenant theology, you also must embrace infant baptism—with all due respect to my Calvinistic Baptist friends. The bottom line is, if you embrace infant baptism, you cannot remain in your evangelical church where children of believers are treated like little pagans, instead of children of promise, and where unbiblical ceremonies of “baby dedication” replace the sign and seal of God’s gracious covenant, which is baptism. To adopt a covenantal interpretation of Scripture is the first step toward receiving the “left foot” of fellowship from many an evangelical church, which are often committed dispensationalists and militantly reject paedobaptism.

Closely related to this renewed interest in Biblical parenting and classical Christian education is the resurgence of the practice of catechism and family worship. This will open many doors to us. This is important because we in the Reformed tradition can offer such folk the Heidelberg Catechism—the treasure of the continental Reformation—or the Westminster Shorter Catechism, as sure guides for families seeking to teach their little ones a knowledge of the Savior. When we add to the catechism our rich Psalmody and hymnody, it is clear that we possess a number of things which so many evangelicals now desperately seek. The more evangelicals begin to use the Reformed catechisms and hymnody, the more and more interested they will be in seeking a good Reformed church. Shouldn’t we be thinking about ways to tell such people that we have been here along and that we are more than willing to share our treasure with them?

This, then, may indeed be a unique moment for us as Reformed Christians. But the critical question remains, “will we take advantage of such an opportunity?” Though I am optimistic about these opportunities, nevertheless, it is my fear that we might not use this *Kairos* moment to our advantage. There are several reasons for my concern, and these, I think, ought to be briefly identified as well.

Causes for Concern

The most significant reason why we as Reformed Christians might not take advantage of these new opportunities open to us is simply a lack of desire to do so. Many of us have fought the good fight of faith in our previous denominations and have struggled to remain orthodox and faithful in churches which were becoming increasingly ashamed of their Reformed heritage. Many of us are just plain tired of fighting. Since we are weary, we naturally gravitate toward the safety of the familiar. This is all very understandable. But it can also be very unfortunate, especially if we don't take avail of the *Kairos* moments which God does see fit to bring our way. Too often, Reformed Christians lack the vision for doing new things. Let's face it. Vision has never been our *forte*.

As a consequence of the recent decline in many of our own churches, often times we adopted a fortress mentality, putting up walls to ward off all outsiders since it became increasingly difficult to tell friend from foe. The fortress was designed to protect us. But its walls cut now us off from the outside world. Our enemy is wise, and he simply moved on, leaving us inside our well-fortified citadel, while he plundered elsewhere. If you know World War Two history, know how quickly France's supposedly impenetrable Maginot Line fell without so much as firing a shot. Hitler's panzers simply entered France through Belgium and Holland, avoiding the Maginot Line's formidable defenses altogether. If modern battle tactics can be related to our contemporary theological situation, fixed positions are useless when our enemy chooses not to engage us on our terms and instead, moves the battle to a position of his own choosing. Regardless of how tightly the military analogy holds, the old battles we have fought and won will not be fought again on the exact same terms and under the exact same conditions. There are new challenges and new issues facing all of us. We are not being faithful if we are not ready for them. Is it not time to shift from defensive positions into an offensive mode, so as to take advantage of these new opportunities and reach out to both the unchurched and disenfranchised evangelicals? Perhaps it is time to become proactive and stop being so reactive.

One last thing needs to be said as well. Sitting inside our fortress of Reformed orthodoxy has had another negative consequence. A fortress mentality often leads to a situation in which we too easily engage in Hatfield-McCoy type feuding within the family, when, in the absence of enemies outside the walls, we turn upon those with us inside the walls. How much ink and sweat has been spilled in our tradition of late over issues about which, we as Reformed Christians, have always disagreed among ourselves. Now let me state without equivocation, that I am a theologian by training and think these issues are important. Our differences *ought* to be debated and not simply swept under the rug. But there is a time and place for this debate—never in public and certainly not when other more pressing matters require our immediate attention.

I am afraid that the degree to which we fight with each other over these long-standing and nuanced differences within the Reformed confessional tradition, is the degree to which we remove ourselves from the broader discussion. Such debate uses up much of our precious energy and weakens our will to take up the new challenges we face. Besides, it is unseemly to be bickering in public when so many people are watching us for the first time. After all, our three-fold enemy is the world, the flesh and the devil, not our fellow Reformed Christian who

believes that the earth is old when we think it young, or who follows an infralapsarian order of God's decrees, when we are supralapsarians. Reaching out to the unchurched and evangelicals will help us put such in-house debates in their proper context. When people say to us, "sirs, what must I do to be saved?" it would not be appropriate to say, "what is your position on common grace?" After we preach the gospel to people and they come to faith, then we catechize them and plug them into a local church. And then, if there's time left over, we can explain to them the history of our internal divisions, and which position we take on these things and why. We need to keep the cart *after* the horse

As I see it, this is a *Kairos* moment. We need to be prayerful and intentional about leaving the walls of our citadels and, at least for the time being, begin thinking and talking about how to take advantage of this moment. May God grant us confidence to believe that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. May we see many non-Christians come to faith. May we also be bold enough and willing enough to encourage evangelicals to join us. May the great truths of the Reformed faith bring them the comfort in life and death these truths have bought us. Let us all make a concerted effort to take our beloved Reformed faith to every corner of this continent. We don't need a strategy. We don't need to compromise. All we need do is be faithful to our own confessions and tradition, as we do our best to faithfully serve the Lord of the church