

Celebrating the Reformation as transformation to dignity

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Abstract:

South Africa is on an urgent journey of transformation toward a life of dignity for all. Dignity is at the heart of the South African Constitution of 1996. Some essential building-blocks of dignity are reconciling justice, responsible freedom, equality as equality of worth and equality as aequitas, equity and equilibrium. This paper will discuss how the theology of Reformers like Luther and Calvin informs our thinking about these central features of dignity. Calvin informs our thinking about justice and equality, and Luther informs our thinking about freedom.

1. Introduction

The Latin word '*Reformatio*', literally means 'restoration or renewal.' When Luther started his onslaught on the Roman Catholic way of belief and religious practices, he and those who followed, actually set out to restore and renew not only the Church's religious thought and understanding, but Luther as the pioneer, as well as his followers, also wanted to renew their understanding of political power.

Thus, one can already detect here that religion and politics cannot be separated; they cannot be understood to be two railway lines that co-exist next to each other, but have nothing to do with each other and never interact with each other. Reformation, therefore brought to light that politics needs religion so as to be just, fair, dignified and equal, fostering equality, equilibrium and aequity. Religion, on the other hand, helps politics to be free and so fosters freedom and helps ensure citizens who enjoy their freedom responsibly.

Likewise religion needs politics for the simple fact that as politics evolves, develops and grows, it challenges religious precepts, concepts, dogma and beliefs. Politics is necessary for religion to adapt, renew and, perhaps, be transformed so as to stay relevant and to continue being a key role player in building not only citizens who treasure and acknowledge

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their own dignity, and respect the dignity of others, but helping to establish a humane society, where all is free, equal and treated justly.

2. The theology of Reformers thicken our understanding of notions like dignity, justice, equality and freedom

South Africa is a multi-cultural, multi-religious, ethnically diverse and economically unequal society. Prior to 1994, theology was one of the major role players in bringing Apartheid to its end. Today it still plays a vital role in building a humane society in which the dignity of all is acknowledge and respected, so fostering human rights, equality and responsible freedom. It was especially the theological understanding and insight of the Reformers that helped to give the impetus as a contribution to putting Apartheid in its reformed perspective and thus emphasising concepts like dignity, justice, equality and freedom.

2.1). Dignity - Reformed theology says it is Trinitarian²

The theology of the Reformers enhances our understanding of dignity in that it argues that every person has an inalienable dignity. It teaches that all humans were and are created in the image of God (Calvin³).

We can therefore say that our dignity has Trinitarian sources. Our dignity is based in the person and work of the creating Father. Our dignity resides in the fact that God takes human beings so seriously that God became human in Jesus Christ.

Our dignity is based in the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the indwelling Spirit, the working Spirit, the actualizing, operationalizing, implementing, materializing, embodying, shape-giving, fulfilling Spirit, the transforming Spirit, the renewing Spirit, the perfecting Spirit.

² For the notion of Trinitarian dignity, the insights of John Webster and Nico Koopman are richly drawn upon. (Webster, J. *The Dignity of Creatures* in P Middleton (ed.), *The Love of God and Humanity Dignity. Essays in Honour of George M. Newlands* (London: T&T Clark, 2007),p19 – 33. Koopman, N. *Human dignity in the context of globalization*, in Boesak, A and Hansen, L (eds), *Global crises, global challenge, global faith. An ongoing response to the Accra Confession*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, p.231 – 242.

³ See Henry Beveridge (translated), *John Calvin Institutes of the Christian Religion*. (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers,2008).

2.1.1 Our dignity resides in the loving act of God

Our dignity resides in the loving act of God, the creator who summons us into being. Our dignity is a created dignity. Our dignity does not reside in autonomy and independence, but in this dependence upon God the creator. The dignity, worth, honor and glory of creatures rest in our calling by God to live in fellowship and communion with Him.

2.1.2 Our dignity is also Christologically based

Through the Person and the extensive and comprehensive work of Jesus Christ God affirms our dignity. According to Webster Christ affirms and protects our dignity “by the full scope of this divine mission: its origin in the eternal procession of the Son; the assumption of flesh; the state of humiliation; the exaltation of Easter; the glorious rule of the Son as the ascended and enthroned reconciler who presents himself in the Spirit’s power”.

The gift of creaturely dignity that humans due to sin do not fully accept and enjoy, is embodied by Jesus Christ. Christ is the perfect human who fully accepts and enjoys the gift of creaturely dignity. Thereby He confirms this dignity and enables us as sinful humans to accept and enjoy the gift. Only through Christological dignity do we accept and enjoy creaturely dignity. The dignity and glory of Christ is *pro nobis*. It is for us, it is our dignity.

2.1.3 Our dignity is also based in the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Our dignity is also based in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of God through whom God perfects and actualises the dignity of human beings in correspondence to God’s plans and purposes, calling and summons. The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ through whom the glorified Son directs creaturely realities to their completion. In this journey the Spirit generates, sustains and purifies obedience and active consent on the part of creatures. Webster states: “The Spirit moves creatures, and in moving gives them their proper spontaneity and integrity, that is, their dignity as the active children of God.”

3. Justice

Just as dignity is portrayed as the dignity forthcoming from God, so we can argue that justice is forthcoming from God. Justice is the justice of God. Four decades ago B Wentsel⁴ discussed justice as God's justice. He argues that God's justice is constituted by a threefold virtue, namely justice as norming and guiding justice for all walks of life, justice as retributive justice, and justice as salvific justice.

All these dimensions of justice are based in the notion of the work of justification of the triune God. Justification entails that the triune God justifies and sanctifies sinners. God brings forgiveness and salvation, justification and sanctification. He transforms people into justified and sanctified ones who receive the vocation to seek justice in the world. Justification and sanctification are interdependent. We cannot talk about one without the other. Moltmann⁵, in line with Luther and Calvin, describes justification as *mortificatio sui*, the dying to the self, and sanctification as the *vivificatio Spiritu*, life in the Spirit.

Justification paves the way for seeking justice in the world. Paul Lehman,⁶ who argued against the unhappy divorce between soteriology and ethics, views justification as what God does to set things right between humans and God. Justice, as the human quest to set things right amongst humans, is our faithful response to these actions of God.

When justice is understood as the setting right of what is not right in man's (sic.) relationship to man (sic), both private and public, then, the struggle for justice becomes the concrete expression, in behavior, of man's (sic.) response to what God has done and is doing to set things right between man (sic.) and Himself. The faith by which man is justified becomes what Luther called a "busy, living, active thing" by which men learn in the struggle for justice what it means concretely to forgive and to be forgiven.

Luther's notion of living and effective faith parallels his understanding of justification as dynamic and effective, as the divine bringing forth and making of humans who are simultaneously sinful, on the one hand, and forgiven and just, on the other hand. These justified ones are continuously in search of personal and social justice through a process of self-judgement and repentance.

⁴ B Wentsel, *Hij voor ons, wij voor Hem. Over gerechtigheid, verzoening en gericht* (Kampen: Kok, 1973), p.50 – 57.

⁵ Moltmann, *The Spirit of life: A universal affirmation* (London: SCM, 1992), p.163 – 165.

⁶ PL Lehmann, *Forgiveness*, in J Macquarrie (ed.), *The Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), p.131.

In a very helpful article Mark Seifrid discusses Melancton's and Luther's views on justification. He⁷ is concerned that Melancton interprets the important notion of the imputation of Christ's righteousness in a reductionist way. He reasons that Melancton views justification - in an arid, juridical manner - as a means of quieting the conscience, and as a means of inward renewal. He runs the risk of viewing justification as a human possession, a human virtue. He does not view justification as a dynamic, sanative and continuous action of God, as Luther does. For Luther, according to Seifrid,⁸ the imputation of righteousness is not merely the initial act by which God imparts salvation, but rather the continuous way in which God governs and purifies the life of the justified. It is a forensic and declaratory act, but it is also more. It is also an effective word of God, which paves the way for faith, daily repentance and self-judgment by which God "makes out of unhappy and proud gods, true human beings, that is, wretches and sinners⁹." We might conclude that for Luther the divine declaration of justification is, therefore, also a continuous divine making into a just person of the sinner¹⁰.

Based on the idea that through justification God transforms human beings into righteous and just persons, Stanley Hauerwas argues that the task of Christians are not only to formulate theories of justice, but in the first place and fundamentally to be just persons.

[...] for Christians, justice is first and foremost a claim about the kind of people we ought to be. You cannot have, contrary to liberal assumptions, a just social system, without people being just. The attempts to create such systems end in creating greater state power in the name of doing justice. Christians do not need such accounts of justice to know that the ill need care and the hungry need food. By learning to share their lives in the church, Christians have learned that justice often demands no more than the most common acts of care.¹¹

⁷ MA Seifrid, Luther, Melancton and Paul on the question of imputation, in M Husbands and DJ Treier (eds.), *Justification. What's at stake in the current debates?* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press/ Leicester, England: Apollos, 2004), p.148 – 150.

⁸ MA Seifrid, Luther, Melancton and Paul, p.145.

⁹ Luther, as quoted by MA Seifrid, Luther, Melancton and Paul, p.151.

¹⁰ Seifrid's summary of Luther's dynamic understanding of justification, and of its implications for a life of personal and social justice, amidst sin and injustices, might be quoted at length:

Luther's dynamic conception of justification much more effectively conveys the way in which God's mercy is granted only in judgment. The justification of the sinner takes place only in and through the justification of God in the event of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Justification" is no mere transaction to be applied to my account. God's "yes" is given only in and with his "no," a "no" and "yes" which are mine only in so far as faith echoes them in my heart. Both in the foolishness of pride and sin and in the despair of misery, suffering and failure, this Gospel of the justifying work of God in Christ both conquers and carries us sinners.

¹¹ S Hauerwas, *Should Christians talk so much about justice?*, in: B&R Reviews May/June 1986, p.6

The author of this article understand Hauerwas's plea to be one that expresses the confidence that just people, people who do not forget the most basic calling to care, are well placed to participate in the public quests for theories and systems, policies and practices of justice.

This discussion hopefully sheds some light on the relationship between God's justice and human justice, between justification and justice.

Where human justice is based in God's justice, a richer understanding of justice is developed. We might identify two dimensions of the compassionate justice of article three of the Belhar Confession. It can be argued that the notion of compassionate justice implies that justice has a forensic or legal dimension and that it also has features like mercy, sacrifice, righteousness, reconciliation and restoration.

The Old Testament uses justice mainly in a twofold way, i.e. as forensic justice (*mishpat*), and as compassionate justice (*tsedaqah*). The New Testament *dikaioisune*, carries both meanings. Bruce Birch¹² describes *mishpat* as a term with a basic forensic character. It deals with judicial activities at every level. It is an ethical concept that deals with rights due to every individual in the community and with the upholding of those rights. Especially God's justice refers to the upholding of the rights of the vulnerable, and with the advocacy of their needs (Deut.10:18; Ps.10:18; Jer.5:28). Where the rights of the vulnerable are violated, God's justice can be translated as judgement, the activity of God to hold accountable those who deny, manipulate and exploit the rights of others.

Various theories of justice that developed in the post- Enlightenment era also strive to employ justice, amongst others through the notion of human rights, as a pathway towards homecoming for millions, i.e. enjoying the good of the land.

Tsedaqah, according to Birch¹³, is also translated as righteousness. Here the focus is on right relationships. God's righteousness refers to his concrete acts to establish and preserve relationship. His law is a gift that aims at establishing terms under which relationship is preserved and maintained¹⁴. Both the Old and New Testaments teach that sacrifice was required to achieve this rightness in relations.

¹² BC Birch Let justice roll down. The Old Testament, ethics, and Christian life (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1991), p.155 - 156.

¹³ BC Birch Let justice roll down, p.153 – 154.

¹⁴ *Tsedaqah* can also be translated as vindication, deliverance, uprightness, right and even prosperity.

Justice therefore stands in relationship to justification. Justification means that we are declared righteous by God because of the ultimate sacrifice of Christ. This imputed righteousness, i.e. righteousness that we possess because of our connectedness in faith to Christ, makes us people who practice justice. Those who are made righteous through a sacrifice also practice sacrificial justice. They know that relationships will not be right and prosperous and joyful without sacrifice.

A crucial dimension of justice is equality. Duncan Forrester¹⁵ argues that equality refers to equality in worth, dignity and value. Inequality is witnessed to in evils like racism, sexism, anti-Semitism etcetera. He, however, concedes that there is disagreement on how this equality of worth can be translated into policy and practice.

4. Equality

Oliver O'Donovan argues against an absolutistic equalization process. He is in favor of the notion of the equal worth of humans. He, however, reckons that this theological and metaphysical notion, which constitutes the foundations of society, should not be confused with the superstructure of human existence. Where revolutionary equalization causes this confusion, social structures are dissolved and degraded, and human life becomes unlivable. The metaphysical foundational principle of equal worth cannot be implemented in society without taking the complex differentiated nature of the structures of society into consideration. For him differentiation is the law of every social organism. Attributive justice, as justice of differentiation, is influenced by notions like affinity and bonds of loyalty, the promotion of talent, wise appointments to office, the provision of opportunities to those who could use them. "We depend on the justice of differentiation from the moment we take our first breath and are placed in the arms of our mother, rather than being handed to whoever may be next in the queue for a child."¹⁶ He does, however, caution that this emphasis on justice of differentiation should not close our eyes for those kinds of difference, which are simply unjust.

O'Donovan¹⁷ suggests that we view persons as always equal in worth, but that we differentiate in roles and classes. Roles that we play are distinguished from each other and

¹⁵ D Forrester, *On human worth* (London: SCM Press, 2001), p.30.

¹⁶ D Forrester, *On human worth*, p.42.

¹⁷ D Forrester, *On human worth*, p.43 – 44, 50 – 51.

are not equal in an absolutistic sense. In the same way classes, communities and collectives e.g. genders do have differences. Allocations to men's health care and women's health care, to boys' education and to girls' education should not be done on a 50-50 basis, but in terms of what each requires in specific contexts and instances. He employs Paul's words in Galatians 3: 28 to argue against the absolute or revolutionary equalization of classes.

In a very illuminating article Bram van de Beek¹⁸ showed a few years ago how Calvin's perspectives on equality can enrich contemporary discussions on justice and equality in our pluralistic public domains. Van de Beek argues that equality cannot be understood as absolute equality. Equality should rather be understood in terms of the notion of *aequitas* that Calvin employs. *Aequitas* refers to the quest for equilibrium, for balance (ewe wig) in society. It implies that we need equity (from *aequitas*) measures to build a society of greater equilibrium; a society of balance, of moderation, where some do not have too much and others too little. A society of equilibrium is enhanced where we practice an ethos of self-denial, sacrifice, service and care, and where we do not only bear the burden of the other, but where we bear the other one as burden.

Justice and equality is due to all people and creatures, because we have God-given, and therefore, inalienable, dignity, worth and value. South African theologians like Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, John De Gruchy, Charles Villa-Vicencio, Denise Ackerman, Dirk Smit, Nico Koopman and many others share these understandings of dignity, justice and equality and used them to propagate the fall of Apartheid and, as we journey to a society of dignity, they and others argued, and are arguing for reconciliation, justice, quality and freedom.

Furthermore, we can say that justice is only present where freedom prevails.

5. Freedom

*"Christianus homo omnium dominus est liberrimus, nulli subiectus. Christianus homo omnium servus est officiosissimus, omnibus subiectus."*¹⁹ - "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

According to reverend Travis J. Loeslie (pastor of St. Peter Lutheran Church in Lester Prairie, MN), Luther's paradoxical teaching of Christian freedom, following Christ and St.

¹⁸ A van de Beek, Beyond the unfounded optimism of equity, in E van der Borght (ed.), Affirming and living with differences (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), p.147 – 160.

¹⁹ See more at: http://lutheranreformation.org/theology/on-the-freedom-of-a-christian/#_ftn1

Paul, joins lord and servant in one person. By faith alone, God sets a man utterly, completely, free in Christ. He is lord of all, subject to none. Love binds him as an utterly dutiful servant to the neighbor, subject to everyone. The paradox of Christian freedom then plays out in faith and love.

The “freedom” Luther has in mind is deeply relational. As he makes clear in “The Freedom of a Christian,” it is found in a relationship with Christ, who has liberated the self from a horizon limited by the forces of “sin, death, and the devil”.

Furthermore, as Luther makes clear, for the one on whom this freedom²⁰ is conferred, the world now becomes an arena for service and good works. The bondage formerly known in relation to “sin, death, and the devil” is transferred now to the needs of the neighbour and the world, but the motivation is completely transformed. The very love that has enabled freedom now flows forth in service.²¹ It is not timid or sentimental; the shape of this love itself is cruciform. Consequently, those held by this love should not be surprised to find themselves in the midst of a remarkable adventure that reflects both the suffering and joy of Christ’s death and resurrection. As Luther says in “The Freedom of a Christian”:

From faith there flows a love and joy in the Lord. From love there proceeds a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves the neighbour and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. We do not serve others with an eye toward making them obligated to us. Nor do we distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or ingratitude. Rather we freely and willingly spend ourselves and all that we have.

6. Reception of Calvin’s and Luther’s theological and ethical thought by South African theologians

From Luther’s teaching on Christian freedom, as stated in his famous quotation at the beginning of this section, one can detect that Luther also calls one to freedom, to just practises, equal treatment and respect for others. His understanding of freedom is one that invites one to freedom of service, free to share and care. As the South African theologian,

²⁰ S Jones, *Feminist theory and Christian theology. Cartographies of grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), p. 79 – 93. Jones identifies five forms of oppression that we need to be freed from, namely freedom from exploitation, freedom from marginalisation, freedom from powerlessness, freedom from cultural imperialism, and freedom from violence.

²¹ A classic study in Luther’s ethics is George Forell’s *Faith Active in Love* (New York: American, 1954).

Denise Ackerman noted; “Was theirs (Reformers) not a journey of ‘freedom from’ to ‘freedom for’²²”.

6.1 On Freedom

It is this kind understanding of freedom that inspired South African theologians to call on all its citizens to become involved in public strategies to fight the oppressive, racist and dividing Apartheid policies, and to work for a democratic, free, inclusive, non-racial, just and equal society where dignity reigns. Ackerman helped us by, firstly, picturing this ‘freedom for’ as abundance; meaning that we discover a sense of fullness, wholeness, and the desire to share our bounty (Ackerman 2014:165). Secondly she thinks of hope. Being ‘free for’ is to live with hope, because we know hope ourselves. As she quotes Heb.11:1, she goes on to argue that

Freedom in faith rests solidly on the belief that God has given us our freedom, that we have to accept and enjoy it, and that we dare to hope and trust that we can move beyond all that limits our freedom into a space that is filled with a lightness of being which we call ‘freedom’. Then we can become communities of hope (Ackerman 2014:166).

Thirdly she thinks “ ‘freedom for’ is to be free to love my neighbour as myself...which is expressed by sharing with and caring for one another” (Ackerman, 2014:166). It is this understanding of freedom that helped South Africa on its journey to dignity.

6.2 On equality, dignity and justice

On the question of equal dignity and justice, Tutu²³ reminds us that

there is another kind of justice: restorative justice, whose chief purpose is not punitive but restorative, healing. It holds as central the essential humanity of the perpetrator of even the most gruesome atrocity, never giving up on anyone, believing in the essential goodness of all as created in the image of God, and believing that even the worst of us still remains a child of God with the potential to become better, someone to be salvaged, to be rehabilitated, not to be ostracised but ultimately to be reintegrated into community (Tutu. 2011:42). He further say that I could not have fought against the discrimination of apartheid and not also fight against the discrimination that homosexuals endure, even in our churches and faith groups.... Opposing apartheid was a matter of justice. Opposing discrimination against women is a matter of justice. Opposing discrimination on the basis of sexual

²² D Ackerman, Surprised by the man on the borrowed donkey. Ordinary blessings (Cape Town: Lux Verbi,2014),p. 155

²³ Tutu, D. 2011. God is not a Christian. Speaking truth in times of crisis. (London, Rider).

orientation is a matter of justice. [...] We are all equal, of equal worth in the sight of our Father. .All, all belong: gay, lesbian, so-called straight.” (Tutu. 2011:54 -56).

De Gruchy holds the view that

restorative justice is not, however, a weak form of justice, a dilution of the normal legal process. Nor does it necessarily exclude other forms of justice, even retribution or the use of punishment as a deterrent. Restorative justice is rather the attempt to ‘recover certain neglected dimensions that make for a more complete understanding of justice. Its emphasis is on rehabilitation, on compensation, on the recovery of dignity and the healing of social wounds. T

his he continues, “is precisely what is at the heart of justice in the biblical tradition; it is relational and social, it requires both embrace and the overcoming of oppression in all its forms.” (De Gruchy, 2002:203).

Pillay also argues for the equality of men and women when she add her voice

to those who believe that it is not important to find the maleness or femaleness of God so that we (Christians, who are either female or male, can align ourselves with God and thereby affirm our superior nature, but that we find our common humanity, our equal human dignity, in God incarnate through the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. (Pillay in Hansen, L. *Christian in public. Aims, methodologies and issues in public theology*, 2007:212-213).

Conclusion

This paper argued that the theological insights of Calvin (justice and equality) and Luther (freedom) enrich our contemporary public theological discussions and our broader interdisciplinary public discourses about themes like dignity, justice, freedom and equality.

From their theological and ethical insight South African theologians in particular have developed their reformed theology and offered a richer way of describing the notions like dignity, justice, equality and freedom, which all enhance and help to guide our journey to a society of dignity, equality and responsible freedom.

Thus we celebrate Reformation as transformation to dignity. Reformed theology also assisted us in identifying and mobilising the resources in faith communities, civil society and also in political and economic life to actively transform our once Apartheid South Africa to a democratic, inclusive, equal, free and just South Africa. We are not fully there yet, but as we journey together, we shall continue to work together on lighting the path on how to get there.

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