Reformed Theology in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand

Introduction

A focused presence of Reformed Christianity and its theology in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand was originally due to the nineteenth-century migration of Scottish and Irish Presbyterians to both nations. Notwithstanding some evidence of theological debate during the nineteenth century,¹ more energy was invested in establishing visible and organised Presbyterian denominations. The nineteenth century also saw the arrival in both nations of Baptist, Congregationalist, and Calvinistic Methodist churches as well as (at least in Australia) a growing presence of evangelical Anglicans who looked to Calvin alongside Cranmer. Reformed theology was, therefore, mediated to this region via the pre-existing denominational fault-lines of British Christianity and those denominations’ allegiances to various Reformed Confessions. In the twentieth century, Dutch migration to Australia added to this mix of Reformed traditions.²

Three developments from these origins can be highlighted: engagement with sources, unity and confessions, and post-Christendom trajectories.

Engagement with sources

Although there is evidence of some direct engagement with Calvin in the nineteenth century, the emerging Reformed theology in this region was typically due to engagement with the Westminster Confession. The early twentieth century witnessed a brief renaissance of the study and promotion of Calvin in Aotearoa New Zealand, largely driven by the emerging awareness of Barth and Brunner in the 1930s.³ Despite any sustained scholarship on Schleiermacher, the Liberal Protestantism he provoked also shaped theological discussion in the Presbyterian churches of both nations during the twentieth century. In this new theological climate, Calvin and the Westminster Confession were often invoked to defend biblical authority, substitutionary atonement, and justification by faith.

In the 1960s Sydney’s Anglican Moore College began to require its students to read Calvin’s Institutes. The intent was to expose the students to one classic text of Christian theology in its

³ See P. Matheson, ‘The Reception of Calvin and Calvinism in New Zealand: A Preliminary Trawl’ in Rae et al, Calvin, pp. 185-87.
entirety, to demonstrate by Calvin’s systematic example that Christianity is an intellectually coherent faith, and to learn from Calvin’s *theological* engagement with scripture.⁴

Celebrations of Calvin’s Quincentenary throughout Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand included academic conferences in Dunedin, Melbourne and three in Sydney. The conferences addressed most issues conventionally associated with Calvin as well as those drawing Calvin into conversation with contemporary hermeneutics, modern politics and the natural sciences. Adding to this interest in Calvin, Jonathan Edwards’ work has become the focus of renewed interest with the establishment of the Jonathan Edwards Centre at Ridley Melbourne.⁵

**Unity and Confessions**

Despite a shared commitment to the Westminster Confession there were twenty-five Presbyterian and Reformed denominations in Australia alone in 2009.⁶ As elsewhere, the Reformed tradition’s theological insistence on the church’s catholicity and unity has been heavily qualified in practice.

A significant attempt to correct this was the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) in 1977 out of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches.⁷ Resisting “ecclesiastical carpentry”⁸ as a path to union, the three churches were invited to enter “union on the basis of a fresh confession of the faith of the church”.⁹ The Reformation confessions functioned paradigmatically in two ways. First, whilst written “to serve the particular needs of the Church of that day” their particularity did “not invalidate [their] universal significance”.¹⁰ Any new confession would similarly be particular but not parochial. Secondly, they embodied the “Church’s re-enactment or reflection of the witness borne by prophet and apostle in Holy Scripture”.¹¹ Consequently, the theological centre of the UCA’s Basis of Union is a confession of the church’s faith articulated not through the repetition of creedal formulae but, strikingly, through a narrative summary of the New Testament witness to Jesus articulated exclusively in biblical concepts and terminology.¹²

In the 1960s the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand also entered union negotiations with that nation’s Churches of Christ, Anglicans, Methodists and Congregationalists. Despite the union not eventuating, the proposed Basis of Union remains a ‘statement of faith’ for the

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⁵ www.ridley.edu.au/
⁷ The Presbyterian Church of Australia continues since approximately one-third of the Presbyterian membership declined to enter Union.
¹⁰ *The Faith of the Church*, p. 23.
now-named Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (PCANZ); it stands alongside other ancient and contemporary statements, the most recent of which (2010) bears the Maori title *Kupu Whakapono* (Confession of Faith). The latter declares God’s triunity, Jesus’ identity and saving significance, and (sharing the widely adopted correction to the Creeds’ and Reformers’ formulaic marks of the church) a confession of the nexus between ecclesial identity and the call to mission.\(^\text{13}\)

**Post-Christendom Trajectories**

In recent decades the development of Reformed theology in both nations has been significantly influenced by engagements with Barth, Moltmann, T.F. Torrance and Gunton. A steady stream of Barth scholarship has emerged. Arguably Moltmann, with his interest in ecumenical, contextual and political theologies, is the Reformed theologian most read in both nations’ non-Reformation churches. Students of both Torrance and Gunton have been involved in theological education and research in both countries. These four twentieth-century heirs of the Reformation recast Reformed theology as a conversation partner with both the church catholic and an increasingly post-Christendom culture. In doing so, they brought Reformed theology to bear on issues never, or barely, in dispute during the Reformation itself: the Trinity, pneumatology, eschatology, cosmology and the natural sciences, the mission of the church, and dialogue with the Eastern tradition. Likewise, the region’s contemporary theologians variously drawing on the Reformed tradition are attending to such issues as theosis, holocaust studies, theological hermeneutics and contemporary missiology.\(^\text{14}\)

Acknowledging the radically post-Christendom nature of both Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand is likely to be the key to the future development of Reformed Theology in these nations. Repetition of sixteenth century polemics risks theological isolationism, albeit with a strong sense of identity and faithfulness. On the other hand, if the inheritance of Reformed theology is to engage the region’s emerging theological and cultural landscape it will need to address issues of gender, indigenous histories and spiritualities, public theology, an increasingly confident atheism, and the realities of multi-religious and multi-cultural societies. It is likely that both trajectories will be pursued for the foreseeable future.


Further Reading:


*Reformed Theological Review*. This is an Australian-based journal existing to provide “scholarly exposition, defence and propagation of the Reformed faith”. See http://rtr.org.au/