

Being Reformed

reviewed by [Douglas F. Ottati](#) in the [January 26, 2000](#) issue

The Reformed Family Worldwide: A Survey of Reformed Churches, Theological Schools, and International Organizations, edited by Jean-Jacques Bauswein and Lukas Visser

Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, and Traditions, edited by David Willis and Michael Welker

Two new books encourage us to pause and take stock of Reformed Christianity. The first lists more than 750 communities and 500 schools, as well as numerous alliances, councils, federations, fellowships, dialogues and conversations. Its purpose is "to allow reformed churches to become more fully aware of the present situation of their family-its multiplicity, its richness, its potential, but also its weaknesses; and . . . to serve as an instrument which will facilitate communications within that family." The second collects 31 essays designed to promote the development of a Reformed theology.

Both books demonstrate that diversity is a hallmark of the Reformed tradition. Lukas Visser notes that though Reformed Christianity's classical roots are in the work of John Calvin at Geneva, the 16th-century movement developed, in other places, both different doctrinal emphases and different models of church order. Jan Milic Lochman's contribution to David Willis and Michael Welker's book emphasizes the history of radical reform among Waldensians, Hussites and Czech Brethren. Lochman argues against narrow understandings of reformation that limit attention to the 16th century and to criteria such as sola scriptura and sola fide. Eberhard Busch draws attention to recent confessions produced by Reformed churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Australia and North America. He also reminds us that the Reformed tradition has been fluid in its approach to confessions. Unlike the Lutherans, Reformed churches spawned a host of different confessional documents in different contexts and locations, and no single confession or collection of confessions has been recognized as binding on all churches.

Although Willis and Welker had hoped for an even greater number of contributions from theologians outside the U.S. and Western Europe, their book includes essays by

writers from Hungary, Japan, Egypt, South Africa, Argentina and Myanmar. Choan-Seng Song (who teaches at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley) calls for "an Asian reconstruction" of Christian theology in a spiritual world shaped by Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims, and John Hesselink describes the distinctive theological contributions of Dutch Reformed communities in southern Michigan. That Jean-Jacques Bauswein and Lukas Vischer list 22 Reformed churches in Brazil, seven in Zimbabwe and 96 varieties of Presbyterians in the Republic of Korea testifies to the diversity of Reformed Christianity.

But if diversity indicates vitality, it also raises concerns. What identifies a church, movement or person as Reformed? What does the Reformed tradition have to offer the wider Christian family? Jürgen Moltmann sounds a typical note when he says that "Reformed churches are confessing churches" that articulate their faith in the midst of contemporary circumstances. This is largely how Busch views the "new confessional eagerness" among non-European churches. A number of writers, including Moltmann, Busch, Vischer, Hesselink, John deGruchy and Edmund Za Bik, outline distinctive emphases of Reformed theology: among them, the word of God attested in scripture; the grace of God in Jesus Christ; the radicality of sin; the law and God's covenant with Israel; and a "worldly" or participatory ethic. Nevertheless, the specific emphases mentioned by particular authors often differ and the same emphases are sometimes differently understood. Welker notes that a theology reformed according to the word of God falls into crisis unless we are able to clarify our understanding of God's word-no small project.

Still, we shouldn't miss the forest for the trees. The writers are at one in calling attention to a characteristic Reformed emphasis on theology. Both volumes encourage wide-ranging conversations as a strategy for advancing Reformed theology. Interchanges among Reformed centers of learning (at Geneva, Cambridge, Heidelberg, Leiden, St. Andrews, Ghent, Montaubon, Hanau and elsewhere) have been a feature of the movement since its beginnings. After writing their own confession in their own dialect in 1560, Scottish Presbyterians did a typically Reformed thing: they published a Latin translation so that it could be shared internationally. Historically, a number of Reformed churches have not only written their own confessions but have also made use of statements written by other Reformed communities. The *Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* embodies this broad conversational strategy by bringing together the ecumenical creeds and the confessional documents produced by seven different Reformed

communities at different places and times.

Though Willis and Welker's book sets forth a multicontextual and multicultural conversation, it is theologically too narrow. On the basis of this collection one might easily conclude that Reformed theology today is essentially Barthian and that the Barmen Declaration is its chief confessional document. There are exceptions: the serious attention paid to Friedrich Schleiermacher by Brian Gerrish and Dawn DeVries; the penchant of Hesselink and other Dutch-American Reformed to look to Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck and Louis Berkhoff; the essays by Sang Lee and Amy Plantinga Pauw on Jonathan Edwards. By and large, however, the volume seems more thoroughly christocentric and more heavily invested in "revelation alone" than is a good deal of Reformed tradition. Though Barth and Barmen are unquestionably superb, it is wrong to pass over Emil Brunner's disagreements with Barth, forget Donald Baillie's christological revisions, and reduce H. Richard Niebuhr to a footnote on Edwards.

Moreover, in a collection that looks to the future of Reformed theology at a time when science is reshaping our knowledge of ourselves, our planet and the cosmos, and when technology promises to manage nature and alter humanity, the occasional paragraph about ecological threats seems a poor substitute for sustained attention to the interaction of Reformed theology and the sciences. Although it is helpful to include voices concerned about liberation and the poor, the failure to engage Huguenot and Puritan political theologies is unfortunate, and the silence about Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism is deafening. In addition, more might be said about theology and world religions (perhaps John Hick's work should come in for serious attention), and North American readers will note the absence of an essay on feminist currents in Reformed theology.

Books such as these almost always provoke questions of inclusion and comprehensiveness. (Bauswein and Vischer's includes a tear-out post card for mailing in additions and corrections, and I've already sent mine.) But both volumes render an important service to Reformed churches and Reformed theology by encouraging genuine interchange and conversation.

I agree with Bruce McCormack that Reformed churches will benefit from additional conversations between representatives of both Barthian and Schleiermacherian streams in Reformed theology. In the future, one hopes that both of these streams will be more equally represented, and that neither will simply ignore or dismiss the many others. As they witness to God's reign in the new millennium, Reformed

churches around the world will benefit from the widest and most vigorous conversation among all streams of Reformed theology. Who knows? There may even be a few new ones.