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Joined in Heart and Will: A Review of Reformed Public Theology

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Abstract

"Drawing from the work and writing of many Reformed theologians both historical and contemporary, these essays provide a fresh insight on how to worship and live faithfully together."

Posting about the book *Reformed Public Theology* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Comments

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Joined in Heart and Will: A Review of *Reformed Public Theology*

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“...This holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain persons. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.” (Excerpt from the *Belgic Confession*, Art. 27: “The Holy Catholic Church”)

Christians from the Reformed tradition affirm these words from the Belgic Confession, but from Sunday to Sunday, many find themselves in a context where there are few visible reminders and little incentive to acknowledge brothers and sisters in faith whose lives and experiences are much different from our own.

In the book *Reformed Public Theology*, a collection of essays compiled and edited by Matthew Kaemingk, Part Six brings our attention to Public Worship.

The authors of these five essays reflect on different aspects of public worship: The *sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism, intercessory prayer, confession*, as well as how personal *piety* is expressed publicly in everyday life.

Drawing from the work and writing of many Reformed theologians both historical and contemporary, these essays provide a fresh insight on how to worship and live faithfully together, acknowledging and respecting the diversity of our experiences but joining together in the journey of faith.

The Lord’s Supper

Alberto La Rosa Rojas invites us to ponder his experience growing up as an unauthorized immigrant in the United States. Rojas compares his sense of homelessness, dwelling in a limbo between his country of origin (Peru) and the place where he lived (Chicago). Neither place felt like “home.” However, at the table of the Lord’s Supper, he, along with all Christians, are pointed to our homecoming in God through Jesus Christ. As Rojas writes, “...The immigrant and the citizen have their understanding of and desire for home challenged and reordered toward our eschatological home with God.” (258)

Intercessory Prayer

In the essay on Public Trauma and Public Prayer, John Witvliet calls our attention to the liturgy of Reformed worship, where there is a time for public prayer, asking God to intercede. There is space in these prayers to acknowledge that the world is, as Cornelius Plantinga once wrote in the same-titled book, “Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be.” We should publicly exercise a vocabulary of lament where we can name, confess, and mourn those who have experienced tragedy and injustice due to racism, abuse, or persecution. As Witvliet notes, “We need habits and patterns of prayer that routinely acknowledge and speak the world’s horrors out loud.”

Baptism

Nico Koopman is a South African pastor who was labeled as “colored” by the system of apartheid. The codified racism of South African law put limits on all areas of his life. While the structures of apartheid have been dismantled, Koopman notes that the cultural remnants which divide people remain. The sacrament of baptism gives us a new identity which transcends the boundaries imposed by racism and sexism. We are claimed by God, included in his covenant promises, brought into union with Jesus Christ, and joined together into the Body of Christ, the church. The categories and barriers which divide have been removed. Koopman challenges the reader to live sacramentally, engaging our world as Spirit-empowered believers, and seeking to end the divisions of racism and sexism.

Confession

“In your mercy, Lord, forgive us, for we have sinned.” A key aspect of Reformed liturgies is taking time to corporately confess our sins. We acknowledge that we have all fallen short of how God desires us to live, and we confess our sins in the hope of the grace, mercy, and forgiveness we receive in the name of Jesus Christ. The world is broken, and we are complicit in the breaking. When there is sincere confession, there is not only an acknowledgement of our sin, but also a desire to turn around, to change, and to be reconciled to God and to our neighbor. Kyle David Bennett, in his essay on confession, writes, “We publicly confess because we want to be right with our God and his creation” (295). True confession develops humility and nurtures healing. As with all aspects of worship, genuine confession may be intensely personal, but as Bennett reflects on the writing of Abraham Kuyper, “...The practice of

confession...makes ripples far beyond the immediate, the individual, and the institutional church” (298).

Piety

In her essay about Piety and the Public Life, Jessica Joustra neatly identifies the dichotomy we are tempted to create between faith and life. Joustra recalls the words of the author Annie Dillard. Dillard attended the funeral of a man who was well-respected in his community for his faith and service. As the man was eulogized, a pattern emerged. He was commended for his generosity, kindness, and service, but as his death approached, people shared the common refrain, “...none of that really mattered anymore. All that mattered was his love for Jesus” (300). Yes, our love for Jesus matters, but it matters in our living, as well as in our dying. Drawing from the work of Herman Bavinck, Joustra uses the biblical images of a pearl and of leaven, which reminds us that the Gospel is both a treasure, like a pearl, but also like leaven, where the “gospel goes out into the world and transforms, restores, and lifts up” (302). There is great value in the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ, but our lives are lived in faithful service, embodying that hope in our calling and vocation, wherever God leads us.

In John 4, Jesus saw and offered the living water of the Gospel to the Samaritan woman, a woman whom many would look past or see as “other.” As bearers of the *Imago Dei*, we are called to see brothers and sisters whose experiences and challenges may be different from our own and join with them as together, we “worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). May our corporate worship strive to reflect what we read from the book of Revelation and speak into our day-to-day lives. Let us see and be seen; may we be restored and join together in the restoring work of Jesus.

And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” Revelation 5:9–10 (NIV)