

Reformed Theology and Movements: What Can We Learn from Each Other?

By J. R. Stevenson (with the Motus Dei DMM-Reformed Dialogue Group)¹

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Abstract

In some current missiological discourse, Reformed theology and movement thinking are portrayed as contrary to each other. This article models and advocates constructive dialogue between these two streams of thought. Demonstrating connection points between Reformed theology and movement approaches, it suggests ways in which each can benefit from the other and offers paths for ongoing dialogue.

Key Words: Church Planting Movements, Reformed Theology, Disciple Making Movements, Motus Dei, Reformed Missions

Introduction

In recent years, many missiologists and practitioners have reported tens of millions in unreached people groups coming to saving faith in Christ (Long 2020, 39; Garrison 2014; Coles & Parks 2019). These reports have stimulated much missiological discussion. However, the little existing interaction of Reformed theologians and missiologists with movement advocates has primarily taken the form of critique (Terry 2017; Rhodes 2022; Clark 2022), often with the two sides speaking past one another.

This article's purpose is modest and invitational: how, for the sake of collective commitment to the mission Christ gave his Church, can constructive dialogue mutually enrich two groups that have often remained in separate silos? A product of dialogue among movement scholar-practitioners and a Presbyterian Reformed field worker, this article progresses through three topics: (1) connections between Reformed understandings and some movement practices, (2) ways Reformed understandings might enhance movement practice, and (3) ways Reformed leaders might learn from movements. First, some preliminary definitions.

Definitions: Movements and Reformed Theology

This article focuses on common characteristics among “movements,” variously described as Church Planting Movements, Disciple Making Movements, Kingdom Movements (Coles & Parks 2019, 314), or Discipleship Movements (Farah 2021). (Such descriptors should not be confused with “Insider Movements,” a label representing a paradigm that includes different issues and thus will not be covered here.)

David Garrison first defined a Church Planting Movement (CPM) as “a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment” (Garrison 2004, 8). An expanded and widely used definition adds: “When consistent, multiple-stream 4th generation reproduction of churches occurs, church planting has crossed a threshold to becoming a sustainable movement” (Coles & Parks 2019, 315).

Distinction should be made between Church Planting Movements themselves and the methods that have been used to catalyze and nurture them (Farah 2020, 3). One of the best-known of these methods is “Disciple Making Movements” (DMM). Popularized by David Watson, DMM refers to a method of working toward a CPM (Farah 2022, 7). Other movement-oriented models and methodologies include T4T, Four Fields, Zúme, and Focus on Fruit. While

these different tools and approaches for nurturing CPMs differ in various respects, they share a family resemblance in “DNA” and “movement principles” which emphasize reproducible methods, viral multiplication, every-believer evangelism, reaching groups and existing social networks, immediate obedience to Scripture, and training and releasing indigenous leaders (Farah 2022, 8-9).

As for Reformed theology, this article focuses on confessions such as the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort).

Connections between Reformed Theology and Movements

To explore the connections between Reformed theology and movements, this article considers (1) sola Scriptura, particularly in relation to Scripture’s sufficiency and clarity, (2) the marks of the church, and (3) God’s covenantal work among families.

Sola Scriptura: Sufficiency and Clarity

The formal principle of the Protestant Reformation, sola Scriptura, affirms Scripture as the final criterion for determining the doctrine and practice of the Church. Reformed theology confesses that Scripture is the sole source of divine special revelation and therefore the final norm (WCF 1.6 and 1.10). Tradition, church history, and teaching must be subordinate to Scripture, with the word given central place in the community of believers.

The clarity (or “perspicuity”) of Scripture is also an essential feature of sola Scriptura. While Scripture is not equally clear in every theological or practical issue, the message of salvation as revealed in the Scriptures is clear enough that “a person concerned about the salvation of his or her soul can easily, by personal reading and study, learn to know that truth from Scripture without the assistance and guidance of the church and the priest” (Bavinck 2003, 477; cf. WCF 1.7).

How does this Reformation understanding of sola Scriptura relate to modern movements and movement thinking? In many Church Planting Movements, several important norms are set which ingrain the sufficiency of Scripture from the first Bible study with a group of unbelievers.

First, Scripture is the primary sourcebook and functional center of group meetings. When questions arise about faith and practice, rather than immediately providing answers, leaders provide sets of Scripture passages for the group to study, thus formalizing the principle that Scripture is the sole source of revelation and the authoritative norm (Smith 2019b, 89). Second, some practical features common in Discovery Bible Studies (DBS) illustrate the central, controlling place the Scriptures occupy. The Scripture text under consideration is read at least twice to ensure that all hear the word together (Larsen 2020, 191). The group restates the text in their own words, with group members helping each other to ensure they noticed what is in the text. Whenever a group member makes a comment about the text, others in the group can ask, “Where do you see that in this text?” (T 2021, 10; Larsen 2020, 195). These practices, when applied consistently, inculcate the expectation that God’s word is authoritative and that the group should shape itself and be corrected by the final, authoritative norm of the word. Finally, the questions commonly used to engage the text (What does this passage teach us about God and people/ourselves? How can we apply/obey what the text says?) illustrate a confidence in the sufficiency of God’s word regarding “what we are to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man” (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q3).

In addition, several movement practices are concrete examples of the clarity of Scripture in practice. First, ordinary people gather around the word—organized in specific, intentional ways—to discover the message of salvation. Second, most movements use intentionally selected Scripture passages that help develop a clear understanding of the gospel story. Creation-to-Christ overviews, for example, are common as they allow people to discover slowly but clearly across the span of redemptive history what God has done in Christ and how that must reorient their lives if they respond in faith. Third, the simple, easily reproduced questions (What does the passage teach us about God and people/ourselves?) naturally lead people to come face-to-face with what Scripture says about who God is, who they are before him, and therefore how they must respond to him. Potential for multiplication is increased because young believers can easily invite their friends and family to study the Scriptures in community, to discover the salvation “so clearly propounded” (WCF 1.7).

When we consider ecclesiology, we discover further connection points between Reformed theology and movement practice.

The Marks of the Church

Reformed confessions discuss visible marks which identify the presence of a true church. The Westminster Confession (25.5) notes that individual churches can be determined to be more or less pure “according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them” (WCF 25.4). Some streams of Reformed theology have described the marks slightly differently than Westminster. Calvin focused on the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments (Vos 2016, 23), whereas the Belgic Confession (Article 29) formalized the practice of church discipline as the third mark of the church. Bavinck describes the third mark as being manifest in the holiness of believers’ lives, with the exercise of discipline aimed towards that end (Bavinck 2008, 312). In gathered worship, all the marks come together. To summarize, Reformed ecclesiology insists on (1) the word being taught in such a way that the gospel is clear, (2) the gospel being visibly present through baptism and the Lord’s Supper, particularly in gathered worship, and (3) the word being lived out such that discipline is implemented in cases of gross disobedience and unrepentance.

While this article acknowledges divergence between movements and the Reformers’ conception of the marks of the church, movements do in fact focus on areas quite similar to the Reformed marks of the church: word, sacraments, and accountability. Underlying theological convictions of various movement advocates affect the details of each mark’s application, yet movement thinkers note it “is difficult to start a church if you do not have a clear idea in mind of when a group moves from being a cell group or Bible study to a church” (Smith 2019a, 76). Some movements use a diagnostic tool with groups that are developing into churches to aid in that transition. One such tool, the Church Circle, diagrams elements that should be present in a group for it to be considered a church (Smith 2019a, 82). When certain elements are not present, a group studies together the missing elements, then implements them to ensure that their life and practice together align with the Scriptures.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are considered essentials for church in movement literature, thus the Church Circle tool includes these. Smith defines a local church as “a group of baptized believers who recognize themselves as Christ’s body and are committed to meeting together regularly” (Smith 2019a, 77). In the significant movement among the Bhojpuri, they “baptize people as soon as they come to faith in Christ” (John and Coles 2019, 167). Similarly, believing communities in movements around the word regularly share in the Lord’s Supper in their gatherings.

The focus on obedience and accountability within movements points, in a different and limited fashion, toward the third mark of the church. From the earliest phases of group gatherings, participants hold each other accountable to submit to the authority of the word. In each study, participants commit to following the word in a specific way that week, and in the next meeting everyone is asked to share how they obeyed. This process lays the foundation for accountability, inculcating the norm and expectation that God calls believers to do the word, rather than hear the word only (James 1:22). As the group matures, this built-in DNA points toward discipline, should any members refuse to repent of sin or begin to spread false teaching (John and Coles 2019, 219; Watson & Watson 2014, 150). While movement advocates do not explicitly describe church discipline as a mark of the church as do the Reformed confessions, the accountability element in movements shows that the gospel must be “heard and heeded” (Clowney 1995, 103) and that holiness of the church’s members is critical (a’Brakel 1992, 34).

We now turn to consider how both the Reformed and movement practitioners highlight God’s work through existing social networks.

God’s Covenantal Work among Families

Another connection point between Reformed theology and movements arises from the perspective of covenant theology and its emphasis on the central role of the family and household within redemptive history. Essential to that role are God’s promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:3) and the promise in Acts 2:38-39, as well as the household (oikos) baptisms in Acts. In light of these biblical themes, covenant theology has identified that God primarily works through family units (though not exclusively per Matt. 19:29). Flip Buys describes the distinctly “Reformed contribution in evangelism and mission work”: the Reformed “seek individuals, yes, but we hasten to add ‘and thy house’” (Buys 2020, 101). Roger Greenway, Reformed urban missiologist, has stated that knowing “the Christian faith has spread via ‘chains of families,’” should not surprise “Reformed people who have believed all along that God works covenantally through believers and their families” (Greenway 1976, 46). Wilhemus a’Brakel, seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed pastor, suggested that families should function as “small congregations” and “be instrumental in the conversion of the unconverted” (a’Brakel 2012, 55).

This Reformed emphasis on the centrality of families finds a clear counterpart in movements. A principle often repeated by movement advocates and observed within movements is, “Groups, not individuals” (Larsen 2018, 173); Watson & Watson 2014, 143). Smith specifically relates this principle to the household (oikos) concept: “From Creation to Consummation, God’s promise and pattern is this: you will be saved, you and all your household” (Smith 2018, 44-47). In movements, disciple-makers look for those on whom the Spirit is working and who will open up their oikos to hear the gospel. Those pre-existing family and other social networks then provide a path for gospel progress through a people group, with a common practical question at the end of each Bible study asking each participant to identify someone from their network with whom they can share what they just learned. This may mean households coming to faith at once, or over a period of time, as family members see the life transformation of those who have begun to follow Christ.

Note the clear connection: Reformed, covenantal theology represents a long theological tradition of reflecting on God’s covenantal working through households, and movements put into practice an emphasis on evangelizing and discipling households among unreached people groups. Covenant theology aligns well with a missiological approach which honors pre-existing social networks—of which the household is foundational.

Having examined three important connections between Reformed theology and movements, the discussion now turns to ways Reformed understandings of Scripture may enrich movements.

Reformed Enrichments to Movements

Given the Protestant Reformation's bedrock foundation of Scripture, it should come as no surprise that certain aspects of Reformed theology's understanding of Scripture would enhance understandings and methodologies within movements.

Scripture Interprets Scripture – Clarity in Action

Reformed theology of Scripture can contribute to movement practice through emphasizing an important principle of interpretation: Scripture interprets Scripture. The Westminster Confession describes this “infallible rule of interpretation”: when any question arises about the meaning of a Scripture passage, “it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly” (WCF 1.9). How might this enrich the study of the word in movements?

A common Bible study approach in movements generally focuses on one or two passages at a time. Whenever a group member makes a comment about the passage being studied, a key question used in the Discovery Bible Study (DBS) approach is, “Where do you see that in the text?” This question intentionally restricts the discussion to the text under consideration. This restriction is intended to (1) teach basic Bible study skills of observation, and (2) ensure that the authority of the word stands clearly above other ideas that group members might bring into the discussion (Steinhaus 2021, 5). A Reformed approach affirms those benefits, particularly in the early days of a group primarily consisting of seekers exploring the claims of Christ.

If not situated within a larger hermeneutic, however, this practice of only one text at a time could lead to distorted interpretations. To counter this danger, a Reformed approach would suggest that the “infallible rule of interpretation” could be intentionally integrated with a discovery approach to Bible study in two ways. First, time could be taken in Bible study to intentionally relate the immediate passage under consideration with passages previously studied. This method is not unprecedented in movement thinking, though it is not always emphasized in all streams. Four Fields, for example, includes a similar question in its guide to Bible study: “Does what we have learned fit the passages studied before and after?” (Shank 2014, 66). In the framing of DBS, explicitly highlighting this point would maintain a focus on “Scripture interpreting Scripture” in practice.

Second, if questions arise related to a specific text that are not directly answered by that text or those previously studied, the facilitator could make clear that the way to answer the question is to explore more (and clearer) passages. Doing that would not require those passages be studied at that moment; it could be the next study, people could read it in between studies, or it could be incorporated into a future study series. But the principle should be explicit and clear. A new church, in this way, could work through tough issues through an expanding set of Scriptures over time, allowing their understanding to build gradually. As churches mature, they will then be able to see more and more ways in which the Scriptures all point to Christ (Luke 24:44). In so doing, a simple, reproducible means of applying the “infallible rule of interpretation” could enrich Scripture study in movements.

Scripture, Creeds, and Confessions

Another potential contribution of Reformed theology to movements is interpreting Scripture within the context of historic expressions of Christian faith. The Reformation doctrine of sola Scriptura did not reject the use of tradition for interpretation but rather subordinated it to

Scripture. The Reformers, therefore, valued the church fathers and the historic creeds of the church, and confessions were developed in the Reformation and post-Reformation era to articulate summaries of scriptural teaching. Movements avoid extrabiblical tradition, both to avoid making the gospel feel foreign and to maintain a clear focus on Scripture as the supreme standard of faith and practice. Considering that commitment, could the historic credal aspect of sola Scriptura be integrated into movements?

In fact, there are several ways one could encourage and resource those in emerging and growing movements to interpret the Scriptures alongside the illuminating insights of historic statements of faith. First, when determining what sets of Scriptures should be studied by groups, passages could be chosen that explicitly work through the content covered by historic creeds of the church. Second, follow-up questions to the core DBS questions could help people discover in Scripture, through special studies, what has been discovered in previous eras—for example about Christology. (See Shank 2011 for one example of helping new leaders in unreached areas develop a confession of faith.) Third, historic Christian statements of faith could be used explicitly with leaders as they grow in their understanding of the word and Christian history.

The Gospel as the First Mark of the Church

The first mark of the church, according to the Westminster Confession, is that “the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced” (WCF 25:4). In a broad sense, the central role of Scripture in movements connects to this mark. However, the mark is not the word in general but that the gospel must be clearly proclaimed for any group of believers to be a true church. How then does Reformed theology speak on this point into the thought and practice of movements?

First, the gospel of grace suggests avoiding the phrase “obedience-based discipleship.” Though diversely explained, on the one hand this phrase is intended to describe the importance of knowledge and obedience going hand-in-hand, not that obedience is the basis of discipleship itself (Watson & Watson 2014, 4, 5, 65, 195; Farah 2020, 6; Trousdale 2012, 99). Several aspects of the function of Bible studies in movements reflect how knowledge and obedience should go together: the studies begin with what we learn about God and proceed to what we learn about man before moving to how we respond in obedience. Further, the Four Fields approach has a specific leadership training module on “Confessing the Faith,” which seeks to help leaders of churches in movements articulate sound doctrine (Shank 2011), and the Bhojpuri movement uses a basic curriculum for new disciples that gives them “a basic knowledge of the Bible” (John & Coles 2019, 226). Movements emphasize obedience and knowledge growing concurrently. Life change happens in small ways as people encounter God’s word, with knowledge and application remaining in close balance. In that sense, movements are urging what Payne and Marshall drew from Richard Baxter’s *The Reformed Pastor*: “we should focus not only on what we are teaching, but also on what the people are learning and applying” (Marshall & Payne 2009, 109).

Nonetheless, the term “obedience-based discipleship” runs the risk of communicating that believers’ obedience is the foundation of discipleship, rather than the good news of what God has done in Christ (Terry 2017, 348; Pratt 2015, 6). Although “the concern has arisen from ambiguous wording of the concept rather than lived reality among CPMs” (Coles 2021, 115), in light of broad criticism of the phrase, a Reformed understanding would recommend replacing it with something that more accurately describes the role of obedience. For example, “obedient-faith discipleship” may more faithfully represent biblical discipleship. Discipleship requires faith, but that faith should result in obedience, because faith without works is dead (James 2:17). “Obedient-faith discipleship” brings together the movement emphasis on living

out faith in obedience to Christ's commands, while also recognizing that true obedience is the "fruits and evidence of a true and lively faith" (WCF 16.2).

Second, the first mark of the church urges movement advocates to consider carefully how the gospel stays central as disciples, churches, and movements continue to grow. Trust in our own works rather than Christ—for sanctification, not only justification—has plagued many types of Christians throughout church history. Reformed theology asserts that emphasis on multiplication of disciples and churches should be combined with emphasis on long-term maturation of believers. (A related emphasis from within CPM discourse is argued in a dissertation on developing leaders for sustainable CPMs, cf. Lafferty 2020, 141). Such maturation involves rooting obedience in the gospel, maintaining clarity concerning "the distinction between obeying God as a means of self-salvation and obeying God out of gratitude for an accomplished salvation" (Keller 2012, 65-66).

The discussion can now turn to how Reformed theology can speak into movements relative to teaching.

Teaching and Preaching

As has already been noted, many CPMs employ some type of discovery Bible study as a method for reaching seekers, discipling new believers, or as part of believer gatherings. Reformed confessions also give a clear place to preaching of the word (e.g., WCF 21.5; LBC 22.5; Belgic Confession 29). How then might Reformed ecclesiology enrich movement conversations in the area of teaching and preaching?

First, it is helpful to return to a point mentioned at the start of this article: the actual reality of movements taking place throughout the world is not synonymous with the content of literature advocating movements. One could read some movement literature and conclude that DBS is the sole means of accessing the Bible in movements. However, churches in the Bhojpuri movement, one of the largest movements in the world, have a teaching time during worship that can exceed one hour, though it is more interactive than the monologue common in most churches (John & Coles 2019, 213). The Four Fields manual notes that inductive studies are "a means to an end" and that as spiritual gifts are identified, "the participative tool can easily be adjusted to allow for more formal content development such as sermons" (Shank & Shank 2014, 68). Additionally, even in movements where DBS is used extensively, training of leaders often moves beyond DBS to analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, to foster "the types of critical or analytical mental processing that is required for leaders to be able to handle complex issues in their context" (Farah 2021, 62).

Recent efforts by movement advocates to reflect biblically and theologically on teaching and preaching (T 2021) are encouraging. The following suggestions hope to lead to more engagement in this area.

First, some ways of framing conversations about teaching in movement discourse unnecessarily dichotomize ideas which Scripture brings together. For example, movement discourse sometimes indicates that studying the word in a group is "learning from God directly" (Forlines 2017, 38), whereas teaching trains people to learn the teacher's opinions (Smith 2019b, 90-91). While all believers should learn to study the word directly (and invite their unbelieving friends and family to do so with them), this dichotomous description of the relationship between DBS and other forms of word ministry is not helpful. The Spirit certainly works directly through the word (2 Tim. 3:16-17), but Christ has also given the church teachers empowered by the Spirit to teach the word (Eph. 4:11, 1 Cor. 12:28-29). Timothy is told to devote himself both to the "public reading of Scripture" and to "exhortation and teaching" (1

Tim. 4:13), thus implying that hearing the word directly need not be set in opposition to hearing from teachers—as if only one is “hearing from God” and the other is simply “hearing others’ opinions.” The example of the Bereans gives a better way to frame these two approaches: equip all believers to read and understand the word themselves, which will also enable them to “check and see if these things are so” (Acts 17:11) when they encounter various forms of teaching.

Second, discussions of teaching and preaching should attend to multiple aspects of Scripture’s witness to the ministry of the word: in evangelistic contexts, in the ordinary lives of believers, and in the worship of the gathered church. Charles Hodge notes that “the power is in the truth, not in the channel or method of communication” (Hodge 1882, 13), yet Reformed confessions give special attention to the worship of the gathered (e.g., WCF 21). Movement discourse advocates for all believers studying the word together and inviting unbelievers into that. J. H. Bavinck, Reformed missionary to Indonesia, argues that all forms of word ministry must be organically related: “the official proclamation of the gospel always constitutes the seed out of which grows the spontaneous witness of the ordinary church member” (Bavinck 1960, 67). Distinguishing carefully between what is meant by ministry of the word in the gathered church and ministry of the word in all of life, while ensuring an organic connection between them, will help advance a mutually beneficial dialogue in relation to preaching and teaching.

Third, movement discourse would do well to consider the role of sequential consideration of whole books or portions of the Bible in the teaching and Bible study of the church. The Reformers focused on moving sequentially through books of the Bible, building on the example of the patristic church and even the synagogue before it (Old 2002). Movement advocates commonly indicate that leaders shape the understanding of DBS groups and churches via the selection of the passages they will study (Watson & Watson 2014, 171). Such an approach is valuable, particularly in the early stages, as seekers trace the story of redemption through Creation to Christ studies. However, in the ongoing life of the church, sequential study of entire books of the Bible is one way to ensure that the church receives “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

The discussion now turns in the other direction to consider how movements may enrich Reformed understandings and practices.

Movement Enrichments to the Reformed regarding Scripture and Ecclesiology

Those who embrace Reformed theology might be surprised at what they can learn from how movements function.

Simple, Reproducible Studies before Churches Exist

Movements use simple, reproducible methods for studying the Bible, which sow seeds for the development of churches, even in the early stages of working with seekers. As noted above, typical group Bible studies insist that seekers and believers draw answers from the text, understand what the text says about God and humanity, and what responses may be demanded of them from the text (Watson & Watson 2014; John & Coles 2019, 207). The questions to facilitate the study of the text and the interaction of the participants are standardized, being used in each study and with each text. This use of oft-repeated, simple questions serves two purposes: (1) All participants can take turns facilitating the meeting, injecting the immediate expectation that all are called to serve and minister the word to each other, and (2) if participants have other friends or family members who are interested to know more, they can start a DBS with them, patterned after what they have already experienced (John & Coles 2019, 166).

These simple studies could enrich Reformed mission efforts by providing a practical means for the outworking of sola Scriptura and the clarity of Scripture in the context of unreached people groups. Where there is no church, how should missionaries begin? How can they plant churches in places where conversion is illegal, no seminaries exist, and there is great economic and educational need? How can missionaries evangelize and start new churches in a setting with great antagonism toward foreign culture and foreign missionaries in particular? How can a missionary get Scripture into the hands of people while keeping appropriate distance, to avoid bringing unwanted attention and suspicion from others? Where there is no church, how can missionaries equip people—the “learned and the unlearned” who are newly encountering Christ—to read the Scriptures and see the truths of salvation for themselves? How can missionaries help people effectively share those truths so that their unreached friends and family might also encounter Christ in his word? The simple, reproducible methods utilized in many movements help put into practice the truths that Reformed missionaries confess, especially in contexts where gospel work must start from zero.

Living under the Authority of the Word in Practice

Sola Scriptura calls believers not only to accept the Bible’s authority in principle but to live in submission to the authority of the Word in practice. How have movements implemented that call, and how might their implementation of it enrich the practice of sola Scriptura among the Reformed? In movements, life change is expected to happen based on the Holy Spirit speaking through communal study of the Word. A common mechanism for such life change to occur is a consistent pattern in group Bible studies: asking participants how they will apply or obey the text and following up in the next study to hear what happened. This pattern allows groups to exhibit submission to the authority of the Word consistently—in deed, not only in word. Several movement approaches use simple methods to help people discover and obey what Scripture says. Before articulating a specific “I will” statement, participants consider if the text clearly articulates a command to obey or an example to follow or avoid (Shank & Shank 2014, 66; Watson & Watson, 155). This process can help practically to implement WCF 14.2:

a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come.

In other words, movement methods of engaging lost people with the Scriptures can help Reformed gospel laborers to implement practically their commitment to the authority of the word—from the earliest stages of ministry among unreached peoples.

Seed Elements

Movements operate with the simple principle that the way groups start meeting (even before all participants are believers) may significantly shape their expectation of how the group will continue, with some describing these patterns as group “DNA” (Larsen 2018, 174; Watson & Watson 2014, 144-151) or the “implicit curriculum” (Prinz 2022, 121-22). For that reason, a consistent structure is followed. Members participate by expressing their gratitude, which later turns into praise and song. They discuss their needs, which later turns into prayer, as well as finding ways to meet each other’s needs, which later helps them fulfill the “one another” commands. They discuss what they learn from God’s word, which creates the expectation of continued submission to the Scriptures. They articulate how they will live out what they see in the word, which grows into the mutual speaking of truth, call to repentance, and when necessary discipline. Finally, they identify with whom they can share the truth they have encountered, which sets the DNA of evangelism from the beginning. These elements shape

even initial group studies of the word with seekers. As members of the group come to faith in Christ, key elements of what it means to be a church exist in seed form and can be developed further into full expression as a biblical *ekklesia*.

This early pattern of how groups begin helps enrich Reformed ecclesiology by connecting the dots between proclaiming the gospel for the first time among an unreached people group and forming churches that exhibit all the marks of the church. Reformed ecclesiology developed in a context in which the church—more or less pure—already existed. Thus, Reformed ecclesiology insists that all ministry flows through the established body of local believers. However, where does one start when there are no local believers, and thus no local church? As S. T. Antonio puts it, “a true church is not something which happens overnight” (Antonio 2020, 347), implying therefore that “it is crucial that even from the beginning, the embryonic church has the right ‘DNA’; that is, it needs to include elements which will grow and flower into the full expression of the biblical church” (Antonio 2020, 348).

Movements show how initial gospel conversations can lead to group discovery studies, which have the seed elements present to lead that group into functioning as a church. Because the seed elements are clearly present, the ingredients for that group of believers to reproduce quickly throughout their relational network are also present, even if the outside missionary were unable to stay involved with that community. In light of the goal of fourth-generation reproduction (a common key element in the definition of a movement), movements challenge others to think through how each aspect of church may or may not be replicable down the road. This approach can help Reformed people to consider how to apply their ecclesiology in a reproducible, multiplicative way among unreached people groups.

Activating the General Office

Movement advocates regularly emphasize the priesthood of all believers. What does that mean for the role of leaders in relation to the role of all believers? This is hardly a new question. Bavinck notes that the Reformation rejected the “clergy” and “laity” categories of the Roman Catholic church (Bavinck 2008, 368) and argues that “just as all believers have a gift, so also they all hold an office,” even referring to it as a “universal office” (Bavinck 2008, 375). Keller describes this “Spirit-equipped calling and gifting of every believer to be a prophet, priest, and king” as “the ‘general office’” (Keller 2012, 345). None of this emphasis on every believer having an “office” need deny that there is a special office for leaders, but remembering that there is a general office as well reflects Scripture’s call for believers to submit to one another (Eph. 5:21), minister the word to one another (Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16), and give a reason for the hope that is in them (1 Pet. 3:15).

Working out practically how the general office and special office flow together is a perennial issue, for Reformed people as well as others. J. H. Bavinck highlighted over 50 years ago that missionaries and churches have erred by insufficiently empowering the general office: “...one thing is sure, we—and by ‘we,’ I mean nearly all missionary societies and sending churches—have from the outset failed to recognize and use the tremendous power inherent in the ordinary believer. We have expected too little and therefore he has done too little” (Bavinck 1960, 213-214).

If all believers have an office, as has been explicitly articulated in Reformed theology, why does Bavinck offer such a striking criticism? We suggest that the theology of general and special office has not always been integrated from the earliest stages of gospel work in new missions contexts. Movements, by integrating the expectation of every believer engaging with the word, practicing “one-anothering” in community, and speaking the word to others, provides ways for Reformed people to activate the general office in pioneer missions contexts.

Leadership development remains essential to the growth and maturation of movements (Lafferty 2020; John & Coles 2019; Cooper 2020; Parks 2019), but such development comes along with the initial and widespread focus on ordinary believers speaking the truth and reaching their communities (John & Coles 2019, 81).

Conclusion

Little meaningful interaction has taken place between Reformed thinkers and movement advocates. This article has explored several areas in which movements align with theological principles arising from the Reformation as well as ways the two may enrich each other. Each topic in this discussion could be explored more deeply with the same mindset of mutual learning. That could lead to other potential areas for exploration and dialogue. These might include the person of peace construct and its role in evangelistic strategy, the connection between leaders of different movements and different generations within movements, the multiple leaders and levels system of Presbyterianism, consideration of who administers the sacraments, and the role of miracles in gospel work among unreached people groups. Unity in Christ can be exemplified through recognizing our limitations and the strengths of those with whom we disagree. May we all pray that increased interaction between Reformed thinkers and movement advocates will increase a desire to learn from one another for the sake of God's glory among all the nations. Soli Deo gloria!

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