

‘Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda’ Church Renewal from a Reformed Perspective

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With a view to the theme of Church renewal, this article explores the role of a well-known and popular phrase in the Reformed tradition within Protestantism, i.e. ecclesia reformata semper reformanda (‘the reformed Church should always be reformed’). Is this a helpful slogan when considering the pros and cons, the possibilities and the limitations of Church renewal? First, the historical background of this phrase is described: it is rooted in the Dutch Reformed tradition, and only in the twentieth century was it widely recognized in Reformed circles. Against this background the hermeneutical problem, linked with the principle of sola Scriptura, is presented, and put into an ecumenical perspective: the Church as grounded in the gospel. Finally, the article focuses on Church polity as an important field of renewal, taking into account Karl Barth’s interpretation of this phrase. From this perspective, a balanced and ecumenical approach of Church renewal is possible.

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A reformation contains ‘a turbulent something’, Dutch Reformed theologian Arnold van Ruler wrote, half a century ago. He continues:

That is why the slogan *ecclesia reformanda quia reformata* ... is also deeply contestable. Of course, renewal, refreshment, purification will always be necessary in the Church. There is development in history, also in Church history. (...) But should that always and at any time happen in that terrible meaning of the sixteenth century Reformation? Should all authorities be violated every year? That is not a minor issue! That is a terrible issue, *if* it is really necessary! The Church may rather pray: save us from a new Luther.¹

Ecclesia reformanda quia reformata, or, in a more common form, *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* is a well-known and popular rallying cry in the Reformed tradition within Protestantism. Basically it says: ‘the reformed Church should always be reformed’. But is it also a helpful slogan when considering the pros and cons, the possibilities and the limitations of Church

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¹ Arnold A. van Ruler, *Reformatiorische opmerkingen in de ontmoeting met Rome*, Hilversum – Antwerpen 1965, p. 29 (transl. LJK).