**Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda: An Intergenerational Perspective**  
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**Abstract:** Within the history of the Protestant movement, the phrase *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* (“always reformed, always being reformed”) has held special significance. Believed to have originated with the Seventeenth Century Dutch Pietist Jodocus van Lodenstein, this phrase reflects an understanding of the reformation of the church not only as a historical phenomenon, but also as an ongoing impulse that must characterize the church’s life. This paper begins with a brief account of the meaning and historical significance of this phrase. The focus then turns to an exploration of the role of generations in the ongoing reformation of the church. It is argued that the contextual theologizing of each new generation, entailing a dialogical interplay between the accrued traditions passed down by prior generations, the prophetic voice of scripture, and the burning questions of their day, is essential to the church’s ongoing reformation. Conversely, this paper also asserts that, when this generation-to-generation renewal dynamic is undermined, the church’s conception of its message and mission is at risk of becoming deformed over time. Darrell Guder’s work on *reductionism* is employed to describe this potential pitfall. Contemporary and historical examples are referenced briefly as illustrations of the paper’s central argument. Because this paper is situated methodologically within the discipline of practical theology—an inherently interdisciplinary field—insights are appropriated from the diverse disciplines of Church history, contextual theology, missiology, and others. This paper hopes to make a stimulating contribution to the ongoing discussions of church renewal, contextual theology, and intergenerational dynamics within the church.

1. **Introduction: A Church Reformed, Always Being Reformed**

The 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation provides us with an extraordinary opportunity to reflect on a number of important themes: the nature of Christian tradition, the Church’s struggle to understand and remain faithful to its calling within the flow of history, and the various ways in which the Church has sought to foster constancy and innovation over the course of time. If we pause to do so, we can point to a number of significant historic developments that have influenced the way that we understand and approach issues of tradition, faithfulness, and change.

One phrase that is frequently associated with these issues within the Protestant movement is *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum*, Latin for “the church reformed, always being reformed according to the word of God.” In this paper, I will briefly explore the significance of this phrase. I will suggest that it has come to reflect an understanding of the reformation of the church not only as a historical phenomenon, but also as an ongoing impulse that is meant to characterize the church’s life. This phrase contains important insights into how the vitality and integrity of the Church’s witness is preserved across time. More specifically, I will approach this subject from an *intergenerational* perspective. I will argue that each new generation has an
important role to play in the ongoing reformation of the church. In fact, we will see that every Christian tradition can foster ongoing renewal by empowering each successive generation to discover the gospel’s call to faithfulness within its day.

2. The Historical Origins of the Phrase

*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* has been a widely cited axiom in recent decades. Despite this, its origins are the focus of considerable debate. Scholars widely agree that its usage did not originate in the sixteenth century; while the earliest Reformation thinkers certainly expressed the need for a “Reformed church,” they did not actually employ this phrase.¹ According to Reformed scholar Michael Horton, the phrase is believed to have originated with the Seventeenth Century Dutch Pietist Jodocus van Lodenstein. By Horton’s account, it first appeared in a devotional written by van Lodenstein that was published in 1674.²

R. Scott Clark, a colleague of Horton’s at Westminster Seminary, challenges this explanation. He agrees that van Lodenstein employed the juxtaposition of “reformed” and “reforming” in his writing.³ In fact, Clark asserts that several of van Lodenstein’s Dutch Pietist forebears and contemporaries expressed similar ideas.⁴ According to Clark, however, van Lodenstein and the other Dutch Pietists did not employ the word *semper* or “always.” For Clark, this is an important point of clarification because it raises the question of whether the early reformers saw reformation as a “finite task” or as something ongoing.

Clark argues that the full phrase *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum* is most likely attributable to a much more recent source: he identifies the twentieth-century Princeton Seminary professor Edward Dowey (1918-2003). In essence, he posits, the phrase in its entirety is a post-WWII invention, one that gained visibility and importance through the influence of Karl Barth.⁵

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³ Scott, “Always Abusing Semper Reformanda.”

⁴ Other scholars who have written on this subject provide comparable accounts. Specifically, Scott cites the Dutch Reformed theological Jacobus Koelman (1632-95), who was influenced by the thinking of his teacher, Johannes Hoornbeek (1617-66); Hoornbeek was a student of Gijsbertus Voetius (1589-1676).

⁵ Scott, “Always Abusing Semper Reformanda.”
Despite the confusion and debate surrounding its origins, we nonetheless have good reason to affirm that this phrase has roots reaching back several centuries. As Horton expresses, “Although the Reformers themselves did not use this slogan, it certainly reflects what they were up to.” Because of the frequency with which it turns up within our modern discourse about the life of the church, we also can affirm that it is viewed as a phrase of some significance among contemporary church thinkers, as well.

3. The Meaning of the Phrase

While the origins of the phrase *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* are somewhat murky, many scholars agree that this phrase expresses an important and longstanding impulse of the Protestant Reformation. This being the case, it will be helpful to explore its meaning here briefly. Horton explains that, for van Lodenstein and the other Dutch Pietists who have been credited with the seminal ideas behind the phrase, “The Reformation reformed the doctrine of the church, but the lives and practices of God’s people always need further reformation.” The main concern of the Dutch Pietists, expresses Horton, was seeing the teachings of the Reformed confessions and catechism “become more thoroughly applied as well as understood.” Thus, suggests the Dutch theologian Leo Koffeman, the early Dutch Pietists were mainly concerned with “spiritual growth.”

Over time, the meanings associated with *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* have continued to evolve and be applied in various ways. Anna Case-Winters, an American Presbyterian, notes that this phrase is sometimes “used as a springboard in all kinds of contexts and conversations, sometimes with little sense of how it arose” or what it meant among those who first employed it. Clark similarly suggests that the phrase often is appropriated to argue that “the church is reformed but needs to be changed in various ways.” Like Case-Winters, he recognizes that this meaning is nebulous and can simply be employed as a justification for reacting against pretty much anything about church life that one dislikes.

The confusion surrounding this phrase does not discount the feasibility of exploring its implications. Horton emphasizes our need for grasping the central point that even those churches

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6 Horton, “Semper Reformanda.”
7 Ibid.
10 Clark, “Always Abusing Semper Reformanda.”
that happen to describe themselves as “Reformed” are “always in need of being reformed.” As he expresses, “Like our personal sanctification, our corporate faithfulness is always flawed. From Horton’s perspective, “We don’t need to move beyond the gains of the Reformation, but we do need further reformation.” Case-Winters strikes a similar note:

Even our best endeavors and highest aspirations are prone to sin and error. Forms of faith and life in the church are no exception... We acknowledge that the church even at its best is a frail and human institution. We know that we ‘hold these treasures in earthen vessels.’ Edward Dowey, another church historian, has written that reform is the institutional counterpart of repentance. Recognizing how far we fall from God’s intentions, we continually submit all doctrines and structures to be reformed according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. The church is a frail and fallible pilgrim people, a people on the way, not yet what we shall be. The church, because of who we are, remains open to always being reformed.

Koffeman summarizes the matter pointedly: “No Church can fully embody the Church of Jesus Christ.” This “incompleteness,” he asserts, calls us continually toward reformation.

4. The Importance of Generational Perspectivism

If the church is called to be “always reforming”—to engage in an ongoing process of reformation—generations must be understood as playing a crucial role in this process. We can affirm this in part for purely chronological reasons: all of human history has been shaped by the influence of a long line of successive generations. This is true of the church, as well. Across 2,000 years of church history and 500 years of the Protestant era, the church has depended upon the Spirit’s work in generation after generation to perpetuate its traditions and to preserve its vitality. The oft-cited aphorism that “The church is always only one generation removed from extinction” may be theologically problematic. However, it is a simple historical reality that the succession of generations is essential for semper reformanda—the reformation of the church as an ongoing reality.

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11 Horton, “Semper Reformanda.”
12 Case-Winters, “Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda.”
14 In my doctoral thesis, I state the following: “When viewed from a broad, catholic perspective, the oft cited aphorism that ‘the Church is always only one generation from extinction’ is an absurdity; that ‘the gates of hell will not prevail against it’ (Matt. 16:18) is a certainty rooted in the covenantal promise of God. However, that the church in its local manifestation is always in jeopardy of nonexistence is an empirical reality that has been demonstrated far too many times throughout history (e.g., the church of North Africa). Thus, every local congregation that seeks to embody a commitment to eschatological sustainability must seek to perpetuate its witness intergenerationally. In other words, we must take seriously the intergenerational implications of the church’s movement toward God’s future.” [Cory L. Seibel, “Intergenerational Reconciliation and Justice as Essential
This being said, I would like to suggest that generations play a crucial role in the ongoing process of reformation for another reason, one that I describe as generational perspectivism. Sociologists tell us that each generation, through its shared “age location in history,” develops “a distinct biography.” Along the way, each generation also forms its own unique “generational style” and weltanshauung (or “worldview”) comprised of similar patterns of belief, values, behaviour, and ways of expressing generational identity. In essence, while this concept is too complex to be explored adequately here, the weight of the social scientific evidence enables us to assert that each generation develops a distinct “view-from-here” by which it understands the world. This “view-from-here” will have a family resemblance to that of their parents and grandparents; however, because each generation inhabits a unique place within history, its vantage point is distinct in ways that build upon, challenge, and, at times, even part ways with the assumptions of their parents.

As we contemplate the significance of generational perspectivism for the life of the church, we can describe its relationship to the need for ongoing reformation in a “negative” sense: as we acknowledge that each generation develops a historically-conditioned “view-from-here,” it is helpful to recognize that this generational perspective is particular and limited, not absolute. This means that every generation is prone to have perspectival blind spots: certain biases and prejudices, or values and priorities that are emphasized to the neglect of other matters. There is ample evidence in the history of the church to suggest that these blind spots sometimes distort our reading of scripture and its call to faithfulness. Every generation sees “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12), each in its own way. In his book Generational IQ, Haydn Shaw goes so far as to suggest that each generation is susceptible to specific “temptations” that are bound up with its particular generational biography and view-from-here. As church leaders in each generation wrestle with the ongoing task of reformation, their generational blind spots can certainly be exposed in the authoritative light of scripture, leading to repentance and reform. However, because we often are unaware of them, our biases, excesses, and oversights are bound to influence how we

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17 Haydn Shaw, Generational IQ: Christianity isn’t dying, millennials aren’t the problem, and the future is bright (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2015), 21.
envision and express Christian faithfulness in our time. The various ways in which human finitude and fallibility is expressed in each generation thus contribute to the need for ongoing reformation. This is true in every generation, including our own.

The significance of generational perspectivism can also be seen in a positive light. Each new generation of church leaders seeks to discern the nature of Christian faithfulness within the uniqueness of its specific time, the specific challenges with which it is confronted, and the specific questions that arise in its lifetime. As the celebrated sociologist Karl Mannheim once asserted, generations grow up facing “different adversaries.” Thus, as each generation wrestles with its unique circumstances, it is provided distinct opportunities to gain fresh insight into the implications of the timeless, universal truth of the gospel and its call upon our lives. While, as I have already suggested, we do not always get it right, the opportunity to hear the voice of scripture within the circumstances of each generation can help to foster ongoing reformation. In some cases, this may even lead to challenging and correcting the sins of commission and sins of omission of past generations.

Garth Bolinder addresses this subject by asserting that the biblical worldview is “transgenerational” in nature. To illustrate this, he appropriates the testimony of Psalm 145: “no one can fully fathom the greatness of the Lord,...one generation can commend the Lord’s works to another, speaking of his mighty acts.” Bolinder suggests that this means it is impossible for any one generation to achieve the full and final expression of the faith. The fresh testimony of each new generation constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of the call to Christian faithfulness.

In his book, The Continuing Conversion of the Church, the American Presbyterian scholar Darrell Guder strikes a similar note. He asserts that by faithfully wrestling with the message of scripture within the contextual situation of each new generation, the church is enabled to foster the ongoing vitality of its witness. As he explains, “What is true of the original witnesses, preserved in the canonical record, continues true of witness thereafter from generation to generation. God’s people are called to carry forward this unique witness, to translate it into every new situation of history, so that the Word happened continues to be the Word witnessed, heard, responded to, and obeyed.” For Guder, this re-translating of the gospel within the situation of each new generation

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enables the church, in his words, to be “continually converted” through fresh encounter with the gospel. In essence, he is advocating for a generation-by-generation understanding of *semper reformanda*.

5. The Danger of Generational Reductionism

The “continual conversation” for which Guder advocates helps to safeguard the church against a pitfall that he describes as *reductionism*. As he explains, over time, the faith communities formed within a given culture tend to reduce their understanding of the gospel to that which has resulted from the interface of gospel and culture in that context. This “reduced” understanding of the faith becomes problematic, however, when “the sinful human desire to control begins to do its work.”21 Explains Guder, “We are constantly tempted to assert that our way of understanding the Christian faith is a final version of Christian truth,” and thereby to “enshrine one cultural articulation of the gospel as the normative statement for all cultures.”

Guder recognizes that this tendency is often motivated by a noble concern for preserving a particular vision of faithfulness within the church.22 While *reductionism* may be rooted in such good intentions, however, it poses great risk to the integrity of the church’s true calling. When the church becomes bound by a reductionistic understanding of its tradition, “the culturally determined nature of much of its life and structure is overlooked,” says the missiologist Howard Snyder.23

This reductionistic tendency severely limits the ability of each new generation to contribute to the ongoing reformation of the church. As missiologist Charles Kraft notes, “Most often the forms of the group in power have simply been imposed upon any new receiving group (whether the children of the group in power or the members of a different society or subculture).”24 He adds, “Faith alone is not enough for [the group in power]. It has to be faith as understood by and expressed in terms of their particular subculture.”25 As we might expect, this prevents members of the rising generation from responding to God “in terms of their own subcultural structures.”26 Instead, they are expected to convert to a cultural form that is native to the world of previous generations.

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21 Ibid., 100.
22 Ibid.
26 Ibid, 265.
The British Anglican scholar Andrew Atherstone cautions against the notion that the sixteenth century reformers, or the proponents of reform of any generation for that matter, “got it exactly right.” As he notes, some choose to assert that past reformers “purified the church and nothing more is needed…. [A]ll we need to do is defend our heritage and the church will be safe.” He suggests that this perspective reasserts the ecclesia reformata, the church reformed, but loses sight of the semper reformanda, which prompts us to keep reforming. This is a significant point. As Atherstone expresses, “When reformation stops, deformation sets in.” Thus, for Atherstone, “reformation is not reassertion—the gospel needs to be continually reapplied, and our historic assumptions need to be continually reformed. Semper reformanda is a clarion call to throw ourselves energetically into the reforming movement...to shake the ecclesiastical status quo with all our might, and never give up.”

Some scholars have set this discussion in overtly generational terms. For example, in describing ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda as a call to “reformation as a movement rather than a completed event,” the Scottish theologian A.T.B. McGowan says the following: “In our twenty-first century we face many complex issues, which earlier generations have not been required to face and it will not do merely to restate old ideas in the old familiar words and try to hide away from the modern world.” Horton also sees the call to ongoing reformation in intergenerational terms: “While the creeds and confessions remain treasures to be defended, we easily forget that they serve rather than substitute for the living confession of Christ as we return in each generation to the original well from which they are drawn.” According to these authors, while a generation must grapple with the nature of faithfulness in its time, some of the answers it discerns may not be sufficient for all time. Thus, it is essential for succeeding generations to be permitted to wrestle with the call to ongoing reformation within their respective lifetimes, as well.

6. The Radical Nature of the Intergenerational Dynamic

While reductionism can lead to the deformation of the church, we can identify another potential pitfall that misses the mark of the true meaning of the ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda saying. Atherstone says that there are those in every generation who seem to possess a
“sense of restlessness” and who are “always champing at the bit for continual change.” Those belonging to this camp, he says, run the risk of misappropriating the principle of *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* in ways that leave the church at the mercy of the shifting *Zeitgeist*. Case-Winters sees this being expressed by some within our contemporary context. She notes that, while the cultural assumption at work in the time of the Reformers was that “what is older is better,” today our culture tends to “applaud the new and ‘innovative.’” As a result, *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* can be invoked to justify “captivity to the spirit of the age,” as Horton expresses. In this case, ongoing reformation is essentially deemed to be synonymous with liberal “progressivism.” However, like reductionism, progressivism cannot be an end in itself. This too is destined to lead to the deformation of the church.

### 6.1 *Secundum Verbum*

This being the case, it will be helpful to make two important observations arising from the wording of *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*. First, it is essential to remember that the meaning of this phrase is qualified by the words *secundum verbum*. These words remind us that the reformation of the church must always be pursued according to the Word of God. These key words must not be omitted from the church’s vision of ongoing reformation. As Koffeman affirms, “the Word of God...is the foundation of the Church.” Therefore, expresses Horton, “Not only our doctrine but our worship and life must be determined by Scripture and not by human whim or creativity.” The church therefore must submit “itself to the judgment of God’s Word” and ask “whether its confession and practice are in accord with Scripture.”

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32 Ibid., 33; in making this point, Atherstone draws upon the work of Michael Welker, “Travail and Mission: Theology Reformed According to God’s Word at the Beginning of the Third Millennium,” in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, ed., David Willis & Michale Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 136-152.
33 Case-Winters, “Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda.”
34 Horton, “Semper Reformanda.”
35 Ibid.
36 In the literature dedicated to discussing this phrase, there is a third important issue that I am choosing to relegate to a footnote for the sake of space: this pertains to the meaning of “semper reformanda.” Several scholars agree that this is properly translated as “always being reformed,” rather than “always reforming.” These authors note that this emphasizes the external agency of the Holy Spirit, rather than merely making reformation a human enterprise. This is an important point deserving more complete treatment (Case-Winters, “Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda,” 2; Koffeman, “Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda,” 3; Horton, “Semper Reformata”).
38 Horton, “Semper Reformanda”; Paul Haffner argues that this phrase expresses “the Protestant position that the Church must continually re-examine itself, reconsider its doctrines, and be prepared to accept change, in order to
Case-Winters shares this concern for the centrality of scripture, noting that the impulse of the Reformation is “neither liberal nor conservative, but radical in the sense of returning to the ‘root.’” The change that is needed is “change in the interest of the preservation and restoration of more authentic faith and life—a church reformed and always to be reformed according to the word of God.”

When reform is advocated, she argues, it “must find its grounding in Scripture.” This challenges both the conservative impulse of reductionism and the liberal impulse of progressivism. As Case-Winters articulates, “It does not bless either preservation for preservation’s sake or change for change’s sake.” Thus, in every generation, in order to promote reformation rather than deformation, both tendencies “must be brought in humble subjection to the word of God.”

6.2 Ecclesia Reformata

A second key facet of a radical approach to ongoing reformation lies in the words “ecclesia reformata.” In saying that the church must always be reformed, we essentially acknowledge that we are rooted in a particular tradition, one that has been shaped by particular ways of confessing the faith. The British Methodist youth worker and author Fred Milson once expressed, paraphrasing John Donne, that “no generation is an island, entire of itself.” In other words, every generation is born into a cultural world that has been shaped by their parents and the generations that have come before them. Thus, as each generation of Christians strives to discern the nature of faithfulness within their time, they do not construct their understanding ex nihilo. Rather, they do so in conversation with the accumulated faith tradition that has been transmitted to them by prior generations.

However, each generation must grapple with what to do with the accumulated tradition that has been imparted to them by their elders. Jackon Carroll, sociologist of religion at Duke Divinity School, suggests that it is helpful to draw a distinction between traditum and traditio: “The former term refers to the core ‘deposit’ of the collective memory, while the latter refers to the core’s

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conform more closely to orthodox Christian belief as revealed in the Bible” [Paul Haffner, Mystery of the Church (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2007), 117].

39 Horton, People and Place, 223.
41 Ibid., 2.
42 Ibid., 1.
43 Atherstone, “The Implications of Semper Reformanda,” 32; Koffeman (“Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda,” 3) suggests that the real issue thus becomes hermeneutics. While a full exploration of this point lies beyond the constraints of this paper, the basic point must be acknowledged here.
various adaptations as it is handed down from generation to generation.\textsuperscript{45} In essence, each
generation must make choices regarding what they will reassert, what they will discard, and what
they will change or correct.

Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that, within any \textit{living} tradition, we will find an ongoing
internal argument regarding the “goods” with which that tradition is concerned.\textsuperscript{46} If we apply this
principle to the life of the church, we can see that, as a particular expression of the Christian
tradition is transmitted through time and into the particularities of specific contexts, it is normal for
this tradition to be subject to dialogue and debate regarding its essence. This sheds valuable light
on our discussion here. As Kraft expresses, “it is crucial that each new generation and people
experience the process of producing in its own cultural forms an appropriate church vehicle for the
transmission of God’s meaning.”\textsuperscript{47} In essence, the “internal argument” of which McIntyre writes
must be seen as having an intergenerational trajectory, one to which each succeeding generation
should be empowered to contribute. This helps to make possible \textit{ecclesia reformata}, \textit{semper
reformanda} as a generation-by-generation reality. It enables the church’s tradition to remain a
living one.

According to Atherstone, in order for the Reformed tradition to be honoured, there are a
few crucial elements of this tradition that must be retained. He cautions that \textit{ecclesia reformata} and
\textit{semper reformanda} “must not be separated.”\textsuperscript{48} As he explains, “The church is to be both \textit{reformata}
and \textit{reformanda}, both reformed and reforming. The foundational truths of evangelical
Christianity—expressed by...the five solas [sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solo Christo, soli Deo
Gloria]—remain inviolable for \textit{ecclesia reformata}.” For Atherstone, however, “Once those anchors
are in place, and within those limits, radicalism is very welcome. But as soon as our innovations
begin to undermine the foundations of the reformed faith, which is biblical Christianity, the church
will come crashing down. These wonderful gospel truths, encapsulated by the solas, need to be
clearly and enthusiastically proclaimed without hesitation in every generation.”

Koffeman notes that there are many different aspects of church life that may become the
focal point of reformation. As he says,

\textsuperscript{46} Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory}, 3rd edition (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame
Press, 2007).
\textsuperscript{47} Kraft, \textit{Christianity in Culture}, 247.
\textsuperscript{48} Atherstone, “The Implications of Semper Reformanda,” 34.
Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Churches can develop new forms of diaconal work or missionary outreach. Pastoral work, Christian education and catechesis, liturgical forms, songbooks and Bible translations can be renewed. Such renewal is due to changing circumstances, new theological insights with regard to the missio Dei, and—together with these—a renewed understanding of the Holy Scripture.49

While Christians within a given generation may feel compelled to make changes of this nature, remembering that we are rooted in the ecclesia reformata can help to combat the sort of post-traditional “throwing the baby out with the baptismal water” that is common in some circles today.50 Rather than operating from a posture of generational chauvinism, one that takes a dismissive, “we know better” attitude toward past generations, we must adopt a posture of generational ecumenism, one that sees Christians of other generations as partners worthy of our honour from whom we have much to learn. As Atherstone expresses, “We are not better Bible expositors or theologians or reformers than they. Just as they faithfully proclaimed the message in their generation, without vacillation, so must we in ours.”51

7. A Historical Example

Atherstone highlights several examples of ongoing reformation from various points in church history. His reflections upon the legacy of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) are especially relevant to this discussion of the intergenerational implications of ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda. According to Atherstone, “Kuyper was the leading conservative churchman in his day, and yet he spoke out passionately against what he called a false conservatism.”52 This “false conservatism” was something akin to what we have described above as reductionism. In his final message to his congregation in Utrecht in July 1870, Kuyper chose to reflect upon the words of Christ to the church at Philadelphia, “hold fast to what you have” (Revelation 3:11). As Atherstone expresses, this “was a bold appeal for them to engage in the present, not merely maintain the status quo of a previous generation.”53

In his message, Kuyper cautioned that “many are joining our ranks whose goal is not, as is ours, the victory of Christianity but merely the triumph of conservatism.” In his view, these people

50 Jackson Carroll provides an excellent sociological analysis of this post-traditionalist impulse in his book, Mainline to the Future. I was first introduced to the phrase, “throwing the baby out with the baptismal water,” as a way of describing the post-traditional impulse by Clayton J. Schmit in Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 128.
52 Ibid., 38.
53 Ibid.
seemed to cry "Return! Return...to the age of our ancestors." Seeing this, he offered this appeal: "No, you men who honour the fathers: first seek to have for yourself the life your fathers had and then hold fast what you have. Then articulate that life in your own language as they did in theirs. Struggle as they did to pump that life into the arteries of the life of our church and society. Then not being a dead form but a living fellowship will unite you with them, faith will be a power in your own life, and your building project will reach success." In essence, Kuyper sought to encourage the inheritors of the Reformed tradition within his day to discover their place within the call of *semper ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, a call toward the continuing conversation of the church within each new generation.

8. *A Contemporary Example*

In recent decades, a great deal has been written about the differences that are evident among the living generations and about the impact that this reality has had within various Christian traditions. In just the last few years, a number of attempts have been made by members of rising generations to articulate visions of reformation for their specific faith traditions: *A Seat at the Table: A Generation Reimagining Its Place in the Church* within the Nazarene tradition, *Generation Rising: A Future with Hope for the United Methodist Church*, and *Insights from the Underside: An Intergenerational Conversation of Ministers* within the PCUSA. Each of these books represents a sincere effort to engage with the voice of scripture and with the Christian traditions to which these authors belong. However, they also voice questions and critiques that arise from the cultural world to which these young leaders are native. In every case, we find these young voices grappling with the shape of the traditions that they have inherited from prior generations and wrestling with the changes that may need to occur in order for faithfulness to be expressed within their generation.

One recent example of this that I find particularly instructive is a book entitled *The Future of Our Faith: An Intergenerational Conversation on Critical Issues Facing the Church*, by Ronald Sider and Ben Lowe. These evangelical authors begin their opening chapter with the following observations:

> It doesn’t take being part of the Christian faith for very long before tensions between older and younger generations become apparent. We don’t see eye to eye on many

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54 As quoted in Atherstone, “The Implications of Semper Reformanda,” 38.
things, whether it’s about stylistic issues such as worship music or Sunday attire, or about doctrinal or ethical issues such as sexuality or social justice. Such tensions are to be expected as incumbent generations seek to safeguard the traditions and institutions they have painstakingly built up, while rising generations react against the status quo and push reforms.\textsuperscript{57}

Throughout the pages that follow these opening sentences, Sider and Lowe engage in dialogue around some of the most problematic theological issues facing the church today. The authors, one a Boomer and the other a Millennial, note that they approach this dialogue “from distinct generational contexts and perspectives...almost half a century apart in age!”\textsuperscript{58}

Over the course of eight chapters, their dialogue progresses through a series of pressing themes, including the interplay between evangelism and social justice, relativism, marriage, homosexuality, discipleship, politics, unity, and God’s creation. While they readily acknowledge that this is not “an exhaustive list of generational differences,”\textsuperscript{59} they note that they have chosen these topics because they represent many of the most difficult tension points they see arising between people of multiple generations within the church today. These authors engage substantively with scripture, with the Christian tradition, and with their respective generational “views-from here.” Where possible, they extend affirmation, engage in lively debate, and offer constructive proposals for how the church may need to change as the mantel of leadership passes to a new generation. They identify ways in which the questions and critiques raised by emerging generations can help the church remain faithful in a changing world.

Sider and Lowe assert that it is essential for Christians within every generation to maintain the proper focus. As they express in their final pages,

Regardless of the question or problem, the key to moving forward faithfully...is that Jesus, as revealed to us in the Bible, must be our center...At the end of the day, we seek first the kingdom of God and trust that everything else, whether quibbles or questions or concerns or challenges, will be sorted out as well. We go out into God’s good but groaning world as we are sent, to make disciples of all nations and all generations, trusting in Jesus’s promise that he will be with us to the very end of the age. Generations come, and generations go. But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb. 13:8).\textsuperscript{60}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 4. While they acknowledge that they “can’t claim to speak for [their] respective generations,” Sider and Lowe write with the awareness that they “do speak from them” (5).
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 216-217.
\end{flushright}
Sider and Lowe provide an encouraging, hopeful account of the ongoing reformation of the church as an intergenerational reality. However, as they emphasize, it is essential that each generation remain rooted in the witness of scripture and centred in the Lordship of Christ.

9. Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to make a case for *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* as a call for the ongoing reformation of the church, a process to which every generation should contribute. A proper understanding of this principle will aid each generation in avoiding the twin pitfalls of reductionism and progressivism, both of which lead to the deformation of the church. The words of Case-Winters provide a fitting conclusion to this exploration:

The backward and forward reference of reform invites us on the one hand to attend respectfully to the wisdom and Scriptural interpretations of those who have gone before us with humility. On the other hand, it pushes us to do more than simply reiterate what fathers and moths in the faith have said. Therefore, while we honor the forms of faith and life that have been bequeathed to us, we honor them best in a spirit of openness to the Word and the Spirit that formed and continues to re-form the church. The church, because of who God is, a living God, remains open to always being reformed.61

Amen. May this be so among the generations of today and throughout generations to come.

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61 Case-Winters, “Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda.”
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