

The American Reformation: The Existence and Exercise of a Social and Religious Community

By Michael Mewborn

Whether viewed from a doctrinal standpoint or observed for the people, decisions and ideology that form its ranks, reformed believers in America constitute a social and religious community (used loosely). In observation of any religious community, one may ask, "In what way do religious communities make sense?" Who would ask such a question? It would probably be people on the boundary—the boundary between the expectations of the particular community and the expectations which they have of themselves and others.

Some individuals in the reformed tradition of course, feel so secure in this religious community that they do not consciously ask this question. Others feel so alienated from the reformed tradition that they cannot imagine how such a tradition and community can make sense. But many believers who happen to be reformed stand on the boundary: the reformed community attracts them, they may even participate in it; but we also wonder if it makes sense.

To deal with the question, "What does it mean to be reformed?", is not a question we ask only of God and therefore it is not a question we ask only of Scripture. Such a question and the answering of it is an exercise which brings into view our consideration of membership in a particular religious and social community. So in order to answer the question, "What does it mean to be reformed", we must necessarily bring into view the thought-paths and frameworks of many people so esteemed by the community that they helped to build. We are then led to the conclusion that the American reformed community with all of its vestments is not inhabited by the divine persons of the Trinity; the American reformed community is composed of everyday people.

Interestingly, as Phillis Wheatley¹ was brought to America, she was not only introduced to Christ; she was introduced to a religious and social culture and community with very clear points of definition, expectation and boundaries. Wheatley not only had to make the decision of whether she would trust God, she had to also face the very critical decision of whether to trust in a social and religious community. It is apparent that I as a reader, and any reader, do not merely define and understand Wheatley merely because she loved Christ and the Bible; her life and ours too are defined by our existence and congruence with the expectations and boundaries of the reformed, religious and social community.

It may seem to some quite daring to readily admit that we as reformed folks compose a religious and social community. Regardless the spiritual validity and inherent biblical truthfulness of one's religious community over and besides others, that conception of

¹ Mewborn, Michael. "Reading Wheatley: A Slave's Impression of Mercy" *Reformed Blacks of America* (July 2007): 22 pars. 23 July 2007
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godly and biblical awareness interpreted by its members as residing at the center of the community, in no way makes the reformed community less of a social and religious society or religious and social culture. In fact, as a community's truth claims become more direct, bold and assured, consequently that particular community exhibits and perpetuates the reality of a very obvious and directed social and religious community and culture.

Each religious and social community would proclaim that any assertion or supposed aggression against their community is an assertion against God and Scripture or their normative law; however, any time spent in exploration, critique or creativity and critical thought in human religious understanding is actually inherently focused on the religious dealings of a particular commune and are to be taken in context as such.

Because reformed believers compose a religious and social community, we must be careful to rightly assess those with whom we should contend, those who are misled and those who are the real enemies. There is a predisposition within our community which leads us to want to exact divine and judiciary rule on given persons who pronounce an undesired assertion, critique or display creativity which seems incongruent with "reformedness". Those individuals who are supposedly incongruent are made to think their battle is between them and the God of Scripture. But this is often a misappropriated judgment and/or a cowardly maneuver designed to allow one to avoid real and honest interaction with others, the world and oneself. This makes the reformed community no different than any other religious community. Incongruence with the community is interpreted as incongruence with the god of their normative rule. The reformed community is no different in this regard and is at these times most human and American. However for the sake of clarity and growth let us realize this: where there exists acts of originality, creativity and critical thought and action, those doings, which may seem to contrast or be incongruent with reformed thought or tradition or culture, until adequately deliberated upon and discussed, should not be considered in any way a contrast or incongruent with the honored will and blessings of Christ.

To promulgate renewed theological trajectories is not to denounce orthodoxy set forth in Scripture, but necessarily to seek renewed trajectory means addressing and contending with the notions of orthodoxy within a given social and religious community. So if one freely thinks on renewed theological trajectories, they do not by default need to think or fear that they are questioning the Bible or God; they only need fear that they are by default questioning, wrestling with and thinking critically about the social and religious community of which they are a part. The social and religious community that makes up the American Reformation is not contained within the walls and boundaries of metaphorical Bibles or Scriptural texts; the walls and boundaries of the American Reformation are composed of people-humanity is the bounds of this social and religious community, not Scripture. The nature of Scripture is esteemed within this community, but the bare bones of this community is composed of and driven by regular, everyday, fast-food eating, farting, snoring American believers.

As an aside, I sense that the best of theological trajectories which have originated from people of color is not an assault against God or Scripture but an address, assertion and growth in light of the exhaustible list of claims to the Bible held and exercised by religious and social communities. For me, the presence of other theological trajectories, thought forms and creativity has led to increased appreciation for my community and further clarifies the need to realize the purpose and goal of Christ as proclaimed within the reformed social and religious community. Therefore, I see other theological trajectories, thought forms and creativity as helping to clarify and expose the expectations, needs and concerns or lack thereof regarding my reformed community.

Admittedly, the attempt by Black theologians in the past to integrate blackness and theology causes a considerable number of Black orthodox believers to turn and run in the opposite direction even at the appearance of such thought. However, the attempt to integrate blackness and theology in light of the perspective that one lives, thinks, interprets and preaches within the bounds of a social and religious community is quite a new situation, particularly within reformed circles. By taking the perspective that there is a reformed community that shapes and is shaped, participation in the theological process is neither a distraction, an approach of the mislead believer or the subject of free-play; participation in the theological process is the attempt to think on, develop and reauthenticate much of the meaningfulness gained in and through the reformed social and religious community. The theological process is at its root not a mislead attempt to get away from God and get back to blackness; the theological process is an interaction with the lives, paths of thinking and thought forms of a people who have come to know the richness of many dimensions of God's revelatory character, their own purpose and His creation. At its very least, theological participation becomes an attempt at reaching an understanding and making sense of the reformed community and not an objection to it.

It is this community and culture which we often are brought to examine as Reformed Blacks. The American Reformation is a community defined not merely by the Christ it seeks to exalt, but it is defined inevitably and inherently by the people and ideologies which make up its ranks. In this way, the reformed community and culture in America is so very human, real and a part of this world. The reformed culture thinks, speaks, deliberates and judges, sometimes it responds slowly and sometimes quickly, but it-that is the people, can perpetrate nothing more than themselves. We must see the reformed community and culture, its leverage, buying power, judgments, expectations and boundaries for what it is-a social and religious community.

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