

A Few Words from the Director

January 2010

Recently I came across this characterization of the cultural situation in which we now find ourselves: "a post-literate, image-driven society." The image that phrase evokes is an exaggeration, but my guess is that anyone reading those words senses what the author is driving at. It may not be the whole story, but it is an important part of what makes the times in which we are living distinctive. And many of the other factors one might want to add to the picture--such as the time pressures under which people tend to conduct their lives these days--only reinforce the point the author was trying to make. We are indeed living in a time when the cultural environment we inhabit is increasingly inhospitable to the kind of learning and reflection that has historically been associated with books. Especially is this true for learning and reflecting on subjects that one is not required to be acquainted with in order to get a degree or make a living.

But the religion we Christians espouse is purported to be a religion of the Book. Especially is that true of the version of the Christian religion espoused by Reformed Christians. For not only did the people who were responsible for laying the foundations of our tradition make a point of insisting that all Christians have access to the Bible in languages they could understand but they also took the position that laity as well as clergy should have informed and articulate views about the theological issues raised by the Bible.

The culture of literacy--and intellectual sophistication--that was produced by the commitment to these ideas in Reformed churches is one of the great achievements of the Reformed tradition, and as long as it endured, it made a real difference in people's lives, in a variety of different respects. It is no exaggeration, in fact, to say that in the countries where Reformed Christianity flourished (such as the United States), this culture was one of the more important factors in preparing the way for some of the features of modern life that are most prized. But it is hardly something that can be taken for granted. There is more than one reason to think that the commitment to this part of the Reformed heritage is fading, and that the conditions that in the past made it possible for Reformed churches to practice it so effectively are fading as well.

The obvious question is: what is to be done? Before acting, however, we need to do some serious thinking. Above all we need to consider two issues: 1) Is this part of our heritage really worth preserving? Why or why not? 2) If so, how might that be done? That's what those of us who are involved in the leadership of the Reformed Institute believe needs to be discussed, at least. We are convinced that the challenge Reformed churches now face in their educational ministry is a deep one, and our hunch is that we will be able to respond constructively to that challenge only if we are prepared to confront squarely some very tough questions. Most of the programs we have planned for 2010, beginning with the convocation later this month, are designed to serve that purpose. We have enlisted the services of some truly outstanding leaders for these events, and we hope very much that many of you will find it possible to hear what they have to say and take part in the conversations.

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