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GUEST EDITORIAL

It is a privilege to be asked to contribute a guest editorial to this issue of SBET. The occasion for this is the inclusion of two papers by Bruce McCormack and John McClean. These were presented at the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference in 2017. The title of the conference was 'Reformation Theology: Maintenance or Revision?' in 2017. It is pleasing to have these papers published in the Bulletin alongside those included in recent issues.

It was suggested that I might say something about the Rutherford Centre for Reformed Theology and also provide some background to the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference.

RUTHERFORD CENTRE FOR REFORMED THEOLOGY

Rutherford House was established in 1982 in Edinburgh by the Rev William Still and others, as an evangelical and Reformed research and study centre. In the early phase of its life, it was a residential library and a publisher and, in addition, organised or sponsored numerous reading groups, study groups and conferences. It also sought to promote biblical and evangelical thinking in the churches, by organising training for ministers and elders, producing journals and by engaging with the major issues of the day from an evangelical perspective.

In 2019, Rutherford House became the Rutherford Centre for Reformed Theology and moved from Edinburgh to the Highland Theological College in Dingwall. Despite the change of name and location, the same essential objective remains, namely, to help people to think biblically and theologically. There are three strands to the work. First, research and writing; second, education and training; and third, promotion of the Reformed faith.

In the first strand, we want to make a contribution to academic theology, not least by organising conferences and study groups and through publications. For many years now, an increasing distance has emerged between the academy and the church, with many in the academy pursuing theological reflection in abstraction from a living Christian faith, and many in the churches growing suspicious of academic theology and doubtful of its value. We are committed to working at the intersection between church and academy because we believe that by reconnecting the academic study of theology with the church's worship, ministry and mission, both church and academy will benefit.

In the second strand, for the past few years, our main emphasis has been on elder training, working with individual congregations, groups of

congregations and Presbyteries. This has been an aspect of the work of RH for many years, with David Searle developing some excellent training material, including helping elders to preach and take funerals. We have produced a DVD for elder training and also offer face to face training. Sadly, much of this was placed on hold due to the pandemic restrictions. Also in this second strand is the work of 'Under the Rainbow'. This ministry, run by Jonathan and Judith Keefe, two of our Board members, is a web-based resource for helping those who have experienced infant loss, miscarriage and infertility to think biblically and theologically about their loss.

In the third strand, we work to make people aware of the history and significance of Reformed theology. This includes co-operating with the World Reformed Fellowship on some of their projects. Most of the people of Scotland, including many within churches which trace their history back to the Reformation of 1560, do not know their history and do not understand or affirm Reformed theology. This theology provided the foundation upon which both church and state were established but has all but been forgotten. We want to engage in a re-education programme, not for the sake of historical studies but to demonstrate the significance of Reformed theology for today.

In all three strands, our current emphasis is on ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church). We have an agreement with a publisher, Wipf & Stock, to produce a number of volumes on the theme, the titles and authors of the first six volumes having been approved. We also hope, as restrictions are eased, to organise gatherings and conferences to discuss our biblical and theological understanding of the church.

EDINBURGH DOGMATICS CONFERENCE

One of the most significant elements of the work of RH over the years, now continued by RCRT, is the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference (EDC). I recently wrote an introduction to the papers from the 2021 EDC (*Engaging Ecclesiology*) soon to be published by Wipf & Stock. In that introduction, I wrote about the history of the EDC and I would like to share some of that with you.

The EDC has taken place every two years since 1985. Since the Tynedale Fellowship, of which some of us were members, focussed on biblical studies, it was thought that we could make a parallel contribution by devoting ourselves to systematic and historical theology, through hosting a conference on Christian Dogmatics. The vision behind the conferences was to create a forum where academic Reformed theology could be presented in a positive way, in engagement with others who perhaps did not

share all of our theological views but were broadly sympathetic and were themselves writing and teaching constructive Protestant theology. In this way, we created an opportunity for academics and ministers from various traditions to come together and encounter one another. It was agreed that the conference would be biennial, alternating with the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians conference, which is also biennial and which some of us attend.

The titles of the first few conferences indicate the range of topics under consideration: 'The Challenge of Evangelical Theology: Approach & Method' (1985); 'Issues in Faith and History' (1987); 'The Power & Weakness of God: Impassibility & Orthodoxy' (1989); 'Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell' (1991); and 'The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age' (1993). The normal practice was to produce a book after each conference and some notable volumes were published. Prominent speakers were invited to all of these conferences, and this resulted in serious and sustained debate. It would take up too much space to list all of the contributors over the years, but they have included T.F. Torrance, Paul Helm, Colin Gunton, Henri Blocher, Cynthia Brown, Bruce McCormack, David Wright, Julie Canlis, Kelly Kopic, Oliver O'Donovan, Elizabeth Shively, Michael Horton, N.T. Wright, Karla Wubbenhorst, Lewis Ayres, Francis Watson, Katherine Sonderegger, Don Carson, John Webster, David Fergusson, Donald Macleod, Kees van der Kooi, Kevin Vanhoozer, and many more. The conferences have attracted many speakers and attendees from overseas. For example, in 2017, papers were given by scholars from the UK, France, the Netherlands, the USA, Australia and Hong Kong.

It had been intended that the eighteenth Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference would be held in Palmerston Place Church, Edinburgh, in June 2021. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, the decision was reluctantly taken to hold the conference by Zoom. Although this was disappointing, there were also significant benefits in that people from all over the world were able to take part. Over seventy people signed up to attend the conference, from eleven countries: the Netherlands, Germany, the USA, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Japan, Colombia, and the UK. This was the highest number attending an Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference for some years and was certainly the conference with the highest number of countries represented. Indeed, we had many subsequent contacts from participants in Asia who said that normally they would not be able to attend such a conference in Scotland because of the travel and accommodation costs involved and thanked us for making their participation possible. This is to say nothing of those who faced a travel ban due to the pandemic.

We were planning the conference just as the pandemic was breaking and we did not know if anyone would be allowed to travel to Edinburgh, so we did something we had never done before: we chose all of our speakers from the UK. Our reasoning was that, even if borders were closed, they should be able to attend. This did not in any way lower the standard of excellence of the speakers. The papers were presented by a veritable pantheon of fine scholars: Professor Oliver Crisp; Professor David Fergusson; Professor Tom Noble; Professor Tom Greggs; Professor Gerald Bray; Professor Stephen Williams; Dr Andrew Clarke; and Professor Tony Lane. In the event, they were not required to travel, and the event became a Zoom conference.

The subject of the conference was ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. The church, especially in Europe, is in steep decline. Many mainstream denominations are losing tens of thousands of members each year, seem unable to attract and hold the attention of young people and have seen hundreds of church buildings closing their doors. In contrast, many churches in Latin America, Africa and Asia are growing. How are we to account for this? The other major problem is the disunity of the church, with schisms, secessions and disruptions meaning that many towns and cities have dozens of churches, each maintaining an independent existence. This is to say nothing of the proliferation of new churches, independent fellowships, house churches and more. Given Jesus' prayer that the church might be 'one,' how can we justify our divisions? Another problem concerns the worship, liturgy and doctrine of the church with its many 'options.' This is to say nothing of the outreach of the church, its mission and evangelism. Are we fulfilling the Great Commission?

As evangelical Christians in the Reformed tradition, RCRT believes that these problems and questions can only be answered and dealt with through a careful biblical and theological examination. Hence our current preoccupation with ecclesiology. The 2021 Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference presented the opportunity to think theologically about the church and our speakers engaged with serious issues in an engaging, challenging and illuminating manner and, both in the papers and the discussions which followed, we were enlightened, provoked and educated.

It is our intention to continue the theme of ecclesiology through the next two Edinburgh Dogmatics Conferences. In 2023 our theme will be 'The Holy Spirit and the Church' and in 2025 it will be 'Creeds, Confessions and the Church'. Further details of these will appear on our website (www.rcrt.scot) in due course.

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Dr McClean's and Professor McCormack's articles were originally delivered at the Rutherford House 17th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, hosted by Palmerston Place Church, 29th–31st August 2017. The conference theme was 'Reformation Theology: Maintenance or Revision?'