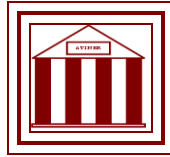


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**Theonome Reciprocity as Key for  
Interpreting the Phenomenon of  
Declining Numbers in Protestant  
Mainstream Churches –  
A South African Study**

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**Theonome Reciprocity as Key for Interpreting the Phenomenon  
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**Abstract**

The phenomenon of declining numbers within Protestant mainstream churches is observed worldwide. This paper approaches this tendency in the light of theonome reciprocity, which is observable in the Great Commission. The Great Commission can therefore be used as a key to discuss the phenomenon of declining churches, as well as growing churches. With theonome reciprocity as starting point, the activity of God, as well as the activity of the believer, can be indicated in a declining or growing process. The activity of the Afrikaans speaking Protestant mainstream believer in South Africa is part of a complex network of factors - some less measurable than others. The only factor in this intertwined context which can be addressed in order to establish possible results, is the believer's way of thinking within the ecclesiology. Research in the Reformed churches of South Africa (RCSA) found that declining churches are mainly dominated by an institutionalistic paradigm (I-paradigm). If the principles engraved in the Great Commission become part of a believer's thinking, a Christ-centered paradigm ought to develop, resulting in Godwilled deeds; deeds that will portray obedience to the Great Commission. A Christ-centred focus might therefore result in a turnaround in thinking, consequently normalising the church practice and enhancing qualitative and quantitative growth.

**Keywords:**

**Corresponding Author:**

## **Introduction**

The phenomenon of declining numbers within the Protestant mainstream churches is observed worldwide. Even the flourishing reformed churches in Korea is experiencing decline since 1995 (Gill, 2003; Gilbert, 2004, Walls, 2002; Hendriks, 2003; Smietana, 2006; Wack & Hendriks, 2001). This paper focuses on the phenomenon of declining numbers within the Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA) and how it is approached in the light of theonome reciprocity.

## **Theonome Reciprocity**

Van Ruler was the reformed theologian who paid attention to the place of man in the church practice. He showed great appreciation for human activity in the church practice and emphasized man's autonomy, maturity, creativity and ability to cooperate according to God's plan (Rebel, 1981:17, 64). This specific God-man relationship reveals covenantal language. Van Ruler (1969:181) describes this relationship between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit as a "secret": divine action makes human action possible (Rom 8:16); while the Spirit dwells in believers, man stays exactly who they are (1969:187). This presence of the Spirit differs in each person, each nation, each culture and each century. Man in time, in his willingness, openness and choices, is part of this "secret", called theonome reciprocity (Heitink 1969:194; Van Ruler 1969:202, 203).

### *Theonome Reciprocity and the Great Commission*

In Math 28:18-20 the Lord gave his last commission to the church. The Great Commission is grounded in the indicative and imperative of these verses (Van der Walt 2007:168). In 28:18 the Lord proclaims his omnipotence (indicative) and this is affirmed by the second indicative (28:20b), declaring his omnipresence. Between these two indicatives, the imperative is imbedded (28:19-20a). The indicative focusses on God, while the imperative focusses on man. Consequently the imperative directs man's church practice activities in order to make disciples (28:19b) by establishing external (28:19a) and internal growth (28:19c) as an unified system (Burger, 1999:88, 111, 149, 150). By incorporating the broken, yet reborn believer, the opposite of church growth, namely decline, is implicitly mentioned.

This structure of the Great Commission reveals the bipolar characteristic of theonome reciprocity (Van Ruler, 1969:181-187). This "secret" relationship between God and man points to covenantal activity. According to Bosch (1991:18) research regarding the Great Commission inevitably involves the covenant, which focusses on the activity of God and the activity of the believer. In short: God as missional God includes man in his mission, and being part of this mission, man's life is transformed according to God's will, thus reflecting and glorifying God.

In the light of theonome reciprocity, the unstoppable thrust of God the Spirit is to be discussed, but also the inevitable involvement of believers within the phenomenon of declining churches.

Discussing theonome reciprocity as a key for interpreting the phenomenon of declining numbers in Protestant mainstream churches, one must realize that this “secret” bipolar activity takes place within time and space (Walls 2002:73-80). The human part is limited, because brokenness causes lacking perfection. Since paradise this resulted in a restarted covenantal relationship. In the context of declining churches it is therefore assumed that man can extinguish the Spirit. However, in spite of this possibility, God the Spirit moves unstoppable.

In order to explain theonome reciprocity in the South African context, the activity of God, as well as the activity of man, as factors in the declining phenomenon of churches, are discussed. The only human factor that can be addressed in order to introduce change, is the way man thinks. An unbalanced paradigm is reflected by an unbalanced church practice, revealed by declining numbers. Research conducted in the RCSA revealed unbalanced Scriptural thinking, thus portraying a terrain where the Spirit was extinguished gradually. This could only be changed by true repentance and turnaround.

Theonome reciprocity is a key for interpreting the declining tendency: The Spirit uses declining to work repentance in man, thus creating a turnaround towards Scriptural thinking and obedience to the Great Commission.

### **The activity of God**

God as missional God moves unstoppable, while the same purposeful zeal is expected of believers, being part of the covenant (Bosch 1991:392).

Equilizing wave: For the past 2000 years a wave manifests about every 500 years. The first pitch of a wave was noticed about 500 AD. This took place due to the decline of the Roman Empire and the start of the Dark Ages. The second wave reached its climax in 1054 when the Great Schism between Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy took place. The third wave peaked in 1517 in Wittenberg being the start of the Protestant Reformation. The fourth wave is still in process and to be revealed sometime this 21st century (Tickle 2008:19-28). It is important to realize that this wave don't destroy religion; on the contrary, it confirms the unstoppable force of the Spirit by which new ways of experiencing religion are created. Mainstream churches thus ought to acknowledge that 2014 is amidst an inevitable transition (Du Toit 2000:57-62).

North-South wave: Historically Protestantism was situated in the developed countries of the northern hemisphere. From here the gospel spread, either by missionaries or colonization. For centuries this implied enculturation which germinates nowadays, revealing a shift from the Christian heartland to the global southern hemisphere (South America, Africa south of the Sahara, Asia). This movement flourishes within developing countries where indigenous

churches interpret the gospel not in a Protestant way, but in a syncretistic and charismatic way, while the decreasing western orientated Protestant mainstream churches reveal a wave of stagnation, seemingly due to an inability to restructure according to Scripture (Rom 12:2, Math 9:17, Math 28:18-20; Walls, 2002).

Waves within congregations: In the life cycle of a congregation (Saarinen, 1992:1-23) prosperous periods (societas waves) as well as periods of hardship (communitas waves) are recognized. It is also recognized as the “revolving-door syndrome” (Barret *et al*, 2001:19) revealing periods of “advance and recession”. Declining churches experience the communitas wave and whenever a turnaround takes place and numbers increase, a prosperous period develops (Brouwer *et al* 2007:16-20, 105; Burger 1995:23-25; Saarinen 1992:1-23).

### **The Activity of the Man**

The activity of man in the declining South African Protestant context, which includes the RCSA, is part of a complex and intertwined network of factors.

#### *Factors Difficult to Measure*

Since the Enlightenment change prevailed in all levels of life. Scientific discoveries influenced everyone (Bosch, 1999:264-317). Questions asked by upcoming generations could not be answered satisfactorily and the integrity, credibility and relevance of the existing church came into question (Du Toit, 2000:33-183).

Other difficult measureable factors are secularism, decline in knowledge of God, globalism, pluralism, materialism, individualism, as well as the restructuring process of thinking within a shattered postmodern society, resulting in a subjectivistic lifestyle (Gill, 2003:5, 6, 17; Niemandt, 2007:22; Tickle, 2008:50).

This subjective lifestyle results into two distinguishable groups, namely those who find refuge in closeness and those who find freedom in openness (Du Toit, 2000:36-49; Ward, 2004:11). The South African Protestant is part of the conservative group, projecting introversion and lack of adaptability. Noticeable is also a tendency to join other denominations (Tickle, 2008:64-66, 91-149), or not to belong to any specific church at all (Ward, 2004:3).

#### *Measurable Factors*

Depopulation and urbanization are clear phenomena in the tendency of declining churches, while statistics of the past three decades also indicate a decline in the birth rate which have a direct effect on numbers (Giliomee, 2004:540; Hendriks, 1993:548, 549).

Economical, political and social factors are intertwined and major causes for declining in South Africa. Thousands left the country since 1994 because of affirmative action in the work place (Brouwer *et al*, 2007:40-47), lack of



security, as well as the inability to control crime. In fact, a whole generation Afrikaans speaking Protestant members emigrated between 1994 and 2006 (Giliomee, 2004:619, 620; Hendriks, 2000:75; Kane-Berman, 2007:11, 251, 489, 490; Van Aardt, 2006:4).

Many church members were displaced by the political change in 1994, experiencing a peripheral shift in society. This alienation resulted in a shift to the privacy of the home where believers could assert themselves by means of the internet and globalisation. The church, the Bible and family life were replaced by technology (Erasmus & Hendriks, 2003:81; Tickle, 2008:51, 104-115). This affected family life drastically. Religious values and rituals were replaced by each family member's own individual experience in his/her isolation. This is worsened by the absence of parents due to the claims of modern materialistic life (Buchner, 2002:12). The primary social structure and socializing processes experience wavering, thus affecting Protestant living and churches in a negative way (Cameron *et al*, 2005:85; Dreyer, 2009:13; Olivier, 2006:120, 152; Rall, 2007:12). Sociologists affirm that inadequate transfer of religious life usually demonstrated by parents, as well as the generation gap, directly lead to declining numbers (Altemeyer, 2004:77-89; Crockett & Voas, 2006:5567-584; Stilma, 1988:25-96).

When discussing characteristics of the Afrikaner as part of the Protestant mainstream churches in South Africa, individualism, reservedness and pedantry ought to be mentioned (Du Toit *et al*, 2002:48; Jordaan, 2008:8, 9; Giliomee, 2004:646; Hendriks, 2000:295). These manifestations emphasize lack of conformity and leadership, as well as lack of servicemindedness towards Africa (Fraker & Spears, 1996:179; Schoeman, 2008:2). It portrays the absence of collective thinking directed by Godly calling. However, one strong positive characteristic which often emerged historically, is that a mysterious vitality is revealed when extermination of the Afrikaner-group seems to be at hand (Giliomee, 2004:663).

Added to these factors is that the South African mainstream believer demonstrates a double history (Van Coller, 2007:55-59). As first world descendents they've lived in Africa for more than 350 years. Since 1994 South Africa is forwarded as developing third world country, which is observed by these first world descendents in a sinical way. The real changing South African context is dealt with at a distance. Nowadays guidance from the church, which directed believers incorrectly through the years of apartheid, is therefore not easily accepted and the ignorance regarding the reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century South Africa, is therefore strengthened (Du Toit, *et al* 2002:48; Giliomee, 2004:633; Niemandt, 2007:53; Olivier, 2006:37, 38; Walls, 1996:9-54; Van der Walt, 1997; Cameron *et al*, 2005: 54, 62; Erasmus & Hendriks, 2003:87; Oliver, 2007:23-40).

Finally, as factor in the declining tendency, the church practice portrays human activity resulting from human thinking. Whenever a church practice displays an imbalance in internal and external growth (re Great Commission), the frame of thinking can be determined either as an I-paradigm (Institutionalistic) or a S-paradigm (Spiritualistic), instead of a Christocentric

paradigm. Research conducted in some congregations in the Reformed Church of South Africa indicated that the determining factor for the crisis in the church practice, is the presence of the unbalanced I-paradigm (Bosch, 1991:2; Hendriks, 1999:17-19; Schwarz, 1999:7; Van Helden, 2010:287-350; Walls, 2002:274).

There are always two poles in any paradigm, namely the static and the dynamic poles. Imbalance manifests when one of these poles dominates. Research indicated that the static pole dominates mainstream congregations (Van Helden, 2010:263-350). These churches were seemingly unaware of this unbalanced situation. *Sola Scriptura* was traditionally regarded as these churches' strong point, thus considering the church practice as "beyond question" (Schwarz, 1999:7). Seeing that the Great Commission was not emphasized according to the missional principles of internal and external growth in a unified system, this seemingly strong point, was altered to become the weak point, furthering decline (Burger, 1999:116; Van der Walt, 2006:31; Van Rooy, 2006:22; Van Rooy, 2007b:32). Signs of stumbling blocks, like formalism and rationalism forthcoming from the I-paradigm, dominated these church practices. The absence of interpreting these signs pro-actively caused that the *communitas* wave of decline was experienced as highly disruptive.

### **I-paradigm and the RCSA-ecclesiology**

Research was conducted in the RCSA to determine the influence of thinking (according to the I-paradigm) as factor in the declining tendency. Thinking is at stake when the unified system of internal and external growth, according to the Great Commission, displays imbalance (Bosch, 1991:2; Hendriks, 1999:17-19; Schwarz, 1999:7; Walls, 2002:274). The RCSA-study indicated that the static pole indeed dominated these mainstream congregations (Van Helden, 2010:263-350).

The above mentioned factors of God's activity and man's activity, lead to only one factor which can be humanly addressed in order to establish a possibility of a turnaround and growth. This factor is the believer's thinking within the church practice.

When human thinking and turnaround are in question, theonome reciprocity and covenantal activity are the key to start the process of interpretation. According to Rom 12:2, God commands the believer to be transformed by the renewing of his/her mind. When man does renew his mind, it reveals that God initiated this transformation in man's subconscious before man became willing to change. Exegesis of Rom 12:2 shows that the indicative and the imperative are structural the same as Math 28:16-20. Theonome reciprocity, true to covenantal activity, is to be recognized and embraced as key in this *communitas* wave of declining (Strong, 2007:52-59,107-110, 445).

Research conducted in certain RCSA congregations between 2005 and 2008 thus focussed on the believer's paradigm regarding the church practice. The unified system of internal (qualitative) and external (quantitative) growth,

as prescribed in the Great Commission, were applied in determining whether thinking in the RCSA was indeed practiced according to the imbalanced I-paradigm, in contrast to a Scriptural Christocentric paradigm. The framework for the research entailed eight aspects present in church practices (Schwarz 2000), namely spirituality, ministry, worship, small groups, evangelising, structures, leadership and relationships. Some conclusions of the study will be discussed in the following paragraphs, emphasizing the need to transform thinking in mainstream churches.

**Spirituality:** Spirituality focuses on the presence of the activity of God in the believer's daily existence (Smit, 1995:24). Doctrine, accompanied by rationality, forms the central part of spirituality in the RCSA. Very little passion is thus demonstrated (Du Toit, *et al* 2002:8-12; Van Helden, 2010:303). Traditionally doctrinal dominated institutions ensured a set way of rules which strengthened the sense of being "beyond question" as mentioned earlier. Due to the disruptions, change and adaptations in South Africa the past twenty years, this way of expressing spirituality is inevitably influenced. It lead to a decline in being traditionally spiritual, but also lead to an emergence of a new way of spirituality. This new way focusses stronger on passionate religious experience by means of a subjective relationship with Christ (Olivier 2006:141; Tickle 2008:123).

**Ministry:** Traditional mainstream ministry is practised by office. According to Rom 12:4-8, Ef 4:11-16 and I Cor 12:27:31, each member is gifted and ought to let the congregation benefit from this (Burger, 1999:189). Absence of a gift-orientated ministry lead to imbalances like comfortableness, mediocracy, closedness, lack of courage and commitment, fear of fallacy, attachment to be in control, the burnout of the pastor (which can result in laying down the calling), as well as ignorance regarding church growth and being a servant believer (Burger, 1999:108-110; Niemandt, 2007:40; Van der Walt, 2006:31; Van Rooy, 2007b:31, 32). The results of the RCSA-research indicated that the ministry focussed only on the offices of the pastor, elders and deacons. Gifts and empowering of members as part of the ministry were not priority, however, the office of the believer recieved very high priority, but then not to be conducted in the church practice.

**Worship:** The activity of the Spirit during worship can never be regarded as self-evident, for the Word is solely alive when God wants to work in a specific terrain (Floor, 1979:123; Schwarz, 1999:9). Being part of an incomplete world, the danger exists that the calling to let God speak, is also done in an incomplete way. Therefore the pastor ought to prepare inspirational liturgy and preach enthusiastically, thus reflecting a living relationship with God (Warren, 2005:176). Adding heavy language, legalism and intellectualism are strengthened (Wijnbeek, 2007:40). In spite of such stumblingblocks noticed in other mainstream denominations, research amongst the RCSA congregations indicated that preachers put much effort into preparing a service, but preferred to follow a strict, traditional liturgical order. Although preachers preached enthusiastically, the same enthusiasm was not always shared by the congregation. Whenever worship took place, Scripture was central and the

atmosphere was seriously sacred and dignified. Modernisation of the service and implementing the most recent form of the spoken language, were not regarded as important.

**Small Groups:** The human need to be part of an intimate group where holistic ministry within the unified system of internal and external growth (Great Commission) can take place, becomes all the more popular (Brouwer *et al*, 2007:154; Strong, 2007:128). The lack of small group ministries indicates lack of leadership, empowered members, evangelising, Bible knowledge and gifts (Du Toit, *et al*, 2002:39; Hendriks, 1993:548-550; 2003; Schwarz, 1999:171, 172). Research conducted in the RCSA indicated that the term, *small groups*, was unfamiliar. Contradictory, the term, *Biblestudy groups*, was familiar in church language. This portrayed closedness, focussing on internal growth. Groups amongst the youth, senior members and ladies focussed on their own goals, thus ignoring a holistic and missional approach.

**Evangelization:** A need orientated church focussing on the community, is unknown where the I-paradigm dominates (Walls, 2002:274, 277; Kerkblad, 2007:41). According to Keller (Kommers, 2006:668), mainstream churches are very effective to prevent promoting pro church development and churchplanting in their direct environment. Growth can't take place naturally, for the terrain for organic growth is not healthy and not nurtured according to the principles laid down by the Great Commission (Walls, 2007:274).

Research in the RCSA indicated that evangelization was regarded as the task of a committee. Evangelization, where each member would be involved, was totally absent. Though, the term, *evangelization*, was well known, meaning that those whom gone astray, ought to be sought, cared for their social and physical needs, and brought back to be active in church. They also assumed that the Word ought to be brought to the godless in other far countries. The absence of evangelization and the stereotypical thinking regarding evangelization, focussed on the absence of missional obedience (Hendriks, 1999:285).

**Structures:** All types of structures are the result of human thinking (Schalekamp, 2005:23-28). Imbalance comes to the fore when structures are regarded as principles. Ineffective structures ought to be changed to be functional (Van der Walt, 2006:31). The power of institutional structures lie in the security it provides the congregation. Bound to set structures, flexibility is prevented and adaptation delayed. Due to depopulation and urbanization, the RCSA in the rural areas still make use of their big churches full of empty seats. Research indicated that the church building, as physical structure, was seen as a symbol reflecting positive values. The church grounds were seen as the centre for church projects (internal growth), but not for projects with missional aims (external growth). Ministerial structures were set traditional ways which provided reassurance to the members.

**Leadership:** Church leadership is a service done by people in order to guide their fellowman in the ways of the Lord (Burger, 1999:182-189). Therefore all services start with human thinking (Olivier, 2006:141). Ef 4:12 states that believers ought to be empowered for their service. Often tension

exists between God's plan and the formulation of the congregation's plan. This indicates lack of practised thinking and obedience in the ways of the covenant (Burger, 1999:95, 96; Warren, 1989:34). The absence of Spiritfilled leaders results in shaky leadership (Warren, 2005:xvi), which leads to shortcomings in the ministry (Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006). Research in the RCSA indicated that the pastor was seen as the main leader who ought to know everything that was going on in the congregation, while others in office were not automatically accepted as leaders. Women were leaders in congregational projects, while men guided the congregation in spiritual matters. Missional and empowering leadership were regarded as relative matters.

**Relations:** If church members don't build loving relations through sacrifice, selfdenial and faith, the warm head and cold heart syndrome, typical to an I-paradigm, is revealed (Wijnbeek, 2006:34). Lack of loving relations and loving deeds affect the congregational atmosphere, friendliness, involvement, mutual visits and hospitality. Imbalance in relationships manifests in differences, groupings, quarrels and intolerance. The amount of energy put into a congregation, projects the level of congregational identity (Burger, 1999:52-142; Olivier, 2006:84-116). Research in the RCSA indicated that relationships reflected mutual respect, patience and fellowship. Friendliness towards outsiders though was regarded as a relative matter indicating the lack of missionale intentions.

Each of these eight ecclesiological aspects revealed the imbalance in the RCSA due to the existing I-paradigm where static aspects dominate. Understanding the effect of the imbalance in the unified system, being a changeable factor in the declining tendency, ought to propel believers to do serious introspection. A turnaround applying Christocentric and covenantal thinking can result in deep change, knowing that the key and all hope lie in theonome reciprocity.

## **Turnaround**

A second research was conducted among the 2012 RCSA-Synod delegates to determine the degree of awareness regarding the crisis. The questionnaire also focussed on the possibility of a shift in thinking towards the demands of the Great Commission, as well as whether the entire South African population, regardless of language and culture, would be regarded as the target group in case a change in thinking would exist (Van Helden, 2013).

Two days after the questionnaire was completed, thus before any results were known, the RCSA-Synod decided in favour of a turnaround towards the demands of the Great Commission (Acta, 2012). The results of the research received later, affirmed this decision, but indicated that church councils haven't formulated decisions to confirm this mindshift yet. Results also indicated that growth can only take place if the South African population in its diversity, is evangelized.

Theonome reciprocity can be recognised as the key to explain this occurrence in the RCSA. A deliberate change in thinking, formulated as a Synod decision, is a sign that the Spirit initiated change in thinking over a long period before the delegates acted towards change.

## Conclusion

Although man's thinking is only one factor in the complex phenomenon of declining churches, it is seemingly a major factor to establish change resonating in the other factors. Theonome reciprocity as key for interpreting the declining crisis, strengthens man to act in faith. Devine action makes human action possible, thus, when man starts reacting in favour of Scriptural change, it signals that the Spirit was already "secretly" at work, creating the change to the salvation of man and to the glory of God.

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