Dear audience, dear prof. Dirkie Smit, dear Ms. Ria Smit-Jonker,

I’m charged with a mission impossible. It is an unreasonable task to summarize Dirk Jacobus Smit’s countless merits - until his recent retirement Distinguished Professor in Systematic Theology at Stellenbosch University - within the narrow time schedule of this ceremony, let alone to appreciate their significance.

I could start with his academic scholarship and go into the more than 460 articles and chapters in journals and books that he wrote, as well as 48 academic and popular books from which he is the author, editor and co-editor.

I could go on with mentioning that Dirkie Smit has been visiting scholar at different universities, has been awarded several times; received medals and awards, and supervised more than forty doctoral students.

I could go into his prophetic witness for half a century, and how he has been a leading public voice in South African’s turbulent history, during and after apartheid, the reconciliation process of the Reformed churches and the transformation of the University.

I could go into the innumerable occasions Dirkie Smit has been invited for public speeches and lecture series, that he spoke to synods about the ecclesiological impact of the 1986 Belhar confession, in the creation whereof he played a pivotal role.

I could go into his significance for initiating and developing public theology as a new style of doing theology in and outside South-Africa, as initiator of the Beyers Naude Centre for Public Theology in Stellenbosch, within the Global Network for Public Theology, and now as the Rimmer and Ruth de Vries Professor of Reformed Theology and Public Life at Princeton Theological Seminary, in Princeton, New Jersey, USA.

I could also get more personal, and illustrate how, in spite of this impressive record of achievements, Dirkie Smit is renowned for his proverbial modesty and humility, his talent for friendship, his sense of humor.

I could go into all this.
But let me instead try to share with you just a few words about Dirkie Smit’s understanding of Reformed theology.
Where one should start to read in the thousands and thousands of pages, he already wrote? I suggest that two of his lectures could serve as a hermeneutical key to his work. K Just read his 2000 inaugural lecture in Stellenbosch¹ and his recent farewell lecture at the same University.² I suggest that from this day onwards, they should be compulsory reading for every student that enters the PThU.
Reformed theology, as Smit understands it, takes its point of reference in the “language of Canaan”, the free and gracious word of God in Jesus Christ. God speaks in such a way, that a surprising and disturbing alternative reality is created, in which ‘there is hope even for the most

¹ In diens van die tale Kanaäns? Oor sistematiese teologie vandag. Published in NGTT, 43, 1 & 2 maart & juni 2002.
wretched”. ‘And therefore’, Smit writes, ‘we may not, cannot, and do not believe that anyone is lost and not the object of God’s eternal love.’

Faith language tries to respond to this divine language of grace, with liturgy, confession, ordinary life. The Reformed tradition is just one dialect of faith among many others. It speaks with its own accent, in temptation, doubt and ambiguity. Yet, the community of faith speaks its language of hope in public to anyone who can hear it ‘on the market-place of the public opinion’ (Inaugural lecture, p. 420).

Church traditions, even or perhaps in particular the Reformed, are provisional, as expressed in the formula ecclesia reformata semper reformanda. And theology, reflecting on them, is also tentative, and contextual. But theology is by definition, in Dirkie Smit’s understanding, always public theology.

In his 2017 farewell lecture at Stellenbosch, Smit returns to this typical Reformed understanding of tradition even in a more ethical vein. A ‘truly living tradition is restless, ever renewing itself by transforming itself.’ If remembering the grace of God means that there is hope even for the most wretched, then, Smit concludes, looking with the eyes of this God, ‘has implications for how we look at others, how we see and regard strangers, recognize in one another objects of God’s eternal love and therefore also objects of our love.’ Any politics of exclusion is radically at odds with a living Reformed tradition.

Again and again then, faith in a gracious God needs new interpretations, surprising, shocking, disturbing perhaps. ‘This is the way in which the Reformation remains a living tradition, the way in which its faith and theology matter’, Smit writes. He refers to John Calvin, Herman Bavinck, Karl Barth. But he also mentions Allan Boesak, Russel Botman, Lekula (Mpo) Ntoane – black reformed theologians who read Calvin against Calvin, Kuyper against Kuyper, the Reformed confessions against their misuse in the history of Reformed churches.

This is obviously what living Reformed theology means: reading and re-reading the tradition, looking attentively to what’s happening today, and listening carefully to what people – in particular, as professor Willie Jonker, Smit’s predecessor (and father in law) expressed: ‘die noodlydendes, armes en verontregtes’ say. And then, amidst of the turmoil of the times discerning the gracious word of God.

If this is Reformed theology at its best, it is lively embodied in professor Dirkie Smit.

Professor Dirk Jacobus Smit, The Protestant Theological University feels truly honored and grateful that you were ready to accept this honorary doctoral degree and that, together with your wife, Ria Smit-Jonker, you were willing to be present today.

Prof. Frits de Lange

9 January 2018

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3 "Hope for even the Most Wretched”? On Remembering the Reformation. Retirement Lecture Dirk J. Smit. 11 – 13 October 2017. Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, p. 4.

4 "Niemand van ons besik oor Christus nie; ons het slegs mekaar, wat saam, stamelend, oor Christus praat.”

5 "die tradisie wat ágter ons lê, wat reeds wás, hoe belangrik ook al, [kan] nooit as finale bron of kriterium geld vir wat nog moet wees en nog gaan wees, vir hoe die tale Kanaäns vandag en môre gaan klink nie.” (Inaugural lecture, 2000)