Theology Matters

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"Live Not By Lies"

by Randal Carter Working

"*You, O Lord, will keep them; you will guard us from this generation forever*" (Psalm 12:7-8).

Ninety years ago, a group of pastors and elders gathered to write a declaration for the Church in Germany. From its rise to power in 1933, the National Socialist Party posed a grave threat to religious freedom and the integrity of the Church. This group of dissenting Protestant Christians formed the Confessing Church in opposition to the Nazi regime's attempt to co-opt the Protestant churches and distort their teachings with their autocratic, "blood and soil" theology.

The Theological Declaration from the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church which met in Barmen, Germany, would become the central theological statement of the Confessing Church under the rule of the National Socialists. Drafted primarily by Swiss theologian Karl Barth, it was affirmed by the Synod on May 31, 1934. For many Protestant churches, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Barmen Declaration remains a bracing guideline for their confession, teaching, and resistance to authoritarianism.

At a time when political ideologies again threaten to squelch individual freedoms and crowd out Christian theology with a social gospel of either the left or the right, the Barmen Declaration remains relevant. It can help Christians learn the difference between legitimate political activism and social ministry and that which is worldly and idolatrous. It can stiffen our resolve to bow the knee before no lord other than Jesus Christ, the Word of God.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we must be mindful, like Augustine, of the City of God and the City of Man, or as depicted by John Bunyan, the Celestial City and the City of Destruction. In its dual nature, the Christian Church must safeguard its faith by consistently evaluating its teachings in light of Scripture. Especially in turbulent times, we gain clarity on our struggle "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness," using the weapons of the Spirit. Similarly, the church must always seek to be reformed by the Word of God as revealed in Scripture.

In light of this imperative, Presbyterians have insisted on the importance of specific bedrock values as defining elements of our identity. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has affirmed throughout its history basic principles of church order. These principles are part of our common heritage and are essential to our Presbyterian concept and system of church government. One of our most basic principles is stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith and in the *Book of Order*, F-3.0101:

> God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.

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The Preliminary Principles of the Presbyterian Church were published in 1788 by the Synod of New York and Philadelphia and included in their Form of Government. These principles laid the foundation for the Presbyterian Church's governance. John Witherspoon is generally recognized as their principal author. Since our inception, Presbyterians have held the importance of the freedom of conscience, both in the civic and ecclesial realms.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is today again roiled by controversy as the Olympia Presbytery has approved an overture to the General Assembly regarding LGBTQIA+ inclusion. It proposes changes to G-2.0104b in the *Book of Order*, adding homosexual, lesbian, and transgender people to a list of "protected classes" whom it seeks to protect against discrimination. Yet this proposal conflicts not only with the church's traditional position of biblical sexual ethics, but also with our long-held commitment to freedom of conscience. The Equity Advocacy Committee (ACQ+E) argues that the overture does not disqualify anyone from serving in church ministries but only promotes inclusion. The litmus test for ordination or installation of officers in the church will now be whether one can embrace LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

The 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirmed that religious freedom should be "equal and common to all." While religious freedom is essential, it should not be used to discriminate against others or impose views upon them. In other words, just as the civil courts of the United States have rejected claims that racial integration violated religious beliefs, so the church has affirmed LGBTQ+ civil rights and advocated for laws against discrimination based on sexual orientation. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) stands against oppression and supports human dignity for all people. That is, the church has traditionally emphasized equality and opposition to discrimination while ostensibly upholding the liberty of conscience according to Scripture. It has sought a balance where the right to religious liberty and individual judgment in matters of faith, a freedom that must be "equal and common to all," does not infringe upon the rights of others.

In the 219th General Assembly (2010), the Presbyterian Church approved Amendment 10-A. This amendment removed the prohibition on ordaining homosexuals and sexually active unmarried members as church officers. The church changed its policy on ordination and on marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman. Conservatives were assured that they could continue to hold a traditional interpretation of the Scriptures on these issues. Now, the latitude that held the church together for the past fourteen years is at risk of disappearing. The Olympia overture indicates that a candidate for teaching elders, ruling elders, and deacons will be asked to affirm an unspecified number ("LGBTQ+") of gender identities and sexual orientations and behaviors. Clearly, this would violate our historic principle of freedom of conscience.

What are we to make of this? Alluding to Orwell's novel *Animal Farm*, historian Victor Davis Hanson claims that totalitarianism always becomes far worse than the wrongs it seeks to correct in the first place. Over time, the hunger for power exposes the emptiness of claims to liberate the oppressed. Hanson wrote in a recent essay:

> Something less violent but no less bizarre and disturbing now characterizes the American *New* New Left [sic]. It is completing its final *Animal Farm* metamorphosis as it finishes its long march through our cultural, economic, and social institutions. Leftists may talk of revolutionary transformation, but they aim to help friends, punish enemies, and keep and expand power.[1]

Overriding our historic freedoms in the church unleashes more trouble and confusion than any injustices the Olympia overture seems to remedy. It also sets aside our traditional Reformed manner of interpreting Scripture.

Eroding Religious Freedom

From the writer of Hebrews to Augustine, from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Diet Eman, and Ernst Lohmeyer to the pastors of the Golden Lampstand Church in Shanxi, China, Christians have wrestled with how to live and bear witness under the pressures of a despotic state. Faithful witnesses to Christ in settings as diverse as first-century Rome, the Spanish Inquisition, Louis XIV's France, the Third Reich, the Soviet Union, Communist China, and theocratic Iran inspire us and stiffen our resolve.

We seem to be devolving into a more intrusive and authoritarian state in America; to be sure, not yet the brutal totalitarianism depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but a soft version akin to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. It is the oppression that lulls us into compliance, that seduces before it crushes the human spirit. Signs of this in our twenty first-century society include ubiquitous surveillance, "cancel culture," "wokeness," and de-platforming on social media like Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Apple, Google, and Amazon Web Services, which remove alternative social media platforms.

A long-serving Presbyterian pastor who I have known for many years reported recently that as he spoke to his congregation about the last election via Facebook Live prior to his sermon, a window popped up on the church's computer screen with the message, "Your information about the election is inaccurate." To his shock and that of his congregation, the server feed then immediately shut down. After issuing a warning, Facebook later allowed the church to resume its platform use. Such an incident is worrisomely authoritarian and would have been unimaginable even five years ago. Growing social media

censorship should have alarmed us long ago, and prospects of quelling it now seem more remote.

China has recently implemented new regulations on religious activities to enhance the supervision of clergy and congregations. Chinese governmental strategy strives to integrate religion with communism and ensure allegiance to the atheistic Chinese Communist Party. Official policy requires religious groups to align with traditional Chinese culture and "Xi Jinping Thought," the Chinese leader's combination of Marxism and nationalism.

We might wonder if initiatives like the Olympia overture intend to shut down dissenting voices in our denomination, similarly, restricting religious freedom.

One consequence of human sin is our almost limitless capacity to deceive ourselves. Most of society tends to avoid the truth and disregard any information that causes discomfort. Whoever reinforces its illusions is in control, while anyone who tries to dispel these illusions is victimized. This is the root cause of its hostility towards the church and the gospel it preaches.

The gravest threat to humanity is not nature, war, or disease but our idolatry, our inability to overcome our delusions. At specific points in history, collective delusions remind us that humanity itself is its own most significant danger. This is true not only on an individual but also on a societal level. Examples of the detrimental effects of mass delusions include the witch hunts in Europe and America during the 16th and 17th centuries. Acts unimaginable for individuals become possible when society is engulfed in distorted thinking. The collectivism that enables such acts erodes the infinite value of the individual as a being created in the image of God. It denies that society is an abstract concept; it does not make decisions or possess moral agency. It is individuals within society who commit either good or evil acts.

Authoritarianism consolidates power to control the masses through dulling the mind. These days, even in the church, people often display little capacity for reflection, meditation, or questioning. We forget the importance of sound theology—of cultivating in us the mind of Christ, as Presbyterians have long prioritized. In our tumultuous world, many yearn for a more ordered one. Hierarchical powers offer an answer to this: relinquish responsibility for our consciences and conform to a prescribed social agenda. However, it is our individual responsibility before God in the context of the Body of Christ that gives our life vitality and creativity.

Fifty years of sexual revolution and social change have eroded the traditions of American life, including those of the Presbyterian Church. In this transformation, we do well to remember that the subjective freedom of the church stands under the objective reality of Scripture. The church's authority is an authority under the Word and accountable to it. The integrity of the church's witness follows God's acts of revelation and salvation that establish the church and the individual Christian. Our personal and corporate integrity is measured by obedience to the Word, wherein we find that authority and freedom are not opposed but in correspondence.

How Should We Then Live (Together)?

The church is currently theologically divided. One side aims to eliminate racism, sexism, and other "phobias," while the other side fears that we are abandoning our heritage of church and nation in pursuit of these ideals. This cultural chasm stems from a lack of connection to the lasting tenets of our faith, which provide us with values and meaning in the modern age.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth grappled with understanding and fulfilling the Christian calling during the dark times of Nazism. The eroding of the church's witness was not on account of modern civilization per se but rather its tendency to alienation, collectivism, rationalism, and loss of faith grounding, making the church vulnerable to the warped ideology of the Third Reich. In its attempt to apply theology to contemporary problems, Progressive theology sometimes confuses the imperfect world of politics with divine revelation. This blinds the church to the dangers of authoritarianism.

Can we overcome this temptation? Like the West in general, the church has become decadent and vulnerable to demagogues and political manipulators. It is unaccustomed to sacrifice, unimpressed by scriptural reason, and careless about virtue. The rise and fall of civilizations throughout history suggest similar patterns of ease and concentrated wealth leading to decadence and idleness.

We cannot redeem or reform the church by our own efforts, but the Lord calls us to be faithful in our endeavors rather than focusing solely on success. We have an opportunity to bear witness and potentially have a positive influence on our communities. This will require a comprehensive approach.

Karl Barth reminds us in his *Church Dogmatics*:

> The Church as the kingdom in which the freedom of God's Word operates is an assembly of men. … This Word has the power to affirm itself and to keep itself pure in the world. … Where this power as such is recognized and experienced, where it is not merely suffered as judgment but is also believed as grace and finds obedience, where then the testimony of Scripture is accepted, there arises and subsists relatively, mediately and formally, utterly dependent upon that acceptance and related to it, but within these limits

quite really, a human power and freedom corresponding to the power and freedom of the Word of God.[2]

How should we then try to live together in the power and freedom of the Word of God? Answers to this question vary. In *Live Not By Lies*, for example, Rod Dreher, a Christian, emphasizes the importance of resisting falsehoods and building "oases of truth" in our communities. Dreher's title echoes Alexander Solzhenitsyn's essay, "Live Not by Lies," reminding us that personal nonparticipation in lies is crucial for our liberation.

First, Dreher recommends that we restore order to our minds and model a life free from cultural psychosis. We must seek time for reflection to free ourselves from the undue influence of popular entertainment and the media.

Second, we must be willing to share information that counters misinformation and groupthink while maintaining peaceful spirits and disseminating the truth as best we can. At times, humor may be a tool to diminish the authority of demagoguery. Certainly, thinking theologically, Dreher would agree, is crucial in this effort,

Third, Dreher advocates that we need to establish parallel structures within a totalitarian society. These structures help support the individual standing on conscience. As an outpost of heaven, he claims, the church can be more effective than political operatives, persuading and subverting in the hope of a new order. Dreher discusses the importance of small groups, like church groups, in providing support, shelter, learning, and accountability, echoing Marxist ideology's idea of resistance cells. Such groups also offer spaces for prayer, reading Scripture, discussing current events, and resistance training.

As promising as Dreher's call for parallel structures may sound, however, it comes with temptations. The church of Jesus Christ is without parallel in its structure, being, and purpose. It is not rightly understood as one means of resistance among others. Nor does it live from one truth among others and does no one any favor to suggest that he or she may find peace or comfort elsewhere. Indeed, the church squanders its time, energy, and resources if it seeks to establish parallel structures, and so do its pastors. Rather, given the great challenges the church faces today, pastors would do well to devote themselves more fully to providing better teaching, preaching, and pastoral care, and so would congregations in supporting them to do so.

We should all support groups for Bible study, prayer, and encouragement. We should also seek to fulfill our social and civic duties. We should resist the many temptations of our day to live by lies. But we need now more than ever to rediscover the gift, truth, beauty, necessity, and unsubstitutibility of the church of Jesus Christ.

The churches of the Reformation affirmed the preaching and hearing of the Word of God and the right administration of the sacraments as marks of the true church. Under authoritarian pressure, however, these marks risk being compromised as the state demands subservience. Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church were compelled to engage in this struggle. Eventually, Bonhoeffer concluded, "He who separates himself from the Confessing Church separates himself from salvation."

Bonhoeffer was appointed by the Confessing Church to lead a new "preachers' seminary," The crisis affecting the university faculties and churches led the Confessing Church to provide theological education to train future pastors. These seminaries provided rigorous theological training until the state eventually shut them down. When faced with the question of how to live under state coercion, Bonhoeffer offered the following counsel:

1. Never act from a position of uncertainty.
2. Never act alone.
3. Never be hasty or allow yourself to be pushed.
   God can open what is locked up.[3]

These principles suggest ways we can fortify ourselves to live faithfully under pressure. They should not come as a surprise, as they have been a source of strength for Christians since the early days of the church.

Since "our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood," we trust God. There is no victory apart from him. We will be effectual as he is at the center of our lives and struggle. If he is not at the center, our witness fails, and we flounder in our fight against evil. And yet the Lord tells us through the apostle Paul, "Do not worry about anything" (Phil. 4:6); we are to be anxious about nothing but to live in a deep sense of trust that God is our Protector and Savior. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil.

Therefore, we are free to live with abandon under God's Word as witnesses, renouncing the world and its ways. In making decisions about who to associate with, what jobs to accept, where to live, and whether to buy products made in countries with inhumane work conditions, we contribute to the world's well-being rather than our convenience. We pay attention to the stewardship of our lives and turn our backs on the agendas that conflict with our values. We embrace wisdom and join the resistance. And as the church has resisted with various strategies according to its context, some common themes emerge.

The family constitutes the crucial cell for Christian formation. Christian families are what Calvin called "little churches," places to inculcate a moral imagination and a sense of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Although the Reformation began as a theological dispute,

it produced sociological and practical implications. As Calvin wrote, "What God intended was that the priests should lead the way in divine service, and the people take example by what was done in the temple and practice it individually in their private houses."[4]

The Reformed Protestants aimed to establish the nuclear family as a spiritual community, mirroring the broader church of Christ. Huguenots, or French Protestants, viewed the home as a "holy household" organized, pure, devout, and capable of instructing its children in the ways of the gospel. These attributes were highly regarded and pursued in Protestant households in early modern France. As the most significant theological and spiritual influence on the French churches, Calvin guided family and domestic piety through his sermons, commentaries, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and correspondence from Geneva. Household practices included prayer, reading and singing of the Psalms, reading of scripture, discussing sermons and other religious works, discipline, and confession. Singing of the psalms mainly brought Reformed communities together and reinforced the theme of faith amid suffering. The well-being of the community of saints significantly relied on the godly functioning of the nuclear family. Consequently, these practices were of great interest to the consistories (sessions) and the leaders of the churches.

For the church to withstand state pressure and persecution requires a clear confessional identity. The church confesses its faith in Jesus Christ, stating its beliefs and resolutions. It elaborates its beliefs and dogmas to bear witness to Jesus Christ. It does so not as a division or sect within the church but as a representation of the entire church, which is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The unity and continuity of the church enable it to maintain its identity during challenging and changing times. In the face of competing worldly ideologies and sometimes heretical theologies, a genuine church confession denies false doctrines and presents a unified witness. This is what the Barmen Declaration achieved by opposing the "Führer principle" and the theology of the Reich Church.

> The Confessing Church here opposed a totalitarian State with utter frankness and without any personal security. They spoke of God's testimonies before kings and were not ashamed (Ps. 119:46). They had to be forsaken, disavowed, and maligned even by those who, like them, bore the name of Christian. They had to be prepared for that, and they were prepared. But the testimony that God is God stood firm.[5]

Barth offered deep insights into freedom of conscience. Freedom, he said, is not autonomy or self-sufficiency. Instead, it is precisely the opposite: dependence upon God. True freedom lies in being bound to God, maintaining a relationship with God, and aligning with the divine way revealed through Jesus Christ. Barth emphasized, above all, that freedom is a gift from God. It liberates humanity from bondage and enables thankful obedience. This freedom extends beyond the present life; it encompasses our earthly existence and our eternal identity as God's children.

While Barth did not specifically address freedom of conscience in these terms, his broader theological framework emphasizes ethical living. Evangelical ethics involves living in correspondence with God's freedom and purposes. It is rooted in our relationship with Christ and our response to God's grace. Barth viewed freedom as a divine gift that connects us to God, shaping our ethical choices and guiding our lives. His theology underscores the importance of living in alignment with God's will rather than seeking autonomy apart from God.

For the church to resist coercion and the oppression of despotism, it needs to live out of an existence beyond the reach of authoritarian systems, as was possible to an extent in Cold War Poland and the former East Germany. The church's prayers and ministry brought hope and fortified its members. A resilient and resistant church gave people strength to remain faithful to Jesus Christ and reminded them that there was still freedom in this world.

Under the conditions of a similar tyranny, Huxley wrote:

> Meanwhile, there is still some freedom left in the world. Many young people, it is true, do not seem to value freedom. But some of us still believe that, without freedom, human beings cannot become fully human and that freedom is precious. Perhaps the forces that now menace freedom are too strong to resist for long. We still must do whatever we can to resist them.[6]

Perhaps we have an unparalleled opportunity today to show young people what true freedom is. In any case, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

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[1] Victor Davis Hanson, *American Greatness*, February 7, 2021.
[2] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2: 696.
[3] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, 598.
[4] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Psalm 134.
[5] Arthur Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler*, 208.
[6] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited*, 118)

The Yoke That Bears Us Up

By Charles L. Bartow

"Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" Mt 11:28–30

"Come to me," Jesus said. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me …" Learn what? We might ask. Why, learn "the way of God's statutes," to use the words of the poet in Psalm 119. But why Jesus' yoke and not the yoke of God's law as understood by its authorized and celebrated interpreters? Why come to Jesus, that out of the mainstream rabbi from out of the way Nazareth of all places? "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46). Even a truly guileless Israelite, Nathanael, had to wonder. Why shouldn't we? Why come to Jesus instead of to the teachers of the law whose credentials had been certified in ancient Israel's synagogues—and in the temple at Jerusalem—for generations.

Of course, Jesus' uniqueness already had been noted in *how* he taught God's word, God's law, "the way of God's statutes," concerning which he said ".... not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Mt 5:18). After what is called his "Sermon on the Mount," we are told how the crowds "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught … as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Mt. 7:28). We note as well that in his rebuke of his generation's unresponsiveness to either John the Baptist's message regarding the nearness of the Kingdom of God, or his own message having to do with the same subject, Jesus referred to himself as "The Son of Man" (Mt 11:19). "Son of Man" is a messianic title taken from the Book of Daniel where it refers to a representative human figure "to whom universal and everlasting dominion shall be given."[1]

Then, in climactic fashion, in the verse from Matthew's gospel immediately preceding our text, Jesus spoke of himself as the unique Son of God in whom the presence of God and the will of God are made known. He said:
All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Mt 11:27).

In other words, Jesus came as he said, not to abrogate the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them (Mt 5:17), and to invite you and me—and anyone else with ears to hear—to join him in his fulfillment of them. So there it stands, now as then; and either it is sheer chutzpa, an outrage, blasphemy, as those who sought to do away with Jesus found it (Mt 26:65) or it is an authentic divine invitation happily to be taken up. "Come to me," Jesus says to us now. Is it an option merely, or a self authenticating authoritative cancellation of all options save this one? "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart. …"

Jesus said he is "gentle," the word can be translated, has been translated, as "meek." "Meek" does not indicate obsequiousness. It indicates that what pleases Jesus is not the pursuit of self-interest. Instead, what pleases him is to do what serves his Father's good pleasure, whatever the cost. And we know that at last, it cost Jesus himself dearly. Further, Jesus is long-suffering. That he is gentle implies that he is long suffering as well as meek. So, for example, though Jesus never condones sin, he does forgive it. He bears patiently, urgently, yet patiently with sinners, even the worst, so that women, and men, and children as well, may feel the burden of sin (of rebellion against the way of God's statutes) lifted. Therefore they are freed more and more to live beyond the debilitations of guilt. Freud, it is claimed, said: "He who controls the world's guilt controls the world."

But if sin is forgiven, if humanity's burden of guilt is lifted, guilt is no longer available as a means of control and humanity goes free. Humanity goes free to aspire to a standard of conduct that in this life, it is unlikely to achieve: withholding anger when provoked, refraining from insult when insulted, holding out hope of reconciliation in the face of what may appear to be irreconcilable differences, seeking the total welfare of those who couldn't care less for you—who in fact may have "done you dirt"—which is what it means to love your enemies. All this is explicated in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1ff.) Nineteenth century poet, Robert Browning, caught the sense of it, "ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp/or what's a heaven for?"[2] Jesus puts it in the plainest prose, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). There's an earful! Jesus' gentleness, his meekness, his long-suffering must not be mistaken for an indulgent affection tolerant of everything that comes its way. Renowned mid-twentieth century preacher, George Arthur Buttrick called it a "hidden fire of wrath"[3] kindled to burn everything that encumbers people as they seek to be taught "the way of God's statutes, and observe it to the end" (Ps 119:33).

Then Jesus says he is "humble in heart." Likewise we—who should doubt it?—are instructed to be humble in heart, in will, in intention. We are to take Jesus' yoke upon ourselves, surrendering willfulness in self-regard as we undertake the life-work to which Jesus calls us. Jesus' humility beautifully is summed up in Philippians where Paul's epistolary prose trembles on the brink of poetry and song. There the apostle says of Christ Jesus,

> though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death–even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, So that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:5–11).

In Eastern Orthodox worship this ancient Christian hymn, held in mind as a single word-phrase, is sung while a liturgical cross is lowered and raised over worshippers in benediction to symbolize Christ's humiliation and glorification. Thus, through sung praise (and lived experience), Christ's humiliation and glorification are shared by all who believe in Jesus as the one—the *only* Son—whom the Father knows and who knows the Father, and who reveals the Father to whomever he chooses. And whom does he not choose? To take upon oneself the yoke of Christ Jesus, then, is to seize upon Christ's invitation to become adopted daughters and sons of God, siblings of the only begotten Son of God (e.g. Rom 8:14–17). It is also to be joined to the true humanity of the messianic Son of Man as foretold by the prophet Daniel. Think of it! Our humanity joined to Christ's divinity through the Son of God's "entering this life of ours to bear himself the weight of it, forever merciful in his judgment, and just in all his compassion."[4] So it was put by the late, great Lutheran preacher and homiletician, Paul Scherer, my mentor, colleague and friend. The apostle Paul, in Colossians, startles us with these words: "... you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory" (Col 3:3b-4).

Can you take it in? Yoked to God's Son, we are not, by his Father—our Father—regarded as the morally compromised, ethically obtuse, spiritually confounded, and guilt-burdened souls we from time to time—no doubt with warrant—may think ourselves to be. To the contrary, we are gentle, meek, long-suffering. We are humble, too, as he was humble, not in self-abnegation, but in self-fulfillment through service to God and neighbor. This staggers the imagination: we, you and I, by God, are counted among the humble, the gentle, the long suffering, the *meek* who are to inherit the earth (Mt 5:5) and to possess (as sheer gift) the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:10). "Do not be afraid, little flock," Jesus says in Luke's account of the gospel, "for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Lk 12:32).

Such is the kingdom of God, such is the presence and power of God, that burdened with immeasurable grief, we know God's solace, that halting in anguish and despair nigh unto death, we know God's quickening of our spirits through the indwelling in us of his Holy Spirit, that, faulted by conscience or condemned by the verbal assaults of tongues sharpened to speak our shame, we know the unflagging companionship of him of whom it was said—by his enemies, whom he loved: "Look, a glutton and a drunkard [which he was not], a friend of tax collectors and sinners [which he was] (Mt 11:19b). "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens," Jesus says, "and you will find rest," divine refreshment, that is what it means, and the happiness of an eternal sabbath (rest for the soul) in the present moment and in the everlasting future. Saint Thomas á Kempis heard and felt Jesus' "Come to me, *all,"* and he cried out in prayer:

> Thou art witness unto me, O God, that nothing can comfort me, no creature can give me rest, but Thou only, my God, whom I long to contemplate everlastingly.[5]

"Come to me all …, All come to me," Jesus says. Christ sets no limit to the blessed all.

And coming, what do we find but that, as Jesus says, "his yoke is easy, and his burden is light." His yoke does not chafe, for it is shaped to our need of it, which is our need of him. And his burden is light, for it is the burden of his caring for us as for no one else, and it is the burden of his caring for all others as if for us alone. Centuries ago, Bernard of Clairvaux sang of it in a melody and cadence of victory: "O blessed burden that makes all burdens light! O blessed yoke that bears the bearer up."[6] So also George Frederick Handel in his glorious *Messiah* made it dance in our hearing, so we may sing:

His yoke is easy
His burthen is light
His burthen, his burthen is light! [7]

This sermon is printed here with permission from Wipf & Stock from the forthcoming volume, *Witness to Life: Preaching and Poetry as Theology and Art*.

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[1] Davis, Gehman, *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible,* 572.
[2] Browning, "Andrea Del Sarto", Selections from *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning,* 77.
[3] Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7, p. 390.
[4] Scherer, in Wallis, ed. *Worship Resources for the Christian year,* 333.
[5] See Speer, *Five Minutes a Day,* 276.
[6] See Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible,* vol. 7, 391.
[7] Handel, *The Messiah,* 98.

Reformed Accents

By Joseph D. Small

Worldliness to a reared Calvinist is not a vague entity but a specifiable sin of a higher order. The privilege of predestination, of being one of the Elect, carried with it the command to "come out from among them and be separate." It is only in light of my long incarceration within that principle under conditions of immigrant inferiority that my drive to reverse the order and get out there and be one of them can be at all understood.

The Blood of the Lamb, Peter DeVries[1]

The Reformed tradition and the churches that embody that tradition share in the faith of the one holy catholic apostolic church. They also share Protestant emphases on Scripture, justification, and the ministry of the whole people of God. However, within these commonalities, Reformed churches represent some distinctive perspectives on Christian faith and life. These perspectives, derived from readings of Scripture, lead Reformed churches to shared emphases in theology, worship, church life, and ethics. The Reformed tradition is not monolithic and Reformed churches are not uniform, but the tradition and the churches that identify with it embody three overarching themes that characterize Reformed thought and life: grace alone, the sovereignty of God, and the character of the Christian community. While these themes are not unique to the Reformed tradition, they receive identifiable stress and characteristic expression in Reformed faith and life.

The three themes are apparent in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s "Confession of 1967" and "A Brief Statement of Faith." Both confessions are Trinitarian in structure, but with a twist. Rather than following the familiar pattern of the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—they follow the order of the "apostolic benediction" in 2 Corinthians 13:13: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." The confessional use of this scriptural expression gives appropriate expression to Reformed emphases in Christian faith by emphasizing grace, sovereignty, and community within a rich Trinitarian perspective. Recalling the opening of the Heidelberg Catechism, A Brief Statement of Faith begins,

> In life and in death we belong to God.
> Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
> the love of God,
> and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
> we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
> whom alone we worship and serve.[2]

The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ

Like many churchly terms, *grace* is heard regularly in sermons, prayers, and hymns, but it is not always accompanied by a clear understanding of what it means. We sense that it is a good word, having something to do with God's favor, yet it may seem abstract and remote from real life. Is grace a *substance*, a religious commodity that we receive from God? Is it a *characteristic*, a spiritual capacity that God bestows on different people in varying quantities? Is grace a *force*, providing us with an impetus to holiness?

Although there have been times in the church's history when people have spoken of grace as a particular benefit measured out to us by God, Christians have more often understood that "grace" is a shorthand way of referring to the fullness of the relationship that God creates with people. What does God have to do with us, and what is the character of God's bond with the world? Is God detached from happenings in the world and aloof from our lives? Does God watch our every move, ready to judge and punish our sins? Or does God love us just the way we are, indulging our foibles and failings? Is God ready to intervene in our lives whenever we ask for something good? The answer to all of the abstract questions about the relationship between God and ourselves is found in the actuality of Jesus Christ. When we say, "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ," we affirm

that God's Way in the world is expressed and known in Jesus Christ as God's free, faithful movement toward us in love. We do not have to settle for intangible definitions of grace, for we have before us narratives of grace, told in the familiar contours of a human life. The opening of the Gospel according to John expresses this central truth in a few flowing words that embody evangelical truth.

> And the Word became flesh
> and dwelt among us,
> full of grace and truth;
> we have beheld his glory,
> glory as of the only Son from the Father …
> And from his fullness have we all received,
> grace upon grace . . . (John 1:14,16, RSV)

The Nicene Creed, the first great ecumenical statement of the church's faith, boldly professes that God's gracious self-giving is made tangible in Christ, and that it is all for the sake of human wholeness. The Creed's great declarations of incarnation, atonement, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension are not abstract doctrines, but summaries of the biblical accounts that are good news *for us*. The second major section of the Nicene Creed affirms faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ in two distinct movements: a movement that confesses the full divinity of the Son of God, and a movement that narrates the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Human One. (Incarnation is not limited to Jesus' birth; his becoming human encompasses the whole of life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming again). The pivot that links the two movements is the very good news that it is all "for us and for our salvation."

> We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
> the only Son of God,
> eternally begotten of the Father,
> God from God, Light from Light,
> true God from true God,
> begotten not made,
> of one Being with the Father;
> through him all things were made.
> ***For us and for our salvation***
> he came down from heaven,
> was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
> and became truly human.
> For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
> he suffered death and was buried.
> On the third day he rose again
> in accordance with the Scriptures;
> he ascended into heaven
> and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
> He will come again in glory to judge the living and
> the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.[3]

Our salvation hinges on the reality that the Son of God is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father" *and* that "he came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human." A Jesus Christ less than truly God or less than truly human could not have accomplished our salvation, would not have been "for us." A century after the Nicene Creed, the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon made the point even more forcefully: Jesus Christ is "perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, truly God and truly human, *of one Being* with the Father as regards his divinity and *of one Being* with us as regards his humanity." Then, together with the Council of Nicaea, Chalcedon declares that this is "for us and our salvation."

Jesus Christ is truly God to us and truly human to God. As one with us and for us, Jesus Christ lived God's Way in the world fully, loving God and loving people with heart, soul, mind, and strength. His full love of God and full love of people is more than an example that we must strive to emulate, however. The love of God in Jesus Christ *does something* for us. As the Word became flesh, uniting God with us, so, in Christ, we are united to God. The incarnation is the union of the Word with us that brings about our union with Christ, so that we are united with him in his fulfillment of God's Way in the world —loving God completely and loving others as himself. Our self-imposed distance from God is overcome, for as God's Son becomes one with us and we are made one with him, we who are in Christ can now love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Our self-imposed distance from others is overcome, for as God's Son becomes brother to all, we who are made one with him can now love our neighbors, even strangers and enemies, as ourselves.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is at the center of our knowledge of God and our experience of God. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—and our own experience of Christ—confirm that we are not loved because we deserve to be loved. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is known most dramatically "in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). But that is not all. Paul goes on to say that, "if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:11). In Christ we know God as the One who takes the initiative to move toward us openly, freely, lovingly, unconditionally. Karl Barth speaks of God's grace in Jesus Christ as "the demonstration, the overflowing of the love which is the being of God. ... It is love in the form of the deepest condescension. It occurs even when there is no question or claim of merit on the part of the other."[4] To speak of grace is to speak of the freedom of the Lover who does

not require that the beloved meet certain conditions: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son …," says John (1 John 4:10).

**Did the incarnate Son of God become one with only the best of humankind? No*. Scripture assures us that Christ Jesus, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil. 2:6-7, TNIV).

**Does Jesus parcel out love only to people good enough to deserve it? No*. Jesus says, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17, TNIV).

**Did Jesus die on the cross only for people worthy of his sacrifice? No*. Paul says, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6, TNIV).

**Was Jesus raised from death only on behalf of people wise enough to appreciate his triumph? No*. Scripture proclaims, "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:7, TNIV).

**Does the risen and ascended Christ care only for those of us who are always faithful? No*. Scripture assures us that "we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God" and that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16, TNIV).

All Christians agree that God's love for us through the grace of Jesus Christ creates a new reality for human life: "For by grace you have been saved though faith" (Ephesians 2:8). However, some Christians stress the grace of Christ while others emphasize the human response of faith. Put another way, some concentrate on the gift that is given while others focus on the necessity of receiving the gift. The Reformed tradition comes down firmly on the side of grace, confessing that God's free gift even creates our capacity for faith and elicits faith itself. The grace of Jesus Christ is not a potential reality, requiring human faith in order to become effective. If we were to claim that our faith is necessary to bring about the new relationship between God and us —our salvation—then salvation would be our accomplishment, in Reformation terms our "work." This would create for us the problem that comes with all forms of works righteousness: how could we ever be sure that our faith is good enough, true enough, faithful enough faith? The Reformed tradition proclaims that the distance between God and humankind is bridged by God alone, and that we are set free from constant striving to achieve sufficient faith to bridge the gap.

The Reformed tradition speaks of the free grace of Christ as "election." God's election is never to privilege. Letty Russell states that "the doctrine of election points to the need for identity as human beings in the world. Those who are nobody affirm their own self-worth as children of God by claiming that God has chosen them and enabled them to live faithfully. In this sense, to be chosen of God is to be granted full human identity and worth as a gift of God's love."[5]

The Reformed emphasis on Christ's grace is liberating, setting us free from anxiety about the adequacy of our lives and the depth of our belief. Neither our works nor our faith can save us; neither is a necessary precondition to God's love. Instead, both our faith and our works are expressions of gratitude for amazing grace. Our gratitude is expressed in more than thoughts and feelings, for as we are liberated for thankful response to God's unrestricted love, we are also freed for gracious relationships with other people. As men and women who know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we no longer need to make calculations about the worth, power, or ability of other people as a precondition for our love. We, too, can live grace-filled lives as we, too, love all people freely and unreservedly.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, not our faith, determines the relationship between God and ourselves. Yet the Reformed emphasis upon grace does not diminish our faith. Calvin devotes fifty pages of the *Institutes* to an exploration of the meaning and significance of faith. His brief definition of faith only hints at the depth of its meaning: "Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."[6] Our faith is not simply belief, but "a firm and certain knowledge" that both believes and trusts in God's goodness, leading to the fidelity of our lives. Our tendency to restrict "faith" to "belief" is an unfortunate consequence of a limitation in the English language. The Greek word translated "faith"—*pistis*—has a verb form—*pisteuo*—while the English language does not. Because we cannot translate the Greek verb as "faithing" (I faith, you faith, he/she/it faiths) it is usually rendered in English as "believing" (I believe, you believe, he/she/it believes). The result is

that faith's trust and loyalty can become eclipsed by faith's belief.

"Faithing" God is *believing* that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14), *trusting* that from Christ "we have all received grace upon grace" (John 1:16), and *being loyal* to "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). Reformed concern for the truth about God is more than a fascination with intellectual orthodoxy. What we "faith" about the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ shapes how we understand God's Way in the world, whether we can trust that way to be good, and how we live our way in the world in loyalty to the One who has placed us on his Way.

The Love of God

The Westminster Confession of Faith, a seventeenth century English creed, declares that God "… is alone the fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom, are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them, whatsoever himself pleaseth."[7] Archaic language and an austere description of God's relationship to the world add up, in their own way, to an expression of the Reformed emphasis on the sovereignty of God—the affirmation that God is the free and powerful source of all that is. Westminster's words do not add up to the gospel's full affirmation of God's dominion over creation, however.

Few of us would deny God's freedom and power, but few of us would use Westminster's abstract, dispassionate descriptions of a distant deity, for they do not adequately express the richness of God's dynamic freedom as we know it in Jesus Christ. Something seems to be missing, and that something is the *love* of God. Apart from God's love, notions of absolute freedom and power are frightening. Calvin notes that "it will not suffice simply to hold that there is One whom all ought to honor and adore, unless we are also persuaded that he is the fountain of every good."[8] If we divorce notions of God's sovereign power from Jesus Christ, we end up with silly speculation (if God is all-powerful, can God make a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it?), or fatalism (human effort is pointless because God has determined everything), or despair (God's power does not deal with human suffering). We avoid theoretical conjecture when we know God through God's self-revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then we can seek to understand God's sovereign power, not through dictionary definitions of omnipotence, but in Jesus Christ. What do we find when we seek? We find Christ crucified, and this rejected and executed one is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). Power and wisdom look different in the form of a cross.

In Jesus Christ, the power of God, we do not experience God's sovereignty as compulsion. God is not a dictator, not even a benign despot. In Jesus Christ we know the God whose power is that of One who loves, seeks, calls, and saves. God does not have a monopoly on power, fashioning the world and all within it as pawns in a divine game, moved around the board according to a mysterious heavenly strategy. Neither, however, do we humans hold all the power, reducing God to a beggar at the door. The Lord proclaims,

> For as the rain and snow come down from heaven,
> and do not return there until they have watered the
> earth, making it bring forth and sprout,
> giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
> it shall not return to me empty,
> but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
> and succeed in the thing for which I send it.
>
> Isaiah 55:11, 12

The word of God is not simply a proposal, but a creative declaration that shapes reality. In the beginning, God speaks and the world comes to be: "God said … and there was" (Gen. 1). When the prophets announced, "the word of the Lord," judgment occurred, and hope was fulfilled (e.g. Amos 1:2; Isaiah 40:1). When the Word became flesh, the glory of the Lord was revealed (John 1:14). God's word is not an empty word, for it fulfills God's purpose in the world.

The church's confession of faith in "God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth" is far more than the postulation of intelligent design that brought the universe into being. Because the Creator is the God we know in Jesus Christ, we understand that the Creator continues to love and care for all creation. As Calvin puts it, "To make God a momentary Creator who once for all finished his work, would be cold and barren … we see the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception."[9] God's providential care for creation is the love of God in Christ, "For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:19, 20).

Because the Creator of the cosmos is the Redeemer and Sustainer of the cosmos, God's sovereign power is God's sovereign love. "The power of God is essentially the power of redemption," says Wendy Farley. "The power and will to redeem are more aptly symbolized by love than by models of domination, judgment, or control." The issue is not one of abstract symbols or models, however, for "divine power is most clearly and

poignantly seen in the Messiah, whose teachings, death, and resurrection manifest the love of God 'made flesh' in history."[10] Jesus Christ, the power of God, cries out to us, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37). The desire of God, beckoning in love, displays divine power more forcefully than any speculative conception of power. The Reformed tradition's emphasis on the sovereignty of God does not extol divine domination, but rather leads us to stand in awe before God's reign of love in Jesus Christ.

The sovereignty of God is the love of God for the whole created order. Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch Reformed theologian, journalist, and prime minister of the Netherlands, expressed dramatically the Reformed understanding of God's sovereignty over all of life: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign overall, does not cry: 'Mine!'"[11] God is sovereign over all creation, so that no part of life lies outside of his nourishment and care. While "separation of church and state" is an axiom of American political life, this does not mean that Christian faith and life are confined to a spiritual ghetto. Human divisions between the "religious" and the "secular" are illusory; God is not concerned only with so-called spiritual matters, while remaining indifferent to social patterns of racial bigotry, class inequity, abuses of political power, global warming, and market driven consumerism. The Confession of 1967 declares:

> God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of human life: social and cultural, economic and political, scientific and technological, individual and corporate. It includes the natural environment as exploited and despoiled by sin. It is the will of God that the divine purpose for human life shall be fulfilled under the rule of Christ and all evil be banished from creation.[12]

Reformed insistence that the sovereign love of God knows no bounds is not a modern innovation. "Our Song of Hope" in the twentieth century, and Abraham Kuyper in the nineteenth century, stand in a long line of Reformed affirmations. In the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards Jr. criticized the recently adopted constitution of the United States for allowing the continuation of slavery. "Africans are by nature equally entitled to freedom as we are," he said. "They have the same right to their freedom which they have to their property or to their lives. Therefore, to enslave them is as really and in the same sense wrong, as to steal from them, or to rob or murder them."[13] In the seventeenth century the Westminster larger Catechism detailed long lists of the duties required and the sins forbidden by the eighth commandment, "Thou shalt not steal." Among the positive actions that the commandment requires are 'justice in contracts and commerce … rendering to everyone his due … giving and lending freely … avoiding unnecessary lawsuits . . . and an endeavor by all just and lawful means to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others as well as our own."[14] In the sixteenth century Calvin asserted that the kingdom of God "does not lead us to consider the whole nature of government a thing polluted, which has nothing to do with Christian men."[15] Calvin's thought and action on seemingly mundane matters such as economic justice, health care, education, and the environment have shaped Reformed thought and action through the centuries. Elsie McKee notes that in the Reformed tradition's gratitude and reverence for the sovereign God, "God always comes first, but the honor owed to God is often most clearly manifested in how believers live their day-to-day vocations."[16]

The Communion of the Holy Spirit

Christians within the Reformed tradition have always understood that faith is not the private possession of individuals but is lived out by persons in community. The Christian community—the church—is a fellowship of women and men called to live together within the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. It is not simply a voluntary organization of like-minded people who gather together for mutual comfort and inspiration. The community of faith is called by Christ and lives in Christ: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20), is Christ's declaration that the normal form of the relationship between the triune God and us is between the triune God and us *in community*.

"Our World Belongs to God," a contemporary testimony of the Christian Reformed Church, gives graceful expression to faith in God's gift of new community:

> At Pentecost, promises old and new are fulfilled.
> The ascended Jesus becomes the baptizer,
> drenching his followers with his Spirit,
> creating a new community
> where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit make their home.
> Renewed and filled with the breath of God,
> women and men,
> young and old,
> dream dreams
> and see visions.[17]

As the new community "where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit make their home," the church is called to embody

God's new Way of living in the world. When we confess the Apostles' Creed saying, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting," we are not merely affirming a laundry list of unrelated doctrinal leftovers. Just as our confession of faith in God the Father and Jesus Christ is followed by narrative depictions of these movements of God among us, so the third article of the Apostles' Creed narrates the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst. God's presence among us as Holy Spirit is the divine mission of establishing and sustaining the reality of human communion with God and with other people. Called together by the gracious love of God in Jesus Christ, the church is a communion, enduring through time and space, in which God's forgiveness generates mutual forgiveness, and God's faithfulness secures certain hope.

In the presence of the Holy Spirit the church is called to be *holy*, a distinctive, Spirit-shaped community in the world. The church's response to the Spirit's presence is always ambiguous; efforts to live as a new people are mixed with grand and petty conformities to the culture. Any actual church may be little different from other organizations in society, but despite obvious assimilation by the culture and accommodation to society's values, the Spirit remains present as the movement of God to create a new and different human community in the world.

In the presence of the Holy Spirit the church is called to be *catholic*, rising above the limitations of race, gender, class, and nation, and overcoming every division of faith and practice, so that the community is whole. Again, the church's response is ambiguous; some dividing walls are broken down while others are reinforced. Any actual church may be captive to exclusivist structures and divisive assertions of faith and live, but in spite of self-imposed restrictions, the Spirit is God's presence among us to create a new space of freedom in the world.

In the presence of the Holy Spirit the church is called to be a community of forgiven people (*the communion of saints*) who live together in mutual forgiveness (*the forgiveness of sins*). The church is called to live now in anticipation of the final victory over sin and death (*the resurrection of the body*). The church is called to move beyond "the way things are" toward God's Way in the world (*the life everlasting*). Even as we speak the words of the Creed, we know that for every sign of faithfulness there seems to be evidence of crass conformity to the prevailing spirit of the age. The church is a community of ordinary people, plainly guilty of the charge of hypocrisy; what we claim in our creeds falls far short of what we display in our life together.

The Reformed tradition does not make unrealistic claims for the character of Christian community, as if the church were divine, floating above the real world. Neither does the tradition fall into cynical dismissal of Christian community, as if the church were a mere organization, fully immersed in the real world. Dutch theologian G.C. Berkouwer expresses Reformed realism by noting that, "The *credo ecclesiam* does not direct our attention only to what ought to be and what ought to happen, but to what obviously has happened in the lives of [Christians]."[18] What has happened in Christian communities is a mix of faithfulness and infidelity, truth and falsehood, obedience and defiance, love and indifference . . . the list goes on. Yet the Spirit remains present, the call continues to be heard, and men and women continue to respond. The Reformed tradition provides us with two resources for faithful discipleship: utter realism about the church and utter trust in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Honesty and hope are the twin pillars that support Reformed community.

The Reformed tradition's utter realism about the church and its confidence in the presence of the Holy Spirit led to the conviction that the church's ministry and mission are the calling of the whole people of God. In the Reformed tradition, ministry is not the domain of a particular group of people called "clergy," who lead a larger group called "laity." This un-Reformed clergy/lay distinction obscures the reality that all specific ministries of the church are particular expressions of the ministry of the whole body of Christ. All Christians are gifted for ministry, and so there is a real sense in which all are ordained to ministry in their baptisms. This leads Reformed churches to establish organizational structures that engage the whole people of God. Within this foundational ministry of the whole people of God, persons may be called to perform specific functions that are important to the life of particular communities of faith. Church school teachers, choir members, treasurers, cooks, ushers and greeters, gardeners, and others are called formally and informally, and exercise their gifts on behalf of the whole congregation.[19]

However, some ministries are *necessary* to the spiritual health and faithful life of *every* Christian community. The whole church gives order to these necessary functions by regularizing their shape, their duties, their qualifications, and their approval. These "ordered ministries," and the persons who are called to them, are grounded in Baptism and established in ordination—the whole church's act of setting apart for particular service. Following Calvin, the mainstream of Reformed ecclesiology recognizes three ordered ministries: deacon, elder, and minister. These three ministries represent two ecclesial functions: ministries of the Word and Sacrament performed by presbyters (pastors and

elders) and ministries of service performed by deacons. These ministries are collegial and are exercised in community, through councils (sessions/consistories, presbyteries/classes, and general assemblies/synods). No minister, elder, or deacon is self-sufficient and no ministry is exercised apart from the other ministries or in isolation from the whole people of God. The structures of Reformed church order are designed to ensure that ordinary people are chosen by ordinary communities in the confidence that "through the ministers whom [God] has entrusted this office and conferred the grace to carry it out, he dispenses and distributes his gifts to the church; and he shows himself as present by manifesting the power of his Spirit in this institution, that it not be vain or idle."[20]

Although Reformed churches have sometimes placed too much confidence in structures, the Reformed tradition's intention has always been to shape Christian community in patterns of grace, love, and communion. The sixteenth century confession of the Reformed churches "dispersed in France" expresses this intention clearly:

> We believe that the [true church] ought to be governed in accordance with the order established by our Lord Jesus Christ, having pastors, elders, and deacons. In this way, pure doctrine can be maintained, vices can be corrected and suppressed, the poor and afflicted can be helped in their need, assemblies can be gathered in the name of God, and both great and small can be edified.[21]

Jürgen Moltmann gives more contemporary expression to the character of Reformed community through the concept of friendship. He says that the communion of saints, the community of faith and faithfulness, "is really the fellowship of friends who live in the friendship of Jesus and spread friendliness in the fellowship, by meeting the forsaken with affection and the despised with respect."[22] Reformed Christians strive to make this more than a lofty sentiment by shaping church life in ways that are open to all, both within and outside of the community of faith, by remaining open to the presence of the Holy Spirit.

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit" are not simply the words of a benediction or a statement of faith; they are the reality in which we live and move and have our being.

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[1] Peter DeVries, *The Blood of the Lamb* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), 45.
[2] A Brief Statement of Faith, *The Book of Confessions*, 10.1, 267.
[3] The Nicene Creed, *The Book of Confessions*, 1.2., 3.
[4] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.2. G.W. Bromiley & T.F. Torrance, eds., G.W. Bromiley, et al., trans. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957). 9f.
[5] Letty Russell, *The Church in the Round* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 169.
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[8] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.1., 40.
[9] Calvin, *Institutes* 1.16.1., 197.
[10] Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 100.
[11] Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty" in James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.
[12] Confession of 1967, Inclusive Language Text, 9.53.
[13] Jonathan Edwards, Jr., "The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade, and of Slavery" in William Stacey Johnson & John H. Leith, eds., *Reformed Reader* I (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 371.
[14] Westminster Larger Catechism, *The Book of Confessions,* 7.251, 218.
[15] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.2., 1487.
[16] Elsie Anne McKee, "Calvin's Teaching on Social and Economic Issues" in Edward Dommen & James Bratt, eds., *John Calvin Rediscovered: The Impact of His Social and Economic Thought* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 21.
[17] "Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony" (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2008) paragraph 28.
[18] G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) p. 9.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.2., 1055.
[21] The French Confession of 1559, trans. Ellen Babinsky and Joseph D. Small (Louisville: Office of Theology and Worship, 1998) XXIX, 14.
[22] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 316.

The Institute for Theological Education

Theology Matters has established The Institute for Theological Education. Our goal is to equip the next generation of pastors and congregational leaders for Presbyterian and other Christian congregations. We seek to provide theological instruction that is biblical and from the mainstream of the Reformed tradition, and we begin by offering three programs:

1. A Master of Arts in Reformed Theology in partnership with the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (for more details, see below);
2. A continuing education program that offers seminars and retreats for pastors, elders, teachers, and other congregational leaders; and
3. An adult education program that offers courses, lectures, and seminars to all interested in the subject matter, whether for academic credit, a certificate in theological studies, or as auditors.

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