



WHAT IT MEANS TO BE REFORMED

AN IDENTITY
STATEMENT



CHRISTIAN
REFORMED
CHURCH

Foreword

The Christian Reformed Church has a unique and important place in the Christian community. Understanding the Christian Reformed Church today requires an awareness of who we are, where we have been, and what has shaped and molded us. God has created and shaped the Christian Reformed Church and has given us a unique and wonderful identity. In his grace and wisdom he designed our church to fulfill his plan and purpose. We believe that we have been called to live and proclaim the good news that transforms lives and communities worldwide. In order to effectively live out God's plan for our church, it is important that we understand that calling in this time and place in history.

In 2002, the synod of the Christian Reformed Church endorsed the Denominational Ministries Plan, including the Identity Statement found in this booklet, so that we might better understand our distinctive place in the broader Christian community and live out that uniqueness in our mission and ministry. The Identity Statement is intended to be used by congregations, study groups, and individual members of the Christian Reformed Church to discover, discuss, and continually refine our identity as God's people today.

The vision of the Christian Reformed Church is that in God's grace we will truly become "a diverse family of healthy congregations, assemblies, and ministries expressing the good news of God's kingdom that transforms lives and communities worldwide." As we begin to reflect the diversity of the whole body of Christ, our growing denominational family will be well served by ongoing reflection on God's grace through every generation. As the Christian Reformed Church looks back at the last 150 years and looks forward to the years ahead, we realize that it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand who we are apart from hearing our own story. To that end, we offer this Identity Statement.

To God be the glory!

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Contents

Preface	5
The Reformed accent	6
The family tree	8
Three approaches to being Reformed	11
What we believe: The doctrinalist emphasis. . .	12
How we experience God in our daily walk of faith: The pietist emphasis	20
How we relate the gospel to the world: The transformationalist emphasis	29
Putting them all together.	36

Preface

The purpose of this identity statement is to answer the question: What does it mean to be a Reformed Christian? Many Christians in North America, including members of the CRC, may question the value, even the appropriateness, of asking such a question. The emphasis in North American Christianity today is upon finding those things that unite Christians with, not distinguish them from, fellow Christians.

In many ways, the impulse to focus upon what Christians have in common with one another is exactly the right one. The CRC often has spent too much time and energy on matters that divide the CRC from, instead of unite it with, other Christians. Jesus himself prayed that the church would be one (John 17:27). Paul makes a great deal of the fact that the body of Christ is one (1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 4:4-6). What better mission and vision statement could any church want or need than Paul's great call to "come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13)? It's hard to put too much emphasis upon what unites Christians with one another.

Moreover, the enemy of the Christian church today is not other Christians, whether Lutherans or Methodists, Roman Catholics or Pentecostals. The primary enemy of the North American church is a deadly secularism that threatens all Christians and against which they should stand together in common faith and action. Indeed, in many ways, the CRC already joins hands with other Christians. Local congregations often work together with other churches in setting up food banks and tutoring programs. Denominational agencies often do their worldwide ministry in collaboration with other churches and religious organizations.

It is in this setting that we offer this identity statement about what it means to be Reformed.

The Reformed accent

All Christians speak with what one person has called “an accent,” a particular theological accent. There is no such thing as pure, Christian speech. Imagine trying to get people from New Orleans, Halifax, Brooklyn, and Winnipeg to all speak with the same accent. It doesn’t work—not because these people dislike each other but because language by its very nature develops locally. Particular people living together develop particular ways of expressing themselves. “Culture” is the accumulation of these particularities, including shared experiences, shared meanings, and shared ways of life. The particularity of human community is actually part of the marvelous diversity of God’s creation.

In the same way, Christians, as they work and worship together, develop particular ways of speaking. There is no such thing as pure, theologically neutral, Christian speech. Particular people who have had common experiences of faith and life develop particular ways of expressing their faith and worshipping God. To be sure, when these differences lead to conflict and alienation, then healthy differences have become sinful divisions, but Christians will always speak with particular theological accents.

Indeed, this particularity is also deeply biblical. The 1 Corinthians 12 image of the church as a body highlights both the unity of the church (one body) and the diversity of the church (hands and feet and eyes). The teaching of this great chapter is clear: The biblically healthy church has deep unity *and* rich diversity. Indeed, one of the deep biblical truths is the truth of the one and the many. The triune God himself is one and three.

There’s nothing inherently sinful or divisive when Reformed Christians or other groups of Christians try to understand and develop their own theological accents. In fact, such self-understanding, as it strengthens the particular hands or feet or eyes of the body, strengthens the whole body in its united witness to the world.

Sometimes people use the term *Reformed* or *distinctively Reformed* as though it’s a theological accent spoken by only a few people, and as though it’s an accent that has little in common

with the broader Christian church. Neither of these is true.

The Reformed accent is much larger than the CRC and the CRC's particular history. It thrives in countries around the world, including Hungary, Korea, Indonesia, Scotland, and Madagascar. The Heidelberg Catechism, only one of many Reformed confessions, has been translated into thirty languages. Moreover, the CRC itself is increasingly diverse. On a given Sunday, members of the CRC worship in at least fourteen different languages!

Moreover, Reformed Christianity has much in common with the universal Christian church. Reformed Christianity is squarely anchored in that broad Christian orthodoxy that goes back to the New Testament church. Reformed Christians share with all other Christians a common faith in the triune God who created the heavens and the earth, whose second person became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, and whose third person has indwelt the church by the Holy Spirit. Reformed Christians join with Christians in all times and places in affirming the saving purpose of God to unite all things in Jesus Christ, the mission of the church to proclaim this good news, and the hope of Christ's return in glory to usher in the new heaven and the new earth. Reformed Christians confess their faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed along with the church universal.

This identity statement seeks to articulate some of the particular accents of the Reformed tradition but in ways that are accessible across many ethnic, denominational, and generational lines. In fact, such an inclusive expression of the Reformed perspective is not just desirable but essential—if the Reformed perspective is to provide ongoing sources of unity and purpose for the CRC.

The family tree

One way to explain the Reformed tradition is to locate the Reformed family in the broader family tree of the Christian church. The following simple chart shows how the Christian church has developed over the centuries.

MAJOR BRANCHES OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

1st to 11th century	The Christian Church		
11th century	Western Catholic	Eastern Orthodox	
16th century	Protestant	Roman Catholic	Eastern Orthodox

Note: In the following, the farther to the left, the more radical the break from the Roman Catholic Church.

	Protestant Churches			
16th century	Anabaptist	Reformed	Lutheran	Anglican
17th century	Quakers	Puritans		
18th century		Methodist		
19th century	Free Church			
20th century	Pentecostal			

The Christian church was united until the eleventh century when the western church (the Roman Catholic Church) split from the eastern church (the Orthodox Church). In the sixteenth century, new winds of the Spirit blew through the Roman Catholic Church, and the Protestant Reformation was underway. Christians discovered anew the central message of the Bible—that we are saved by grace alone through faith. Out of the Protestant Reformation came four major branches—the Anabaptist, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican. The order in which these four branches are listed from left to right is significant. The further to the left one goes, the more radical was that church’s break from the Roman Catholic Church. In terms of formality of worship, this chart moves from less formal (left side) to more formal (right side); in terms of sacraments, from less central in worship to more central in worship; in terms of church government, from less hierarchical to more hierarchical. In this family of European-based churches, the Reformed perspective often represents a broad middle ground.

As Reformed Christians seek to locate themselves in the North American Protestant family tree, it’s tempting to think that the Reformed perspective as found in the CRC represents a middle ground between present-day liberalism

and fundamentalism. After all, Reformed Christians do share with fundamentalism an unapologetic belief in supernaturalism and with liberalism a desire for the Christian faith to be culturally engaging.

But the Reformed tradition as that has evolved in the CRC doesn't really fit on a continuum between these two North American extremes. Most Reformed Christians strongly distinguish themselves from liberalism, with its inadequate view of Scripture's inspiration and authority, its anti-supernaturalism, and its wariness of talking about personal sin and the need for repentance and faith in Christ for salvation. Furthermore, Reformed Christians also strongly distinguish themselves from fundamentalism, with its anti-intellectualism and suspicion of science and learning that arises from a lack of emphasis upon the doctrine of creation; its lack of cultural engagement; and its tendency to emphasize the rule of Christ in the world to come rather than in this world, a tendency that arises from a dispensational understanding of history in which the kingdom of God is still a future reality.

Traditionally, the Reformed perspective has represented a third way that is quite distinct from both liberalism and fundamentalism and that does not define itself in terms of this North American struggle. Reformed Christians are "confessing Protestants" whose posture is not first of all defined polemically (against liberals or against fundamentalists) but is defined historically by a theological tradition that goes back to John Calvin and the Reformers and to St. Augustine.

One helpful way to locate the Reformed branch in the North American family tree is in relationship to evangelicals. The term *evangelical* is used differently by different people. When evangelical Lutherans, of whom there are eight million in North America, use the term *evangelical*, they mean orthodox and Christ-centered theology. For them it is quite possible to be part of a mainline, historic Protestant denomination *and* be evangelical and feel no tension between those two. Others use the terms *evangelical* and *fundamentalist* synonymously, which is quite a different meaning.

The term *evangelical* is most often used by those who wish to distinguish themselves from fundamentalism and often for many of the same reasons that Reformed Christians wish to distinguish themselves from fundamentalism. Furthermore, evangelicals themselves often see significant overlap in the terms *evangelical* and *Reformed*. Institutions such as Fuller Seminary, Gordon Conwell Seminary, Wheaton College, *Christianity Today*, and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and persons such as John Stott, J.I. Packer, and Chuck Colson would describe themselves as evangelical. Also while they are not *confessionally* or *denominationally* Reformed, they would consider themselves *theologically* Reformed in much of their teachings. In the same way, many Reformed folks positively (and rightly) identify themselves as *evangelical*.

Three approaches to being Reformed

Observers of the Reformed tradition have identified three major Reformed emphases or “minds” that have flourished in the North American cultural context.

The first emphasis or mind is the *doctrinalist*. Here Reformed refers primarily to a strong adherence to certain Christian doctrines as taught in the Scriptures and reflected in the confessions of the church. The question for doctrinalists is: What do we believe? Doctrinalists especially appreciate Louis Berkhof, a Reformed theologian whose *Systematic Theology* is a thorough summary of Reformed doctrine.

The second emphasis or mind is the *pietist*. Here Reformed refers to the Christian life and to one’s personal relationship to God. The question for pietists is: How do we experience God in our daily walk of faith? Pietists especially appreciate Hendrik de Cock, a pastor in the Netherlands who led the Afscheiding, a breakoff in 1834 from the Dutch state church that had lost its theological and spiritual vitality.

The third emphasis or mind is the *transformationalist*. Here Reformed refers to the relationship of Christianity to culture, to a world-and-life view, and to Christ as transforming culture. The question for transformationalists is: How do we relate the gospel to the world? Transformationalists especially appreciate Abraham Kuyper, a pastor, scholar, and prime minister of the Netherlands who led the Doleantie movement in the Netherlands in the 1880s, a movement that stressed the development of a Christian culture and had a very direct impact upon the CRC in North America.

Obviously these three emphases or minds are overlapping. No hard and fast line can be drawn between them. They also represent three distinct approaches, both historically and conceptually, and provide the framework for presenting sixteen key words or phrases that summarize the Reformed accent.

What we believe:

The doctrinalist emphasis

1. *Scripture* (2 Timothy 3:16)

Reformed Christians have a high view of Scripture. They believe that the Bible is the inspired, infallible, authoritative Word of God. Two passages of Scripture illumine Scripture's nature and authority:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Peter 1:20-21)

Inspired, infallible, and authoritative are three words Reformed Christians frequently use in explaining their view of Scripture. Inspired has in view the source of Scripture: God himself speaking by his Holy Spirit through human authors. Infallible means that the Scriptures are true and absolutely unfailing in matters of faith and practice. The Bible is true and trustworthy in all that it intends to teach. Authoritative refers to the claim of God's Word upon believers' lives. Believers live "under," and are called to obey, God's Word.

During the Reformation, Reformed Christians asserted *Sola Scriptura* (only Scripture) to distinguish themselves from the Roman Catholic Church, which asserted that Scripture, tradition (the teachings of the church), and the official pronouncements of the church were all equal in authority. To this the Reformers responded that only Scripture is our authority for faith and life.

Today the strongest threat to a high view of Scripture is not from those who would try to *raise up* church teaching to a level of authority equal to Scripture. Rather, it's from those who would *pull down* Scripture and say that Scripture is not the Word of God at all, that it's not from God, that it's not historically accurate, that things like the resurrection are just myth, and that it certainly isn't authoritative for our lives. Christians

counter that no matter how foolish it may look to the modern, enlightened mind, Christians believe this book is the means by which the God of the universe has communicated with human beings, his image bearers. Christians believe that this book is the Word of God.

Another threat to a high view of Scripture today is what might be called the God-told-me-this view of revelation. Many Christians testify that God has revealed himself to them personally, inwardly, and uniquely. While Reformed Christians fully embrace the work of the Holy Spirit, they also insist that the Spirit and the Word work together. As Henry Stob, past Calvin Seminary professor, has succinctly stated it, "The Spirit always rides the back of Scripture." Or as Bernard of Clairvaux said it, "Scripture is the wine cellar of the Holy Spirit."

Finally, a word about the Bible's message. It's possible for Christians to become so absorbed in debates about the Bible's nature and authority that they miss its positive message. The Bible is not first of all a set of problems to be solved; it is a dramatic story of God's salvation of the world. The main character in the story is Jesus Christ. The climax of the story is his death and resurrection. All this and more is what the church has in mind when it says that the Bible at its core is "redemptive revelation."

2. Creation-fall-redemption

(Colossians 1:15-20)

Creation-fall-redemption is a basic Reformed way of organizing and understanding the Bible and its message, and of understanding history. God created the world; the world fell into sin; God has redeemed and is redeeming the world through the work of Christ, a redemption that will one day be complete when God creates a new heaven and new earth.

Pastors and elders are always delighted when young people come forward to make profession of faith. In the course of the interview, the young person is usually asked, "What does it mean to be a Christian?" Pastors and elders are pleased with any answer that includes a clear reference to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and his death and

resurrection for our eternal life. Reformed pastors and elders are doubly pleased when a young person begins the answer to that question, "Well, Christians believe that in the beginning, God created everything. And then, the world fell into sin. . . ." Creation-fall-redemption is the way Reformed people tell the story. It's the story line of history and of Scripture.

More will be said later about the importance of the doctrine of creation. Here, however, the critical importance of the biblical teaching that human beings are *image bearers of God* must be noted.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26-27)

The biblical teaching that human beings are image bearers of God is pivotal for knowing ourselves and knowing God. Human beings image God as they exercise their God-given mandate to rule over all things (v. 26) and as they live in loving communion with each other.

As John Calvin says at the beginning of his *Institutes*, human beings come to know more about themselves as they learn more about God, and they come to know more about God as they learn more about themselves. This is so because human beings, in fact, *bear God's image*.

The truth that human beings are all image bearers of God has implications for nearly every ethical position the church takes, including those on abortion, sexuality, marriage, abuse, capital punishment, war, race, and disabilities. Few biblical doctrines cast a longer shadow over the church's ethical discourse than the doctrine of humanity's creation in the image of God. Indeed, we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14).

3. *Grace (Ephesians 2:8-10)*

Grace is the unmerited favor of God toward those who do not deserve it. Grace is the unconditional and freely given love of God to people who can

do nothing to earn it but can only accept it as a gift. Grace is the love of the father in the parable of the prodigal son that moves him to welcome and accept the lost son, not because the son finally did this or that but simply because the father loved his son unconditionally. Grace is the astounding truth that nothing we *do* can make God love us more or less. God loves us because he loves us. God loves us because he is rich in love.

Historically, when Reformed folks have talked about grace, they have stressed how much salvation is a gift of God, not a human achievement. Indeed, as Paul says,

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Eph. 2:8-10)

The “five points of Calvinism” refer to Reformed doctrines that underscore the radical nature of God’s grace. They have often been summarized with the acronym TULIP (Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints). As an acronym, TULIP is often misunderstood as focusing on human failings. But, in fact, its central thrust is the graciousness of God, and the biblical teachings that lie behind it are some of the richest teachings in all of Scripture:

- Every human being and every part of human existence is corrupted by sin, leaving humanity helpless and hopeless except for the grace of God. Paul says, “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once lived” (Eph. 2:1). In their fallen condition, human beings are not just weakened, sick, or at a disadvantage. They’re dead, unable to do anything, unable to believe, and without God’s help.
- In his divine mercy, God has chosen believers and called them to himself in love even before they were born, indeed, before the world was even created. “[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his

will" (Eph. 1:4-5). God did not elect his children based upon his foreknowledge of who would believe but did so "according to the good pleasure of his will."

- God's saving grace is not universal, but particular, given only to those whom God has chosen from eternity.

For those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined, he also called; and those whom he called, he also justified; and those whom he justified, he also glorified. (Rom. 8:29-30)

- God's grace, not human decision, is the decisive factor in salvation. Believers do not choose God so much as God chooses believers. Jesus taught that "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5) and "no one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me" (John 6:44). Certainly, faith is a human act and decision. But even this faith is a gift of God.
- By his power, God holds believers securely in his grasp and will not permit anyone or anything to separate believers from himself. Jesus said,

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-28)

Believers are held securely in God's grip. Believers do not hang onto God so much as God hangs onto believers. This has been called the eternal security of the believer; the perseverance of the saints. As Paul says at the end of Romans 8,

Who will separate us from the love of Christ?... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (vv. 35-39)

When Calvinists talk about their salvation, they become speechless at how thoroughly their salvation is the work of God—from beginning to end, God's gift and God's grace, expressed the

words of the hymn, “Nothing in my hands I bring, only to thy cross I cling.”

4. *Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34)*

Covenant is one of the richest biblical concepts for describing God’s relationship to his people. Covenant means partnership, an agreement between parties that entails promises and obligations. It’s significant that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, again and again portrays God as one who binds himself to his people in promise, in obligation, in covenant. God doesn’t have to promise anyone anything. Again and again, to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, and to David, God promises to love them and be with them.

The whole Bible is suspended on the great covenants God makes with all these people and others. Furthermore, the Bible is unified around this *one* covenant of grace. One of the reasons one tends to hear more Old Testament preaching in Reformed churches than in many other churches is that Reformed preachers don’t set the Old Testament against the New Testament but see the Old Testament and the New Testament as revealing one covenant of grace—a single covenant beginning with God’s promise to Adam and Eve that he would crush the head of the serpent and spanning to the new city of God described in Revelation 22.

The concept of covenant—God binding himself to his people in promise and commitment—is a rich concept for understanding God’s saving activity today. In worship, God renews his covenant promises to us, and we renew our covenant vows to God. Preaching declares and offers the covenant promises of God. The Lord’s Supper is a sign of God’s new covenant. In baptism God promises to be faithful to our children. Fellow members of the church make promises to God and one another.

Together these promises form a thick web of commitments, of communal connection that we know as the body of Christ, the church. Church membership is very important because when someone joins the church, she is not just putting her name on the membership list of an organization but is entering into covenant with God and

with other believers. In this covenantal understanding of the church, leaving one congregation for another is a very weighty matter because it tears at this rich web of covenantal connections and commitments made at the congregational level.

Covenant is an important and strategic emphasis for the church in this individualistic culture. In a time when society is desperately trying to figure out how morality and character are developed, Christians understand the key role of promise-making and promise-keeping. Our society needs communities of promise. The church needs an emphasis today upon covenant in our understanding of God and the church.

5. Common grace (Matthew 5:43-48)

God's common grace, in distinction from his saving grace, refers to that attitude of divine favor that extends to humanity in general; to believers and unbelievers alike. The church has observed three distinct evidences of common grace in the world. First, God gives natural gifts to unbelievers as well as believers. One doesn't have to be a Christian to be an excellent pianist or attorney or scientist. Second, God restrains sin in all people. Because of sin, human beings are not as good as they could be; but because of common grace, they are not as bad as they could be either. This is why unbelievers at times actually seem to behave better than believers. Virtues such as patience, courage, and compassion never totally lose their resonance in any image bearer of God. Third, God enables unbelievers to perform positive acts of civic good. God preserves a basic sense of civic justice that enables human societies to function in an orderly way. Common grace prevents society, marred and distorted by sin and evil, from totally disintegrating.

The teaching of common grace has many implications for how Christians live and serve in the world. God's common grace is a model of grace that Christians should embody not just within the church and toward believers but in the world and toward all people. Common grace encourages believers to develop positive points of contact with unbelievers as they live in the

world together and seek common ends. Christians should give their attention to not just what divides them from, but what unites them with all people. Common grace is the reason Christians can appreciate movies or novels or works of art produced by unbelievers, viewing them as God's good gifts, and at times even seeing in such works the allusions of transcendence or grace. Common grace reminds Christians that the conflict of this age (what Abraham Kuyper called the "antithesis") is between God and Satan, not between Christians and non-Christians. The battle is not between two groups of people but between two spiritual powers, which, significantly, reside in and cut through every person.

The teaching of common grace calls the church to have multiple purposes in her ministry that correspond to multiple divine purposes. The deacons' food pantry, the chaplain's hospital ministry, and the pastor's marriage counseling are all part of the mission of God to save the world, even though the receivers of these ministries may not be believers or become believers. The Christian's deep desire is that every person in the world will bow to Jesus Christ, but within that overarching mission of God, the church ministers in multiple situations with multiple purposes. It does not subordinate the value of one ministry to another. God is glorified in many different things, and all these ministries have their integrity and purpose in the overarching mission of God to save the world.

How we experience God in our daily walk of faith: The pietist emphasis

It's important to point out once again that the three approaches (doctrinalist, pietist, and transformationalist) overlap. Christians may not separate what they believe, how they experience God in their daily walk of faith, and how they relate the gospel to the world. Even so, these three approaches do capture different emphases not only within the CRC but also in the broader Christian Church.

1. *Personal relationship to Jesus*

(Romans 8:38-39)

When Christian Reformed people are on their deathbeds, their pastors often use the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism to remind them of the heart of their faith: "What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." The heart of our faith is our personal relationship to Jesus Christ. As Paul says in Romans 8,

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (vv. 8:38-39)

At times, the Reformed tradition has been misunderstood as emphasizing too much the "head"—knowing the correct doctrine—and not enough the "heart"—our personal relationship with Christ. However, the Heidelberg Catechism, the CRC's most used and most loved confessional statement, is filled with references to one's personal relationship to Jesus Christ, and is a deeply pastoral and personal statement of faith. However, more important than vindicating the catechism, the Christian faith, at its heart, is the story of God restoring sinners into a right relationship with him through Christ.

Not all Christians and faith traditions are as open and ready to talk about their relationship to

Christ in this way. In fact, as was pointed out in the brief explanation of the pietist approach, the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, the CRC's mother church, actually started as a breakoff from the state church because the state church had become very liberal and was embarrassed by such "heart talk." Many churches today are also reluctant to call people to this most personal encounter with Jesus Christ. While Reformed Christians always see the work of Christ as encompassing more than the believer's personal relationship to Jesus Christ, they never see it as less than this personal union with Christ.

Reformed Christians do have concerns about American evangelicalism's tendency, at times, to talk about one's relationship to Jesus in a way that unduly narrows the scope of the Christian life. The Christian life is more than my inner affections, my feelings about and toward Christ. The inner state of the believer may, but also may not, be the best reference point for Christian obedience. Especially in a therapeutic age, dominated by the quest for inner happiness and self-fulfillment, Reformed Christians are rightly concerned that the language of "personal relationship to Jesus Christ" not overshadow other equally important and often more comprehensive ways of understanding and enacting the Christian life.

2. The Holy Spirit (Romans 8:1-17)

The Holy Spirit is one of the three persons of the holy Trinity of God. Biblical Christians seek a proper and balanced appreciation for the work of all three persons of the Godhead. Moreover, Christians not only stress the work of each person of the Trinity—the work of God the Father in creation, the Son in redemption, and the Holy Spirit in sanctification—they also stress the unity and fellowship of the divine life and the way that Scripture has revealed God as a divine community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Indeed, in the very life and fellowship of God himself, Christians see modeled the communion and self-giving love for which they were created and redeemed.

Within this Trinitarian fellowship, the Holy Spirit is the sanctifier of the people of God and of the church's life and witness. The work of the Holy Spirit is all-encompassing. The Holy Spirit is the giver of spiritual life; the one who is renewing believers to be like Christ; the one who gives believers his fruit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control; and the one who gives gifts to the church to empower ministry.

John Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism both offer a rich and vibrant theology of the Holy Spirit. (One nineteenth-century theologian referred to John Calvin as “a theologian of the Holy Spirit.”) The Reformed confessions especially emphasize these works of the Holy Spirit:

- The Holy Spirit gives the believer saving faith and new spiritual life.
- The Holy Spirit assures the believer of eternal life.
- The Holy Spirit renews the believer to be like Christ (the work of sanctification).
- By God's Word and Spirit (an important combination for Reformed Christians), Christ gathers his church. The Holy Spirit builds it.
- The Holy Spirit is active in the sacraments, uniting us to Christ's body and blood, washing away our sins by Christ's blood, effectuating the real presence of Christ in both baptism and holy communion. Indeed, Christian worship is only possible because of the Holy Spirit's life and work in the church.

Too often people associate the Holy Spirit with particular kinds of piety or with particular, extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit (healing, speaking in tongues, prophecy). The teaching about the Holy Spirit set forth above makes clear that the work of the Holy Spirit is comprehensive, that it encompasses every aspect of the believer's life, of the church's ministry, and of God's redemptive program.

It's important to say a word at this point about the role of prayer in the Christian life and in the church. According to the Heidelberg Catechism, prayer is the centerpiece of the Christian life of thankfulness. Christians pray both to thank and to ask God for the gifts of his grace and the Holy

Spirit (Q. and A. 116). The Holy Spirit is both the subject and the object of Christian prayer. The Holy Spirit empowers Christians to pray and is the gift that comes to those who pray. A rich and lively understanding of the Holy Spirit will be accompanied by a rich and lively understanding *and practice* of prayer.

Finally, a rich and lively engagement with the Holy Spirit is virtually inseparable from Christian worship. Worship as an engagement of God and his people is, from beginning to end, empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is central in the Reformed understanding of the real presence of Christ in the sacraments and preaching as Spirit-charged encounters with God. Worship renewal, wherever it takes place, is the work of the Holy Spirit.

3. *Gratitude* (Colossians 3:15-17)

A very important question in the Christian life is: What motivates the believer? What is the root disposition that empowers everything one does in the Christian life? The Bible's answer, and a Reformed emphasis, is gratitude—not guilt, not fear, not the obligation of law, but gratitude. The whole Christian life is an acting out of one response: Thank you!

In Colossians 3, where Paul lays out the basics of our new life in Christ, he mentions thankfulness three times:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. *And be thankful.* Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another with all wisdom; and *with gratitude* in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks* to God the Father through him. (vv. 15-17, italics added)

It's ironic that Christians who emphasize gratitude as the energizing source of all Christian disposition and action could still be seduced by legalism—external conformity to dos and don'ts—for legalism cuts believers off from Christ. Legalism preoccupies people with how their religious life looks to other people, not how it

looks to God. A legalistic spirit is far from a grateful spirit, far from a heart of thanksgiving.

Such legalism at times has infected CRC piety and must be acknowledged for what it is: a perversion, a failure, a sin to be confessed, and a contradiction of a central biblical teaching, namely, that all obedience flows out of a heart of gratitude.

One of the most significant features of the Heidelberg Catechism is the placement of its teaching on the Ten Commandments. Of the three sections of the catechism—Our Guilt, God’s Grace, Our Gratitude—the Ten Commandments are placed in the section on gratitude. Christians don’t obey God *in order to* get rid of their guilt or *in order to* earn their salvation. They obey *because* God already has removed their guilt and given them the free gift of salvation. Obedience is the Christian’s way of saying thank you for the gift of salvation, not the way of earning salvation.

Linking obedience to gratitude doesn’t mean that obedience is less important, that Christians should only obey God on days when they feel especially grateful. Duty, discipline, calling, and obligation are still important marks of Christian piety. But guilt, fear, and moralism have limited value as motivators for the Christian life. All obedience ultimately must flow from the deep wellspring of gratitude, from the thankful heart.

4. The church (Ephesians 4:1-16)

When Reformed people talk about the Christian life, they very quickly begin talking about the church. Reformed Christians hold strongly that *to belong to Christ is to belong to those who belong to Christ*. Many Christians have the false notion that one can be a Christian but not have any connection to the church, the body of Christ. It’s already been noted that one tendency in much of North American Christianity is to unduly narrow the scope of the Christian life to one’s personal relationship to Jesus, and to one’s inner affections and feelings. Such a narrow focus quickly becomes too inward and subjective, and often unconnected to the church. While a personal relationship to Jesus Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit are an important part

of the Christian experience, that relationship with Christ and the Spirit is fleshed out *in the church*, the covenant community of believers, the children God has gathered and is gathering.

The church as the body of Christ is strategic in God's great mission program. Far from existing for itself and unto itself, the church exists to proclaim the gospel to the nations and to call people to faith and discipleship. Peter clearly links the church's identity to its purpose:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

When churches live for more than their own institutional security and give themselves in faith and obedience to God's mission, they experience the blessing of God. Jesus' teaching that "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:25) applies to the church as well as to individuals. Churches that lose their lives for Christ's sake and dedicate themselves to the mission purposes of God will in the end find their lives.

It's also important to understand that the church to which believers are organically connected is a *worldwide church* in all its history and diversity. To be in Christ is to be reconciled with one another as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people of God. Justice and reconciliation work is not simply an option for churches that choose to pursue it, it is a foundational mark of the church as God's new community.

For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Eph. 2:14-18)

North American Christians today tend to minimize the importance of their identification with the worldwide church. "Who cares about the church of history or the worldwide church?" But the church wasn't invented in the 1980s in Southern California or in the nineteenth century in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The church must remind itself of its deep solidarity with the church of all times and places. A much-needed corrective to the extreme individualism of our age is for Christians to see the project of personal sanctification less as an inward, individual project, and more as a journey in connecting one's self to the universal practices and habits of Christians everywhere and from throughout history.

Such solidarity with the universal church and appreciation of tradition does not inhibit change and innovation in the church. A key Reformed principle is that "a Reformed church is always to be reforming." The Reformation itself was a radical reforming and renewing of the church, and thus, the church is always reforming and renewing, dying and rising again. The church as a living organism, vitally connected to Christ as the branch to the vine is, by definition, ever growing and changing.

5. Word and sacrament (Romans 10:14-15; Matthew 28:16-20; and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

Public worship is one of the main ways Christians nurture their faith and their relationships with God. For Reformed Christians, the heart of Christian worship is the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. It's significant that ministers in the CRC are ordained to *the ministry of Word and Sacrament*.

Reformed Christians have a high view of preaching. Preaching is not just a lecture in which the preacher talks *about* God; it is a Spirit-charged encounter with God in which the preacher, in the reading of Scripture and in preaching, proclaims the Word of God. Reformed Christians actually speak of the sermon as *the Word of God* to highlight the revelational significance of preaching in the context of public worship. In this connection, it is significant that in Reformed worship the Holy Spirit is traditionally invoked not only in

the context of the sacraments but also in the context of the reading and preaching of the Word (the prayer for illumination).

As worship renewal takes place around the world and within the CRC, there is also a renewed interest in the sacraments—holy communion and baptism. It's important to note two particular emphases of Reformed Christians when it comes to the sacraments. First, Reformed Christians seek to recognize and celebrate *all* of the biblical themes associated with each sacrament. Just as a diamond has many different sides and angles from which to view it, each sacrament is viewed in Scripture from many different angles.

For example, baptism is bound up with the call to discipleship (Matt. 28:19), the gift of salvation (Mark 16:16), the reception of the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16; Acts 8:16; 10:44-47), new birth (John 3:3), forgiveness and washing (Acts 2:38; 8:12), dying and rising with Christ (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12), incorporation into the church (1 Cor. 12:13), the new clothing of Christ (Gal. 3:27), and the unity of the body (Eph. 4:5).

The Lord's Supper is also bound up with many Scriptural themes, including covenant renewal (Ex. 24:8), thanksgiving, forgiveness, the eschatological hope of the heavenly feast (Matt. 26:26-29), atonement (Mark 14:12), spiritual nourishment (John 6:35), remembrance (1 Cor. 11:24), and proclamation (1 Cor. 11:26). The Reformed tradition seeks to recognize and celebrate all of these biblical dimensions to the sacraments.

A second Reformed emphasis with respect to the sacraments is the accent it places upon God's action. Each sacrament involves both God's action and our action. But Reformed Christians emphasize God's action in both sacraments: the way in which God, in his grace, is promising, proclaiming, nourishing, sustaining, comforting, challenging, teaching, and assuring.

Put another way, the sacraments are more than just an exercise on the part of the worshiper. They are celebrations through which *God*, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is present among us and actively nourishes our faith and draws us closer to himself. They are the means by which God actually comes to us in grace.

People around the world today are hungry for mystery and transcendence, spawning many new forms of spirituality. Many Christians themselves long for more awe and transcendence in worship; they long to see the power of God in worship and experience his divine presence in real and powerful ways. In such a world, Reformed Christians have in their own worship tradition an emphasis upon Word and sacrament that highlights the great engagement between God and his people that takes place in Christian worship in the power of the Holy Spirit.

How we relate the gospel to the world: The transformationalist emphasis

In this emphasis, Reformed refers to a certain view of the relationship of Christianity to culture, to a world-and-life view. The question for transformationalists is: How do Christians relate to the culture around them? More specifically, how do Christians promote the Lordship of Christ in culture and society? How does the church address the gospel to the world around it and avoid the isolationism that so often has characterized the church? Six words or phrases help in understanding this dimension of being Reformed.

1. *Jesus is Lord* (Philippians 2:11)

These words, of course, come straight from the Bible. Paul concludes that great hymn of praise to Christ, "At the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:11). Another biblical phrase that Reformed Christians use to make the same point is "Our God reigns."

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet
of the messenger who announces peace, who
brings good news, who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Isa. 52:7)

This affirmation that Jesus is Lord takes on particular significance in the modern world where we are plagued by *dualism*, the devastating split between the sacred and the secular. The secular worldview, which is the air one breathes today in North America, would have Christians believe that the world is really split in two, split between the *sacred* and the *secular*. It's fine for Christians to have their little Jesus in their little sacred world, but whatever claims Christians make about Jesus apply only to that little world called "the sacred."

When Reformed Christians hear such sacred-secular talk, they remember the words of Jesus: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18), and the teaching of

Paul that God “raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” (Eph. 1:20-21).

Under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper, Reformed Christians strongly reject this sacred-secular dualism and declare that Jesus is Lord of all things. If the most well-known passage of the Heidelberg Catechism is Q. and A. 1 (“What is your only comfort in life and death? That I belong . . .”), then the most well-known quotation of Abraham Kuyper is, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”

2. *Kingdom* (Matthew 6:10)

The concept of Christ’s lordship over all things is closely related to the biblical and Reformed emphasis upon the kingdom of God. Jesus said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news” (Mark 1:14-15). Jesus taught many parables of the kingdom. Jesus taught Christians to pray, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

The kingdom of God is the rule of God over all things. God is king. He is sovereign. He reigns. God always has ruled, but his rule has been vindicated and established once and for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:15-20; Eph. 1:15-23).

The kingdom is both a present and a future reality. It is “already now” and “not yet.” Jesus said the kingdom is at hand; he also prayed for the kingdom to come.

One can see the fruit of this already-now kingdom concept in ministries throughout the CRC. The list below is only a small sample of such kingdom endeavors:

- Christian colleges and Christian schools across the United States and Canada
- Elim Christian School for children with physical and mental disabilities in Chicago
- Citizens for Public Justice in Toronto

- Cary Christian Center, a community development association near Jackson, Mississippi
- Center for Public Justice in Washington, D.C.
- Beginnings Counseling and Adoption Services of Ontario
- Pine Rest Christian Hospital of Grand Rapids, Michigan

These are all kingdom endeavors. These institutions are bigger than the church, God's gathered people. They are the fruit of Christ's reign in the world. They are part of that new order of peace, justice, and healing that Christ has ushered in.

Christians live in hope because the kingdom is also not yet. Christians look forward to not just the defeat but the banishment of Satan, to Christ's glorious return, and to a new heaven and a new earth where there will be no more tears or brokenness or death and where, at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Closely related to an emphasis upon the kingdom is a commitment to seek justice in society. Many passages of Scripture call for Christians to seek justice, but none is more eloquent than Micah's call to Israel:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?
(Mic. 6:8)

It follows from an emphasis upon the lordship of Christ and the kingdom of God that Reformed Christians would be strong promoters of involvement in the broader society. And *justice* is generally what Christians seek as they work in these broader areas. Theologians and philosophers talk about the relationship between love and justice. Generally speaking, Christians construe God's call to *love* as applying to the personal relationships Christians have with people within the communities in which they live; whereas *justice* is something that Christians can seek for all people everywhere. Some examples of seeking justice are:

- Fighting against laws or practices that cause racial discrimination or economic inequities.

- Promoting a proper balance of punishment, rehabilitation, and restoration in the criminal justice system.
- Promoting policies that alleviate human suffering, poverty, and hunger and that give hope and opportunity to the weaker members of society.

One important caveat is in order here. Biblical justice and the idea of justice as it is used in North American political discourse often have quite different overtones. Justice in North American society tends to focus upon personal rights, what one is entitled to, what is due an individual; whereas justice in the Bible, while it certainly includes a concern for personal rights rooted in the human person's exalted status as God's image bearer, upholds the notions of righteousness, obedience to God's law, the restoration of relationships, and the righting of wrongs that leads to righteousness and peace. Justice in the Bible is fully bound up with the kingdom of God and God's new order of righteousness and peace.

3. *Word and deed* (James 2:14-17)

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

Just as a biblical understanding of the Christian life quickly leads to the church, so a biblical understanding of the church quickly leads to the word-and-deed nature of the church's mission. The church's mission has a *word* (proclamation) component; it also has a *deed* (action) component.

- The church proclaims that Jesus is Lord *and* mentors those on public welfare.
- The church calls people to faith in Jesus Christ *and* helps refugees resettle.
- The church builds the body of believers *and* promotes justice in society.
- The church has elders *and* deacons.

Word and deed go together in the Christian life and in the church's ministry. The church

cannot divide the ministry of word and deed, and it certainly cannot choose between them.

4. *The cultural mandate* (Genesis 1:27-28)

Cultural mandate is a term one hears frequently in Kuyperian, Reformed circles. The cultural mandate refers specifically to Genesis 1:27-28:

So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

This is a mandate, a job description that God gave Adam and Eve at the very beginning of the world in the Garden of Eden. God gave Adam and Eve a position of dominion over the whole earth, a position that included the power to name, which, in significant ways, is the power to create. Human beings rule the world with God!

You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet. (Ps. 8:5-6)

The point here is not that human beings are in control and can do anything they want. The point is not that people can dominate and exploit. It's quite the opposite. Human beings are appointed stewards; they are responsible to make the most out of this great world God has created. Human beings are builders, designers, creators!

The cultural mandate accompanies a strong emphasis upon creation. One of the things that flows directly from a strong doctrine of creation and the cultural mandate is an appreciation of science. Reformed Christians don't have a deep suspicion of science (or of the rest of learning, for that matter) the way some Christians do. God has revealed himself through two books: the book of Scripture and the book of nature. Of the latter book, the psalmist says, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). Science is a systematic way to "read" the book of nature. When the book of science appears to conflict with the book of

Scripture, Reformed Christians reread and study both books to see where they are misreading. Ultimately, these two books can't contradict each other because God is the author of both.

Environmental stewardship is another strong implication of the cultural mandate and its emphasis upon creation. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Ps. 24:1). Christians are to be caretakers of the earth and the environment. This world is not ours to do with as we please. It is God's world, and he has appointed human beings to be stewards, guardians, and caretakers.

5. *Christian education (Proverbs 9:10)*

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.
(Prov. 9:10)

Reformed Christians share with all Christians a strong emphasis upon Christian education. Historically the CRC in particular has emphasized the importance of Christian education not only in home and church but also in educational institutions—elementary, high school, college, and university. Because Christ is Lord of all of life, including all spheres of learning, all education must be God-centered. In this understanding of the integration of faith and learning, God should not be left out of education at any level.

The biblical mandate for Christian education, for integrating Christ into all facets of life and learning, perhaps can be seen most clearly and beautifully in Colossians 1:15-17:

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Therefore, the Christian schools started by Reformed Christians are built upon a positive vision: Learning is rooted in Christ. At the same time, they are not opposed to public education. As public citizens, Reformed Christians are typically very supportive of the local public education system; they support Christian schools *and* vote for school taxes. Many CRC congregations have teachers and students in Christian schools *and*

public schools. Though Christian schools sometimes have isolated the Christian school community from its broader community, such isolation is not the goal and in fact must be resisted at every turn. All the world, not just the church, is God's; and God, in his common grace, cares for all people, even those who don't acknowledge him. Reformed Christians have strong convictions about Christ-centered education; they also have a strong interest in all people's well-being.

6. *Christian vocation (Ephesians 4:1)*

"Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1). The entire life of the Christian—not just on Sunday and not just church life—is a divine vocation, a response to God's call to follow Christ. In a world where all things hold together in Christ, Christians offer every part of their lives—their time, their work, their giftedness, their creativity, their wealth, their recreation—to God as an offering of thanksgiving and obedience.

Many people who hear the word *Calvinist* immediately think of "the Calvinist work ethic," an ethic of working hard, working honestly, and taking pride in one's work. That work ethic is rooted in the Calvinist conviction that all human work—whether one calls it a job, a career, or a calling, whether it is high-powered or simple, high-paying or nonpaying—is a response to God's call and is part of fulfilling God's mandate to rule the earth and Christ's command to follow him.

Beyond our daily work, this all-embracing understanding of God's *call* upon our lives produces strong and conscientious kingdom servants in business, professions, labor, homemaking, civic community organizations, volunteer organizations, education, science, industry, farming, and government. This emphasis upon Christian vocation is one of the reasons the CRC has had a special love for Christian liberal arts education in which every area of learning, from philosophy to physics, biology to business, is a response to God's call. This healthy sense of Christian vocation also fosters a strong sense of stewardship—a commitment to use wisely the time, talents, resources, and wealth that God has entrusted to us.

Putting them all together

It was pointed out earlier that these three emphases—doctrinalist, pietist, and transformationalist—often have functioned as distinct approaches or minds in the CRC. It's important to observe that a well-balanced Christian life and theology need all three of these integrated emphases. The doctrinalist emphasis by itself can lead to exclusivity and inaction. The pietist emphasis by itself can lead to individualism and nondiscernment of broader dimensions of Christianity. The transformationalist emphasis by itself can lead to an overstated inclusivity that softens the antithesis between Christ and the evil one. Each emphasis, by itself, tends toward pride and an uncharitable devaluing of the other two emphases. One key to healthy ministry lies in living with an integrated, whole vision of the Christian life.

Finally, one might very well ask whether this identity statement is descriptive or prescriptive. Does this identity statement *describe* what the CRC is or *prescribe* what the CRC should be? The answer is both. This identity statement should be viewed as a description of the Reformed faith at its best as well as a fervent call to live more fully into this biblical vision.

May God grant the church, as Paul prayed, “a Spirit of wisdom and revelation as [we] come to know [Christ]” (Eph. 1:17).

*Now to him who by the power at work within us
is able to accomplish abundantly far more
than all we ask or imagine,
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

(Eph. 3:20-21)

