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# CALVIN SEMINARY FORUM

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## COVER ESSAY

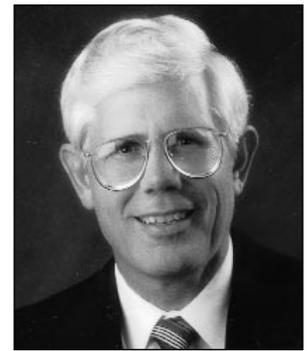
# THE LANGUAGE OF FAITH

I remember when my father would sit by the shore of Gun Lake on a quiet, sunny July Sunday afternoon with old "Dominee" Bell talking theology. Sometimes these talks revolved around current events or movements in the church. At other times, the conversation sim-

ply focused on theology for theology's sake.

My father was not one to accept easy answers to life's deeper puzzles. As a professor of organic chemistry at Calvin College, he graciously embraced the call for faith to seek understanding. This pursuit often led him into

troubling waters. In 1948 he published a then controversial book entitled *Beyond the Atom* in which he posited, among other things, "that the inorganic earth is very old, probably of the order of two billion years." The controversy waxed and waned over at least the next decade. But one common element through the entire debate was this: both sides appealed to what they believed was a mutually understood, universally accepted notion of what was true, objectively established and available to all human beings. Human understanding was limited only by darkened minds, sinfulness, and/or laziness. The debate also assumed that we could know this truth because God would not create a world in which the evidence would intentionally deceive us.



**ROBERT C. DE VRIES**

Professor of Church Education at Calvin Seminary.

The world of modern philosophy, dominated by the likes of Kant and Hume, stood in sharp contrast to this Christian perspective. Modern philosophers, too, believed that truth existed objectively and was available to all. But for them objective truth by *definition* excluded any appeal to belief in God, spirituality, or matters of faith. *The modern world rea-*

Please see COVER ESSAY next page ▶



*The church must speak in culturally appropriate words and ways while at the same time precisely communicating the Christian and biblical ideas expressed by those words.*

## FEATURED ARTICLES

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COVER ESSAY cont.  
DE VRIES

*soned God out of existence.*

Now, as many observe, we have entered a fourth major period of philosophical thought in the west (following the ancient, medieval, and modern). This period is often referred to as "postmodernism."

**"The Reformed tradition has never been afraid of cultural change."**

Diogenes Allen cuts to the quick in his article "The End of the World (*Christian Scholar's Review*, June, 1993) when he says: "postmodern simply means 'after the modern world.'" But its not quite that simple. Robert Bellah in *Habits of the Heart* and Stephen Carter in *The Culture of Disbelief* present a now popular view of postmodernism that predicts doom and affliction on the church and the Christian enterprise. Rampant individualism, subjective morality, new forms of pleasure, and a rise in spiritualism without reference to the true God are all cited as signs of the times -- signs that the moral fiber of western society is eroding beyond control.

*We fear the consequences of postmodernism in our churches.* Many fear that the "worship wars," the crisis in leadership, the consumer attitude toward church life and ministry, and growing theological ignorance are irreversible signs of the demise of the church. True, these trends demand serious address. But how should we approach this "enemy?"

The Reformed tradition has never been afraid of cultural change.

*I first suggest that the Reformed tradition has never been afraid of cultural change.* Whether one consid-

ers the posture of Calvin, Kuyper or Niebuhr, the fact is that those in the Reformed tradition have always embraced an attitude of seriously reading, interpreting, and transforming culture.

Second, I see postmodernism as an era in which *Christian beliefs can be taken seriously once again.*

Diogenes Allen also asserts that "the end of the modern world means that Christianity is liberated from the narrow, constricting, asphyxiating stranglehold of the modern world." Secularism is crumbling, and the postmodern mind now has room for God. People are once again open to the spiritual world. Closer to home, Alvin Plantinga has been at the forefront of turning the tide philosophically on the modern mind. Plantinga essentially contends that *any philosophy which does NOT have room for God is implausible.* I guess that is what my dad was saying so many years ago when he said: "faith is the basis of all science as well as of religion, and when a scientist tells us that we may have no faith, intuitions, beliefs or hunches, we can smile at his inconsistency." (*Beyond the Atom*, p. 23).

**// The church must in this postmodern era diligently teach those who profess Christ the language of the faith. //**

Third, I am impressed with how the Reformed tradition has used, often successfully, culturally conditioned means for con-

veying the message of the gospel, a message that crosses all cultural boundaries. *Culture is not a bad word.* Fundamentally, culture simply means the environment within which we live. We need an environment in order to thrive, just as birds need air to fly or fish need water to swim. What kind of environment we have is the issue. *How we use the environment is critical.* As other articles in this issue of FORUM point out, *culture is always an issue in interpreting both the Word of God and the world of God. We need to be skilled in interpreting both.*

Fourth, *we need to speak the language of the day.* When one visits Germany, one needs to speak German. When one wishes to truly understand the world in which Matthew, Mark and Paul wrote, one must understand Greek. If we are to speak to postmodern Canadians and Americans, we need to understand and use the language of the day when speaking to those immersed in our North American culture. *We are part of that culture.* So are our children and youth. This language of postmodernism takes many forms, verbal expressions, art forms, music, and other media forms of communication. Just as the church in the sixteenth century adapted its hymns to the music of the day, so God's church today in reaching those who are

of faith, the doctrinal language of the church, or the language of worship representing the "culture" of Christians has to be sacrificed.

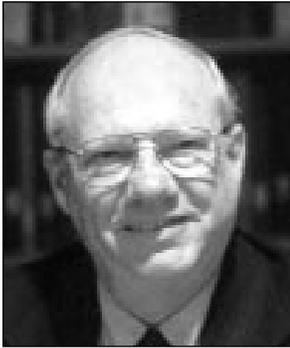
Fifth, *the church must in this postmodern era diligently teach those who profess Christ the language of the faith.* By "language of the faith" I mean the doctrinal or theological terms the church has, throughout history, used to express basic Christian beliefs. Words like "covenant," "sacrament," and "sin" need not be replaced in the Christian's vocabulary by words like "agreement," "ceremony," and "failure."

The primary task of the church has always been to communicate the gospel. In order to do that, Paul made great accommodations. "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (I Cor. 9:22). Yet Paul did this without compromising clear doctrinal teaching. He admonishes Timothy to "watch your life and doctrine closely" (I Tim. 4:16). *The church must speak in culturally appropriate words and ways while at the same time precisely communicating the Christian and biblical ideas expressed by those words.*

We still all talk theology. Maybe we use a language in this emerging postmodern era different from that my dad used with Dominee Bell. That doesn't mean we don't need to learn the historic language of faith--the language of the creeds and confessions. It does mean, however, that we need to come at the faith from a different direction. Our culture speaks a different language today. Popular culture is not necessarily the enemy of the church. Popular culture challenges the church to communicate the eternal truths of the gospel in ways that invite *all* of the faithful to seek understanding. ■

Henry Zwaanstra, Editor

# THE CHURCH AND CULTURE: *a Matter of Yes and No*



**HENRY  
ZWAANSTRA**

Professor of  
Historical Theology  
at Calvin Seminary.

This issue of the FORUM is devoted to a discussion of church and culture. H. Richard Niebuhr in his classic work, *Christ and Culture* defined culture as "that total process of human activity and the total result of that activity".... Culture is what human beings impose on nature. Niebuhr says, "it comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organizations, inherited artifacts, technical processes and values" (*Christ and Culture*, p. 32).

The church always has to deal with the culture in which it finds itself. The relationship between the church and culture is complex. Culture is for the church a matter of "being in the world, yet not of the world."

*The church is uniquely positioned between Christ and the gospel on the one hand, and its cultural environment on the other.* It is both called out of the world and sent into the world. The church brings the eternal and unchange-

able gospel to the world; while at the same time, it is constantly being shaped and formed by culture.

*Unlike the gospel, human culture is always changing and in flux. Cultural changes, especially big ones, offer the church special challenges and opportunities. They also present special dangers and risks. In interacting with culture the church must paradoxically always say "yes" and "no." It must affirm human culture and it must position itself antithetically over against the world.*

## Cultural Affirmation

Reformed Christians following Augustine and Calvin affirm cultural life. In the Bible the word "world" often refers to all of creation, including humanity, as the object of God's love. God created the world good. Even after the fall the created order remains essentially good. Christians, therefore, should not separate themselves from creational life and culture; they should rather obediently bring them under God's sovereign rule and the Lordship of Christ. God's Word (Logos) still orders creation and God in his providence continues to govern human cultural life.

Moreover, the church must use cultural language and ideas in order to communicate the gospel. The apostle John took a risk and adapted the gospel to Graeco-Roman culture when at the beginning of his gospel he said: "In the beginning was the Word (Logos) and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1). It took the

**// Culture is for the church  
a matter of being in the  
world, yet not of the world. //**

church almost four centuries to purge itself of the Greek understanding of "Logos" and to confess the full deity of the Son. It was, however, a risk worth taking.

*The church cannot grow and flourish without accommodating itself to its culture.* The best illustration of this fact in the history of the Christian Reformed Church is found in the change from the use of the Dutch to the English language in worship and church education. Many opposed the change, fearing that it would open the church to all kinds of heresies and practices detrimental to Reformed doctrine and church life. Had the change not been made, the church may have died.

## Antithesis Between Church and Culture

Since the Fall, human nature itself is fallen and perverted. Sin appears in human culture and is transmitted through it. The Bible also uses the word "world" to refer to human beings who reject Christ, live in darkness, and do evil works. The church and human culture in its sinfulness are antithetically related. They stand over against one another.

The opposition does not always originate from the side of

the church. In some cultures Christ and the gospel are considered enemies. The Caesar-centered Roman world rejected Christ. For three centuries the followers of Christ separated themselves culturally from the world, often suffering persecution for no reason other than that they were Christians.

Sometimes the opposition between the church and culture must arise from inside the church. This is the other horn of the church and culture dilemma. The church may become so adapting and accommodating to the culture in which it finds itself that its own life and purpose are in danger. In *The Church Against the World*, Niebuhr says by surrendering to worldly idolatries and lusts present in cultural ideologies and "isms" such as humanism, nationalism, individualism and even capitalism, the church can lose its own soul. According to Niebuhr, Liberal Protestantism and the Social Gospel did this.

Niebuhr called the church to declare its independence from modern culture and once again obediently to return to God, to Christ, and his Word. Only then could the church again aggressively enter into the world of human culture. Niebuhr's counsel and advice were relevant and wise. The church and culture--yes and no. ■



**JEFFREY A.D. WEIMA**

Professor of New Testament at Calvin Seminary.

# THE MODERN READER & the ancient world of the Bible.

Reformed believers have long recognized the importance of interpreting every passage of Scripture in its cultural or historical context. The Bible

**// The Bible did not fall down from heaven in the King James Version with maps in the back. //**

did not fall down from heaven in the King James Version with maps in the back. *Instead, God chose to reveal himself and his work of redemption in very specific cultural contexts. This means that modern readers of Scripture must always work at thinking themselves back into the ancient world of the biblical authors--into their history, their language, their geography, their culture.*

**All Scripture Culturally Conditioned**

First, the importance of studying Scripture in its cultural context can be illustrated in one of the best known stories of the Bible: the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Modern readers cannot

really appreciate how blasphemous this parable was to hearers in Jesus' day unless they know something of the bitter hatred that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans.

The Samaritans claimed to be descendants of the ten "lost" tribes of the Northern Kingdom and thus considered themselves to be part of the covenant people of God. They had their own version of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) and offered sacrifices at their own temple on Mount Gerizim. The Jews of the Southern Kingdom who returned from captivity in Babylon, however, completely

rejected the Samaritans' claim to be descendants of Abraham. Thus, when the Jews later gained independence following the Maccabean revolt, they destroyed the Samaritans' temple. And when Jews living in Galilee travelled south through Samaria to worship at their temple in Jerusalem, the Samaritans typically denied them food and lodging. Many Galilean Jews, therefore, chose the longer route to Jerusalem, traveling through the region across the Jordan rather than to set one foot in the land of the despised Samaritans.

The intense enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans is evident in the parable. At the end of the story the champions of the Jewish faith--the Priest and the Levite--are reduced to hypocritical,

unsympathetic figures, while the hated Samaritan is elevated to the status of a compassionate hero. Jesus then asks: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robber?" Instead of simply giving the obvious answer, "The Samaritan," the lawyer who was testing Jesus can only bring himself to respond in a round-about manner: "The one who had mercy on him."

Our common title for this story, the "Parable of the Good Samaritan," would have made no sense to first-century Jews. It would be like our talking about a "good arsonist" or a "good murderer." For the Jews in Jesus' day, a "good Samaritan" was an oxymoron--a contradiction of terms.

An awareness of the cultural context, therefore, gives deeper meaning and added significance to the parable. Jesus uses this story to show not only who our neighbors are, but also how we should treat them. Our neighbor is not limited to people who come from our own ethnic background, church, or social class, but includes any person in need. And we are to treat such people with the same self-sacrificial compassion that the hated and despised Samaritan had for the poor victim.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is not the only scriptural passage spoken in a specific cultural context. This is true for every passage in the Bible. *All of Scripture--100 percent of it--is "culturally conditioned."* When the biblical writers wrote in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, they did so because these were the languages used in the culture of

their day. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the propriety of eating meat that had been previously offered to a pagan god (1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1), he did so because of the specific cultural situation which that church faced. When James wrote to the Jewish Christians of Palestine who showed favoritism to the rich at the expense of the poor and used this occasion to explain to them the proper relationship between faith and works (James 2:1-26), what he said was conditioned by the specific cultural situation in the churches at the time. When John wrote to the persecuted Christians in Asia Minor and made heavy use of apocalyptic imagery (the Book of Revelation), he did this because of the specific cultural situation in which these Christians found themselves.

**No Scripture Culturally Bound**

But while all of Scripture is culturally conditioned, *none of scripture--0 percent of it--is "culturally bound."* In other words, there is no passage in the Bible whose cultural context is so specific to its day that that passage is somehow bound or stuck in its own cultural context and no longer normative for the church. As John Cooper reminded us a few years ago in the women-in-office debate: "But first it is crucial to reiterate that all of the Bible is authoritative and normative for today. The issue is not *whether* the Bible is normative or *which parts* are normative, but *how* it is normative for us today" (*A Cause for*

Cont. pg. 5 ►

THE MODERN... cont.  
WEIMA

*Division? Women in Office and the Unity of the Church*, 1991, p. 26). It is wrong, therefore, to dismiss what the Bible has to say about marriage, divorce, women's role in the church, homosexuality, masculine language for God, or any other subject simply on the grounds that Scripture's handling of it is thought to be hopelessly outdated and irrelevant for today. *The church must affirm that all of Scripture is normative while engaging in the often difficult task of determining how a specific text is normative for believers today.*

Thankfully, this task is usually not very difficult. In much of Scripture the cultural gap between the modern reader and the ancient world of the Bible is not great. For example, in Colossians 3:1-17 Paul claims that the Colossian believers have died and been raised with Christ. This spiritual reality has important consequences for how they should act, speak and think. Since it is equally true today that Christians have similarly died and been raised with Christ, this spiritual reality also has implications for how we now act, speak and think.

**Bridging the Cultural Gap**

But sometimes, however, the cultural gap between the modern reader and the ancient world of the Bible is a bit greater. In Ephesians 2:11-22, for example, Paul addresses the problem of division between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians over the issue of circumcision. In this specific context, the apostle appeals to the reconciling work of Christ on the cross: "For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by

abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thereby making peace" (vv 14-15). The cultural gap is greater here because Christians today are not divided over the issue of circumcision. How, then, is this passage normative for believers today?

We need to remember the difference between a principle and the application of that principle (so *Acts of Synod*, 1978, p. 500). A principle states God's abiding will for our lives. But how a principle is applied may vary according to the cultural context. The abiding principle in Ephesians 2:11-22 is that the reconciling work of Christ on the cross unites believers into one new

body, thereby bringing peace. This principle needs to be proclaimed today, even though the cultural context in which it is declared is different from what it was in Paul's time. Churches divided today over issues of worship, the role of women in the church, or any other controversial matter need to hear about the reconciling work of Christ on the cross that unites believers and thus brings peace.

There are still other passages of Scripture where the cultural gap between the modern reader and the ancient world of the Bible is very great. One such example is Paul's command to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26). We may well be tempted to dismiss this

exhortation as simply culturally bound and no longer normative for the church today. But since all of Scripture--including this command to greet others with a holy kiss--is the inspired and authoritative Word of God, we must try to determine how this specific command is normative for the church today. What is the abiding principle inherent in this command that needs to be applied in our twentieth-century cultural setting?

There is compelling evidence that the kiss-greeting among believers was not merely an expression of friendship but more specifically one of reconciliation and peace (see Gen 33:4; 45:15; 2 Kings 14:33; Luke 15:20). This may explain why Paul does not close all of his letters with the entreaty to

principle inherent in this command, then, is that believers are to remove any hostility that may exist among them and are to exhibit publicly the unity that they have as fellow members of the body of Christ. This principle remains normative for the church today. It may be carried out through a holy kiss or through some other expression of affection and unity more fitting to our cultural context.

In summary, modern readers of Scripture need to take very seriously the cultural context of any passage in the Bible. Admittedly, this sometimes requires careful study and detailed investigation. Yet there is no excuse for doing it in a slovenly and half-hearted manner. Handling Scripture in a careless way shows contempt for the fact that God chose to reveal himself and his work of salvation in very specific cultural contexts. Instead, modern readers must always work diligently to understand the ancient world of the biblical authors. Only then can we truly comprehend what God was saying to his people of old, and can we also confidently apply that message to the new cultural context the church faces today. ■

“ Modern readers of scripture need to take very seriously the cultural context of any passage in the bible. ”

"greet one another with a holy kiss," but only those letters in which he addresses problems creating conflict and divisions within congregations. The



Paul's command to "greet one another with a holy kiss"... We may well be tempted to dismiss this exhortation as simply culturally bound and no longer normative for the church today.

# THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH AND WORLD CULTURES



**GARY BEKKER**

Professor of Church Education and Missiology and Academic Dean at Calvin Seminary.

*“ The worst villain in history and the most sanctified believer belong to the same family tree. ”*

## A Definition

What does *culture* mean? Cultural anthropology has focused on the concept of *culture* more directly than any other academic field. Anthropologists, however, work within several schools of thought. Each defines *culture* differently. The range of definitions is about the same as that of theologians defining the atonement. To cut through the myriad definitions, I offer one by Charles Taber as an umbrella definition within which representatives of particular schools of thought would either shift the emphasis or add details:

*Culture is a more or less coherent set of ideas (symbols, taxonomies, definitions, explanations, values, attitudes, and rules) which are created and shared by a group of people and transmitted to their children and which enable them to make sense of their experience and to cope with their natural and social worlds to their collective advantage (The World Is Too Much With Us, p. 3).*

Culture has to do with ways of being human. What do we know about humans? First, we know that God created all humans in his image.

No matter how wide the cultural range may become, all humans share a common biological, social and spiritual heritage. We live in this world as relatives. The worst villain in history and the most sanctified believer belong to the same family tree.

Second, we know that all people and the cultures that they produce are fallen. All stand under God's judgment. All are found wanting. This does not mean that all people

*“ ...the challenge lies in joining with people culturally different from ourselves in forming a new culture, ... ”*

are equally bad or that one culture is not more morally reprehensible than another. It does, however, mean that we ought to be humble in ascribing excellence to our own ways and subdued in criticizing the shortcomings that we attribute to others.

Third, there is no person or group whose culture is so

spiritually and morally decadent that it can resist the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. By the power of the Word and Spirit, any person or any group, including their culture, can be brought under the Lordship of Christ. In the Heidelberg Catechism Reformed churches assert that Christ builds his church by his Word and Spirit (Lord's Day 21). The inscripturated Word can be translated into any language. Some languages present greater problems for the translator than others. Nevertheless, what God has made known about himself and what we need to know about him can be placed in any language. Christians have not hesitated to translate the Scripture. Lamin Sanneh observes that, in contrast to Islam with its insistence on a nontranslatable Arabic scripture, Scriptural translation is a vintage mark of Christianity (*Translating the Message*). *The gospel can also be preached in any language. No matter how corrupt a culture and society may become, no matter how far they have distanced themselves and fled from God, the preaching of the gospel can open to them the way to the kingdom of heaven.*

Fourth, all members of God's household, whether Jews or Gentiles, live as fellow citizens with all other mem-

At some point in our lives, most of us have felt like strangers when we were away from home. In our home setting, physical objects made or at least shaped by people, human behaviors, language and all forms of communication, patterns of social relationships, and the meaning ascribed to anything seem normal to us. We may not like the objects, appreciate the behaviors, enjoy the language, value the patterns, or agree with the meaning ascribed to them. Nonetheless, these features of life constitute the *culture* of our world. *What, if any, difference ought an awareness of culture and of cultural differences make in the way we proclaim, explain, and apply God's Word?* Finally, what view ought Christian Reformed people to take over against the cultures of the peoples of the world?

**CHRISTIAN... cont.**  
BEKKER

bers (Eph. 2:19). When one comes to know Christ as Lord and Savior, one joins the communion of the saints. This society has its own culture. All issues of meaning are defined for the members of this group by their relation to God as a redeemed community and by what he has said and done. Although they remain identifiable members of their original

region to region in at least some behaviors, rituals, and patterns of social organization. For example, when ministers in the past moved from one congregation to another, they did well to learn the funeral customs of the new place. Cultural similarities between congregations were structured and reinforced in many ways. They shared the same language and theological vocabulary. Many members of the congregations had common

es and work together in Christian Reformed agencies. With this diversity, how can we as brothers and sisters in Christ serve God? We come from very different societies, each with its own peculiar cultural ways.

**Some Challenges That We Face**

The first challenge we face is to critique ourselves. *We must ask ourselves in what ways our own forms of meaning and valuing, our social patterns, and our behaviors need to be renewed in Christ. What can you and I learn about the Christian life from Christian brothers and sisters whose language, social patterns, and behaviors differ from ours?* What questions can they ask to prompt me to ask God's and their forgiveness for sins and failures in relating to them. And again, what questions can they put to you and me that may lead us to ask God for his power and their advice in finding more sanctified ways of living?

A second challenge has to do with respecting the spiritual and intellectual gifts of people who are culturally different from us. Such respect usually

does not come easily. It is particularly difficult when the cultural patterns of these people baffle us or drive us nuts. This challenge confronts us all. It must, however, especially be faced by those of us whose color of skin, educational background, language, or family connections place us in a position of power over others. *Facing this challenge requires all of us to accept and respect the leadership of others who are different from us. If God has granted spiritual and intellectual gifts to a person whose native culture differs from mine, if God has called that person and me to walk side by side in his service, or perhaps even to direct my service to God, how can I not respond with respect, fellowship, and submission?* The biggest cultural challenge for Reformed people today is not to contemplate how other world cultures can be transformed to Christ's service. Rather, the challenge lies in joining with people culturally different from ourselves in forming a new culture, one obedient to God's Word and empowered by his Spirit. ■

**// No matter how corrupt a culture and society may become,...the preaching of the gospel can open to them the way to the kingdom of heaven. //**

society, the meaning and purpose they ascribe to all aspects of life get radically redefined. A big question mark hangs over all that they think, say and do. Now that they are no longer their own, but belong entirely to Christ, they ask themselves how can we live for him in this situation?

**The CRC and World Cultures**

The CRC is not known for its cultural diversity. Yet, Christian Reformed people have always differed from

educational experiences at Calvin College and perhaps networks of kinship through Calvin student marriages. The congregations also had similar patterns and forms of worship. Today Christian Reformed people worship in many different languages. The strong social fabric, consisting of a shared theological vocabulary and maintained by a common seminary training for all ordained ministers, is fraying. And, praise God, people from many different social and ethnic groups now worship God in Christian Reformed church-



People from many different social and ethnic groups now worship God in Christian Reformed Churches and work together in Christian Reformed agencies. With this diversity, how can we as brothers and sisters in Christ serve God? We come from very different societies, each with its own peculiar cultural ways.

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