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Visionary leadership will save the Church from irrelevance, or perhaps even from extinction in the West, we are told. Hopeful church leaders flock to seminars where they eagerly soak up the latest managerial and therapeutic strategies. They return to engage in imaginative revisioning of an exciting new future for their congregations. Sometimes the members are not convinced and there is conflict. But the seminars have prepared them to expect some opposition to the vision and to be ready for some losses. In the end such leadership will create communities focused on and dedicated to their vision. So they are told.

Throughout North America such seminars are challenging the Church to rethink its identity and the mode of its leadership for effective ministry. At the same time the increasing centralization at denominational levels and a growing congregationalism create an environment of uncertainty about the office-bearers, assemblies and even theological traditions of the church. There is a growing sense, perhaps even a convergence of opinion, that what has defined us in the past will not bear up in the present. But, as noted in the first article, the extent to which God's people isolates itself from the foundational theological traditions that define her institutions and office-bearers, she runs the danger of disappearing into the culture. She will continue with the forms of churchly piety but will lack the power of her true identity.

The Church's one foundation.

Israel's prophets, priests and kings provided true leadership when they observed Torah: the law revealed at Sinai. False leadership was the consequence of marginalizing the Torah: when they emulated the kingship of the nations, shaped their sacrifices according to local health and wealth theologies, or cast prophetic visions not rooted in the council of God (Jer. 23). Truly effective leadership is totally dedicated to...
the inscripturated account of God's speech about his mighty acts of redemption in the past which alone can illuminate the present with hope for the future.

Few will argue with this. But things change when we make similar claims about the Reformed confessions, ecclesiology and church polity. Of course, we do not equate these traditions with Scripture. But we do believe that they are shaped by Scripture that they properly exercise authority over all confessing members of the Church, especially office-bearers who vow before God and his Church to uphold and defend them. Those born into the Church and converts to the faith will be taught to submit to them. Such careful attention to these foundations is fundamental for true and effective leadership in the Church. Still, the question remains: Why such attention to things from the past?

Jude urges the church "to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." This faith, whether revealed at Sinai or more fully in Christ, does not change in its intent or significance. For example, the law was normative throughout Israel's history and continues to be so for us today (Romans 8:4). Revealed truth transcends, time, place and people; it is universally true for the Church of all ages. When the leadership of God's people abandons this revealed truth in order to be culturally relevant, compassionate in perceived brokenness, or to be eschatologically affirmative, they sow the seeds of relativism. They will reap the whirlwind (Job 38:14). This is the lesson from Israel's history in the land: the prophets spoke against the abandonment of the truth revealed at Sinai; against making God relevant in Canaan. Ezra and Nehemiah confirmed this for the returned exiles.

Rootedness in the past is difficult for a culture almost exclusively oriented to the present and loath to learn from the past. The past is acknowledged, but often as a museum of our ancestors' foibles which provide little or no resources for responding to present concerns. Above all, it seems, the past cannot be associated with the truth which transcends time, place and people; it is more acceptable to believe that everyone has a different and valid perspective on the truth. Such an attitude to the past in the Church can only place enormous pressure on its theological traditions, including its teaching concerning the Church, its organization, and its office-bearers. The pressure becomes even greater when this attitude is placed within the context of multi-cultural concerns: the received theological traditions of the Church can then be regarded as mere expressions of the dominant cultural group. As a result, they are reduced to relative truths, so charged with cultural bias that they must be changed or other ethnic communities will not feel comfortable. But there is a contradiction: the traditions of other communities are considered relevant for the present.

There is an essential unity in the nature and function of office-bearers throughout Old and New Testament, a unity that the Church has diligently kept alive in its theology about office-bearers. Although office-bearers in the CRCNA are not kings, priests and prophets, they are charged with the same responsibility: to administer and safeguard the revealed tradition, the truth of God according to Scripture. Contemporary office-bearers also do so according to the theological traditions we believe to be faithful expressions of the revealed tradition. While our church polity does not have the authority of the confessions, its ecclesiology is so tied into the confessions that minimizing its normative status or ignoring it for the sake of relevance is hazardous. After all, office-bearers promise to abide by it in spirit and in truth (Deut. 23:21-23); the CRCNA is a denomination based on promise-keeping. Of course, proposed changes will be properly channeled and conversations about them sanctioned by the assemblies of the church.

There is also the matter of the specific nomenclature of office-bearers and their function in the history of redemption. Although Scripture uses words that may be translated as "leader," neither such words, nor the concept of leadership as often discussed is prominent. Leadership is consistently associated with particularly defined roles: the priest to teach Torah; the king to administer justice according to Torah; and the prophet to admonish the priest,
Change and decay - is it really that bad? We sing, "change and decay in all around I see." There is a lot of evidence that some changes create decay in our society: Only the spiritually blind favor change at any cost.

**Change is Difficult**

Change is difficult, especially in the church. Perhaps you recall when Andrew Kuyvenhoven, former editor of The Banner, advocated change under the symbol of burning the wooden shoes. The symbol was too hot for many to handle and the editor himself got burned a bit in the process. Today that symbol would not evoke the same heated response. We have changed.

Still, change in the church is difficult. There are good reasons for this. Older members, myself included, have worshiped for decades shaped by a certain worship style, certain liturgical forms and hymns. These have been for us a channel of blessing, of genuine worship. We do not want to lose that by needless and grandchildren, and for the sake of outreach to persons shaped exclusively by the idioms of contemporary culture. Toleration is in place so long as change neither obscures nor threatens what is essential to the church and the gospel.

**Reflections on Change**

This issue of the Forum addresses three significant areas of change: styles of leadership, worship styles, and the changes demanded by mission outreach in a secular society. Each article intends to be a contribution to the continuing dialogue in the church. In this spirit of dialogue, I will make a few observations about the article by Rev. Neil Jasperse. I told him I would, and I would not want him to be disappointed if I failed to do so.

Neil Jasperse is absolutely correct in distinguishing distinctions from essentials. We all agree that it is more important that a person be a Christian than that he or she be Christian disciple in business and the laboratory, in political office and education, wherever Christians live, work and play. It is a vision that has learned to mine the Old Testament for guidance in Christian living today.

This is not a parochial vision, not just Dutch or Christian Reformed. It has a broad ecumenical sweep and is increasingly impacting other traditions today. Many Christians, as well as theologians, in other traditions are discovering the Reformed perspective to be significant for guidance in being a Christian in a secular age.

How then do we pass it on? Certainly we may distinguish between past forms and the essence of the vision. Visions need renewal and forms may change. The Heidelberg Catechism is four hundred years old and we could write a new catechism. However, we must not overlook the fact that almost the entire catechism is but an explanation of the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. These are the three elements which the Christian Church from its beginning has considered essential for instructing converts in the faith.  

**Change is Necessary**

The winds of change continue to blow strongly upon the church. Can we successfully negotiate the passage? Some of us prefer to return to the way it was before the 1960s, to a time nostalgically remembered as a time of calm and certainty. But most acknowledge that cannot be a long-term strategy. All who have raised or taught children in recent decades know that in some significant ways these children are not like their parents. They have grown up in a significantly different culture, influenced by a different musical idiom, and have developed a freer idiom of personal expression. Most of us learn to tolerate that in the children we love. So it must be in the church. Even if we find ourselves unable to enthusiastically embrace certain changes, we must learn to tolerate it for the sake of our children.

**Most of us learn to tolerate change in the children we love**
BEING CHRISTIAN REFORMED:
— Essentials Versus Distinctives.

Some time ago I read the Winter, 1996 issue of the Calvin Seminary Forum with interest and concern. The transcript of the keynote address by Rev. Jacob Eppenga especially crystallized something for me. Among us there is a marked difference in the lenses by which we view the church and therefore how we assess its health. My terms for the difference are “essentials” versus “distinctives”.

Essentials

Let me explain. Until just recently I have been involved in new church development in Santa Rosa, California. When I kneel before God and assess the ministry of our church, first of all I ask such questions as: Is the gospel of Jesus Christ clearly and effectively presented in all its fullness? Are people coming to a personal, informed commitment to Christ as Savior and Master? Are my people being nurtured in their walk with God through regular Bible study, meaningful prayer, and fellowship? Does the church have a Spirit-filled passion for witnessing and reaching the lost—enough passion to count the cost? Is there deep concern to be salt and light in promoting justice and compassion in the world?

These questions focus on what I will call essentials of the Christian faith and life: central, basic, and crucial ingredients in a balanced, biblical church which will please the Lord Jesus. Essentials in doctrine include the Bible being God’s Word. God existing in three persons, Jesus Christ being the only way of salvation, that we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone, that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. The Apostle’s Creed is a leading expression of such essentials.

With this primary focus on essentials, when I look at the Christian Reformed Church today I see plentiful signs of growing health and vitality, as well as doctrinal faithfulness. In fact, one could readily conclude that our churches and our people are spiritually healthier and more fruitful than a generation ago. Conversely some of my greatest concerns about our churches are quite different than those voiced at the South Holland event. For example, I am greatly concerned about such influences as materialism, the pervasive- ly secular impact of TV and movies on our minds, the growing consumerism about churches which weakens loyalty to local congregations, churches with too little focus on God’s concern for justice and compassion in the world, and individualism which bypasses accountability and dislikes submitting to spiritual authority.

In contrast to a focus on essentials, Rev. Eppenga’s keynote address evidenced a classic focus on Christian Reformed “distinctives”. So when Rev. Eppenga looks at the church he asks such questions as: Is there a strong emphasis on Heidelberg Catechism preaching? Do all our churches still have worship services with a traditionally CRC flavor? Do we sing hymns which are fittingly full, objective, and free of repetition? Is there a passion for the five points of Calvinism? Do we maintain our stance of excluding women from serving as elders and ministers?

By this measuring stick, that of CRC distinctives, many churches don’t measure up. Our church in Santa Rosa certainly doesn’t. As a result, Rev. Eppenga sometimes feels that “the denomination into which I was born doesn’t exist anymore.” He concludes that “we are in danger of losing some of our essential characteristics as a Christian Reformed Church.” Therefore, with the Covenant Union he believes that “all is not well”; that “the good ship CRC has sprung some leaks”; and that there is “cause for alarm”.

The reason I generally do not share this alarm is that I think a “distinctives” measuring stick is unsound. A measuring stick which looks only at distinctives is incomplete and unbalanced. It is like measuring my son’s educational progress solely by the length of his hair, by whether he sings the same songs I grew up with, and by how he treats girls on the playground. While those matters are significant, his education encompasses a far greater scope than just that.

The inadequacy of the “distinctives” measuring stick is all the greater when Christian Reformed characteristics include not just theological matters, but things merely historical and cultural. For example, historically Heidelberg Catechism preaching has been a Christian Reformed staple. That is useful (I certainly have found it so). But is it essential to a sound, biblical, God-pleasing church? Clearly not. For the first 1500 years of its history, Christ’s church got along just fine, even though the catechism had not yet been written.

Important But Secondary

All this is not to say such distinctives have no importance. They certainly do. Reformed distinctives have shaped our heritage and identity and have often strengthened us as God’s people. And theological matters which are secondary within the church still have importance as God’s truth—significance which
calls for careful study, discussion, and finally obedience to conviction. But the point is that our historic Christian Reformed distinctives should be kept in proper perspective. Reformed Christians should keep first things first- the essentials of the faith, and we should keep secondary things second, no matter how precious and distinctive they are.

John Calvin made this important point in writing about maintaining the unity of the church. In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book Four, Chapter One about the church we find section 12 "Heeding the marks guards against capricious separation."

Here he writes:

"Not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith." Its too bad Calvin didn't offer more help on where the line is drawn between primary and secondary matters.

When it comes to Christian Reformed distinctives I don't think it's too far off the mark to suggest two things:

**FIRST**, more of our Christian Reformed distinctives are cultural-not theological/principal- than we have traditionally cared to admit. **SECOND**, many (not all) of those matters which truly are biblical/principal truths end up not being as distinctively "Reformed" as we have often claimed. For example, we have often claimed an appreciation of God's sovereignty as a Reformed distinctive. However, in my fellowship and shared ministry with other evangelical Christians God's sovereignty has also been fully acknowledged and embraced.

**Our Identity**

In the latter part of Rev. Eppinga's address he notes: "It is becoming increasingly difficult for us to know who we are." Then he poses this crucial question: "Who are we, really? What is our identity?" At that point in my spirit I cried out: "We belong body and soul, in life and in death to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ! We've been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. What other ultimate identity could we possibly have? What other identity do we need?"

A second read of the keynote address showed hardly any mention of the person and work of Jesus Christ. But that is where our fullest, truest identity and unity lies! Any core identity resting on historical, cultural, or even secondary Reformed theological distinctives is dangerous. It is an identity sure to fade and disappear. (In fact it is an identity which is fading in our church today and indeed causing great disappointment among some.)

I first was convicted of this danger when reading a George McDonald novel. The Vicar's Daughter. In it a lady by the name of Mrs. Cromwell is in physical distress and is carried to the garden house of the vicar's daughter. After she is revived Mrs. Cromwell notices a certain hymnbook in the house. The vicar's daughter, from whose point of view the book is written, discusses various songs with great admiration.

Then this telling interchange:

"Ah!" said Mrs. Cromwell, opening her eyes very wide, and letting the rising tears fill them. "Ah! Mrs. Percival! You are, you must be one of us!" "You must first tell me who you are," I said. She held out her hand, and I gave her mine. She drew me toward her, and whispered almost in my ear... the name of a certain small and exclusive sect.

"No," I answered, speaking with the calmness of self-compulsion. For I confess I felt repelled. "I am not one of you, except as we all belong to the Church of Christ." She [Mrs. Cromwell] gave a little sigh of disappointment.

Then the Vicar's daughter's final thought: "It was a pity she had sought to claim me by a would-be closer bond than that of the Body of Christ." Like Mrs. Cromwell, I fear that in our church's history too much of our identity has rested on "would-be closer bonds": on historical, cultural, and theological distinctives. With the vicar's daughter, I believe its high time we rest together in our essential and truest identity- Jesus Christ alone.
Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture

“Why in the world are there so many changes in worship today?” “The gulf in our church between ‘traditional worship’ folks and ‘contemporary worship’ folks seems to be too great to overcome. What do we do?” “We want to reach out to our community and are open to change in worship, but how do we know when we are changing too much?”

These are the questions that most congregations in the CRC are struggling with today. You can hear the pain in these heartfelt questions. No doubt questions regarding the nature and direction of worship are among the most burning questions that local congregations face today. However, dealing openly and wisely with these questions can also be exciting and lead to great spiritual blessing in a congregation.

“Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture” is the title of a 59 page synodical study committee report that will be presented to the synod of 1997. Building upon the principles of the Worship Report of 1968, which conceptualized worship as a dialogue between God and his people, this report seeks to address the questions raised above and give guidance to church leaders, worship leaders, and worship committees as they struggle with these issues. For purposes of this brief article, we’ll summarize the report in terms of the three issues raised in the first paragraph above.

Why all the Change?

An important part of our mandate was to analyze the contemporary cultural and historical forces that have led to so many changes in worship today.

We first note four major forces in Protestant worship since 1968: the world wide ecumenical liturgical movement (today many of us talk about Advent and Lent and use the lectionary), the charismatic movement (of which the praise-and-worship movement is the second generation); the shift to consider public worship the primary vehicle for evangelism, and the growing emphasis on cultural diversity in worship.

We then look at some of the cultural forces that have changed the way we think about worship and the way we worship. Consider five such forces: 1. We live in a consumer culture in which worshipers increasingly go “shopping” for worship experiences and in which worship leaders are tempted to view worshipers as customers they must satisfy. 2. We live in a society that is increasingly biased toward change. “We’ve always done it that way.” used to be a persuasive argument for maintaining the status quo. No more. 3. We live in a society where change is more of an attraction. 4. We live in a culture where fast-paced visual images have replaced reasoned discourse in communication. 5. We live in a culture with much brokenness and breakdown; people have many hurts and needs which they take with them to church.

The report tries to explain the impact of these cultural forces on worship in North America. Understanding where the pressures to change worship are coming from is critical in deciding whether the changes are good or bad, necessary or unnecessary helpful or harmful.

Traditional vs. Contemporary Worship

Is there any way out of the division many churches face, a division between those who favor traditional worship and those who favor contemporary worship? Is the gulf between the organ and the drum simply too great to bridge for many churches? What should churches hopelessly divided, questions of worship style do?

The title of our report suggests the creative tension between “authentic worship” and a “changing culture.” Authentic Christian worship has certain biblical, theological and historical given that are not ours to ignore or change. Trashign songs, preaching, the sacrament and hymnsinging would be foolish. But worship also changes. We worship in a given time and place. Worship is organic, growing, and ever-changing. We must also sing new song.

Authentic worship happens in community, and the healthiest communities are those which both have deep rootedness and narrative unity with their own past and continue to grow and change. The goal is both honor the historic structure of worship and be creative within that structure.

Churches that are embroiled in a worship conflict probably have not kept these two things in tension. Churches that refuse to change anything in worship are unnecessarily setting themselves up for conflict. But churches that simply abort th...
Worship tradition of a church do violence to the church as a community and also unnecessarily set themselves up for conflict.

Throughout the report we talk about changing worship carefully, integratively, and pastorally. By "carefully" we want to remind worship leaders that there must be reasons for changes in worship and to suggest that worship change be deliberate and thoughtful, not reckless. In this regard, one good policy for worship leaders to apply to any proposed change in worship is this: Before we will change a time-tested worship practice, we must first thoroughly understand why the church ever started this practice. Often worship leaders are not even aware of why the church does certain things in worship. By "integratively" we are referring to the importance of unifying the proposed change in worship to what already exists in such a way that there is harmony and wholeness. By "pastorally" we are referring to the need to be loving. Worship leaders must love the people they lead in worship. To paraphrase Paul, "If I have the best arguments in the world for changing or for not changing worship, but have not love, I have nothing." Too often "traditional" and "contemporary" are labels that polarize the church and caricatures that misrepresent the sincere attempts of fellow believers to worship God. Beyond questions of worship and music, Christians must hear the call of Christ to love one another.

Worship and Evangelism

Only in the last fifteen years have we thought of public worship as a primary vehicle for evangelism. Today more and more churches evaluate their worship in terms of how intelligible it is to visitors and spiritual seekers.

Christian worship is primarily the activity of believers. Certainly, we expect that nonbelievers will be present in Christian worship (I Cor. 14). And certainly, the church must worship in ways that call people to faith and life in Christ. But the fact remains that the church of Jesus Christ that gathers for worship is a believing community that is clearly differentiated from the world. Given that, we should be neither surprised nor apologetic that nonbelievers do not understand everything that is happening in Christian worship.

At the same time, churches must seek to be as visitor friendly and seeker friendly as possible and to eliminate all unnecessary barriers to communication with visitors and seekers. Avoiding in-house reference (Not everyone knows what NIV or CRWRC means), clarifying what is happening in worship with brief explanations, producing a church bulletin with visitors and seekers in mind, designing prayers and sermons that are sensitive to the full range of people who are present—these are things that we can do which make worship more intelligible to nonbelievers.

Too often we care more about our own style of worship that we do about reaching unbelievers. In the report we suggest a test to apply to see how sensitive we are to the nonbeliever's presence in worship. Imagine that your daughter marries a nonbeliever. Of course we hope and pray that never happens. But it does happen all the time. Your son-in-law, the father of your grandchildren, never comes to church. But now, for some reason, he has started coming. How do you see worship as you view it through the eyes of your son-in-law? Are there unnecessary obstacles and barriers in worship?

The point of the test is this: if we loved the stranger, the one lost sheep, as much as we love our own families, no doubt we would look at some things in worship differently.

The test above cuts both ways. You don't want unnecessary barriers for your son-in-law. But you also don't want anything less than authentic Christian worship. You've gained little if the son-in-law comes to church but finds there something other than authentic worship of the triune God.

May Worship Wars End!

The central thrust of our report is a unifying one. While we are aware of the “worship wars” in many churches today, we are also aware of and very excited about more and more churches that are weaving together the best of historic Christian worship and the best of new and creative forms of worship into beautiful, God glorifying, upbuilding, and outreach worship of God. May the numbers of these churches increase—to the glory of God!

EDITORIAL... cont.

HOLWERDA... cont.

One necessary guide in distinguishing the “baby” from the “bath water” is a knowledge of the tradition. What was it saying and trying to accomplish in its forms? The Spirit leads us, but He also led them, and we remain surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We must also learn from them.
Stop the Fantasy: A Plea for Bodily Christianity.

JOHN BOLT
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"You are the body of Christ." I Corinthians
"I believe... the resurrection of the body." Apostles' Creed
"I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." John 6:53

The Christian religion is a very physical, fleshly, bodily religion. The sacraments—material realities of water, bread, and wine—are the very means of God's grace. Genuine Christian spirituality is never suspicious or disdainful of the physical; it affirms it and considers it holy.

Gnosticism, the earliest and most persistent Christian heresy, specifically denies this and considers physical matter a fall from pure spirit. Salvation is then deliverance from the material world through special knowledge or gnostis (the Greek word for knowledge).

Gnosticism was decisively rejected by the church but it is important to understand its attraction. The real world is messy, full of ills, evil people, with limitations, brokenness, tragedy, pain and sadness. The way things are is messy and difficult; we often feel overwhelmed and helpless before that reality. Then gnosticism alluringly asks us, what if that reality is an illusion? What if there were a secret knowledge that could lift us out of all that messiness; what if the confines of the material can be overcome? Understandably, that attracts us.

Nonetheless, Christianity is utterly opposed to all gnostic fantasizing, because it denies the truth of creation and incarnation and because its consequences are disastrous for Christian doctrine and discipleship alike. A few examples to illustrate this.

Gnosticism changes our view of Jesus' resurrection from a bodily to a merely spiritual one; the memory of his example and teaching or a charming sign of birth and life like crocuses and daffodils. With Paul in I Corinthians 15:17 we must say, "NOT!"

Our attitude to the church also changes. Bodily Christianity is demanding and sometimes even depressing; the reality of our church life in particular congregations usually misses the ideal of I Corinthians 12 and 13 by a long shot, tempting parishioners and pastors to greener church fields.

Eugene Peterson (Under the Unpredictable Plant) has observed that "most pastoral work involves routines similar to cleaning out the barn, mucking out the stalls, spreading manure, pulling out weeds." But, "propagandists are abroad in the land lying about what congregations are and can be," luring pastors into fantasizing about glamorized alternative churches while profiting enormously from selling the secret gnostic needed to bring it about. Peterson calls this "eclesiastical pornography—taking photographs (skillfully airbrushed) or drawing pictures of congregations that are without spot or wrinkle."

Church shopping for the ideal church is a form of gnostic fantasizing.

Finally, one of the moral hallmarks of gnosticism is repudiation of creation patterns for human sexuality. The pattern of a woman and a man joined in love as "one flesh" for procreation and communion is rejected, through ascetic repudiation of all sexual expression for the spiritually "higher" ideal of celibacy, through sexual libertinism, or through exalta-