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“Vitalizing Profession Faith” (Sectional D 14)
Symposium 2010
Howard Vanderwell

A. The Origins of Profession of Faith.

B. Identifying Current Debates in the Church.

C. The Purpose of POF – Actions of the professor...

1.]

2.]

3.]

4.]

5.]

D. The Purpose of POF – Actions of God...

E. Issues to Consider for Revitalization of POF –

1.] Milestones of development

2.] “Age-Appropriate”

3.] Rites of passage

4.] Healthy Ritual

5.] Counter-cultural

6.] Other?

Affirming Baptism and Forming Faith

Faith Formation Committee of CRCNA

* * * * *

PART 3: AFFIRMING BAPTISMAL IDENTITY THROUGH A REVITALIZED PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH

3.1 Public Profession of Faith as an Affirmation of Baptism

For those who come to faith as an adult their time of baptism also includes a profession of their faith. This event is always a milestone event for them and carries great personal significance. Those who are baptized as an infant, however, are expected to make their personal profession of faith later, when they are able to give their personal response to their baptism. Public profession of faith, though not a specific biblically mandated practice, is nevertheless an especially important milestone by which persons affirm their baptism, express personal trust in Jesus Christ, and indicate their pledge to follow Christ. Reformed Christians have practiced public profession of faith with good benefit for theological, pastoral, and historic reasons. It marks a time in which a believer is ready for new responsibilities and roles in the life of the church. It offers the Christian community rich opportunities to express gratitude for the work of God in the lives of his children. The opportunity for public profession of faith is a gift, then, both for individuals and for the church.

We call on each other to highlight the way that public profession of faith is an affirmation of baptism, and to celebrate public professions of faith with joyful gratitude.

3.2 Profession of Faith of Children and Youth as a Milestone.

Profession of Faith by a baptized person represents both an affirmation of their baptism and a response of commitment to the promises of God given at baptism. It is affirming what was given and looking forward to obedience in living it out.

There are significant developmental or psychological reasons for affirming profession of faith. For many generations, a public profession of faith has served as a rite of passage out of childhood and into adolescent or adult faith. It serves as a natural occasion for challenging youth to consider the claims of Christ, to give voice to the faith within them, to celebrate and affirm their God-given gifts, and to join in God's world-wide work.

However, there is no single age which the church is able to mandate for public profession of faith. Indeed, in God's sovereign grace, congregations have witnessed profound professions of faith by believers of 8 and 88. Professions of faith arise out of individual initiative as the Holy Spirit leads. However, congregations need not passively

wait for individuals to step forward, but should rather eagerly and sensitively invite children and youth to take the significant step of publicly professing their faith.

We acknowledge, however, that several contemporary factors have recently eroded this practice, including the extension of adolescence as a distinct stage in one's life cycle, the reluctance of some churches to impose any expectation of a formal profession of faith, the practice of welcoming of young children to the Lord's Supper, and —for some— prolonged periods of formal education at a distance from a young person's congregational home. These factors, however, do not offer grounds for setting aside this practice, but only for becoming more intentional about it. Congregations that offer warm, personal invitations to each child and young person to explore making profession of faith by probing their doubts and questions, developing Christian practices of Bible study and prayer, and discerning their gifts for service will have served them well.

We call on each other to explore ways in which the ritual of a public profession of faith can be revitalized and become a memorable and encouraging event in the spiritual journey of each believer.

We call on all baptized persons to resist the temptation to unnecessarily delay or postpone their personal response to baptism, but to sense the urgency of such a response.

We call on each other to resist practice and instruction that gives the impression that profession of faith is a one-time stand-alone event.

We call on each other to develop and recognize multiple occasions in the life of a person and within a congregation when we profess our faith, and discover ways in which this can be celebrated liturgically.

3.3 Young Children and Profession of Faith

Young children are people of faith. Little ones have much to teach us when we listen to their simple, spontaneous expressions of love for Jesus—as Christ himself suggested (Mark 10:13-16). The Christian Reformed Church took Christ's reminder seriously when it urged congregations to invite covenant children to affirm their baptisms and profess their faith at younger ages, rather than waiting until late adolescence. In 1988, synod encouraged covenant children “to make public profession of faith as soon as they exhibit faith and are able to discern the body and remember and proclaim the death of Jesus in celebrating the Lord's Supper” (1988 Acts of Synod, p.559). In 1995 synod outlined a four-step procedure for hearing such age-appropriate professions of faith (1995 Acts of Synod, p.719-720).

(This paragraph reflects our current understanding of the matter, but may likely be modified to reflect the discussions and actions of Synod 2010.)

We call on each other to be sensitive to the faith often found in younger children, and to encourage younger children to consider professing their faith and seeking admission to the Lord's Table, as the Synods of 1988 and 1995 have encouraged.

We call on each other to embrace young children who have professed their faith and to heartily affirm their baptisms, celebrate with great joy, welcome them to the Lord's Table, and give thanks to God for his faithfulness throughout the generations.

3.4 Persons with Disabilities and Profession of Faith

Healthy congregations welcome and include all who seek to belong to the body of Christ by professing faith in him—including persons with disabilities. Healthy congregations welcome people with disabilities heartily and intentionally with the message: "Come to Jesus. Belong to the people of God. Give and receive love and acceptance—and participate by sharing your gifts with brothers and sisters in this faith community." The invitation to profess one's love for Christ and to live in community with fellow believers is offered to all in the measure in which they are able to respond to it—with no age requirement, no physical, emotional, or cognitive prerequisite! The invitation has no higher goal than to extend Christ's love to all, to deepen the fellowship of believers, and to strengthen the witness and work of the church in this world.

We call on each other to practice the full welcome of God to all whose disabilities make it necessary for them to express their faith in their own appropriate way.

3.5 Profession of Faith and Confirmation

While confirmation was considered a sacrament prior to the Reformation, the Reformers resisted identifying it as a sacrament, preferred, instead, to call it profession of faith, and acknowledged that there is no explicit mandate in scripture for a specific ritual action (as there is for baptism). Rather, the Reformers identified profession of faith as a pastoral practice which worked together with catechesis and worship to encourage vital faith formation and to provide a public opportunity to affirm the grace of God signed and sealed in baptism (See Calvin's Institutes, IV.19.4-13). They mandated that the journey prior to profession of faith should include instruction in the Christian faith, a personal response to the grace of God, an expression of love for and commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior, a confession of the church's common faith, and a pledge of obedience to the triune God.

We affirm the Reformers' resistance to making public profession of faith a sacrament of the church, like baptism and the Lord's Supper, and affirm their approach of practicing public profession of faith as a fruitful pastoral practice which builds up the body and encourages vital faith formation.

3.6 Profession of Faith and the Mission of God

Public profession of faith is both an expression of and catalyst for the missional work of the church in the world. The great commission calls the church to a public testimony of

faith as it disciples nations, “baptizing them . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28: 19-20). Indeed, the church’s profession of faith, and each individual profession of faith, is an act of proclamation that reaches out to the lost and disciples the found. This reaching out toward the world that God loves happens both through explicit witness to the love of Christ and through faith-filled actions in society (Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A. 86), including caring for “the least of these” with grace-filled words and deeds (Matthew 25:31ff) and serving as an advocate for the victims of injustice (Proverbs 31:8-9; Micah 6:8).

Yet in some contexts, the missional character of public profession of faith may be too unclear or obscure, with little attention given to challenging all believers to joyfully use their gifts for the sake of God’s mission in the world. Indeed, when we affirm our baptism and profess our faith we express our intentional commitment and vow to “join the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere”. (cf. Form for Public Profession of Faith) The private and personal expression of faith must always be seen as a genuine public pledge to join the mission of God in the world.

We call on each other to see public profession of faith as an expression of the missional work of the church in the world, and to look for ways to celebrate public profession of faith with more explicit commitment to the mission of God in the world.

3.7 Profession of Faith and the Worship of the Church

Public professions of faith are a lifelong practice, rather than a once-in-a-lifetime event. Some of these professions happen at significant life moments, for example, parents who present children for baptism profess their faith, and office bearers who are ordained and installed to their offices profess their faith, each in the public assembly for worship. Additional expressions of faith happen as a recurring part of worship, as the congregation recites creeds, sing songs which testify to God’s goodness, or exclaims “Amen” or “Thanks be to God” after a scripture reading or in the middle of a sermon. Every time we participate in the Lord’s Supper, we profess our faith, “proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes.” Professing faith should thus be seen as an indispensable element in regular worship practices. And the formal, rite of passage we call “Profession of Faith” can be understood as a way for each individual to join in expressing assent to the faith regularly professed by the whole congregation.

We call on each other to strengthen and revitalize profession of faith by underscoring, celebrating, enhancing and multiplying these liturgical moments, and by resisting the idea that a profession of faith is a once in a lifetime event.

We call on each other to understand the high value of such times of corporate professions of faith in worship as a time in which we give encouragement in the faith to one another. (Romans 1:12)

3.8 The Significant Role of Parents and Guardians

At baptism, parents make important vows about their role in the faith development of their children, specifically to instruct their children in the Christian faith and lead them by example to be Christ's disciples (Deut. 6:4-9). We call on parents to nurture their children's faith by faithfully teaching the truths found in Scripture, and by using every possible means in everyday life to interact with their children on the questions and issues of faith. The key to a revived Christian nurture of children is a parental faith that is vital, involved, and communicated. Adult spiritual growth and discipleship is the foundation for children's faith and its nurture. Alongside traditional church-based Christian education programs for children and youth, congregations must emphasize training parents for this enormous responsibility, as well to encourage a culture of life-long learning and growth for adults. Whether through classes, workshops, or mentoring, congregations need to walk alongside parents to assist them in their task of Christian nurture in the home from birth until the child leaves the home. A strong denomination-wide effort is needed to invite and exhort parents to accept this responsibility with renewed commitment and joyful hope. Many Christians have historically provided Christian Day Schools to assist parents in this task.

We call on parents to understand that the faith development of their children is primary among all the tasks of parenthood. We call on each other to take an active supportive role with parents, not only reminding them, but also providing support, encouragement, counsel and training in their tasks of faith formation.

3.9 Profession of Faith and Lifelong Discipleship

Profession of faith is a significant milestone in the lifelong journey of discipleship. Congregations should not view profession of faith as a graduation from church-based education programs, but rather, profession of faith should further encourage and stimulate the individual towards greater levels of maturity in faith formation (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 114/115). Profession of faith should further awaken the entire congregation to challenge and stretch Christian believers of all ages in ways that make faith formation a priority in every stage of life.

We call on each other to see profession of faith not as an end but as the beginning of a new step forward in the journey of faith formation. We call on each other to emphasize the life-long nature of Christian discipleship and develop ministries to aid this awakening.

3.10 Profession of Faith and Contemporary Culture

Public profession of faith goes hand in hand with the church's calling to be a prophetic voice in contemporary culture. Obligated to speak out against injustice and wickedness in the world, the church errs seriously when it suppresses the faith by remaining silent. It must sound a loud and clear voice for the voiceless that embraces all, without exception, with the love of Christ (Proverbs 31:8-9; I Corinthians 14:8). In the faith formation of its members, young and old, the body is equipped to profess its faith,

staking the claims of Christ in every sector of modern society. The profession of its members ought not be an expression of world-flight Christianity that trumpets platitudes over a fortified wall of isolationism, nor a profession submerged by or indistinguishable from the deafening noise of this world. The church's public profession of faith and the faith formation of its members must be in line with the Bible and the Reformed tradition, but, as truly reformed and reforming, the church must be determined to be a clear voice for today with an ear for the times.

We call on all who have professed their faith to be committed to the task of the Body of Christ to be his transforming presence in the world.