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A STRATEGY FOR COVENANTAL SPIRITUAL FORMATION
AT COMMUNITY CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH
FRANKFORD, ONTARIO

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ABSTRACT

A Strategy for Covenantal Spiritual Formation at Community Christian Reformed Church Frankford, Ontario

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Some years ago Community Christian Reformed Church, Frankford (Community Church) adopted the phrase: “Building a Community of Believers Called by God for Works of Service” as its guiding principle. The church believes that a significant part of its purpose is to be an active provider of help and hope in its community. In order to accomplish this, the congregation must be formed as a conduit of God’s transformative grace. To assist the church to achieve this goal, this ministry focus paper will develop a strategy for spiritual formation for Community Church rooted in reformed covenantal theology by evaluating historic and emerging understandings and practices of spiritual formation.

This paper begins by exploring the context of Community Church. It gives a brief overview of the congregation’s history and how it dealt with issues of spiritual formation. This section also gives a description of Frankford, its relevant history and some understanding of how Community Church has been perceived by non-members.

Next, this paper explores covenant theology, looking for insights for spiritual formation. It examines the theology and practices of the various Reformed traditions, which were merged into the CRC. This part of the paper also explores the impact World War II and immigration had on the spiritual formation of Dutch immigrants to Canada. This historical background provides insights for a current strategy for spiritual formation.

Based on these explorations this paper offers a strategy for spiritual formation, which is rooted in Dutch Reformed theology and practice. Both historic and emerging spiritual practices and beliefs are explored. It argues that the historic practices should not be abandoned but should be properly understood and modified for the current context. The strategy takes into account the short but volatile history of the CRC in Canada in the hope that Community Church can move into a future more productive for the Kingdom of God.

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May God, by his gracious love, draw us all deeper into covenant fellowship with himself.

INTRODUCTION

The desire to write this paper has grown over fifteen years of pastoring in two Christian Reformed congregations¹ in Ontario, Canada. This desire stems from four observations rooted in these congregations and confirmed by exposure to many others. In response to these observations, this paper is written as an act of love for this part of God's church. This is an effort to encourage at least one congregation, Community CRC of Frankford,² to enter more deeply into the Kingdom of God.

The first observation comes from the results provided by Natural Church Development³ surveys among CR congregations. Thirty-seven percent of the 117 churches who took the survey in the past decade found "passionate spirituality" to be their lowest area. However, among healthy⁴ congregations, the percentage stands at 45. At a minimum, these surveys suggest that significant work needs to be done in this area of the church's life.

¹The initials CR refer to Christian Reformed and CRC to the Christian Reformed Church as a denomination.

²This congregation will be called Community Church.

³For more information on Natural Church Development (NCD) see Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (British Columbia: The International Centre for Leadership Development and Evangelism, 1996). NCD analyses congregations in eight areas: empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships. The scores are not a percentage but are based on an annually updated standardization for each country.

⁴NCD considers churches with a combined score of less than 35 to be unhealthy.

Secondly, over the past fifteen years, there has been a significant shift in the leadership of CR congregations in Ontario. Most of these congregations were established by Dutch immigrants in the 1950s, whose children are now assuming leadership in the churches. These new leaders can be divided into two general categories. The first group is comprised of people who are church members because their parents raised them as Christian Reformed Christians. They have not wavered from those values, but many of them are not deeply connected to God or to the church. Their biblical knowledge and knowledge of CRC practice and history is significantly less than that of their parents. Generally, they want the church to do well, but do not know what that means or how to achieve it. The second group of leaders has a much deeper faith, but a faith often nurtured outside the CRC.⁵ They genuinely desire to see greater depth in the CRC, but their faith language and practices are often foreign to other CRC members.

These two groups of leaders are not at war with each other. Rather, because they use different language and have different experiences and expectations, they often fail to understand each other. The existence of these two groups raises a critical question: “Who are we?” or as it is often phrased, “What does it mean to be CRC today?”

The third observation is that CRC members are generally insecure about their faith. Many of the Dutch immigrants did not learn to express their faith in their new language, in part, because they had never learned it in their mother tongue. Such expression was left to those more educated, specifically, the ministers. Further, religious

⁵ The most significant influence comes from groups that fall under the title of “Third Wave Pentacostalism.” The CRC is currently studying this movement. Two reports were presented to Synod 2007 and new reports will be presented to Synod 2009. These reports can be found on the resources page of the CRC webpage, www.crcna.org (accessed April 27, 2008).

nurture at home was often provided only through Bible reading and prayers around the family table. These prayers were often formulaic because it was believed that only the clergy could construct their own prayers. Faith was seldom brought outside the home, church, or Christian school. Thus, a Christian community was formed in which the believers did not develop the language to discuss religious matters with unbelievers.⁶

Finally, many CRC members desire “something more” for themselves and for the church. They yearn for a deeper and richer experience of God and the ability to share their faith effectively with their coworkers and neighbours. They want to see their congregations have a vital impact in the neighbourhoods surrounding the church buildings. The question, “How can this be done?” is often left unanswered.

This paper is offered to the Community CRC of Frankford as an answer to this question. The need for this paper was crystallized in two recent events at Community Church. First, in the late spring of 2007, its council was engaged in some conversations about the state of this congregation. There was a consensus that, though many good things were happening in the congregation, there seemed to be a spiritual malaise. It was not so much being lukewarm (cf. Rev 3:14-22), as the lack of an edge, a purpose, a vision, a common understanding of where we were going with God. Second, early in 2008, a NCD survey revealed that passionate spirituality, at 31 on the NCD graph, was the lowest score. This second event suggests that the council may need to adjust its perception from a year earlier.

⁶ This conclusion is drawn after extensive conversation with CRC members and is consistent with conclusions drawn from NCD surveys of CR congregations.

Some years ago Community Church developed the phrase, “Building a Community of Believers Called by God for Works of Service,” as its guiding principle. This phrase gave expression to the congregation’s desire to become more engaged in the town of Frankford as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God. To assist the congregation in accomplishing this desire, this paper will offer a strategy for spiritual formation rooted in reformed covenantal theology by evaluating historic and emerging understandings and practices of spiritual formation. This paper’s goal is to offer a strategy for spiritual formation that will enable this congregation to become a greater blessing in Frankford.

The paper will begin by giving a concise history of Community Church, focusing on its original vision, the separation from its second pastor, and how spiritual formation was understood and practiced in this church. This part will also include a comparison between Community Church and the larger Frankford community. It will conclude with an analysis of how the residents around Community Church view this congregation.

By exploring the CRC in Canada from two different perspectives, this paper will assist Community Church in self-understanding. It will examine and evaluate the particular version of covenant theology taught in the CRC and argue that this theology needs to be placed within the framework of the Kingdom of God. It will also analyze three different strands of Reformed people who emigrated from the Netherlands to Canada, analyzing how these immigrants practiced their faith. The effect that World War II and the immigration experience had on spiritual formation will also be explored.

Based on these investigations, this paper will offer a strategy for more effective spiritual formation. This strategy will examine the traditional spiritual practices in the

CRC and offer ways to improve their effectiveness. It will also explore spiritual practices that are becoming more common in the CRC and encourage their broader use.

The strategy will argue that the home and church are the two primary places of spiritual formation. It will examine the church as a discipleship community, where disciples encourage each other along the road (cf. Eph 4:11-16). Further, it will show how the church needs to encourage healthy spiritual formation in the home.

Finally, the strategy will argue that spirituality is tested first and foremost in the marketplace because this is the primary place where Christians interact with people of other faiths. The value of Christian spiritual formation will be revealed in those places. This is the location where a person's true loyalty is exposed. This part of the strategy will offer a rhythm of life which will enable Christians to live out their commitment to the Kingdom of God.

The goal of these investigations and strategies is to assist Community Church in becoming a community that is more intentionally engaged in forming people to be like Christ Jesus. It is intended to offer a strategy for "becoming a community of believers called by God for works of service" and will encourage those who see themselves as merely believers in Jesus to become disciples of Jesus. As Eugene Peterson remarked, discipleship is necessary to ensure that the church is not about the church, nor that our works of service are about us, but that we are about Jesus Christ.⁷

⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Subversive Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 15.

CHAPTER 1

COMMUNITY CHURCH AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD

As indicated in the introduction, the goal of this paper is to help Community Church to be a conduit of God's grace and hope in the neighbourhoods of Frankford. For that purpose, this chapter will introduce both Community Church and the village of Frankford. The history of Community Church focuses on issues that contributed both positively and negatively to the spiritual formation of its members. The history of the village is given to provide information by which to compare and contrast Community Church with its neighbourhood. These histories are not meant to be exhaustive but to give a context for the rest of this paper.

A Brief History of Community Church

The change went largely unnoticed by the villagers of Frankford. More and more members of Ebenezer CRC of Trenton, ON, were establishing their homes in and around the little village nestled in the Trent valley at the crossroads of Highway #33 and County Road #5. As these people drove through or around the village to go to worship on Sundays and to mid-week programs during the week, a quiet desire to worship closer to their homes and their neighbours became fixed in their hearts. So it was that in 1986, thirty-five families¹ from Ebenezer organized Community Church.

¹ In 1986 the CRC counted members in terms of families.

In many ways, the new church was a smaller version of its mother church. In those days, the CRC seldom established new churches unless there were sufficient people in a geographical location to warrant such an effort. However, there were also significant ways in which Community Church intended to be different from Ebenezer. A rationale paper prepared as part of the birthing process for this new congregation mentioned two of these:

a. We find that the size of the Ebenezer CRC makes difficult the kind of sharing and caring that come from knowing each other by name and by face. We think reluctant members may join in more freely and feel more challenged to become involved in a smaller group.

b. Presently there are five churches in the village...only one doing community outreach so there is plenty of room for improvement. Some of us feel called to do this type of work for the Lord and it would be better accomplished if we gathered in an established church in this village.²

These short and simple statements resonate with two central themes of the Kingdom of God: developing community and reaching the lost.³ In this way, these central desires are rooted in God's plan for the church. It should be noted that no strategy was developed to implement these desires. Thus, since there were no intentional ways in which Community Church distinguished itself from Ebenezer, it naturally behaved like its mother church.

Nevertheless, with these purposes in mind, plans were laid for the new congregation. The first services were held in a small rented building in the middle of the village. Very soon, the space overflowing, plans were laid to build a new facility. To this

² This material is taken from a report prepared by the steering committee of Community Church for Classis Quinte dated February 17, 1986.

³ Cf. Ephesians 2:11-22 and Matthew 28:18-20. A more detailed explanation of the themes of God's Kingdom will be given in later chapters.

day, the original founders of the church remember fondly that time of building. Even though finances were tight, the experience of constructing a new building created a deeper sense of belonging together.

Before the new building was completed, the congregation had called her first pastor, Rev. Russell Graff. With great joy and excitement the Graff family was welcomed into the congregation, and a house was built at the edge of town to serve as a parsonage. The seven years of Graff's ministry are remembered fondly by those who were here, but seven years did seem long enough.

During those years, the congregation established various programs intended to train up her own members. Most of this effort was directed towards the children and youth. Sunday School classes were established for the children while catechetical instruction and a youth group were offered for the high school youth. Various Bible Studies for adults came and went, only two of which have enjoyed longevity: Coffee Break, a ministry for moms and pre-schoolers, and the Ladies Bible Hour.

Programs were also initiated to reach out into the community. The most significant outreach work was also among the children. A Vacation Bible School, held annually at the end of summer vacation, was established, and programs similar to Girl Guides and Boy Scouts were established to take place during the school year. Coffee Break was also able to draw in people from outside the congregation.

During these early years, the two purposes for establishing the congregation were not forgotten. There are no records which suggest any effort was made to reach members on the fringe, yet personal testimony from a variety of people indicate that Community

Church was the first congregation in which such people found a place to belong. No cohesive outreach plan was developed but progress was made through individual effort.

After Pastor Graff left, the congregation began looking for a new shepherd. In 1995 Pastor Charles Kooger accepted the congregation's call and arrived in Frankford with his family. Unfortunately, some of the congregation found it difficult to connect with him and an uneasy relationship developed. Some years into his ministry, criticism crystallized around a perceived lack of depth in his preaching, and conflict concerning worship styles added fuel to an already tense situation.

When the church council⁴ was unsuccessful in solving these conflicts, it asked for help from Classis Quinte.⁵ After some consultation, it was determined that the congregation and Pastor Kooger should sever their relationship. Classis Quinte determined that, before the congregation could call another pastor, it needed to conduct a thorough self-assessment. In the midst of this process, the congregation once again set out to find a new pastor. This search led eventually to my arrival in August 2002. The congregation provided my family with a freshly built, spacious parsonage.

Assessing the full effect which the turmoil surrounding Pastor Kooger's leaving had on the congregation may not be possible. It is clear that this period made the congregation more aware of its personality and culture. Recognition of its weaknesses has led to a deeper humility and dependence on God. Many members understand that

⁴ In the CRC the council is comprised of the elders and deacons and pastors who together form the leadership team of the congregation.

⁵ Classis Quinte is comprised of the 19 CR congregations in this region of Ontario. It meets three times each year to discuss matters of common concern and to encourage each other in ministry. Each congregation sends a pastor, an elder and a deacon as delegates to each meeting.

effort must be put into the relationship with the pastor. That conflict created both a tendency to shy away from other conflict but also a desire to learn how to deal with conflict. These events deeply wounded some members; some of them left, others significantly reduced their involvement in congregational life. Though for most people this chapter is closed, some residual affects linger and the tasks Classis Quinte assigned the congregation have not been completed.

As already mentioned, Community Church adopted the statement: “Building a Community of Believers Called by God for Works of Service” as its guiding principle.⁶ Again, since no implementation strategy was developed, this principle has not become embedded in the congregation’s life. The leadership of Community Church has determined that she must specify what her “works of service” are going to be in the Frankford community. A Community Opportunity Scan was conducted to identify needs in Frankford, but so far nothing significant has developed from this.⁷ The two-fold purpose, with which the congregation began, still remains. Some progress has been made on both fronts; however, few express satisfaction with it. The congregation is now significantly larger but is still largely structured as it was in the beginning. In many ways, it functions as a large extended family, rather than an organized structure.

⁶The phrase *guiding principle* is used to alert the reader that this is not a vision or mission statement, but more of a slogan to articulate some sense of intention for the church.

⁷ A Community Opportunity Scan (COS) is a tool developed by *Diaconal Ministries Canada* to assist congregations to “discern how God is calling its people to use its gifts to touch the lives of people in the community.” www.diaconalministries.com (accessed May 8, 2008). The COS was conducted by two members of Community Church. The results were published for the congregation in May 2007.

Today, according to the church's address book, approximately 80 percent of the members live within fifteen kilometres of the church property, but only a few live in the village of Frankford itself. Many of the founders are nearing retirement age, and the bulk of the membership consists of families with school age children. There is a growing group of young adults, both single and married. The members of the church are involved in a wide variety of occupations, and income levels range from the poverty line to upper middle class.

Spiritual Formation at Community Church

Even though a more extensive understanding of spiritual formation will be developed in chapters 2 and 3, a basic definition is offered here so that Community Church's approach to spiritual formation can be explored. Spiritual formation refers to the manner in which believers of any religion move towards the goal of their faith. This formation happens through three primary means: learning the required knowledge, practicing the religious disciplines, and learning how to live according to the religion's mores.⁸

Community Church was established during the years in which the CRC was in the throes of severe theological controversy. Several issues dominated these debates: whether women could hold church offices, how the first eleven chapters of Genesis should be understood, and what constituted proper CRC worship. These controversies came hard on the heels of controversies regarding the charismatic movement of the 1970s. Amidst all

⁸ "Mores" refers to the behaviours, laws, or customs that are binding on the adherents of a religion. Members who live outside the mores are often disciplined, which may include banishment.

this heated debate, many believe that the basic goal of Christianity was lost in the CRC. The early records of Community Church show that these controversies were very important to the leaders of the time, yet, within a few years, this concern seems to have evaporated. Nowhere in these records is there found a clear understanding of what it means to be a Christian or what the goal of the Christian life is.

Therefore, what do people at Community Church think the goal of the Christian life is? From my interaction with members of Community Church, I have noted at least five different responses to this question. One, Christianity is the entrance ticket to heaven. These people believe that, if they do a limited amount of Christian activity, they keep one foot wedged into heaven's door. Two, some people believe that being a Christian enables them to maintain a good moral life. The church's task in the larger society is to help maintain a level of common decency. Three, Christianity is part of family tradition and should be kept up. Four, some remain influenced by Abraham Kuyper's famous phrase, "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!'"⁹ These people believe that Christians are supposed to promote biblical principles in all areas of human life. Five, Christianity is the positive response to Christ's call to discipleship. Probably no one at Community Church fits exclusively into one category, yet the church needs to recognize this diversity because each of the above answers will have its own approach to spiritual formation.

⁹ Abraham Kuyper, "Souverain in eigen Kring (Sphere Sovereignty)," Amsterdam, 1880. This is the inaugural speech Kuyper gave for the Free Christian University he established in Amsterdam.

Despite this diversity, Community Church quickly took up the task of teaching the knowledge of the Christian faith. Children and youth were expected to attend age-appropriate Sunday school and catechetical classes. Youth and adults were expected to attend worship services where the preaching was supposed to convey biblical and theological knowledge. During its short history, Community Church has had a variety of small groups, most of them focusing on Bible study. Many of its families practiced devotions at meal times, which included reading Scripture and prayer.

Like many other CR congregations, Community Church has put a lot of energy into transmitting the knowledge of the Christian faith without clearly articulating why that knowledge is important. The CRC, like many other denominations, believed that its theology and practice was superior to that of other branches of Christendom. Thus, knowledge was more about learning the CRC system of truth than about developing the Christian life. Today, very few hold that the CRC way is the only way. As this commitment to the CRC system wanes, the interest in the knowledge component of spiritual formation is also diminishing. This is especially apparent in the area of youth catechetical instruction.

One of the major influences in the teaching ministry of the CRC has been the Heidelberg Catechism¹⁰ (HC), a document developed in the 1600s to help teach converts the Protestant version of the Christian faith. This excellent document should continue to have a place within the church, even though it does fall short in the area of spiritual

¹⁰ *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988). References to the Heidelberg Catechism will only include the question and answer number in brackets.

formation. It asks “What is faith?” (Q 21) but not “How does one grow in faith?” The last segment of the Catechism is quite helpful in spiritual formation but is usually presented as our duty to God. Many people believe that because God saved them, they need to pray and keep the Ten Commandments. In contrast, the HC teaches that Christians “do good because Christ, by the Holy Spirit is renewing [them] to be like himself...” (A 86).

Even twenty years ago, many CRC people were biblically informed and took what the Bible said seriously. There is a consensus that this is not as true today. Few have learned to read the Bible for the transformation of the mind (Rom 12:1-2). There is a myth that the Bible is too difficult for the untrained person. However, a healthy resurgence is taking place in the congregation. Various people take notes and others keep their Bibles open for further reference while listening to sermons. Bible studies are on the rebound. It appears that the renewed interest in the Bible is not just about information but about changing lives. It will be helpful if Community Church develops a statement that gives a basic purpose to all its educational ministries.

The second area of spiritual formation is the practices or disciplines of the Christian faith. Members of Community Church engage in the typical practices of the CRC, the primary practice being Sabbath keeping. In the CRC, this meant attending worship twice on Sunday and doing as little work as possible. There is a high expectation that members should participate in congregational ministries with both time and money. A quick analysis of the membership suggests that about two-thirds of the members are actively volunteering their time in a church ministry. Almost every year, enough money is donated to meet the church’s budget and mission commitments and to support a broad

range of parachurch ministries. Serving people, at home and globally, has also had a high priority, especially service projects to support missionary work in other countries. As already mentioned, many families make time for mealtime devotions.

Several observations can be made regarding how members view these practices. Historically the emphasis has been on corporate rather than personal practices. There is a tendency to see practices such as worship, service, Bible reading, and prayer, as duties rather than as disciplines to help faith to grow. Some of the practices are maintained simply because “that’s the way it has always done it.” Thus, they are perceived as rules of righteousness. If they are not done, God will get angry. This need to maintain CRC traditions is eroding quickly, and, with it, people are abandoning the historic CRC disciplines. Unfortunately, they are seldom replaced. Finally, it is difficult for many to believe that God will use them to bless others. Some people do not believe that their giftedness has any spiritual value. Others are afraid to appear proud and so offer themselves only reluctantly.

The third area of spiritual formation, learning to live according to the mores of the Christian life, is more difficult to evaluate because there is no agreement on exactly what the mores are. Even if there was agreement, it would be difficult to evaluate how well people are living those mores. Some progress could be made by clarifying what makes up the mores of the Christian life. Undoubtedly, some voices would suggest that these mores are summed up in the Ten Commandments God gave to the Israelites through Moses. Others would suggest the fruit of the Spirit Paul lists in Galatians 5. Others would even suggest Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). However, all would probably agree that

the two greatest commandments which Jesus identified in Matthew 22¹¹ serve as a starting point. One way to bring focus to this issue is to ask, “What sets Christians apart?” “What actions would identify someone as a Christian?”

Another observation is that the CRC has been significantly influenced by Abraham Kuyper’s statement about Jesus’ Lordship, as quoted above. This is largely understood in light of Paul’s comment to the Colossians, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Col 3:23). An emphasis on this text has had two influences: one, a belief in the value of industriousness¹² and two, a belief that faith in God must impact how believers conduct their lives. Many would contend, however, that the first has had more influence than the second. One member of Community Church wrote, “The need to succeed financially often gets in the way of Christian maturity.”¹³ Financial success seems to have more sway than faithfulness to Jesus. There seems to be a satisfaction with a “bare minimum” Christianity rather than a striving for maturity.

Nevertheless, it is my observation that, over the years, some progress has been made in spiritual formation. Church education classes have been shifting from merely imparting information, to the shaping of godly characters and developing obedient followers of Jesus. Most understand that being a Christian begins by establishing a

¹¹ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’” (Matt 22:37-39).

¹² This industriousness tends to be limited to financial endeavours and, as many women will lament, housekeeping. It tends not to spill over into the arts, helping other people, or even spiritual formation.

¹³ Email message to author from a member of the congregation.

personal relationship with Jesus Christ and that Christians ought to be maturing in their faith. However, many are unsure how this growth takes place or how to deepen their relationship with Jesus. Some think that it happens by trying harder to be good. Others have come to realize that simply trying hard does not work and wonder what does work.

Many people are not satisfied with the form of godliness without the power (2 Tim 3:5). For many, the historic ways of being CRC appear to be empty rituals. Thus, it is deemed healthy that these practices are disappearing. Their disappearance creates a spiritual vacuum, which, if not filled with quality practices, will be filled with other things. The task of this paper is to offer practices to fill the vacuum, which will help people grow towards the goal of the Christian life.

The Frankford Community

Nestled among the beautiful Murray Hills where Cold Creek empties itself into the Trent River, the village of Frankford lies just north of Ontario's main east-west highway. This once thriving little village, made famous by the Bata Shoe factory, began as a fording place across the Trent. Frankford straddles one of the low spots in the Trent River, where, before bridges were built, travellers and traders crossed at the river. Before it became incorporated, five hotels marked this spot as a resting place for travellers.

For many years the village bustled with activity, attracting a large variety of businesses. The early business owners harnessed the power of the Trent River to produce electricity for their factories; soon thereafter, a distribution system was built for the village. By the end of 1949, the village bought this system to supply energy to its citizens. Frankford had a train depot from 1900 until the 1970s, and a train made regular

stops in Frankford on its route between Trenton and Bancroft. As early as 1927, a covered arena was built to house a skating rink in the winter and to provide a venue for an agricultural fair during the summer. In 1939, the Bata family opened its first shoe factory here. At its height, this factory employed 1200 people. Later, it moved to a new location just south of the village but, eventually, due mostly to cheaper labour in other parts of the world, shut down its assembly lines.¹⁴

Frankford lost its distinctive identity in 1990 when it was amalgamated into the City of Quinte West. Few of the businesses that once competed for space along its main roads and water frontage now remain. Today, it is largely a bedroom community for the cities of Trenton and Belleville. It has a high percentage of seniors, people living alone, and single parent families. It also has a significant transient population due to the Canadian Air Force Base in Trenton, which frequently transfers personnel in and out of the area.

The Village of Frankford and Community Church

As already mentioned, it was the original desire of Community Church to become part of the Frankford community. This desire has been hindered by the fact that most of the church members have lived outside the town, keeping them physically separated from the villagers. Further, the town consists largely of blue collar workers while many of the church members are independent business owners. Many of the older members began as

¹⁴ Bata Shoes shut down its factory in 2005. Two former employees have spoken to me about why the factory closed down.

labourers in Frankford businesses but quickly moved on to establish their own successful businesses. This has created some economic and sociological disparity.

It must be added that there are ways in which the congregation has been moving towards its community. Community Church has at least ten families which now live within the boundaries of the village. The latest demographics from Statistics Canada suggest the membership of Community Church is similar to the larger Frankford community in education level, in family make up, and in ethnic origin. The vast majority of people originate from Northern European countries. Although few immigrated themselves, many can recall immigration stories from their parents or grandparents.¹⁵

There are probably two barriers which loom largest between Community Church and its surrounding neighbourhoods. Strangely, the first is its ethnic origins. The majority of Christian Reformed congregations in Canada were established by Dutch immigrants after World War II. Even though Community Church has many members, even in its leadership, who are non-Dutch, it is still considered “the Dutch Church” by many in the community. Adding to this difficulty is the perception that the Dutch have kept themselves separated from the rest of Canadian society. This perception is not without merit. Dutch reformed immigrants were well known for establishing their own organizations (especially Christian Schools), which served to keep them separated from other Canadians.

¹⁵ The details for this information can be found in *Community Profile Demographics* prepared for Community Church by Outreach Canada (Delta, BC: Outreach Canada, 2005). The data in this report is taken from the Statistics Canada Census Data May 2001, www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/release/index.cfm (accessed April 28, 2008).

The second barrier is the self-perception of being unable to bring Christ to other people. Peter's injunction to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet 3:15) scares many CR people. Many people at Community Church will admit that this is the most difficult aspect of discipleship for them. The difficulty here lies in a number of factors. First, English is the second language, for many of the seniors. They found it difficult to talk about their faith in English; thus, their children did not hear them verbally communicate their faith. Second, there was an idea that real religion was for the intellectual; therefore, lay people lacked the knowledge and consequently the courage to speak of their faith to unbelievers. Evangelism was understood as convincing others to become CRC members, and faith was a series of facts about God rather than receiving the love of God in Christ and becoming part of his story of redemption. Third, CR people have not wanted to stand out; they already felt like outsiders because of their ethnic background. Many Canadians and church members saw Dutch and CRC as being synonymous. Fourth, witnessing and disciple-making have not been part of our theology or preaching. Finally, a significant fear of being contaminated by the world and other churches created an "us versus them" mentality in the church.

Community Church has made significant efforts to reach out to its neighbours. It has organized a biannual day to provide free oil changes for people with low income, organized home repair projects for local residents, and been actively involved in community initiatives to raise money for the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. Members of Community Church also regularly staff the breakfast program at Frankford Public

School. People from non-CRC backgrounds have become members of the congregation, but not all have stayed. These ways of helping our neighbours close by and far away are all good, but there is at least one troubling issue that must be recognized: few personal relationships have been developed with those that have been helped. Today, we are like neighbours who talk over the fence and offer assistance only when it is asked for.

Community Church must make a concerted effort to earn the trust of the community in order to be invited into the back yard and eventually into the house.

Conclusion

For twenty years, Community Church has been part of the village of Frankford. Currently, new attempts are being made to connect with its neighbours. This effort is being made so that these people may know that Community Church exists to help them in any way needed. To actualize its capacity to help its neighbours, Community Church must develop itself as a community deeply rooted in Christ Jesus. Her people must be “imitators of God...and live [lives] of love” (Eph 5:1). The congregation’s vision must be rooted in God’s words to Abram, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3). It must firmly believe that God intends to use Community Church to bless the people of Frankford. To encourage Community Church towards this vision, this paper will offer a framework for spiritual formation rooted in the covenant theology. This is the theology in which the CRC was founded. It is to this theology and its implications for spiritual formation to which this paper now turns.

CHAPTER 2

COVENANT THEOLOGY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Introduction

The doctrine of the covenant has been the cornerstone of CRC theology since its formation. Some say that it deeply influences the rest of CRC theology and impacts both the faith and the living of CRC people.¹ Andrew Kuyvenhoven called it the lens through which Reformed people read the Bible.² In 1977, when *Promise and Deliverance* was published in English, it was used both by preachers for sermon preparation and by families for mealtime devotions. This series tells the story of Scripture from a covenantal perspective. In his introduction, the translator spells out the full scope of covenant theology: “In Scripture, religion means covenant....without covenant there is no religion, no conscious fellowship between man and God, no exchange of love and faithfulness.”³

In 1988 the CRC published a new worship and preaching resource called, *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony*.⁴ Its purpose was to offer a

¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Christian Reformed Church and the Covenant,” in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church*, eds. Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 185.

² Andrew Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership: A Study Guide* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1974), 5.

³ S. G. De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, trans. and with an introduction by H. E. Runner (St. Catharines, ON: Paideia Press, 1977), 12.

⁴ *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988).

contemporary confession of our reformed faith. It understands universal history as directed by the covenant: “From the beginning, through all the crises of our times, until his kingdom fully comes, God keeps covenant forever.”⁵ It describes the Bible as telling “God's mighty acts in the unfolding of covenant history”⁶ and teaches that it is God’s covenant love that saves us.⁷ Humanity’s purpose is to be God’s covenant partners⁸ who reflect his covenant love in the way we live, especially in our marriages.⁹

These documents suggest that, at least in the Christian Reformed Church’s theology and confessions, the doctrine of the covenant has played a significant role. It is more difficult to assess the claim that it has impacted “both the faith and living of CRC people.” Very little has been written on the covenant in the past decades and John Bolt suggested that the connection between the covenant and spiritual formation has not been examined.¹⁰ This chapter will look at the doctrine of the covenant for insights into spiritual formation.

Before beginning, it is helpful to define both the term *covenant* and the phrase *doctrine of the covenant*. Merriam-Webster defines a covenant as a “formal, solemn, and binding agreement” or “a written agreement or promise, usually under seal, between two

⁵ *Our World*, paragraph 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, paragraph 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*, paragraph 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, paragraph 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, paragraph 49.

¹⁰ John Bolt is a professor of systematic theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, the Seminary of the CRC. He made this comment in a private conversation with the author on September 14, 2007.

or more parties especially for the performance of some action.”¹¹ Thus, a covenant is a formal relationship which stipulates how the covenanting parties will live together or conduct a certain business affair. This relationship can be anything from a simple handshake, or some variation thereof, between two children on the school playground to a legal and binding contract. Dr. C. van der Waal sums up a covenant’s purpose this way: “A covenant implies peace, harmony and good relations. It regulates a relationship.”¹²

In the Bible, the term *covenant* is used to refer to the same broad range of formal relationships. The doctrine of the covenant concerns itself specifically with the covenants of God. This paper focuses on God’s covenant with humanity. Since Reformed theology has a great deal to say on this covenant, this study will deal only with that which is relevant to the thesis. It will seek to understand how the doctrine of the covenant helps believers to live the Christian life.

CRC theologians have consistently contended that there is only one covenant of God with humans that spans the entire Scripture.¹³ This one covenant appears in different manifestations and renewal ceremonies which differ only in their form, not in their content.¹⁴ These will be looked at, not as separate or competing covenants, but as progressive developments in the relationship between God and His people.¹⁵ Each

¹¹ *Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary*, s.v. “covenant,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/covenant> (accessed May 5, 2008).

¹² C. van der Waal, *The Covenant Gospel* (Neerlandia, AB: Inheritance Press, 1990), 9.

¹³ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 11.

¹⁴ Anthony Hoekema, “Herman Bavinck’s Doctrine of the Covenant” (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1953), 119.

¹⁵ W. Hendricksen, *Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1932), 17.

renewal was intended to deepen the relationship that already existed. As the story of Scripture unfolds, God reveals more of his gracious plan to redeem his creation.¹⁶ This chapter will trace the development of this covenant through the story of the Scriptures to discover what it says regarding spiritual formation.

God's Covenant with Humanity

The Covenant's Purpose Revealed at Creation

In the Bible, the term covenant is not used until the account of Noah (Gen 6-9). However, reformed theologians generally agree that elements of a covenant are evident in the story of creation (Gen 1-2). Moreover, Hosea 6:7 implies that God had entered into a covenant relationship with Adam. In CRC theology, the term “covenant of works” has often been used to describe this covenant between God and Adam and Eve. This stands in contrast to the covenant of grace which was initiated by God after the fall into sin. Since grace and works, that is, earning our salvation, stand opposed in the realm of salvation, this terminology creates some misunderstanding. The phrase also does not adequately describe the relationship established. Therefore, the phrase “covenant of creation” will be used to describe the relationship of God with humans as told in Genesis 1 and 2. The purpose of God's covenant with humans is revealed in this covenant of creation.

The covenant is established in God's twofold declaration about humans in Genesis 1:26. God states that humans are created in God's own image and that they are

¹⁶ Menno J. Bosma, *Exposition of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Smitten Book Company, 1927), 114.

rulers over the whole creation. In this way humanity's existence and purpose is tied directly to God himself. Apart from God, humans will lose themselves and their purpose. In the abstract, this purpose is to be God's image bearer in God's creation by being fruitful, filling the earth, and ruling over all the creatures that God had made. Even though this is true, it does not express the depth of God's purpose. In making humanity in his own image, not only are they tied to God, but God tied himself directly to humanity. God's purposes for his creation can only be carried out by the people he made. S.G. De Graaf writes that a human's "task is to represent, reflect, and glorify the King in his walk of life."¹⁷

To enable humans to carry out this task, God gave them wisdom, a heart full of love, and a desire to do God's will.¹⁸ Bosma suggests that being God's image bearer means that humans have three capacities which distinguish them from God's other creatures: intellectual, moral, and spiritual.¹⁹ Their intellectual ability enables them to direct their lives according to their own wills; they have the power to think and be creative. As moral creatures they are able to choose between good and evil. Their spiritual capacity allows them to enter into an interactive relationship with God. They are neither like the angels who simply do God's bidding, nor like the animals who glorify God instinctively. As God's image bearers, humans have the capacity to make choices.

¹⁷ De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁹ Bosma, *Exposition*, 89.

Humans' direct tie to God and the potential to fulfill God's purpose are crystallized in the one specific command that God gave to Adam. They may not eat from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:17). Eating from this tree would result in death. If humans follow this command, they will live in the blessedness of their current relationship with God. Many reformed theologians believe that, if the first people had not sinned, they would have been allowed to eat from the tree of life. Life in paradise was a testing period to see if humans would be faithful to the covenantal conditions God had set. If they disobeyed, they broke the covenant God had established with them.

This covenant is more than just a matter of obedience. As H. E. Runner wrote in his introduction to *Promise and Deliverance*, "Without the covenant, man would be just an instrument in God's hand. When God created man, He had more than an instrument in mind. He made a creature that could respond to Him."²⁰ In forming a covenant, God wanted a partner. Humans were created with the capacity to be full partners with God. They were given the ability to choose. God desires their "free and voluntary love and service."²¹ The tree was placed in the garden to create that choice. Humans needed to choose whether or not to stay in fellowship with God.

The covenant's purpose has these two essential parts: fellowship between God and humans and the administration of God's kingdom. These two parts are intimately connected; they rise and fall with each other. The earth is not at people's disposal; it was

²⁰ H. E. Runner, Introduction to *Promise and Deliverance*, by De Graaf, 12.

²¹ Bosma, *Exposition*, 94.

created as God's kingdom.²² In fellowship with God, humans were to take care of it in such a way that it would continue to give glory to its Creator.²³ God entered into covenant with them so that, by their life and service, they would "lift up all of God's creation redounding with praise to the throne of God."²⁴ It was intended that humans use all the things God had created in such a way that God's will was done. Humans were to make God's kingdom the program of their own lives. Through the love and service of humans' hearts, all things would, in harmony, serve God's purpose.²⁵

In pursuing covenantal spiritual formation three things should be observed which relate to the purpose of the covenant of creation. First of all, God is the primary agent in this covenant. Theologians use the term *monopleuric*.²⁶ This means that God is both the initiator of the covenant and the partner who sets the conditions. Adam and Eve do not bargain, barter, contract, or negotiate. They receive the conditions of the covenant and voluntarily accept them. The tree from which they are not to eat constantly reminds them that they are not God. By freely keeping the conditions of the covenant which God has set, they enter into the blessings of the covenant. If they do not keep covenant, they will experience its curse, death.

²² De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, 30.

²³ Bosma, *Exposition*, 65 (cf. Romans 11:36).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁵ G. W. Hylkema, *God's Covenant with Man* (Grand Rapids: by the author, 1944), 19.

²⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), 264.

Second, the covenant of creation reveals God's love towards humanity. As Genesis 2 tells the story, God went to great lengths to prepare a special garden for us (Gen 2:7-15). God also condescended to come down to the level of humans and to establish a covenant with them as an equal.²⁷ God's delight in his covenant partners is revealed in his declaration at the end of day six. Six times God had looked at what he had made and declared it good (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), but the seventh time, after he had created man, male and female, he declared it very good (Gen 1:31). God's love towards humans is also seen in the capacity God gives them to keep the covenant. In their original state, humans were fully capable of living in obedience to God,²⁸ and thus receiving the full blessings which were part of the original covenant, namely, continued fellowship with God.

Finally, the fulfillment of the covenant's purpose rests on humans' response to the Word of God. Acceptance of the Word brings about an abundance of good, but rejection of the Word brings an explosion of evil. God says that humans may eat and enjoy all the trees of the garden except one. No explanation is given. It should not be assumed that the fruit itself was dangerous. Humans must choose obedience for the sake of obedience alone.²⁹ This obedience reflects both faith in God's word and trust in God's character. Humans must live by the belief that what God says is always right, even more, that God's

²⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 264.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 84.

Word is enough. The blessings of the covenant are experienced by faithfulness to God's Word.

The covenant of creation hangs on humans' faithful response to this Word. Anything less than perfect obedience will result in death (Gen 3:2-3). Thus, this covenantal relationship was not a covenant of grace. It was a covenant of obedience. Adam and Eve's role in the covenant was to freely choose to do what God had told them to do. In creating humanity, God gave us the ability to keep our side of the covenant. Adam and Eve had the ability to choose to either keep or reject the covenant. Because they were human, they were "capable of resisting the will of God."³⁰

The Contours of the Covenant of Grace

The tragedy of life on this earth is that Adam and Eve did not keep the covenant. They chose to reject the will of God. Disobeying his one command, they ate from the one tree which God had told them not to eat from. They disagreed with the way God had ordered the creation, even though God had warned that, if they ate, they would die.

God did not obviously mean an immediate end to physical life. The story bears out that God meant severing of the intimate relationship between himself and his covenant partner. Death is the breaking of the direct, life-giving connection between God and humans. It is separation from "the source and fountain of life,"³¹ and not just for Adam and Eve but for all of creation. Because of human sin, all of God's handiwork experienced disharmony; it was destabilized. What had been wonderfully ordered became

³⁰ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 34.

³¹ Bosma, *Exposition*, 95.

disordered. What had once functioned in perfect relationship was now characterized by enmity. Thus, after the fall, when Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden, they ran away and hid; they were afraid (Gen 3:8, 10).

In covenanting with Adam and Eve, God made them stewards over his creation. As such, when they chose to disobey God's Word and death entered the creation, it affected everything. The enmity which death brought would not be limited to humans.³² Yet, when God responds to the fall, the greatest burden falls on the stewards of creation. To Eve, God speaks about pain in child bearing and about stress in the marriage relationship.³³ To Adam, God says that the ground will be cursed on account of sin. Labour in the garden, which had once been a pleasure, would now be a burden. The earth, which had once richly provided all the necessities of life, would now be tilled with sweat, and weeds would compete with edible plants. Humanity's task of caretaking would become a burden which would consume them and the fear of death by starvation would always hang over their heads. A deep rift would separate humanity into two camps: the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

Everything had changed. God's good creation had once been teeming with life; now it was shadowed by death. Humans had once been fully alive to God and to God's creation; now their lives were marked by fear and separation. Before sin, humanity knew God and his goodness; now they knew good and evil but they no longer knew God or their own place in creation. When humans abandoned their role as stewards, creation

³² Bosma, *Exposition*, 92.

³³ There are various different views on exactly what this curse actually means. We do not need to examine these but simply note that commentators agree that sin caused trouble in the marriage relationship.

could no longer blossom. The abundance of life mutated into a “failure to thrive.”³⁴ Sin became the barrier keeping humanity from reaching its full potential. Humans plunged from soaring with the eagles to hiding with the rats, from walking with God in the garden to running from his presence. The fellowship was broken.

In response to this act of covenant violation, God took the initiative to re-establish his covenant with humans. This time, of course, it was of a different nature. This time it was a covenant of grace. Humans had violated the covenant, but God took it upon himself to set things straight, to re-harmonize and re-stabilize his creation. God himself would lift the curse which had fallen upon it.

This is the essential ingredient in the covenant of grace: that God himself will set right what humans have set wrong. However, God will not do it alone. He will use humans to accomplish this work. It is through the seed of the woman that God will redeem his ruined creation. Again, there is no bargaining on the side of humanity; there is no discussion. God declares that one day the seed of the woman would crush the seed of the serpent. This response pictures the full course of human history which will be a battle between humanity and the snake, which represents Satan and everything evil.³⁵ Hope for creation is heard in God’s declaration that though the snake will strike the human heel, the human will strike the snake’s head, giving it a fatal wound. Nothing more is offered, except the simple hope that the fight will not be in vain. This is the promise of salvation.

³⁴ John Ortberg, “Ministry and FTT,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletter/2008/cln80609.html> (accessed June 11, 2008).

³⁵ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 6.

It is important to note that God does not articulate any enmity between himself and his covenant partner. Rather, the enmity is between humans and evil. God's call to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" is first of all a call back into covenant partnership. It is an invitation to return to covenant fellowship.³⁶ God holds true to his purpose for creation. He will work through history to restore humanity to the exalted place in which it was created. In order to receive the promise of the covenant of grace, though, humans must respond in faith. Adam expresses his faith in God's promise by naming his wife Eve because "she would become the mother of all the living" (Gen 3:21). Even though death has entered God's creation, there is the hope of life and salvation. In their children, Adam and Eve saw the fulfillment of God's promise, but, when Cain killed Abel, their hopes were dashed. However, new hope and faith blossomed when Eve conceived a third child, whom they named Seth, which means "granted" (Gen 34:25). Adam and Eve saw his birth as God's answer to Abel's death. They believed that the covenant of grace would continue.

In the days of Noah, God revealed that the covenant of grace is tied to the covenant of creation. God looked out on his ruined creation and saw that the human heart was inclined to evil all the time (Gen 6:5). In response, God destroyed most of humanity with a flood. Noah and his family are all that remain. After the flood, God covenants not just with humanity, but with the entire creation, pledging to maintain the creational order (summer, fall, winter, spring). Having reissued his command that humans fill the earth, God assists them in their role of stewards. He causes the animals to fear them, gives the

³⁶ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 7.

animals to them for food, and promises to uphold justice in human society (Gen 9:2-6). With this provision, God makes life on earth “possible despite the influence of sin.”³⁷ This shows that God has not abandoned his original covenant of creation. Rather, the creation remains an integral part of God’s covenant with humanity.

Even though the flood was the result of humanity’s evil heart, God makes his commitment to the creation without qualification. Creation will endure to the end (cf. Rom 8:22).³⁸ God places the rainbow in the sky to remind him of his promise. It is as if a cosmic bow is pointed at God. If he reneges on his promise, he will pay the price. God is so delighted with Noah’s sacrifice, this act of worship, that God replies with this amazing promise. Here, again, is shown God’s desire to be in relationship with his creation and the delight he takes in that fellowship.

God covenants not just with a person, but with family. God finds Noah alone to be righteous, but still saves Noah’s wife and children. No comment is made about their relationship to God; neither are we told why they are brought into the ark. It appears that, simply because they belong with Noah, they are included. So one sees that the entire story revolves around Noah’s righteousness. God is on the hunt for someone who still does what is right. In response to Noah’s righteousness, God provides a means for him and his family to be saved. Human righteousness is not inconsequential to the future of the universe. God takes the initiative and responsibility for fulfilling the covenant of grace, but humanity has an integral role to play in it.

³⁷ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 7.

³⁸ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 122.

The Covenant with Abraham: A Call to Fellowship

The next major phase in the development of God's covenant of grace with humanity comes in God's relationship with Abram. Once again, God takes the initiative and tells Abram what to do. Abram is to leave his home and go to the place God will show him. Most remarkable is the unconditional promises which God makes to Abram. God promises to bless Abram, give him a land and a large family, and use Abram as his instrument to bless the whole world. Moreover, God says that anyone who blesses Abram will be blessed, and anyone who curses him will be cursed. Most importantly, God promises to be Abram's God and the God of his children. God does not put any conditions on these covenant promises (Gen 12:2-3). These are critical verses; "the rest of biblical history is nothing but the extension of the lines which are drawn in these verses."³⁹

The story of God and Abram is the first time the Bible gives extensive coverage to a covenant relationship. There is a single thread that is woven throughout the story (Gen 12-22), which can be articulated with the question: "Will Abram believe God?" Abram's faith in God is tested as he waits for God to fulfill his promises. Abram is not given a reason for these tests, yet several of the testing stories end with Abram building an altar (Gen 12:7, 8; 13:4, 18). At these altars, the covenant partners meet, and Abram gives himself to God. Even though he does not understand everything, Abram worships God. This is what God desires: not that Abram understand him but that Abram find him

³⁹ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 9.

and trust him.⁴⁰ Out of faith in God and trust in his promises, Abram needs to live in covenant obedience. This covenant obedience is the heart of the story because it opens the way for covenant fellowship.

Three times in the Abram narrative God approaches Abram with covenant renewals. Each of these covenant renewals includes a ceremony with the shedding of blood. In each ceremony, God reveals more of his plans for his relationship with humanity. These renewals reveal the development of God's covenant.

The first of these ceremonies is in Genesis 15. Without owning any of it, Abram has settled in the land, but has become anxious because both he and Sarai, his wife, have aged beyond the normal child-bearing years, and they have no son. In response to Abram's troubled faith, God tells Abram to get five animals. Three of them he cuts in half and arranges the halves opposite each other. Then God, in the form of a smoking firepot and a blazing torch, passes between the pieces (Gen 15:17).

In those days, when a covenant was made, the weaker or lesser party would pass through these pieces. This act symbolized that the weaker party would become like those animals if it did not keep covenant. It was a form of calling down curses upon oneself if one became a covenant breaker. In this ceremony, God, the stronger member of the partnership, walks between the pieces. He calls down curses upon himself if he does not fulfill his covenant promises.⁴¹ To shore up Abram's struggling faith, God enacts this

⁴⁰ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 13.

⁴¹ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 130.

remarkable covenant renewal. This is a reminder that the future of the covenant is dependant on God, not humanity.

In a second covenant renewal ceremony, recorded in Genesis 17, God renews his promises to Abram by changing Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah. These new names mean they will be the parents of many nations. God re-emphasizes that he will be Abraham's God and the God of his children. It will be an everlasting covenant and the land of Canaan will belong to his descendants forever.

For the first time, God commands Abraham to keep the covenant. His part of keeping the covenant is a bloody affair. He must again cut flesh, but this time it is his own, and that of all the males in his company. Each of them must be circumcised as a sign and seal of the covenant. This sign is so important that anyone who does not receive the sign in his flesh will be considered a covenant breaker; he will be cut off (Gen 17:14). Participation in the covenant is open to all who are in Abraham's household, born and bought (Gen 17:13). Circumcision is a sign that they belonged to Abraham's descendants and a sign that those descendants belonged to God. It was a sign of God's promise that he would keep the covenant and an act of faith on Abraham's part that he believed in the promise. That is why the non-circumcised had to be cut off from the people; they did not believe that God would keep his promise.

The story of Israel makes clear that the outward circumcision was intended to point towards an inner circumcision. The Israelites often assumed that God would always bless them because they carried this outward sign of the covenant. Moses indicated, though, that outward circumcision only counted if the heart was circumcised as well.

Outward belonging only counted if the heart belonged as well (Deut 10:16; 30:6).

Further, the outward sign symbolized that even covenant people are sinful and unholy at conception, and that this sinful life must die and be replaced. “Through circumcision, God expressed His intention of destroying that old, sinful life in us and replacing it with a different life, a new and holy life.”⁴² A circumcised heart is characterized by faith in God and a life of love and obedience. Such hearts enter into covenant fellowship with God.

The third covenant renewal with Abraham is recorded in Genesis 22. Once again, blood must be shed. This time it is not an animal or a piece of Abraham’s flesh, but his only son, not just a piece of his son, but his son’s life. God asks Abraham to sacrifice the son given as a fulfillment of the promises. Will Abraham sacrifice this son and still trust God to keep his promises? Abraham does. In response, God keeps Abraham from killing his son and provides a ram in Isaac’s place. God renews his covenant with Abraham with new vigour because God is delighted with him. Abraham was a man of faith who walked in fellowship with God and was known as God’s friend (2 Chron 28:7; Isa 41:8).

This covenant renewal introduces one of the profound mysteries of the covenant. In the covenant of creation, covenant breakers come under the curse of death. This curse is still in effect. Here, on Mount Moriah, it is shown that substitute blood may be used. This sacrifice points forward to the sacrificial system under Moses. More importantly, it has rightly been understood as pointing towards Jesus’ death, in which God himself provided the blood of his own Son to fulfill his covenant. God declared himself cursed if the covenant were not kept. The seed is now planted for the fulfillment of that

⁴² De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, 111.

declaration. God himself would carry the curse so that the covenant could be fulfilled, but not because he broke the covenant. He himself would carry the curse for humans.

These renewals highlight the fundamental dynamics of the covenant. First, the entire covenant is rooted in God's declaration, "I will be your God and you will be my people." This lies at the heart of what happens in the continuing covenant story and is followed closely by the second dynamic, namely, that God desires his covenant partners to walk before him in faith and obedience. In the Bible, Abraham is repeatedly used as the standard by which people of faith are measured. Abraham is considered righteous because he believed God's promise (Gal 3:6; James 2:23).

Third, though the covenant is unconditional, it has become clear that receiving the promises of the covenant is conditional. In order to receive the promises, Abraham must believe and obey. Thus, the writer of Hebrews says, "By faith, Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going" (Heb 11:8). The inheritance of the covenant is not received by human effort. It is received by faith, but faith is made real in obedience. As James writes, "Faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26).

The story told in Genesis 18 reveals the heart of God's covenant desire. He sits down and eats at Abraham's table. The God of the universe takes time to receive food from Abraham. Then he proceeds to tell Abraham his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah so that Abraham can interact with God about those plans. Many see this as a daring act on Abraham's part, and Abraham himself marvels at his courage. Yet, God not only permits this but responds favourably to it. Abraham's courage comes from having been in

fellowship with God. As they eat, God renews his promise, and then Abraham takes up his role as covenant partner. This story foreshadows the partnership created by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, God's people know the deep things of God's mind (1 Cor 2:9-16) and are called upon to be intercessors, just like Abraham.

The Formation of a Covenant Community: Law and Priesthood

When God called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt into the Promised Land, a significant development of the covenant was about to take place. Since this is a long story that takes all of the books from Exodus through Joshua to tell, only three aspects of the covenant can be examined here. These three are the giving of the law of God, the formation of the priesthood and the giving of the land of promise.

In the giving of the law, summarized in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-21; Deut 4:13), God, for the first time, gives an externalized summary of his will.⁴³ Humans had been created with access to the will of God through fellowship with him, but sin had destroyed that fellowship and, therefore, humans' ability to know God's will. Now God gives detailed instruction about how his people are to live in the land of promise. This law separated Israel from other nations (Lev 20:24; Deut 4:8; Psa 147:19-20). They were not to be like those nations, but a holy people dedicated to God.

This law, showing Israel how to live as God's holy nation (Exod 19: 4-6), was the map for the path of life: how to live for Israel's good and God's glory. It would not save them or make them into God's people since God had already chosen them as his own.

⁴³ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 173.

Because God loves life and desires that his people enjoy it, he shows them how to live it (Deut 32:46-47; Lev 18:5). All who are obedient by faith are assured they will enjoy good life in the land. Living in the land is conditional on God's people being holy. If Israel follows other gods, then the land will spew them out and they will be scattered among the nations (Deut 28:63-64). Israel's inability to keep the law is the critical component of the Mosaic covenant that propels the rest of the Old Testament story.

In the establishment of the priesthood, God articulates for his people the difficulty which sin creates in the covenant relationship. The priests are to take animals, kill and clean them, and sacrifice them to God on behalf of the people. The massive amounts of blood show the people how difficult it is to deal with sin. This sacrificial system stands as a buffer zone between a holy God and his unholy people. If they want to have fellowship with God, they need to go through this buffer zone which keeps them pure.

Through the priesthood, it becomes clear that, to be in fellowship with God, one must be holy. It also shows that God greatly desires this fellowship. Israel is a sinful people, and the curse of sin is still death, but God provides a substitute so that he can dwell among his people. This priesthood was not intended to be a complicated manner of getting access to God. Rather, God gave detailed instructions for animal sacrifice as a gift so that he could dwell with his people. The book of Exodus ends with that beautiful picture of the presence of God enveloping the tabernacle (Exod 40).

The final part of the covenant with Israel through Moses is the giving of the Promised Land. The gifting of the land had been an essential promise of the covenant from the very first call of Abram. The Israelites learn that they can only enter the land if

they are the holy people of God (Josh 5:1-12). The law was given before Israel entered the land as a means of administering a holy people in a holy land, and the priesthood was established so that, when Israel sinned, her holiness could be restored. Keeping the law, as the means of holiness, is the condition of occupying the land (Jer 26:4-6).

The connection among these three elements of God's covenant with Israel must be recognized. There is one covenant made up of these interrelated components. There must be a clear understanding of the function that the law and sacrificial system had in Israel. They were not put into place to make Israel acceptable to God, nor to make a relationship possible. They were established to regulate the relationship which already existed. Before he died, Joshua placed Israel's basic choice before her: serve the Lord and enjoy the land or rebel against him and be thrown out of the land (Josh 24:1-27). This is reminiscent of the choice God himself placed before Israel in Deuteronomy 30. God called Israel to love him and follow his ways, thereby choosing life and not death (Deut 30:24:19-20) and God promised great blessings to the obedient (Deut 28:1). The land was a gift, but staying in it required holiness. Keeping the law and observing the sacrifices were acts of faith, faith that God would keep his word and fulfill his promises.

The heart of the covenant is God's desire to have his own people. Since God had chosen Israel to be that people, they were not free to make their own laws. God carried Israel out of Egypt on eagle's wings to be his possession. God's purpose was to make Israel into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:4-6). The law and sacrifices were instituted to serve this purpose, to help Israel become this kind of people. By living according to God's design, they were to bring God's glory to the whole world. Through

them, God intended to bless the other nations, as he had promised Abraham. Ultimately, God's goal was to fulfill the promise he had made to Adam and Eve to crush the head of the serpent. The description of the Promised Land as a land flowing with milk and honey is a deliberate effort to arouse the memories of the Garden of Eden, where God and humans walked in fellowship together. The inheritance of the land is God's promise, so they will receive it, but they cannot remain in it "without a living, active, penitent and obedient faith"⁴⁴ (Gal 3:18; cf. Deut 9:4-6). This is the refrain of Hebrews 11: through faith the heroes received what was promised (Heb 11:33).

The Covenantal Kingdom

The next major development in God's covenant with Israel comes in the time of David. David has become king of Israel and has established Jerusalem as his royal city (2 Sam 5). He has brought the Ark of God into the city to connect his rule with God's rule (2 Sam 6). In 2 Samuel 7, David expresses his desire to build a permanent building for God's ark. God is delighted with David's desire but does not accept the offer. Instead, God promises to build David a house, not a house to live in, but an everlasting royal dynasty. There will always be a descendent of David sitting on the throne of Israel.

This dynamic, a king in a kingdom, is the last development of the covenant in the Old Testament, and it is a surprise. God clearly told his people that he would be their king. However, now they have a human king, and God enters into covenant with him in order to identify his own kingdom with the kingdom of David. David's son will be God's

⁴⁴ Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), 30.

son (2 Sam 7:14; Psa 2:7). When Solomon, David's son, is finally established as king of Israel, "he sat on the throne of the Lord as king" (1 Chron 29:23). God's kingdom will forevermore be tied to David's dynasty. Here is the fullest expression of God's kingdom on earth since the Garden of Eden. Until this point, God has lived among his people in a tent, moving from place to place. Now, because of David's request to build a temple for the Lord, God will dwell among his people in the temple that David's son will build. More so than ever before, God has himself a people, a kingdom.

Beginning with David, the kingship takes on the role of covenant mediator. When God covenanted with Israel through Moses, the people still responded to God. In Exodus 19 and 24 and Joshua 24, the people committed themselves to obeying the word of God. In Exodus 19 and 20, God came directly to his people and spoke to them. Only because they were afraid of getting too close to him did he speak through Moses. Now God relates to his people through the mediation of the king. David becomes king during a covenanting ceremony in which he makes a covenant with the people before the Lord (2 Sam 5:3). Later, when Israel forsakes God, it is King Josiah who renews the covenant on behalf of the people (2 Kings 23:1-3). Later still, King Zedekiah binds the people to keep the Law of Moses (Jer 34:8). Through these things, it becomes clear that God's covenant with Israel is directly tied to the Davidic dynasty.

The Davidic covenant would be a wonderful place to end the story of the covenant in the Old Testament. However, the story does not end here. God's people, led by their kings as covenant mediators, are not faithful to God. They neglect the word of God and even despise it. They repeatedly forsake their covenant God and worship other

gods. God sends a succession of prophets to warn them about their ways and to remind them that life in the Promised Land is conditional on Israel's obedience. Even David in his dying words reminds Solomon that God's promises are conditional on Solomon's faithfulness (1 Kings 2:1-4). God will punish them if they persist in their evil ways.

In David and Solomon's days, the kingdom is characterized by rest from its enemies (2 Sam 7:10-11). This rest is a symbol of God's presence among his people, but, as soon as the kings lead the people astray, enemies begin to besiege Israel's territory. Because David's descendants do not keep covenant, they are eventually expelled as covenant breakers (2 Kings 17:7-18). Yet God had guaranteed that he would have a people for himself and that David's descendants would sit on the throne of Israel forever. So the Old Testament ends with the people waiting for the fulfillment of that promise. Somehow God needs to provide a way for the covenant to be fulfilled.

In the writings of the prophets, there are some strong suggestions about what will happen. Several of them speak about a new covenant that God will make with his people. Jeremiah 31:31-34 captures the essence of this new covenant:

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest....For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more (Jer 31:33, 34).

This new covenant will replace the covenant God made with Israel through Moses. The new covenant will do what that covenant was not able to do. However, in Ezekiel 37:24-26, this new covenant is connected to the covenants made with Abraham and David.

From this, one expects that the new covenant will fulfill all that God has promised in the Old Testament.

The Covenant Fulfillment in Jesus

In the New Testament, there is only one major development of the covenant story. This one development is Jesus Christ, and he embodies all the promises of God. In John's gospel, the prologue echoes the story of creation, and Jesus calls himself the "I Am," echoing God's self description to Moses (Exod 3). Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us." He lives the heart of the covenant: God and humans living in fellowship with each other. His birth sets the stage for the culmination of everything the covenant promised in the Old Testament, especially the fellowship ruptured by sin. Though much is fulfilled through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the covenant promises will find their complete fulfillment in the new heavens and earth. The focus here will be on the fulfillment of God's covenant promises through Jesus' life and ministry.

On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus clearly identifies himself as bringing the new covenant. While he sits with his disciples at the Passover, he takes the cup and says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20). Much has been written about the manner in which Jesus relates to the Old Testament covenant. At the heart of this relationship is Jesus' self-understanding that he came "to fulfill" not "to replace" the law (Matt 5:17). Similarly, the writer of Hebrews argues that Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant (Heb 9:15; 12:24). The CRC has understood Jesus' mediation of the new covenant as defined by the Heidelberg Catechism. Answer 31 states that Jesus was ordained by God the Father and anointed by the Holy Spirit to be

our chief prophet and teacher, our only high priest, and our eternal king. This threefold understanding of Jesus' mediation of a new covenant will guide the following discussion.

First, Jesus is the high priest of the new covenant. In the Old Testament, the high priest went into the presence of God once a year to make atonement for Israel with the blood of animals, but the apostles argue that this blood was not able to deal with sin. Under the Mosaic covenant, the sacrifices had to be made over and over again. They were neither able to pay the penalty of sin, nor were they able to take sin away. The blood of sheep and goats could only provide a temporary cover for sins; it could not forgive them. It was merely a shadow, a longing for the real blood that could forgive. The animal blood was not able to keep the people holy.

Jeremiah prophesies that the forgiveness of sins will characterize the new covenant. God says, "I will remember their sins no more." The old covenant of Sinai is replaced with a better covenant (Heb 8-10). Jesus is the better and final everlasting high priest who is also the final lamb, the final sacrifice. By one complete sacrifice, Jesus has completely paid for all sins (Heb 7:27; 9:26-28). The cross of Christ is the last word concerning sin. Jesus entered into the presence of God with his own blood to make atonement once and for all (Heb 10:12). Entering heaven, he sat down for good at the Father's right hand side and, with a great exclamation mark, said, "It is finished."

When Abraham ascended Mount Moriah, he told Isaac that God would provide a lamb for the sacrifice. On that occasion, God did provide a ram, but that ram pointed forward to another lamb, one that would take away the sin of the world. In Christ, God provided that lamb. When Abraham arranged the pieces of the cut animals, it was God

who walked between the pieces, calling down upon himself curses if the covenant promises were not fulfilled. Now, in Christ, God himself bears the curse of the covenant so that the promises may be given to those who believe. In the Old Testament, covenant breakers needed to be cut off from God because they were under the covenant curse. On the cross, Jesus was cut off from God, carrying the curse of the covenant in place of all covenant violators.

As Jesus passed out the bread and the cup declaring that they were his body and his blood, he identified himself as the final Passover lamb. He carried the curses of the covenant in his body so that believers might receive the promises of the covenant. The original curse of the covenant was death. If the covenant was broken, humans would die and, in Christ, they do. In Christ, God bears the curse of sin, and its power is broken so that God forgives the sin of his people. In Christ, the God-man, the head of the serpent is crushed; the blow is fatal. Death could not hold its prey. Jesus Christ is alive; therefore, He is the mediator of a new and everlasting covenant.

Second, Jesus is the prophet, law-giver, and teacher of the new covenant. Just as the sacrificial system was not able to deal with sin, so the law was not able to accomplish its purpose. Weakened by the sinful nature (Rom 8:3), the law was unable to make Israel live a holy life so that God could dwell among them. Thus, instead of drawing people toward God, the demands of the law drove them away. Instead of humbling the people and driving them toward God's grace, it filled them with pride at their own power to keep the law. Instead of leading the people to holiness, it exposed their sinfulness. Rather than humbly coming before God in repentance, Israel went after other gods.

In showing the impossibility of finding eternal life by way of perfect obedience, the law revealed the sinfulness of sin (Rom 7:13). In this way, it became a burden and a curse, but Jesus carried the curse of the law in his body when he died on the cross. Moreover, Jesus lived a perfect life, doing everything the law demanded. In this way, he fulfilled the law, and it is no longer able to condemn believers.⁴⁵ Thus, Paul could write, “Christ is the end of the law to all who believe” (Rom 12:4). Because Jesus carried the curse of the law, Christians are set free to obey the law and prophets.⁴⁶ The end of the law is death, but the death of Jesus is the end of the law; one who believes is no longer under the law, but under grace (Rom 10:14).

Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17). As mentioned, this means that Jesus lived the law perfectly, but it also means that he came to teach the true and full meaning of the law. He came to teach how God had intended humans to live on this earth, so what God had said through Moses and the prophets would now be made full, completed by the life and teachings of Jesus.⁴⁷ When Jesus laid down his life in death, one man had lived the law, had lived in full fellowship with God. He had lived out the radical obedience required of the covenant. Thus, Paul calls him the second Adam.

When Paul calls Jesus the second Adam, he is teaching that Jesus did what Adam had failed to do. Jesus lived the perfect obedience that Adam had not. Thus, Jesus opened the way to eternal life, which Adam had lost through his disobedience. Jesus had met the

⁴⁵ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 199.

⁴⁶ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 37.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

original condition of the covenant of creation. This means that followers of Jesus are now able to live the life that humans were intended to live. Further, through his obedience, Jesus obtained eternal life.⁴⁸ Jesus is the new beginning for all humanity.

Jeremiah declared that the time will come when God's people will do what is right. They will know him and obey him; from the least of them to the greatest. The writer of Hebrews argues that in Christ that time has come. Besides having lived a perfect life, Jesus returned to the Father to send out the Spirit. The Spirit makes the new life possible. The Spirit of Jesus now lives in every believer, so that they know God. It can even be said that the perfect life is in them, because, through the Spirit, Jesus lives in them. Christians should not say they cannot obey because that denies the power of the Spirit.

Under the old covenant, the law was external, outside, written on stone tablets. Under the new covenant, the law is written on the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit. This is the part of the new covenant that is often missed in the CRC. The new covenant is not just the forgiveness of sins; it is also a new power (Rom 8:1-4). The new covenant is the sending of the Holy Spirit. As Kuyvenhoven reminded us, "The Spirit inside God's people will make them perfectly willing to do God's will."⁴⁹ The primary work of the Spirit is to give believers new hearts that desire to live in obedience to God. In this way, the intent and meaning are fulfilled by the Spirit as proclaimed today in the sacrament of

⁴⁸ Hendricksen, *Covenant of Grace*, 29.

⁴⁹ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 18.

baptism. Thus, Paul can say that baptism is a circumcision of the heart, not done by the hands of men, but by God himself (Col 2:11-12).

What is meant by the renewal of the heart? Earlier, this chapter dealt with humans as the image of God with moral, intellectual, and spiritual abilities. Sin effectively severed the spiritual connection between humans and God.⁵⁰ This, of course, affected humans' moral and intellectual capacities as well. Through the ministry of the Spirit, believers are reconnected with God. They are no longer dead but alive. Today, they have eternal life within them.

Jesus declared that the law he brought was the law of the kingdom of God. He taught how God had intended people to live. In his teaching, he continually instructed that concern for spiritual and ethical matters was more important than concern for the physical.⁵¹ The kingdom is first of all a matter of the heart. It is a heart that has been immersed into the love of God. Having absorbed this love, our hearts can now love both God and neighbour, which is the fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:10). The new man is not someone who just obeys the rules but mirrors the love of the Father. Love is not an emotion but a gift of the Spirit which is received through faith and lived in this world. Living the life of love makes believers partners with God (John 15:15). As Kuyvenhoven wrote, "When God's Spirit rules our spirit, we have become co-workers with Christ, covenant partners of God. We do His will and His work in His world for the coming of

⁵⁰ Bosma, *Exposition*, 182.

⁵¹ Gerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), 103.

His kingdom. We agree with Him, love Him, are zealous for His honour—in short, He and we are covenant partners.”⁵²

Finally, Jesus is the true king of Israel (Ezek 37:24). He is both the son of God and the son of David (Isa 9:6). This is the king who shall reign forever on David’s throne and on God’s throne (Rom 1:3, 4; Heb 1:5; Isa 9:6; and Psa 45:7). He brings the fullness of the Kingdom of God which is not some otherworldly entity but is found wherever people do what God wants done. As a CRC ministry paper put it, “God’s Kingdom relates to the whole of creation and the fullness of God’s dynamic reign in bringing a fallen creation back into a right relationship with its Creator.”⁵³ Having ascended into heaven, he now sits at the right hand of the father until all things submit to him. Because Christ is king, Christians dare to live the life of love. They know that all things will work together for those who love God (Rom 8:28).

When that has happened, the final chapter in the story of the covenant will begin, as previewed in Revelation 21 and 22. These chapters picture a restored paradise, but not as a garden, now as a city. In this city is the throne of the great king who reigns over all. The citizens of his kingdom are kings and queens reigning with him over his dominion (Rev 5:9, 10). This is a place where all who have been broken are healed and where provision is once again plentiful. It is a place where there is no more death or anything else that even faintly hints at the curse inflicted on God’s creation due to human

⁵² Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 41.

⁵³ Christian Reformed Home Missions and Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, *Rethinking Ministry: From Church-Shaped Missions to a Mission Shaped Church* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Home Missions and Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, 1999), 28.

rebellion. In fact, anyone who carries any trace of that rebellion is not allowed entrance. Only those who have put their faith in the gracious blood and righteousness of the great high priest-king are allowed in. The greatest joy of the covenant is that God and humans now live together. The book of Revelation pictures, not just a redeemed humanity, but a redeemed creation. It is a place where humanity can again fulfill its God-given mandate to have dominion over all of God's creation.

This is the final fulfillment of the covenant for which believers still wait. Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matt 5:5). The meek are those who have submitted themselves fully to Jesus. The meek desire to do only what God wants them to do. They are the new covenant people who will inherit the Promised Land, which is the whole earth. While they wait, though, they must persevere. They must remain faithful and obedient, or else they cannot receive. The writer of Hebrews says that Christ will come again to bring salvation to those who persevere (Heb 9:28; 10:36).

Implications for Spiritual Formation

Throughout this study of the covenant, it has been shown that God takes the initiative in the covenant. He establishes the covenant and promises to fulfill it. In Jesus Christ, God fulfilled his promises of the old covenant. The same is true in the new covenant. God is the initiator of the covenant and the fulfiller of its promises. At the heart of the new covenant are the forgiveness of sins and the giving of the Spirit. Reformed people also believe that one of the promises of the covenant is sanctification, which is very similar to spiritual formation. Thus, it must be concluded that spiritual formation is first and foremost the work of God. God will see it done. All spiritual formation is rooted

in God's love and promises toward those who believe. God Himself directs the formation of His people through the agents of the Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture.

It has also been seen that the covenant was unconditional in that God made promises without condition. However, to receive the promises, people had to believe. The same is still true today. The forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit are received by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9). Faith, which includes knowledge, consent, and trust, is the conviction that God's word is utterly reliable.⁵⁴ Therefore, it is the motivation for trusting, obedient action (Heb 11:1). This is the foundation of the Christians' relationship with God and of all spiritual formation.⁵⁵ The exercise of faith is the only way through which one can come to conscious enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant.

Is faith, then, the only condition of the new covenant? In the New Testament, faith is coupled with repentance (Eph 2:8; Acts 16:31 Rom 1:16; 4:16; Matt 3:2; 4:17; Mark 6:12; Acts 2:38; 17:30: 20:21). Repentance includes turning away from sin and turning toward a new life. It is the rejection of sin and the embracing of the life in Christ by the Spirit. Thus, Jesus could commission his disciples to make new disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything he had commanded (Matt 28:20-21). Baptism ushers people into the new life of the Spirit, making obedience possible.

Faith is required to receive the promises, but faith looks away from personal ability and merit to the promises of God. A living, active, and abiding faith is the way in

⁵⁴ Bosma, *Exposition*, 193.

⁵⁵ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 25.

which the believer enters into eternal life.⁵⁶ Eternal life is unearned but must be received by faith, penitence, and obedience. Repentance and obedience flow from faith as the fullness of faith. The land promised to the wilderness generation was the Promised Land, an unearned and unmerited gift of grace. Yet the first generation did not inherit the land because of its unbelief and disobedience (Heb 3:18-19). Similarly for Christians, eternal life is an undeserved gift of grace; yet it is entered by way of a living, active, and obedient faith.

In the comments about the covenant with Noah, it was mentioned that God made his covenant with Noah and his family. When God called Abraham, he covenanted with him and his family. Much of the Old Testament tells the story of God's covenant with his people Israel. The kings covenanted with God on behalf of the community. In the New Testament, Jesus established his church as the new covenant community. When Peter addressed the crowd on Pentecost, he told them, "The promise was for them and their children and for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). One reads that the early church was noticed for its fellowship (Acts 2:42; 4:32). The Bible does not try to convince people to enter into community; rather, it assumes community. The promises of God are always communal promises. The creation story reveals that the solitary human was not good. It is the community that is formed spiritually. This community is a vital component of spiritual formation.

Finally, the goal of spiritual formation is to enjoy God through faithful obedient living in the ordinariness of life in the context of the covenant community. Living with

⁵⁶ Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, 50.

God does not happen only on the mountain. It is meant to be lived on the plain and in the valleys. Covenant living means that, through the ordinary interactions with God's creation as God's image bearers, Christians live in covenant partnership with God. Only as followers of Jesus devote themselves to the Father's business in the ordinary events of life can their souls find the satisfaction of covenant partnership. As God called Abraham to faithful obedience, God calls believers today to the same faithful obedience. Now, though, believers live in the grace of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit. As they learn to walk in step with the Spirit, his gifts and fruit take up residence in their lives. The covenant relationship propels Christians, as kingdom citizens, to be active in the world bringing the kingdom wherever they go. The kingdom must begin in their own hearts from which it moves into the world through their lives. As Gordon Spykman wrote, "Christian communities can now bless their nations with life renewing programs of kingdom service, sharing freely the healing power of the gospel with a broken and bleeding humanity."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Gordon Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 475.

CHAPTER 3

ASSESSING SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE CANADIAN CRC

In the first chapter, spiritual formation was defined as “the manner in which believers move towards the goal of their religion.” It was suggested that this happens through three primary means: gathering the required knowledge, practicing the religious disciplines, and learning how to live according to the religion’s mores. In this chapter, an understanding of spiritual formation will be developed using the insights learned in the previous chapter. This chapter will also explore various traditions and ideas that have influenced how the Canadian CRC views and practices spiritual formation.

What Is Spiritual Formation

As discussed in chapter 2, the goal of the Christian community, and thus the goal of spiritual formation, is to enjoy God through faithful, obedient living in the ordinariness of life. God desires a people who enter into partnership with him to be “a kingdom and priests in the world” (Exod 19:5, 6; Rev 5:10). It was shown that the heart of the new covenant in Christ is a people who know God. This has become possible because, in Christ, God forgives his people and gives them new hearts through his Spirit. Thus, spiritual formation occurs because God has promised it will. The primary human contribution is faith. Faith believes that God keeps his promises. One could say that spiritual formation takes place as our faith in God is strengthened. The Belgic Confession

confirms this when it says that sanctification is “‘faith working through love,’ which leads a man to do by himself the works that God has commanded in his Word.”¹

The three means of spiritual formation: knowledge, disciplines, and mores, are subservient to faith. Faith in God’s work of renewal is the only way that spiritual formation can take place. The pursuit of knowledge, disciplines, and mores must always be done in faith. Christian security is not in the correct knowledge, disciplines, or mores. Reformed covenantal Christians put their trust squarely and only in God himself to make them holy. They pursue these other means as an outworking of their faith in obedience to Paul’s command “to work out your faith with fear and trembling” (Phil 1:12). Just as Abraham and Sarah needed to believe that God would produce an heir out of their dead bodies, so Christians need to believe that, though they are dead in sin, God makes them alive with Christ (Eph 2:1-4, 8).

From this perspective, the knowledge of the Christian faith is defined by the phrase Jeremiah proclaimed: “They will know me” (Jer 31:34). This knowledge should not be understood simply as facts, even though correct facts are important. It is the knowledge of relationship. Through the ministry of Jesus Christ, by his blood and Spirit, believers are restored into covenant fellowship with God. This “knowing God” has various components: having the law of God written on our hearts, having our sins forgiven, and being the people of God (Jer 31:33-34). Reformed Christians have always believed that this knowledge is given through the combined ministry of the Bible and the

¹ *Ecumenical*, 101.

Spirit.² Through the Contemporary Testimony, we confess that it is the Spirit who speaks to us in the Bible³ so that we are led “to know God and have life in Jesus Christ.”⁴ Thus, it is important to note that this knowledge comes to us as a gift through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the Word. The relationship between God and his people is sealed with the Holy Spirit who lives within those people.

It is the Bible, which informs our practice of religious disciplines. It does not give a list which is required of all Christians. Rather, in its stories of people walking with God, it tells how these people stayed in fellowship with God. There are several disciplines which, along with most Christians, Reformed people have understood to be essential, such as reading the Scriptures, prayer, and communal worship. Later chapters will look at these. For now, the function of these disciplines must be understood. Christians engage in these disciplines to strengthen their faith and help them move deeper into covenant partnership with God. They are never an end in themselves, nor are they laws but means of developing fellowship with God. They are tools submitted to the Holy Spirit to transfer loyalties from the kingdom of evil to the Kingdom of God.

The mores of the Christian life are quite simple. Jesus said that all of God’s commandments can be summed up with these two: to love God above all and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matt 22:37-40). This is the law of Jesus’ Kingdom which he came to establish, the law of covenant fellowship with God. This love is not a

² *Ecumenical*, 19.

³ *Our World*, 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*

requirement for entering into fellowship with God. Rather, love is the result of fellowship with God. A brief look at the Reformed understanding of sanctification will flesh out this understanding of spiritual formation.

Sanctification is popularly understood as the process by which Christians are made holy. According to one influential Reformed theologian, sanctification is the “moral and re-creative activity” of God, “by which the sinner is renewed in his inner being and made to conform ever-increasingly to the image of God”⁵ This activity, directed by the Holy Spirit through the Word, begins at conversion and lasts for the duration of a believer’s life. Even though this is the work of God, the believer needs to cooperate in this process. Thus, the Belgic Confession understands sanctification as “faith working through love, which leads a man to do by himself the works that God has commanded in his Word.”⁶

It should be recognized that “holiness is both an affirmation and a challenge.”⁷ Paul writes “to the saints” (i.e. holy ones) (Eph 1:1) and Peter declares that the church is a holy nation (1 Pet 2:9). This is the affirmation of holiness. God has declared the church to be holy, to be his holy people. The challenge is that this holiness “calls for constant self-examination and mutual discipline.”⁸ At the core of these disciplines is the question of loyalties: which kingdom is the Christian heart aligned with? Since Christians have

⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1933), 267.

⁶ *Ecumenical*, 101.

⁷ Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 445.

⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 337, quoted in Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 445.

been rescued from the kingdom of Satan and are citizens of the Kingdom of God, their lives need to reflect that reality. Yet, they often find their actions still in tune with the kingdom of Satan. They proclaim and believe that Jesus Christ is both Saviour and Lord, but often submit themselves to a different lord. The challenge is to align their hearts and their behaviour with the kingdom of God. They do this by the development of their faith, as the Belgic Confession says, “True faith, produced in man by the hearing of God's Word and by the work of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a ‘new man,’ causing him to live the ‘new life’ and freeing him from the slavery of sin.”⁹

From the study of the covenant, it was learned that God desires a people who live in full covenantal fellowship with him, which is the fulfillment of God’s created purpose for humanity. Spiritual formation is the renewing of the human heart so that one does not just walk with God, but wants to walk with him and wants to do what God wants. Jesus shows the depths of spiritual formation when he calls his disciples friends (John 15:15). He says that they are now friends who know the master’s business. They are to occupy themselves carrying out this business, producing much fruit by obeying Jesus’ commands, which are again summarized in the one command: love (John 15:9-10).

This is the goal of spiritual formation: to shape Christians so that they do the Father’s business here in this world. Jesus teaches that only those who abide in him can produce much fruit. By faith, a Christian abides in Christ and produces the fruit of Jesus’ friends. Here then is the key to spiritual formation: abiding in Christ. This must be the focus; abiding in Christ brings Christians to the place where they do what God wants.

⁹ *Ecumenical*, 101.

Abiding in Christ makes them friends of God who want to and who do live out the Kingdom. The Christian's focus is not on the fruit that comes from abiding, but on abiding in Christ. To keep abiding, the Christian looks to God to fulfill his covenant promises. The ability to abide does not reside within the Christian, but in God fulfilling his promises. This is the hope and certainty of spiritual formation.

Spiritual Formation in the CRC

With these things in mind, it will help to turn to the history of the CRC to gather some understanding of how spiritual formation has been understood. Historians of the CRC suggest that the members of this denomination are comprised of three groups of Dutch reformed people who each view the Christian life differently.¹⁰ These outlooks do exist in other strains of Christianity, but have taken on certain characteristics within the CRC. There is variation within each of these groups, depending on time and place, but it is the basic tendency within each that is the concern here. It is not likely that anyone holds exclusively to one of these patterns, but recognizing them helps us understand ourselves. In 1973 Nicholas Wolterstorff labelled the three groups in the Canadian CRC as the doctrinalists, the pietists, and the Kuyperians.¹¹ This foray into CRC spirituality will begin with an examination of how each of these groups viewed spiritual formation.

¹⁰ Fred H. Klooster, "The Kingdom of God in the History of the Christian Reformed Church" in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity* ed. Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 206.

¹¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The AACS in the CRC," *The Reformed Journal*, December 1974, 2-4.

The Doctrinalists

As the title suggests, the doctrinalists believe that Christianity is essentially a belief in certain doctrines.¹² Thus, the greatest part of the Christian religion is assenting to the right doctrines. Such people see the Bible as God's book of doctrine, and faith is understood as consenting to these doctrines. The study of theology becomes of utmost importance in this tradition. Getting the right ideas into the mind is the most important component of spiritual formation.

The evidence of the doctrinalists' influence in the CRC is most visible in the history of profession of faith. In the CRC, members are only supposed to participate in the Lord's Supper if they have made a public profession of faith. In the past, preparation for this profession included study of the three Reformed creeds and sometimes even the CRC church order. A former public profession of faith form began with this question focussing on doctrine:

Do you heartily believe the doctrine contained in the Old and New Testament, and in the articles of the Christian faith and taught in this Christian church, to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation, and do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this profession?¹³

For many years, only those who were nearing the end of secondary school considered making public profession of faith. In fact, it was often seen as a graduation from catechism classes. With such a heavy emphasis on learning the Reformed faith, many believed one could not be a good Christian unless one had a firm grasp on

¹² Wolterstorff, "The AACS in the CRC," 3.

¹³ *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1975), 132.

Reformed doctrine. The CRC Synod of 1995 challenged congregations to change the requirements for participation in the Lord's Supper.¹⁴ Before partaking in the Supper, participants should have made a profession of faith which focused on their relationship with Jesus; learning the Reformed faith should come later. This was the conclusion of almost a decade of work. Throughout this decade, fear that knowledge of the Reformed faith would disappear caused persistent opposition to this change.

The doctrinalist tradition encourages the church to pay careful attention to what it teaches and challenges it to teach the truth. This is a valuable contribution to the Christian life, and ought not to be minimized. There is ample evidence that bad theology derails the church. Thanks to the doctrinalist influence, the CRC has developed its theology and taught it to the members, especially through catechetical instruction for its youth. A strong emphasis on doctrinal preaching can also be linked to this influence.

This tradition helps the church remember that the mind is a very important component of spiritual formation. Paul frequently speaks about the importance of the mind when he tells the Romans to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2) and the Ephesians, “You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him...to be made new in the attitude of your minds” (4:20-23). Earlier in the chapter, it was shown that “knowing God” stands at the heart of spiritual formation. The mind is an integral component in knowing God.

¹⁴ “Clarification of Public Profession of Faith for Covenant Children” in *Agenda for Synod 1995* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1995), 272.

Having said this, it must also be acknowledged that there are pitfalls in the doctrinalist tradition. The most obvious are the beliefs that Christianity is limited to the realm of the mind and that the Christian faith is a matter of believing certain things. As long as one believes these things, that person may consider himself or herself a Christian. An obvious complication is that somebody has to define what constitutes the right set of beliefs. As is often the case, several different sets of beliefs will vie for dominance. Already in 1984 John Bolt briefly outlined just how many sets of beliefs were vying for dominance in the reformed tradition.¹⁵ Because of this, doctrinalism often leads to pride that comes from believing one is right. In this setting, church life often deteriorates into arguments over doctrine.

Further, when the mind takes such a central place, other parts of our humanity are neglected. For example, the doctrinalist perspective on grief can often be very harsh. It gives rise to comments considered to be comforting, such as, “God is in control, this is God’s will; so don’t be sad and don’t worry.” This neglect is also experienced in the worship service. It is believed that the only thing that really matters is the sermon. Sometimes the impression is given that the sermon is even more important than reading the Bible. One of my colleagues was chastised for reading the Bible instead of the liturgical form in preparation for Lord’s Supper. Theology and preaching should always be of excellent quality, but there is more to the Christian life than good theology.

Finally, this tradition often neglects the fruit of our faith. With its emphasis on filling the mind with the right facts, it ends up neglecting the transformation of the mind.

¹⁵ John Bolt, *Christian and Reformed Today* (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press, 1984), 14-19.

The Belgic Confession speaks of "faith working through love." James says that "faith without deeds is dead" (2:26). The doctrinalist tradition is concerned with determining what this faith and love mean, but the danger is that it stops there. Once the truth is known, a contentedness sets in and little emphasis is placed on living out the faith.

To sum up, in terms of spiritual formation, the doctrinalist emphasizes right teaching. There seems to be a belief that, if the theology is right, everything else will follow. To some extent, this camp reduces the Christian life to a life of the mind. Many in the CRC complain that minds and hearts are disconnected. There is a lot of knowledge but very little practice of the Christian life or experience of God. This is an obvious result when the mind gets elevated over the rest of our humanity. With its focus on right doctrine, this pattern leaves little room for questioning and probing. Those with questions are told to be content with the right answer even if they do not understand it or find it difficult to accept. Such an attitude tends to truncate spiritual formation.

Pietists

Pietists have two particular dynamics that distinguish them from the doctrinalists.¹⁶ First, they believe that Christianity consists largely of developing a personal piety or performing the actions of the faith. The emphasis is more on religious practices and laws than on the mind. The Christian faith is defined as a certain set of behaviours. These behaviours include disciplines such as Bible reading and prayer, as well as following laws such as those developed for proper Sunday observance. Second,

¹⁶ Wolterstorff, "The AACCS in the CRC," 2.

pietists tend to avoid interaction with non-Christian culture. They are inclined to hide from the world and from other forms of Christianity. Pietists believe that outsiders, Christian and non-Christian, are dangerous and will contaminate the faithful. Thus, they tend to cluster together and avoid relating with other people as much as possible.

Pietism has had several significant influences on the CRC. The practice of “family visiting” is connected to the rise of Pietism in the mid-1700s.¹⁷ It is from this tradition that the CRC developed its practice of family devotions before and after meals, and personal devotions at bedtime. A strong Sabbath tradition, focused on avoidance of work and recreation and attending two worship services, also came from pietism.

The two distinguishing aspects of pietism are both its strength and its weakness. The emphasis on a disciplined Christian life is healthy. The practices of devotions and Sunday observance have helped many walk closely with God. However, this strength can also turn into a weakness. Sometimes the practices become law and rather than helping people walk with God, they produce guilt if not adhered to properly. When practices become law they can lead to spiritual pride. If keeping these practices is the core of the Christian life, then the person who keeps them best is the best Christian.

Moreover, differences of opinion on what practices must be observed can lead to infighting. For example, the piety of Dutch immigrants centred on family devotions and Sunday observance. The American pastors who helped organize new congregations in Canada came with a piety focussed on staying away from worldly amusements such as going to movies, dancing, and smoking. The Dutch found this humorous because they

¹⁷ Wolterstorff, “The AACCS in the CRC,” 3.

had no money for movie going and no interest in dancing, but they loved to smoke.¹⁸ A group's choice of practices is often arbitrary.

Their cautionary attitude toward unbelievers is also a healthy element of the pietism strain. It reminds the church that, if Christians are not careful, they will compromise their holiness. The world is a dangerous place, but Jesus tells us not to be afraid of the world because he has overcome it (John 16:33). The antidote to that danger is not flight, but learning to delight ourselves in the things of God. As discussed in the last chapter, humanity was created to bring glory to God, and God covenants with us to bring his blessings to those outside the church. Thus Peter tells us to “live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet 2:12).

Pietists also stress a personal walk with God. The Bible is considered a devotional book that helps one in his or her relationship with God. This, too, is healthy and should not be trivialized. However, among the Dutch immigrants, this walk sometimes became so personal that even children were not witnesses to their parent's faith.¹⁹ These people took Jesus' commands in Matthew 6, not to let others see their good works, too literally. Unfortunately, many of the children never knew the deep faith which held their parents steady during the difficult days of immigration and adjustment to a new land. This emphasis on the personal dimension of faith often keeps the pietist from developing a

¹⁸ Tymen E. Hofman, *The Canadian Story of the CRC: Its First Century* (Belleville, ON: Guardian Books, 2004), 72.

¹⁹ Anne Van Arragon Hutton, *Uprooted: Dutch Immigrant Children in Canada 1947-1950* (Kentville, Nova Scotia: North Mountain Press, 2001), 188.

larger vision for the Christian life. The Christian life is lived between oneself and God. The church may have a small part to play, but the pietist seldom has the kingdom vision which is at the heart of the covenant.

Like the doctrinalist strain, the pietist has some strong contributions to make in our continual struggle for spiritual formation. The emphasis on a disciplined Christian life resonates with Paul's repeated challenges concerning self-control (1 Thess 5:6, 8; 1 Tim 5:8). However, when the focus is on the disciplines rather than their purpose, it can degenerate into a deadly legalism. Further, fear of the world, though healthy in itself, has caused many pietists to shun the world rather than seek to bring God's blessing to it.

Kuyperianism

Kuyperianism is the Dutch Reformed pattern of the Christian life that seeks to reform society. This pattern existed in the Dutch Reformed churches before Kuyper's time, but Kuyper has become its champion. Kuyperians have elements of both pietism and doctrinalism in their expression of the Christian life; however, they believe that the appropriate response to the gospel is to do the will of God in all areas of life. Kuyperians seek the reformation of society in accord with the laws of God.²⁰

Kuyper's vision is expressed by the slogan "Let Christ Be King." He elaborated with these often-quoted words, "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!'"²¹ In the practical outworking of this foundation, Kuyper said that all areas of human

²⁰ Wolterstorff, "The AACS in the CRC," 10.

²¹ Kuyper, "Souverain in eigen Kring (Sphere Sovereignty)."

thought and practice were related. As a result, Christians ought to take their Christian faith and thinking into all arenas of human endeavour: politics, education, church, family, and labour, for example. In each arena, Christians were encouraged to promote the principles of Christ. In Canada, there was a particular emphasis on the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd. He believed that God had embedded laws within creation that were distorted by the fall. The Christian's job was to discover these laws or principles and reform societies and cultures so that they would live by God's laws.²²

It was these ideas which propelled the Kuyperians who immigrated to Canada. They began with educational institutions: grade schools, high schools, and the "Association for Reformed Scientific Study."²³ They also established such organizations as the Christian Labour Association of Canada which has become a self-supporting labour union and the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario, which remains a significant part of the Ontario agricultural landscape today.

The Kuyperians were not the largest of the groups, but they were the most vocal in the Canadian CRC. Unfortunately, they have also caused a great deal of tension within the denomination. The attitude with which they engaged the church often hampered their efforts. This attitude is described by Hofman: "They were visionary, quite cocky and sometimes arrogantly hostile over against any who didn't gear in with their hopes and

²² James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 213.

²³ This institution's detractors found much delight in its acronym: ARSS. The founders quickly renamed it "Association for the Advancement of Reformed Studies" and later it was renamed "Institute for Christian Studies" which it remains today. It is now an accredited graduate school with the University of Toronto.

actions. They were triumphalist, as though the kingdom of God was about to come to earth through them.”²⁴ Those who led the movement had no patience for those who were slower to catch on to the vision. Instead of inspiring others to catch the vision, they were “impatient, critical and judgmental, portraying a spirit which alienated those who didn’t share their vision.”²⁵ Wolterstorff offers a similar criticism of this group but also notes that non-Kuyperians retaliated with the same tones and arrogance.²⁶

These descriptions suggest that, within this group, there was more emphasis on the outward transformation of society than on the inward transformation of the heart. There was interest in societal change, but not a heart that pulsed with the love of the Father. The claim that “Christ is Lord” seemed to apply to everything except the human heart, thus missing half the covenant’s purpose. They understood the administration of God’s creation, but forgot about fellowship with God. It is difficult to know why this happened, why personal transformation seems to have been neglected, especially since Kuyper had a strong pietist bent. However, there are several possibilities that need to be examined here because they will help in understanding spiritual formation in the CRC.

Roger Henderson suggests that there is a common misunderstanding of Kuyper’s slogan. Many know it as “over the whole domain of creation” rather than “over the whole domain of our human existence.”²⁷ He suggests that many take the easy way out by seeing creation as the physical universe and human culture and industry, thus avoiding

²⁴ Hofman, *The Canadian Story of the CRC*, 128.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 177-178.

²⁶ Wolterstorff, “The AACS in the CRC,” 2.

²⁷ “Kuyper’s Inch,” *Pro Rege*, March 2008, 12.

coming as close to home as the human heart. Focussing on Christ's reign in society and culture, Kuyperians neglect submitting their own hearts to the scrutiny of Christ's lordship. John Bolt argues that Kuyperians understood social activity to be part of the cultural mandate, but not as part of kingdom living.²⁸ There was such a heavy emphasis on restructuring society according to God's creational principles, that there was no room for reflecting on redemption or disciple making. The great commission that Jesus gave was eclipsed by the cultural mandate given at creation.

Another background to this neglect may be Kuyper's teaching on sanctification. He believed in "presumed or slumbering regeneration."²⁹ Kuyper taught that everyone who will be regenerated is already regenerated in the mind of God. Such a person simply has to wake up and realize who she is. Too put it differently, the seed of faith may lie dormant for many years before it wakes. Christian parents ought to assume their children are elect unless there is evidence to the contrary.³⁰ Within the church, this idea removes the need to call people to repentance, and it breeds spiritual indifference. This teaching has also encouraged a false confidence. It is believed that, as long as people spend time with other Christians, they will be fine; they will wake up someday. In this view, the Word and Spirit do not bring spiritual life into being but bring it into consciousness.³¹

²⁸ Bolt, *Christian and Reformed Today*, 142.

²⁹ Cornelis Pronk, "F. M. Ten Hoor: Defender of Secession Principles against Abraham Kuyper's Doleantie Views" (ThM thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987), 108.

³⁰ Hoekema, "The Christian Reformed Church and the Covenant," 192.

³¹ Pronk, "F. M. Ten Hoor," 108.

It is fair to say that this Kuyperian kingdom vision of cultural transformation has not captured the heart of the Canadian CRC, except in the area of education.³² There is still scattered support for the CLAC and periodic support for political action, but it is the schools established by CRC parents which will be the Kuyperian legacy in Canada. Still, Gene Haas has made a troubling observation about the Kuyperian vision among college students. The Kuyperian approach is “often used by Reformed students to justify their involvement in all kinds of questionable cultural activities.”³³ There is a desire to see how far one can be involved in “questionable cultural activities” and still be a Christian. It is as if a circle has been drawn in the sand. The goal is to stay in the circle, but as close to the edge as possible. It is important to notice that, in this attitude, there is little interest in righteousness, let alone walking with God as a friend. Rather, people are looking for permission to play with fire.

The Kuyperians should be commended for their desire to engage the world and its secular culture. Unfortunately, sometimes they went too far and got lost in the world. The antithesis, which was such an important part of Kuyper’s theology, was erased. This mentality was the complete opposite of pietism, which encouraged flight from the world. It is fair to conclude that some of the chaos the CRC has experienced is due to these opposing world views. The Kuyperians have had a profound impact on the Canadian CRC, for both good and bad.

³² The doctrinalists and pietists also supported Christian schools, but for different reasons. However, most of the teachers and administrators were of the Kuyperian persuasion.

³³ Gene Haas is a member of the Presbyterian Church and is professor of religion and theology at Redeemer University College. Redeemer is a liberal arts university in Ontario, established mainly by Dutch immigrants but now multi-denominational. Haas’ comments were made via email correspondence.

All three of these patterns can still be found in the CRC today. As Wolterstorff notes, many of us are unaware of these patterns and which ones we ourselves follow.³⁴ It is important to remember that these patterns express what people see as the heart of the gospel life. Thus, those who use Scripture according to the norms of one pattern are often considered less than fully biblical by adherents to the other patterns. Members of each pattern have accused the CRC of becoming too “worldly.” This accusation often boils down to a concern that the CRC is leaving its reformed heritage and accommodating secular culture. Adherents of each pattern would define worldliness in a different way. It seems that in the heart of most CRC people (until quite recently) is a deep desire to remain Reformed. However, when there are at least three different definitions of what it means to be “Reformed,” it becomes quite difficult to remain anything.

There is an increasing dissatisfaction in the Canadian CRC with the manner in which we have historically done church and lived the Christian life. Many are recognizing that our ability to extend the kingdom of God is limited because we have not been willing to begin with the human heart. The desire to be more Christ-like is growing among us. Before turning to addressing that need, a few more historic issues are worth considering.

Family Visiting

One of the few official practices for spiritual formation in the CRC, outside the classroom and worship service, has been that of elder’s family visitation. This practice

³⁴ Wolterstorff, “The AACCS in the CRC,” 9.

dates all the way back to the Reformed churches under the leadership of Theodore Beza in 1550.³⁵ These visits were meant to instruct believers, originally raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, in the Reformed faith. Their primary purpose was to examine believers before the celebration of the Lord's Supper to ensure that they embraced its Protestant understanding. They were made four times a year by a minister in the company of an elder. Thus, this practice was begun to help form people into the Reformed understanding of the Christian faith.

Over the years, this practice has changed. Eventually the work became too much for the pastor, and so two elders were sent out. Nobody today remembers the days of quarterly visits, since in Canada, they have always been made annually. In most churches a single elder visits in order to be less intimidating and more efficient. In those churches in which the elders still go in pairs, the elders usually visit for only one hour so that two visits per night can be made. Such visits tend to be conducted like formal interviews.

In a recent handbook for elders, the authors say that the visit ought to be “done yearly for schooling the believer in faith and obedience.”³⁶ Today, the purpose of the visit is to encourage the members in their personal walk with God, in their family devotions, in the commitment to the church and to find out if there are any grievances. Unfortunately, in times of internal church tension, this last reason tends to dominate. Most elders discover that there are significant mutual benefits to making these visits. Such visits do help build people's loyalty to the church and sense of connectedness to the

³⁵ Email correspondence with the author from Henry De Moor, April 22, 2008.

³⁶ Gerald Berghoef and Lester De Koster, *The Elders Handbook: A Practical Guide for Church Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Christian Library Press, 1979), 91.

fellowship. However, due largely to the pace of today's lifestyle and the districts being too large, few elders manage to make annual visits to their entire district.

There has been a great deal of value in this historic practice of elders' visits. This brief history has shown just how much the practice has changed since its beginning. These changes suggest that, as circumstances change, practices need to change to meet those circumstances. If spiritual formation is to come closer to the centre of the church's activities, which it should, an annual family visit by the elder will not suffice. The historic elder visits may still have a function within the CRC, but they cannot be expected to have a significant place in spiritual formation.

A Church Born Out of Immigration

It will be helpful in developing a strategy for spiritual formation to have a basic understanding of CRC history in Canada. Until World War II, there were only eleven isolated congregations in Canada. In 1947, an immigration wave from the Netherlands began to swell the ranks of the Canadian CRC. There appear to be four basic reasons for this wave. First, there was a desire to own property. There was very little opportunity for this in the densely populated Netherlands, and Canada was offering cheap land in abundance. Second, there was a desire to flee the devastation and hopelessness which was part of the aftermath of World War II. Third, the Netherlands was still dominated by a rigid class system. Emigration was seen as an opportunity to break out of one's caste and move up. Many came over for a better future; better apparently meant richer. Fourth, Holland was becoming hostile to conservative Kuiperian social ideals. The emigrants saw Canada as a place where they could live out those ideals in freedom.

The motivation for immigration was largely a desire for improvement in material wellbeing. Within the Dutch communities in Canada, this has been achieved. The churches, schools, and homes all testify that the Dutch generally know how to make money. Interestingly, many Dutch considered Canada to be “morally, culturally, religiously and medically inferior to the Netherlands.”³⁷ The immigrants came believing that the Canadian culture was more or less pagan and less civilized than Dutch culture, so they came with feelings of superiority and an unwillingness to become part of Canadian culture. They came with the old colonial mentality, believing that they could show the Canadians how civilized people lived.

The CRC became home to many of these Dutch immigrants. Among them were people from each of the three patterns discussed earlier. They were also from various Reformed denominations, which were at significant odds with each other in the Netherlands. There were people from various Dutch social classes, and the church was the only place where class distinctions still held some sway. The church became the place of structure and familiarity in lives that were chaotic and in a culture which they did not understand. Unfortunately, some who had lost their place of power, tried to find places of power in the church. Sometimes, when that was not given openly, they resorted to the tactics used in the Dutch underground during World War II. They would gather a following and create schemes to have their ideas implemented.³⁸

³⁷ Hutton, *Uprooted*, 129.

³⁸ Hofman, *The Canadian Story of the CRC*, 60.

Most Dutch immigrants lived lives characterized by poverty and isolation. It was these things that bound them together in the church. The people may have met to worship together on Sundays, but that did not mean things were unified. Anne Van Arrogon Hutton included this quotation in her book:

Church meetings during those early years were always so volatile. At congregational meetings emotions would run high and people got very hot under the collar. I can remember many gatherings where I literally had my hands over my ears because the fighting and arguing was so violent....All these members had originally come from many different backgrounds....Tolerance was something that was very seldom seen during those early years.³⁹

This certainly was not the situation in all churches. However, it is a part of our history, and the schism we experienced in the late 1980s and early 1990s forces us to reckon with this part of our history. The unity of the church was not found in Christ as much as in the common cultural background. We have been more prone to argue with each other than to seek to advance the Kingdom together.

The Netherlands had been a Reformed country since at least 1816, when the Dutch king made one official Reformed church.⁴⁰ Often, this served to fuse culture and religion, causing one's lifestyle to be determined more by social class than by discipleship. This confusion was not left behind when the Dutch immigrants came to Canada. Neither they, nor their Canadian neighbours, made any effort to distinguish their Dutch culture from their reformed faith. This confusion was compounded by the pietist

³⁹ Hutton, *Uprooted*, 131.

⁴⁰ Louis Praamsma, *Let Christ Be King: Reflections on the Life and Times of Abraham Kuyper* (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press, 1985), 30.

influence which urged the immigrants to remain separated from their Canadian neighbours. Hutton remarks how this impacted the children,

Many immigrant children experienced the church as an institution which kept alive the Dutch religious culture, erecting “unscalable walls” between them and the people among whom they lived....Such immigrant children learned that Canadians were part of a hostile culture that should not be engaged but fled from.⁴¹

The use of the English language in worship became the focal point in this issue, and it set the pietists and Kuypersians against each other. The pietists saw the move towards English as a move towards godlessness; whereas, the Kuypersians saw it as a necessary step to engaging and transforming the Canadian culture.⁴²

Conclusion

This chapter has taken a panoramic view of the Canadian CRC, while focussing in on specific issues that impact spiritual formation. The original Dutch members were from a variety of backgrounds, and their cultural background, more than anything else, brought them together in the CRC. Historic Dutch issues eventually came to the foreground in the CRC and caused significant stress. People were more interested in staking religious ground than in discovering together how to live the gospel in a new culture.

Thus, when someone from non-Dutch background asks what it means to be CRC or even Christian, many people’s first response is to be tongue tied. The CRC has not been very successful in defining itself, so it is difficult for people to answer such a question. Thankfully, due largely to the persistent encouragement of Home Missions,

⁴¹ Hutton, *Uprooted*, 130.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 232.

many people of non-Dutch background are finding their way into our congregations. As they are integrated they help the CRC articulate its fundamental principles, thus helping the church in discipleship training.

The analysis of the different patterns may appear harsh. The dangers of each pattern were pointed out so that they can be avoided in the future. Hopefully, many at Community Church can understand themselves more clearly by examining these different patterns. Further, it is important to understand that the impetus for leaving the Netherlands was largely economic. The Dutch went to work and quickly began to make money. Their effort to succeed financially competed with the pursuit of faith, and the pursuit of faith often lost the battle.

The Kuyperian element provoked the most trouble, but this was not all Kuyper's fault. One must maintain the distinction between the man and his followers. Kuyper himself was known to have a very deep faith, which he expressed in his devotional writing. James Schaap remarks, "Kuyper doesn't need to tell us how to be spiritual because in so many of the meditations he shows us, beautifully, by describing God with intimate respect and awe."⁴³ It is to the search of that kind of faith that the paper now turns.

⁴³ Abraham Kuyper, *Near unto God*, trans. James C. Schaap (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1997), 14.

CHAPTER 4

RENEWING THE HISTORIC ELEMENTS OF CRC SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Introduction

In chapter 2 it was argued that the goal of spiritual formation is fellowship with God and that the Holy Spirit is the primary agent in this work. Through faith in Jesus Christ, believers receive forgiveness of sins and a new heart that knows God. It was shown that the primary human contribution to spiritual formation is faith. Faith believes the promises of God and works itself out in obedient love. However, the focus of faith is not love or obedience, but abiding in Christ. As Christians abide in Christ through faith, they receive the grace through which they enter ever deeper into fellowship with God.

The rest of this paper is devoted to developing a strategy for abiding in Christ. This chapter will look at four practices which have been part of historic CRC spirituality. The next chapter will look at practices becoming more prevalent in the church. The final chapter will look at several important environments in which spirituality is both developed and practiced. This strategy is developed with two assumptions. First, spiritual formation is not a “one size fits all” proposition. The strategy must be spacious enough for the wide range of personalities which comprise any church community. Second, there is both a personal and a communal aspect to spiritual formation. Some people are more inclined to the personal, others to the communal; but everyone must have some of both.

The community can offer very little assistance to a person who does not intentionally pursue spiritual formation.

The strategy will focus on the spiritual disciplines or practices. Earlier, these were identified as one of the means for spiritual formation. The focus is placed here because these practices are the means which God utilizes to bring his grace into believers' lives. Some are prescribed in the Bible, while others are simply described. Without using these disciplines, Christians cannot expect to grow in grace. As Richard Foster wrote, "if we expect to grow in grace, we must pay the price of a consciously chosen course of action..."¹ If Christians want to be formed by the Holy Spirit, they must be open to his work. The spiritual disciplines are means through which believers open themselves to the Spirit.

Christians do not fully understand how God works through these disciplines, but engage in them believing that God will use the disciplines to help the Christian abide in Christ. There is a divine mystery here. Jesus told his disciples to abide in him and they would produce much fruit (John 15:1). When Christians deliberately choose to utilize the disciplines, they discover that they are abiding in Christ. As the practices are used, believers gather the knowledge of the Christian life and increasingly live according to the mores of their religion. The Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way, "We do good because Christ by His Spirit is renewing us to be like himself."² As the Holy Spirit brings God's grace into the Christian's life, she increasingly walks in step with the Spirit. Often,

¹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978), 8.

² *Ecumenical*, 53.

Christians focus on doing what is right but Jesus told his followers to focus on abiding in him. So the mystery is that, if Christians focus on abiding in Christ, he will cause them to bear much fruit.

This strategy is not a full explanation of the spiritual disciplines. The books by Richard Foster and Dallas Willard listed in the bibliography are recommended for that purpose. This paper is interested in what Reformed covenant theology has to say about these practices. The strategy will assess how these practices have been used and offer some suggestions for developing their use in the CRC, particularly, Community Church.

The Bible

This strategy begins with the Bible. The Bible is the starting point of all Christian spiritual formation practices. Reformed Christians believe that the Bible and sacraments are the most significant “means of grace.”³ By this, they understand that God has chosen two primary means by which to bring his grace. There are others, but these are unique since all other means work in association with these two. Reformed theology also states that, when separated from the Word, the sacraments lose their ability to bring God’s grace.⁴ In this way Reformed theology teaches that the Scripture is the Holy Spirit’s chief tool for spiritual formation.

A good starting point in considering the Bible’s role in spiritual formation is the Bible’s claim to be God-breathed and “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and

³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 604.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 616.

training in righteousness...” (2 Tim 3:15). Here it is learned that the Bible is the Word of God which comes from God with the power of God. God’s breath is life-giving breath. In the garden, God breathed into Adam and he “became a living being” (Gen 2:7). The Holy Spirit is spoken of in Scripture as the breath of God who was active in creation and who now gives new life to all who believe (Ezek 37:1-14 and John 3:5-8). So, when the Bible describes itself as God-breathed, it means that it comes with the power of God to breathe new life into people. Further, God has breathed this Word so that believers will be shaped into righteousness. The passage concludes, “so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17). The purpose of the Bible is to mould Christians so that they walk with God, doing what is right.

The Reformed confessions echo this thought when they say that only the books in the Bible were received “for the regulating, founding and establishing of our faith.”⁵ The Word of God is the fully reliable tool through which we come “to know God and have life in Jesus Christ.”⁶ When these confessions teach the singular importance of the Word for spiritual formation, they always combine the Word with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who speaks to us through the Bible.⁷ The Spirit is the power of God through which the Bible comes alive in hearts and lives.

It is important to understand the content of the Bible. The last chapter noted that the three dominant spiritual patterns in the Dutch Reformed churches each saw the Bible

⁵ *Ecumenical*, 79.

⁶ *Our World*, paragraph 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, paragraph 34; *Ecumenical*, 19.

differently. None of these patterns was wrong, but neither did any of them exhaust the full dynamics of the Bible as expressed in the confessions. When the Contemporary Testimony says that “the Bible tells God’s mighty acts in the unfolding of covenant history,”⁸ it teaches that the relationship between God and man stands at the heart of the Bible and the restoration of that relationship is the dominant theme of its story.⁹ The story of God keeping covenant with his people and pursuing them in love until they are restored to him in righteousness, drives Scripture’s narrative (Hos 2:16-20).

Since Christians live under the new covenant in Jesus Christ, it is important that they understand the relationship between the old and the new. As part of God’s one covenant with humanity, the Old Testament tells of the early years of God’s relationship with his people. Those years pointed toward and made the way ready for Jesus. Ignoring them is like pretending that a twenty-metre tree has no roots. Living under the new covenant, Christians relate with God through the blood and Spirit of Jesus.¹⁰ In both testaments, the covenant rests on believers’ response to the Word. As Adam and Eve, Abraham, and Israel needed to put their faith in the Word of God in the Old Testament, so must Christians today rest solidly on that Word.

As Christians read the Bible, they discover that the story is not finished. The last chapter of God’s covenant with humanity still needs to be written. Even today, if Christians wander away, God will not abandon them, but will pursue them until the very

⁸ *Our World*, Paragraph 36.

⁹ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

end when, “Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they shall be his people and God himself will be with them; He will wipe away every tear from their eyes...” (Rev 21:3, 4). The end of the story will be the fulfillment of the covenant when Christians are a kingdom and priests to serve God and they will reign on the earth (Rev 5:10).

When Christians read and study the Bible, the Spirit is moulding them towards that future reality. The stories in the Bible reveal both positive and negative “models and patterns for living with God.”¹¹ The doctrinalists are correct in emphasizing that the Bible contains the true doctrine for life and faith; however the Bible was not written as a theological textbook. It contains stories, poetry, and visions, which cannot be reduced to doctrinal formulas. With the Kuyperians, Reformed people believe that the Bible teaches how life is to be lived in this world, but it is more than creational norms. With the Pietists, Reformed people recognize the sanctifying power of the Bible but refuse to limit redemption to the human soul because the covenant and kingdom pursue the salvation of the entire creation. Understanding doctrinal formulas and creational norms are helpful, but it is the Bible itself which the Spirit uses to shape believers.

Thus, Christians need to absorb themselves into the Word of God. It is not enough to dip their toes in; they must become immersed into the covenant story. They must encourage each other to swim confidently in the rivers of Scripture, plummeting ever deeper into its oceans of life, and floating contentedly in its streams of grace.

¹¹ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 13.

To help its members dig into the Bible, Community Church will offer a “Bible Challenge” in the weekly bulletin which will include four parts. First, it will include a list of Bible passages to be read each day of the coming week. Members will be encouraged to read the selected passages and spend time digging into the passages using the four steps in the acronym READ. The R stands for “read it” which simply means reading the passage. The E stands for “eat it”. This calls for people to spend some time reflecting on the passage. As they re-read it they ask questions about the passage and they wonder what God wants them to meditate on. How does this passage challenge their current thinking or lifestyle? Does it call them to change how they relate with people or with God? What do they not understand? What does it say about God or themselves? The A stands for “altar it.” Here, the people are encouraged to pray the passage back to God. How does this passage call them to respond to God? Does it elicit praise, confession, a request or thanksgiving? It might invite a prayer for greater understanding or for the Spirit to enable the believer to be more faithful. The D stands for “do it.” How does this passage call the Christian to live? In what contexts will this be the most difficult? The D calls the Christian to follow through with some practical action.

The second part of the “Bible Challenge” will require the church to set up a web forum where members can share stories about their READ experiences. This forum will include a daily blog by the pastor reflecting on his reading of the Scriptures. This blog is an important component because it will allow the pastor to show people how to read the Scriptures well. Those people who are not web savvy can write out their reflections, and

the church secretary will enter them onto the forum. Excerpts from this forum will accompany the list of passages in the weekly bulletin so that it is available to everyone.

Thirdly, the Bible Challenge will include recommendations for passages to be memorized. This will include a verse of the week and a passage of the month. The verse of the week will be only one or two verses that can be committed to memory quickly and be meditated on throughout the week. The passage of the month will be worth 10-20 verses and will be read by one of the young teens during the morning worship services, each Sunday of the month. Meditating on the law of God is one of the practices often referred to in the Old Testament. The psalmists take great delight in doing this. Christians can only do that if they have it in their hearts. Many believers have the idea that they are unable to memorize. If it is seriously tried, many will discover that it can be done. If believers desire to grow as covenant partners with God, then they will need to do the things that cause them to grow. A varied and disciplined use of Scripture is the first and primary practice that will move believers down that road.

The fourth part of the Bible Challenge will be follow-up to the Sunday sermons. This part would include other Scripture passages and questions that carry the themes forward and some practical suggestions on how to respond to the Word. This follow-up could be used by families during devotion time, by small groups, or even by friends having coffee after the service.

Another suggestion for improving the use of the Scripture is Scripture partners. Partners agree to meet together regularly and to read certain amounts of Scripture. A partnership could be formed with two to four people. At their meeting, the partners would

share together some impressions they had about the reading, share some stories about life, and pray together. The meetings could be as short as half an hour. Neil Cole has developed a system like this which he calls, “Life Transformation Groups.”¹² This idea could be expanded to partnerships between a new Christian and a seasoned Christian. In this relationship, the seasoned Christian would take on the role of mentor to the new believer. The particular program is not so important. What is important is that Christians immerse themselves in the Bible.

To help Community Church symbolize the vital significance which the Bible has in the life of the Christian person and the Christian church, a new large Bible will be purchased for the front of the sanctuary. One of the children will carry this Bible into the sanctuary to mark the beginning of the worship service. The child will then place the Bible on the table prepared for it and read a call to worship from that Bible.

In the CRC, the elders are responsible to provide proper preaching of the Word during the public worship service.¹³ It would be helpful if the elders began the practice of regular evaluation of the preaching, keeping in mind that this should not degenerate into “a roast the preacher” session. No one is perfect, not even a preacher. The CRC is careful about which guest preachers are permitted to preach in its churches and requires extensive training before it ordains someone into ministry. Regular evaluations will help maintain the high standards, help the preacher improve, and provide future themes and

¹² See Neil Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples through Life Transformation Groups* (St Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1999).

¹³ “Ordination of Elders and Deacons,” in *Psalter Hymnal*, 1004.

content for the preaching. Evaluation also helps the evaluators focus on what is taking place. The elders might occasionally enlist the help of church members in this work to encourage the members to pay attention to what is happening and why it is happening.

Over the past several years, Community Church has seen a rise in the number of small group Bible studies. This is a good thing, and the council should encourage this development. A full exploration is not part of this chapter, but it does open the way for an important dynamic of the Word. Dallas Willard and Richard Foster have both written about the value Christians can derive from the Word through various disciplines.¹⁴ Many are accustomed to simply reading the Bible. Others are accustomed to using a devotional guide which reflects on one or two verses at a time. These practices certainly have their place within the Christian life. However, it is beneficial to diversify the use of Scripture to include such practices as study and meditation. The doctrinal background has caused CRC people to be overly concerned with the right interpretation of Scripture. Again, correct doctrine is important, but there is more to Scripture than doctrine. More effort needs to be placed on learning the scriptural story. Study groups are particularly helpful for this. In these groups Christians can listen to each other wrestle with the meaning of Scripture, trusting that the Holy Spirit will direct and cause the Word to be rooted in their hearts.

¹⁴ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, and Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991).

Prayer

A second historic practice common in the CRC is the discipline of prayer, but it has not been given as high a value as Scripture. A significant reason for this is the lack of opportunity for learning how to pray. The idea persists that prayer is for the clergy while regular believers should stick to formula prayers. In some homes, prayers were not spoken; thus, the children had no model to follow. Further, the purpose and place of prayer within the covenant relationship has not been understood.

For many, prayer has been reduced to asking God for the things they want in their lives even though the covenant clearly shows prayer's deeper purposes. Prayer is part of the human dimension to fellowship with God. God approaches his people through the Word, the Holy Spirit, and his creation; God is approached through prayer, meditation, and worship, but prayer is the most important.¹⁵

In Genesis 18 there is a vivid picture of the intimacy which God desires to have with his people. When God, along with two angels, visits Abraham, Abraham prepares a meal which he himself serves to God. In commenting on this, De Graaf says that God did not visit Abraham just to give Abraham a blessing but also to “receive the love and faith of His servant...”¹⁶ Following the meal, God reveals to Abraham his plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness. As Abraham proceeds to intervene for the righteous people in those cities he is amazed at his own boldness, but God does not discourage him. This amazing, often misunderstood story reveals the covenant

¹⁵ Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 116.

¹⁶ De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, vol. 1, 116.

partnership and God's intentions for prayer. The Bible describes Seth walking with God, and Moses meeting with God as with a friend. Friendship with God as defined by Jesus in John 15 is the context out of which Christians pray.

For many Christians, this is a tall order. It is often taught that people are sinners and therefore unworthy of God's attention. Further, because they have often failed to be holy, many believers cannot imagine God is still interested in them, or that intimacy is possible. God's transcendence is easier to believe than his immediacy. However, the clear testimony of Scripture and the repeated attestation of God's people is that intimacy is possible. God is interested in having fellowship with us. In order to develop the faith that God desires, Christians need to understand the new covenant in Jesus Christ. It has been shown that the chief aspects of that covenant are the forgiveness of sins and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. These realities are the building blocks of the new covenant relationship believers have with God in Jesus Christ.

A rather common accusation against CRC preachers today is that they preach too much grace. It could be that they are preaching a poor gospel, but it is also true that many Christians have not understood grace. Many still believe, or at least act as if they believe, that they have to earn the right to be heard by God. A certain level of holiness needs to be achieved before God will listen. Often people still suggest, maybe in jest, that a preacher has easier access to God because of his or her position. The only way that anyone can approach God is through Jesus Christ. He is the great and final high priest who sits in the presence of God with human flesh and blood. His work is finished; therefore, his followers may enter into the presence of God.

If prayer is to have the high place it should have, Christians need to believe that they must come confidently into God's presence (Heb 4:13). God does want to enter into fellowship with his people, and in Jesus Christ he has provided the way. In themselves, Christians will never be adequate, but, in Jesus, all may always enter in. Fellowship with God must be the primary purpose for prayer, as Abraham Kuyper described it,

To be "near" is to be so close to God that your eye sees, your heart is aware of, and your ear hears him, and every cause of separation has been removed; near in one of two ways: either that you feel yourself, as it were, drawn up into heaven, or that God has come down from heaven to you, and seeks you out in your loneliness, in that which constitutes your particular cross, or in the joy that falls to your lot.¹⁷

In order to enter into this purpose for prayer, Christians must return to Jesus' teaching on prayer. When his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he taught them the Lord's Prayer. Many have hijacked the petition for "our daily bread" from that prayer, focusing almost solely on things they want. They have become materialists, without even attempting to disguise it. Thus, their personal wellbeing stands at the centre of their prayers, neglecting the other petitions. If this petition is lifted out of its context, the Christian community will lose its ability to have fellowship with God. It is called the Lord's Prayer because Jesus taught it, but also because it helps Christians focus their prayers on the things of God.

When his disciples desired to be schooled in the art of prayer, Jesus taught them to pray about the things of God. The first three petitions, "Our Father who is in heaven,

¹⁷ The Kuyper Foundation http://www.kuyper.org/main/publish/books_essays/article_25.shtml?page=2 (accessed July 27, 2008).

hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done,” request the fulfillment of God’s purposes for humanity in the Garden of Eden. They are a request that the Christian become immersed in doing what God wants done. The context of Jesus’ teaching on prayer in Matthew 6 bears this out. He tells his followers not to worry about food and clothing because God has promised to take care of those things. If Christians seek his kingdom, he will provide (Matt 6:25-34). This is the fulfillment of the Old Testament covenant promises which Christians cannot expect to receive when they are not seeking the kingdom of God.

Covenant is fulfilled in the phrase “God will live with them” (Rev 21:3) which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The heart of Pauline theology is that believers are in Christ. Their prayers need to reflect a longing for that reality, moving away from a fixation on the material to a longing for a life fully in tune with the Holy Spirit. As noted in the last chapter, material success has been part of the legacy of the Dutch immigrants. Prayer is a crucial tool that allows us to go beyond mere materialism. It is a significant tool which God uses to help believers renew their inner life.

Thus, the two great dynamics of prayer are fellowship with God and kingdom concern. To become schooled in the art of prayer, Christians must begin with the request of Jesus disciples, “Lord, teach us how to pray” (Luke 11:1). If that request is made, it can be expected that God will answer it. One good place to begin learning is by praying the Bible. At least once a day, each Christian ought to use a biblical prayer as the guide to his or her own praying. Some of those prayers are the Lord’s Prayer, the prayers found in Paul’s letters to the churches; the prayers of Mary and Zechariah (Luke 1 and 2), the

prayers of Moses found in Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32, the prayer of David found in 1 Chronicles; and the whole book of Psalms.

When Christians use the Bible as a learning tool for prayer, they discover that there is much more to pray for. As Ben Patterson once wrote, “I came to pour out my heart to God and discovered there wasn’t much to pour out. The problem was that I wanted so little!”¹⁸ Real praying begins when Christians learn to desire the things God wants to give. Praying the Bible, especially the Psalms, back to God enables the Christian to pray in tune with Him. Such learning will enable the CRC to get beyond mere praying for “our daily bread” and “learn to want and feel what the Bible expresses.”¹⁹

If prayer is as vital as the Scripture in the Christian life, then it must also have a more important place in the life of the church. Here are several ways Community Church can increase the prominence of prayer in its fellowship. First, the pastor will designate at least one hour a week in which he invites the congregation to join him for prayer. This prayer time will have three main focuses: the spiritual wellbeing of Community Church, the Frankford community, and the world. This hour should be announced in the Sunday bulletin with an invitation to join him. Since the pastor already works enough evenings, this will need to take place during the daytime. Council will also look for someone who can lead such an hour during an evening session.

¹⁸ Ben Patterson, “Schooled by the Psalms” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/october/34.87.html> (accessed Oct 25, 2008).

¹⁹ Ibid.

Second, once a month there will be a prayer walk though the streets of Frankford. Teams of two to three people will go out to pray for the town while walking through the streets. John De Vries' book *Why Pray? 40 Days – From Words to Relationship* will be used as a teaching tool for this work. His sections on why and how to pray for neighbours are especially helpful for this.²⁰ A significant component to this prayer walking is learning to listen to the promptings of the Spirit as he instructs us how to pray.

Third, for many years Community Church has used a prayer chain to pray for emergencies. There have only been a few people who have participated in this ministry. There are several things that should be done to increase the use of this ministry. Using email instead of the phone would remove much of the hassle of the “chain” breaking. Further, this group of praying people should be invited to pray for issues relating to the church's ministry. A weekly prayer bulletin should be sent out either by email or the church mailboxes indicating the concerns. Those who pray must commit themselves to confidentiality regarding issues of a personal nature.

Fourth, one evening service a month will be a prayer service. The purpose of this service is to learn by doing. It will not be just a matter of sharing prayer requests and then praying. The worship planners will develop the services in various ways to enable the congregation to use different methods to pray. The services will be structured to encourage the content of the prayers to be expanded. For example, a service could follow

²⁰ John DeVries, *Why Pray? 40 Days – From Words to Relationship* (Grand Rapids: Mission India, 2005), 104-177.

the structure of the Lord's Prayer, the ACTS acronym, a psalm such as Psalm 145, or the mandate from Jesus to begin in Jerusalem, then Samaria, then the whole world.

These four things need to be understood as only the first steps. A conversation about the place of prayer at Community Church must also take place. There have been seasons in which prayer had a greater place within the church. The church must openly discuss why the importance of corporate prayer tends to fluctuate. Prayer seems to be the only public ministry that is willingly abandoned. This conversation must not be about accusations against other members, but a willingness to listen and learn from each other.

In conclusion, it is helpful to remember that the problem with repetitive actions is that they are done without thinking. When people learn to drive, they pay a great deal of attention to everything they do. After many years, they can drive without even thinking about it; it is as if the vehicle is on automatic pilot. This happens with praying as well. Many who grow up in the church learned to pray and talk and walk all at the same time. The goal of walking and talking is to do them without thinking about the mechanics. The goal of prayer is to have fellowship with God and enter deeper into his Kingdom. The mechanics of prayer must be sufficiently mastered to achieve the goal.

Communal Worship

The gathering of God's covenant people for public and communal worship services has been the cornerstone of the CRC experience for as long as most members can remember. It has been what defined their understanding of church. When children thought of church, they imagined worship services. During the immigration boom,

families without a vehicle were trucked to services on the back of large stake trucks. Many families brought food along so they could have lunch in between the services. Services were held at 10:00 am and 2:00 pm for the convenience of these people. The menu for these services was almost always the same. Changes to the liturgy were thought to be as dramatic as a level seven earthquake.

Today, the churches are awash with change: differences in liturgy and style abound, and second services have been eliminated. At Community Church, the second service is still held regularly, but there is a growing fear that this will not last. However, even to this day, the worship service and what happens during that time remain one of the most significant aspects of church life. If people are asked how they like their church, they will usually talk about the worship services, assuming that this is what the questioner wanted to hear about.

There are two long-standing perspectives on worship in the Reformed churches which come from the covenantal reading of the Scripture. The first is that the public worship service is the high point of fellowship between God and his people. Many of the Abraham stories ended with a sacrifice: the meeting place of the covenant partners. This has been the covenantal understanding of worship. It is the meeting place between the covenant partners: God and his people. Already in Exodus 24, in which the covenant is ratified with the shedding and sprinkling of blood, Israel saw that this was God's desire. After this, the leaders of Israel climb the mountain, they see God, and they eat and drink with him (Exod 24:21).

In the communal and public worship service, God is among his people, and the people worship God together. It is the place and time where God feeds his people with his Word and with the sacraments. The sacraments, in which God unites them with himself and seals all the promises of grace,²¹ are the greatest expression of unity. In response, the people offer to God their praise, thanksgivings, and prayers. Through faith, Christians receive nourishment from God as the Holy Spirit takes the Word, the water, and the bread and cup and nourishes the Christian with it. Reformed people believe that humans cannot make this covenant intimacy happen; it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Tempted with the desire for an experience, many are under the illusion that something dramatic needs to happen. There is an old story of a newspaper editor who declared that sermons were meaningless. Responding both negatively and positively, many of the readers told about how boring and forgettable sermons tended to be. Then an older gentleman wrote about his wife preparing three meals per day for him throughout their married life. He remembered only a few of the thousands, but he was sure that he would have died of starvation if she had not prepared them. So it is with worship. It is important. When Christians die, they may only remember a handful of worship times, but the rest of them helped keep them in fellowship with God.

Along with the Word, the sacraments are the means through which God speaks most directly to his people and administers his grace to them. In the sacraments, Christians experience one of the great mysteries of God, namely, that the transcendent

²¹ VanderZee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, 51.

God is imminent with his people.²² He is and remains Emmanuel, sitting at the table with his people. In fact, Reformed Christians believe that Jesus invites them to sit at his table to meet with him and receive his grace. These sacraments are signs that point Christians back to Jesus, calling forth from them the faith that every spiritual blessing comes to them from the Father, through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:3).

The second covenantal perspective on worship is captured in the phrase “Worship is all of life.” When God gave the Israelites his law, He commanded that the altar was to be kept burning day and night; it was never to go out (Lev 6:13). Acts states that the early church met together daily in the temple (Acts 2:46), but the fullest expression is found in Romans 12:1 where Paul tells believers to offer their bodies as living sacrifices as a spiritual act of worship.

To fully grasp this idea, it is helpful to look at a common refrain among the Old Testament prophets. Because of Israel’s idol worship, the prophets accused her of unfaithfulness in the sense that a husband or wife might be unfaithful to each other. God rejected Israel’s worship at the temple because her life outside the temple was unfaithful. Even today, most people have a sense that, if one is dating, it is necessary to be faithful to that one person. If that person goes out with someone else, it is considered a betrayal. Many of today’s television sitcoms would lose their story lines if this was not commonly believed.

²² VanderZee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, 21.

In the same way, God's people need to be faithful to him everyday, not just on Sundays. In commenting about Abraham's worship, De Graaf writes that "to believe is to worship the Lord in the greatness of his work and power and glory...belief always involves worship."²³ Every day needs to be a worship day. It is possible that the heart and depth of worship have been lost because Monday through Saturday are spent chasing after other gods. If Christians live their lives like this, then on Sunday they do not know how to have fellowship with God. To return to the marriage analogy, it is frequently said that sex starts in the kitchen. Two people who are not getting along during the day cannot really be intimate at night. Just as we can go through the motions of sex we can go through the motions of worship, but God is never impressed. He is not content with going through the motions; he wants our worship, our fellowship. Every day, every hour must be lived intentionally for God.

There are several things that could be done to promote these two perspectives on worship. First, to help develop the understanding of intimacy, the decision to celebrate the Lord's Supper once a month needs to be implemented. This decision was made several years ago but has not been put into practice. Reformed people believe that the sacraments are signs which keep pointing Christians towards their God and Saviour. Further, they are seals which strengthen faith and bring us God's grace. The sacraments bring Christians into the presence of God and remind them that that is where they must live.

²³ De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, 109.

To help develop the “worship is all of life” perspective, Community Church will promote the “Missional Lifestyle Rhythms”²⁴ and “Missional Cells”²⁵ developed by Karl House, pastor of Living Hope CRC in Peterborough, ON. The Missional Lifestyle Rhythms help Christians embody the life of Jesus in the way they live. These seven rhythms enable Christians to keep God and his covenant purposes for the world as the central focus of their lives. The Missional Cells are small groups of people who pray for particular communities and encourage each other to live the Christian life. These cells help Christians remember that how they do their work is as important as how they relate with their co-workers.

Further, Community Church needs to encourage its members to continue developing personal and family worship times. Family and personal devotions have a long history in the CRC but have often been very formulaic. The goal should not be “to get it done,” but to help the people involved stay connected with God. For example, people might want to recite a psalm of praise out loud. A person or family might also give something extra away or help a particular person or family, not so much for the sake of that person, but as an act of worship to God.

Finally, entering into fellowship with God is a tremendous reality. It ought to fill his people with thanksgiving. A thanksgiving space should be created in the facilities at Community Church. This would be a place where people could bring items that they give

²⁴ www.missionpeterborough.ca/mlr.asp (accessed October 8, 2008).

²⁵ [www.missionpeterborough.ca/resources/MPR_8\\$276~MISSIONAL%20CELL%20FACT%20SHEET.pdf](http://www.missionpeterborough.ca/resources/MPR_8$276~MISSIONAL%20CELL%20FACT%20SHEET.pdf) (accessed October 8, 2008).

to God to express their thanks and praise. These items could be some form of artistic expression; it could be a gift of money. It could also be a promise to do something for God, an expression of love to God or to a neighbour. It could be something that is brought to bless the community and encourage others to give thanks. These expressions should be anonymous; if they are not, their focus changes.

Sabbath Keeping

The Sunday as Sabbath has, for many years, been a definitive factor of CRC life. It was a day for worship, family, and rest. It stands out as a separate day in the minds of children now grown up. Sundays set them apart from “the world,” which meant anything that distracted from a thoughtful Christian life. The day of rest was not only part of a private lifestyle, but it made a public statement about how life ought to be lived. Life was larger than work, love, and play; it necessarily included the spiritual practice of worship. Sundays were a small yet potent reflection of the eternal Sabbath promised in the Bible.

It is not so today. One reason for the slippage is that the Sabbath emphasis was negative: “Do not work!” Sundays were for going to church, sitting around at home, and reading books. Some people were not even allowed to go for a walk, lest they be exposed to sinful ways. Many observed Sundays in a very legalistic way, and the positive elements were largely neglected. Another reason is that Sundays were in competition with the rest of the week, which was about work. Hutton’s research sums up the dominant thinking about work:

...the Dutch immigrant work ethic taught not only the virtue of labour but also the necessity of overcoming the difficulties standing in the way of economic

independence. Success was measured by material achievement: a farm, a home, a car, or even perhaps a business of one's own... [Adults] focused almost exclusively on getting ahead and [children] were among the instruments they used to do so.²⁶

She also writes about teenagers being sent to the factories to work. This had been considered low-class work in the Netherlands, which many had come to Canada to escape. Factories would also bring the teens into contact with unbelieving Canadians. However, a paycheque outweighed the moral danger.²⁷ In many homes, the teens were forced to hand over their paycheques to their parents. Their only escape from helping the family bank account was to get married. This emphasis on financial success fought against the need to rest. Sundays were often seen as an intrusion into economic success. Young adults who attend college and university are often driven to succeed, but have little time for Sabbath keeping. Sabbath keeping has been squeezed out by the need for economical security.

There are few families left who truly observe Sabbath on Sundays. The CRC would do well to revive its vision of Sunday rest. However, in doing so, she needs to ask a different set of questions. The primary question is not "What may I do and not do?" but "Whose kingdom do I live in?" For members of God's kingdom whose lives are shaped by the covenantal relationship with God, Sabbath rest is a wonderful vehicle by which to enter into that kingdom. The above comments about work suggest that building human kingdoms has gotten in the way of entering into God's eternal rest.

²⁶ Hutton, *Uprooted*, 166.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

Abraham Kuyper wrote this reflection on his own conversion: "...that absolute conviction in which alone my soul can find rest—the adoration and exaltation of a God who works all things, both to do and to will, according to His good pleasure."²⁸ God invites his people to rest because He is Creator (Exod 20:11) and because He is Redeemer (Deut 5:15). Survival, both physical and spiritual, is totally dependent on God. Christians need to seek first His Kingdom, and He will provide all physical and spiritual things for them (Matt 6:33). Bred into the Dutch immigrant culture was a deep fear of financial failure, even though Jesus said, "Do not worry" about that.

Despite being a valiant advocate of the Heidelberg Catechism (HC), the CRC has not understood its teaching on Sabbath keeping. The HC suggests that Christian Sabbath keeping is about living the eternal life which Jesus offers now. Sabbath keeping is not just for one day per week, but for every day. To renew and improve Sabbath keeping, the CRC can do no better than to dig deeper into the Catechism, her cherished preaching tool. This document provides the positive side of Sabbath keeping, namely worship, giving to the poor, and ceasing from evil.²⁹ In order to find this positive side to the Sabbath, Christians will need to learn to say no. Most of all, they will need to say no to their own desires for material things, such as vacations and children who are involved in endless extra curricular activities. If Christians can stem their desires, they will have time for Sabbath keeping, time to enjoy God, his people, and his creation.

²⁸ Praamsma, *Let Christ Be King*, 49.

²⁹ *Ecumenical*, 61.

Part of the revival of Sabbath keeping is the discipline of celebration. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that the Sabbath is a “festive day of rest,”³⁰ indicating that celebration is part of the Christian experience. Having emerged out of poverty, many people feel guilty when they enjoy the good things of God’s providential hand. There seems to be an ingrained stinginess among CRC people, which is sometimes abandoned for outright excess. Celebration is the discipline of enjoying life. According to Richard Foster, celebration is “at the heart of the way of Christ.”³¹ Jesus was announced by the angels, “I bring you good news of great joy” (Luke 2:10), and before He left Jesus said, “I tell you these things that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). The apostle Paul declared, “The Kingdom of God is...righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17).

The CRC needs to celebrate not only her material blessings, but also her spiritual blessings. Since Christians already live in the Kingdom today, they ought to celebrate this life. Where sin is overcome, there ought to be celebration. Years ago, CRC worship services, especially Lord’s Supper services, had the aura of a funeral dirge. They were more about human sin than God’s grace. Thankfully, this is changing. When Christians celebrate, they ought to invite people who are “strangers to the Kingdom.” Many celebrations are family based. This is a good thing, but people could intentionally invite others to celebrate with them.

³⁰ *Ecumenical*, 61.

³¹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 191.

Conclusion

The value of the disciplines is like the rocks at the bottom of a riverbed that have been smoothed because the water has run over them. Christians are like those rocks, the disciplines are like the riverbed, and God's grace is the water. God directs his grace through the disciplines to make his people holy. The riverbed analogy is helpful because it reminds Christians that "becoming smooth" takes time. It cannot be rushed. Further, the control of grace is in God's hands, not in those of the Christian. The limitation of the analogy is that Christians are not rocks, but living beings. Like all living things, they can thrive or shrivel. Placing themselves in the stream of God's healing power, Christians can thrive. In the riverbed rocks are changed on the outside, but Christian spirituality is about changing on the inside: the transformation of the heart.

The disciplines of worship and Sabbath invite an examination of life's rhythm. They invite a reflection on balance. Is there adequate room for both work and rest? Is there adequate time for both receiving and giving? Is time given for being loved by God, or is life only about loving God through loving the neighbour? The next chapter will look at new disciplines coming into vogue in the CRC. Their purpose and use will be explained within the covenantal framework and are offered as practices which can help bring balance into the Christian's life to foster worship and Sabbath keeping. It will be shown how these practices can help root out some of the evils which have been identified earlier in this paper.

CHAPTER 5

EMERGING ELEMENTS OF CRC SPIRITUALITY

The previous chapter used covenant theology as a framework to explore and evaluate four historic practices of CRC spirituality. As part of the larger strategy to develop spiritual formation at Community Church, suggestions were made to deepen the faith of church members. This chapter will use a similar approach to encourage the use of spiritual disciplines which are still emerging. These practices can help members develop healthy lifestyle rhythms which foster both worship and Sabbath keeping.

Service

The first of these emerging disciplines is service. By serving, people enter into the mundane and the trivial to help release themselves from all forms of snobbery.¹ This happens in the church when a pastor takes out the garbage or an elder cleans the urinal. Service was central to the training Jesus gave His disciples (John 13:14, 15). Acts of service are the tangible means by which Christians illustrate their love for people, especially if those loving acts are things they would rather not do. Through service, Christians become great in God's Kingdom (Matt 20:25-28). Reflecting on this, Paul recognized that, through service, the church reaches both unity and maturity (Eph 4:12-13).

¹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 127.

Service can help root out the CRC's propensity for division, and serving those within the local church helps overcome internal divisions. In reaction to the doctrinalist pattern, various new forms of piety arose. In a 1979 address, Hank van Andel indicated that a new faith based on physical experiences² was replacing the covenantal relationship with God. Physical manifestations of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, created significant controversy because they were often portrayed as evidence of a deeper sanctification. The frequent result was competition in which people were "trying to out do each other on the road to sanctification and...scaring the hell"³ out of others. It appeared the Corinthian problem had crept into the CRC. Thirty years later, the same problems still exist. A simple gesture such as raising hands in worship, let alone speaking in tongues, is still considered by some as portraying a "holier than thou" attitude.

It seems that Paul's manifesto on the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is misunderstood. His fundamental conclusion is that sanctification is not evidenced by tongues or prophecies but by love. Those who engage in physical manifestations are often misunderstood by those who do not. Rather than seeking to understand each other, people who differ tend to judge one another. Of course, this quickness to judge is nothing new. The intention of integrating all Dutch immigrants into the CRC was a noble endeavour, but few made the effort to make it work. The prejudices felt by people in the Netherlands were brought along when they came to Canada. "The church, which preached love and

² Hofman, *The Canadian Story of the CRC*, 125.

³ This is a quotation from a CRC pastor made at the October 2005 pastors' network meeting at the Cobourg CRC.

forgiveness, apparently was unable or unwilling to address such longstanding grievances among its members.”⁴ Service can be an effective antidote to overcoming these differences and knocking down the walls that divide people.

Service can also help to unravel the inability to reconcile with others. People tend to believe that reconciliation is only possible if the other party admits they are wrong. This lacks both humility and love. Instead of pursuing reconciliation, people tend to avoid those they have conflict with. Many are unwilling to trust Jesus’ words that service stands at the heart of his Kingdom. Deliberately finding ways to serve those people helps open the way for reconciliation. The freedom and joy of the kingdom is not experienced because they will not love one another (John 8:31-37; 15:9-17). Here, the doctrinalist tendency troubles the CRC. People know the truth intellectually but do not realize that to really know it they must practice it. Jesus combined love, joy, and obedience (John 15:10-11) to teach his disciples that Kingdom joy can only be experienced by living according to the ways of the Kingdom. Further, when Christians deliberately serve a people they do not like, it often changes their own attitudes towards those people. Love grows in the Christian community as members serve one another.

The discipline of service also helps Christians root out the natural tendency toward selfishness. With the memory of the Depression and World War II still lingering in the CRC, there is a tendency towards miserliness. There remains a fear that one day the cupboards will be bare. Even though many members are saturated with riches, they are

⁴ Hutton, *Uprooted*, 133.

still focused on survival. The second and third generations are reaping the benefits of their parents' hard work and are living life to the full. Richard Foster wrote, "Giving with a glad and generous heart has a way of routing out the tough old miser within us....Just the very act of letting go of money or some other treasure does something within us. That something is it destroys the demon greed."⁵ The act of serving others reminds believers that life cannot be lived selfishly within the Kingdom of God.

Community Church has a healthy history of serving those in need, including regular service trips to impoverished areas. This is not an official ministry of the church but usually takes place through the initiative of one or more members. A team is gathered to serve for a set amount of time in a certain location. There seems to be no need to change this, but there are several issues that are worth reflecting on.

The motivation for participating in these service projects needs to be rooted in the Christian's covenantal friendship with God. The great triune Creator has befriended his people; he is the Christian's friend.⁶ This friendship can only be established through Christ's saving work on the cross, but Christians are more than just saved, they are friends of God. They commit themselves to works of service because it is the business of the King. Service offered in the name of God is God's manner of bringing his blessing to the nations. It is a fulfillment of God's promise in Genesis 12:3, to bless the nations through Abraham. Christians who go on service trips go as the friends of the God of the universe, and they desire the whole earth to be filled with the glory of God.

⁵ Richard J. Foster, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life: Christian Reflections on Money, Sex and Power* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), 35.

⁶ Hendriksen, *Covenant of Grace*, 44.

Through these acts of service, believers fulfill the foundation of God's law, namely, love. As the apostle Paul says, love is the fulfillment of the law of Christ (Rom 13:8). Through love, Christians share each others' burdens (Gal 6:2). These acts of love, which rise out of friendship with the covenant God, keep Christians from serving others out of sympathy. Sympathy is a dangerous motivation for service because it quickly gives rise to superiority, which suggests that the servers are more important than the receivers. Sometimes Christians also develop the idea that they, because of their covenant membership, are superior to others. This is deadly to Christian spirituality. Each person in the universe has unique value because he or she is created in the image of God. The motivation for service should never be out of sympathy or superiority. Rather, it should be that "being part of the family of God" (Eph 3:11), each person deserves to be loved. As God has befriended Christians, they go and befriend others.

There is a second issue that should be addressed. As things now stand, only those who have sufficient personal resources are able to participate in service trips. The most visible trips are made to the Dominican Republic and Africa. It should be made possible for those who do not have the financial resources to participate. The spiritual benefits for the participants ought to be available to all. As argued in the beginning of this section, service can go a long way in overcoming differences, including economic differences. People of different economic circumstances can learn a great deal from each other. Every member of Community Church needs to be able to participate in these service trips.

It is clear that a great deal of unity and maturity can be reached through acts of service. When members of the church seek to help rather than destroy each other, the

Kingdom of God is clearly advanced. Further, when Christians serve each other, hatred, which may have entered a heart because of disagreement, can be rooted out. A rhythm of life that refuses to allow discord to take root allows Christians to worship their God (Matt 6:23-24) and enter into the eternal Sabbath.

Community Church needs to increase its service to the local community. Offering itself to the larger Frankford community is one very important way to break down some of the barriers which have already been mentioned. This service to the community can be done through particular projects the church takes on. It should also include getting involved in established service clubs within the community. Serving alongside other people is also a practical way of breaking down barriers. The material produced through the COS, mentioned in chapter 1, needs to be dusted off. There are enough suggestions in that report to enable Community Church to increase its service to its community.

Sacrifice

Among the disciplines discussed in this chapter, the discipline of sacrifice may be the most surprising and unknown. Though foreign to many, sacrifice is a discipline that stands at the heart of the Christian faith. If there is one thing that distinguishes the Kingdom of God from the kingdoms of this world, it is the work of sacrifice. Without sacrifice, the Kingdom of God would not exist. At its very heart stands the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross; this reveals the Kingdom's true nature.⁷ This is the opening act of the new covenant which neither the Jews nor Jesus' disciples could understand while

⁷ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 224.

he walked among them. When his disciples had been filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to embrace His sacrifice. Some of the Apostle Paul's most stunning words express his desire to share in the suffering of Jesus Christ (Phil 3:10).

Christians cannot duplicate the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, but understanding his suffering can help Christians embrace their own sacrifices. Jesus suffered most at the hands of sinners. These were not ignorant sinners, but proud sinners who thought they knew so much about God, when actually they knew nothing about him at all. The ones who were most worthy of God's punishment were the very ones through whom redemption was accomplished. Because of them Jesus suffered and for them Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Christians need to pray that God will enable them to endure similar suffering. Believers in Jesus are to become like him, even to the point of suffering for those who do not deserve help.

There are two aspects to sacrifice that need to be practiced. Christians must learn to practice sacrifice intentionally. This means that they choose to give up a certain comfort for a period of time. Such sacrifice causes personal hardship for the Christian and must benefit someone else. Jesus' act of sacrifice was clearly intended to benefit many. So it is not suffering for the sake of suffering, but suffering for the sake of others. Such sacrificial choices help believers identify with Christ's sufferings. There must be no intended material or physical benefit for the sufferer, but rather the goal is to be drawn closer to Christ.

When sacrifice is a choice Christians willingly make, it prepares them to receive the suffering that others inflict. If a way of life is developed that includes sacrifice,

Christians will not be as easily offended when someone else forces pain or discomfort upon them. It is a natural tendency to get angry and protest when someone causes hardship. This type of suffering may be as simple as somebody butting in line at the grocery store or as painful as someone tarnishing a reputation so that a promotion evaporates. How Christians respond to such things says a tremendous amount about their spirituality. This suffering is sacrificing the desire for revenge.

The response to such incidents indicates just how far a believer has entered into covenant friendship with God. Clearly, one of the first things that God reveals in the covenant stories of the Bible is that he is God. Abraham's response to the kings he rescued in Genesis 14 indicates the faith of a true covenant partner. He desired to be totally dependent on God, not people, for his wellbeing. One's ability to sacrifice helps one rely on God in a similar way. When the right to vengeance, or just getting even, is given up, God is given his proper place within the covenant. As the apostle Paul reminds the Romans, "It is mine to avenge," says the Lord" (Rom 12:19). When Christians demand the right to have justice, they put themselves in the place of God. This does not mean that the justice system should always be avoided. Reformed Christians have always advocated a more nuanced approach, which cannot be unfolded here.

Sacrifice is giving beyond prudence. It puts Christians in a place where they must depend on God. The early immigrants understood this to some degree. Those days were difficult and lean; many lived from hand to mouth because money and resources were scarce. Yet church buildings, schools, and other organizations were established. Sacrifice was part of daily life. Today, those days of sacrifice are all but forgotten. Hofman makes

this evaluation of the Canadian CRC: “Records indicate that the richer we became the more difficult it has become to meet budgets and to elicit a sacrificial attitude.”⁸

The discipline of sacrifice helps Christians depend on God rather than on material things. Such dependence creates the context for worship and helps root out the love of money, that “root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim 6:10). Further, it enables Christians to embrace all manner of persecution which comes their way. Embracing hardship for the sake of the gospel with the meekness of Christ is an act which compels others to find out more about Jesus Christ.

Fasting

The discipline of fasting tantalizes and fascinates CRC people. It is a form of sacrifice which needs separate attention. Its main purpose, like all other disciplines, is to draw believers closer to Jesus, to help them abide in him. It does this by reducing the need to satisfy fleshly appetites. Fasting redirects believers’ eyes away from their own desires towards Jesus. The dependence on material things is loosened as Christians find their needs satisfied by Jesus. By fasting, they discover that that they can live quite well without material things. As a result, the grip those things have on them is lessened. One might choose to fast from certain foods, or from all foods for a predetermined length of time. Fasting can also include giving up certain forms of entertainment, sports, or cosmetics. Whatever forms the fasting takes, its purpose is to loosen the control that a certain material item has on one’s life and to help one become more dependent on God.

⁸ Hofman, *The Canadian Story of the CRC*, 125.

For this reason, fasting is often combined with repentance and prayer. When a Christian recognizes a dependence on a material thing, fasting is often a means to end that dependence.

Fasting can have tremendous value within the Canadian CRC because material wealth has made its people prone to self-sufficiency, to pride, and to thinking they are entitled to what they have worked for. They need to consider fasting as an antidote to these sins. However, they must remember that the primary purpose is to draw near to God. Further, in Isaiah 58, the prophet severely chastises the people of Israel for fasting, but not changing their behaviour. The temptation is to think that God will be impressed with those who choose this rigorous discipline. God does not think more highly of people who fast, but is delighted if this discipline draws people closer to him.

The passage in Isaiah highlights a deep covenantal reason which leads believers to fast. God clearly wants his children to treat others the way he has treated them. He could not abide Israel's fasting because it made no difference in their lives. Their fasting on the Sabbath ended in fistfights and mistreatment of the disadvantaged. It should cause God's people to treat others with justice and righteousness, seeing them through the eyes of God. Fasting helps shift one's desires, changing one's focus from selfishness to justice. As the dependence on material things is loosened, Christians are freed to share their resources with those in need, engaging in real Sabbath keeping.

Submission

Submission is also a discipline rarely discussed at Community Church. In fact, it is probably most often thought about within the context of the marriage relationship. Many recognize that the classic passage on husband/wife relationships in Ephesians 5 begins with an admonition to all Christians to submit to each other (Eph 5:21), yet few think about submission as a Christian discipline. It is one that is of vital importance to Christian congregations and of particular value within the context of the Canadian CRC.

The discipline of submission proceeds in two directions. Christians submit to God and to each other. The apostle Paul teaches that mutual submission is “out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). This instruction teaches that submission to God leads naturally into deference to other Christians and that mutual submission honours God and blesses the church. When it comes to submission, many Christians are like Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5) who refused to dip himself seven times into the Jordan River because he could think of better ways to get healed. Like Naaman, Christians tell God that they can solve their own problems. Submission is the discipline that says, “OK, I will do it God’s way.” It is the surrendering of the human will to God. Living life God’s way means that Christians need to die to their own ways and desires. Even though they find themselves extremely resistant to this dying, Christians must learn to submit totally to God’s grace, even his sanctifying grace. Spykman’s plea concerning sanctification was to let God take control.⁹

⁹ Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 445.

Submitting to God begins with repentance, the door to the Kingdom of God.

Historically in the CRC, the Ten Commandments were read in every Sunday morning worship service. People knew the Law and knew they were sinners. It is more difficult to assess if people knew what to do with their sinfulness, if they knew how to repent. There is a tendency to gloss over sin because people do not really want to repent, or they do not really think they need to. There has been adherence to the letter of these laws, but not to the spirit of them as explained in the Heidelberg Catechism. When the Catechism calls Christians to examine their own hearts to consider the root causes of murder, adultery, and lying, it calls them to submit their hearts to God. James calls Christians to submit as an antidote to pride which causes wars and fighting (4:6-10). A significant amount of trouble in the CRC and in Community Church might have been avoided if people had committed themselves to the discipline of submission.

Submission is that discipline that admits having lived life wrong, and looking to Jesus to be taught a new way of life. A very difficult but healthy way to benefit from repentance is to have a spiritual friend who will listen to one's confession. This is not a recommendation to return to the confession box of a previous age, but to turn to someone who will help another be honest about sin and then speak the words of God's grace. The pronouncement of forgiveness is often spoken generically in the worship services, but it has a more profound affect on the sinner if it is spoken to specific confessions.

Many of the Dutch immigrants understood that submission to God also enables Christians to enter deeper into the tasks of the Kingdom. They firmly believed that they

were working on God's behalf and that He would take care of them.¹⁰ They were deeply rooted in an Old Testament Zion theology, which banked heavily on passages like Psalm 46. They ardently believed that they were right with God and, therefore, He would take care of them. Since they felt secure within the walls of Zion, they submitted to all adversity as part of the "good" which came from God's fatherly hand.¹¹ Unfortunately, this trust in God has not been passed on to their children and grandchildren.

Resistance work during World War II and the struggle to survive after immigration have encouraged in many Dutch immigrant souls an "I can do it myself" attitude. This has also led to the kind of materialism which says "we are doing quite well and don't really need more of God." Hutton wrote this illuminating comment: "We've worked far too hard, true, but it was partly because we wanted enough money so we would not have to feel ashamed. We wanted the pride of acquisition, of possession. We did not want other people to be helping us out; we wanted to help them."¹² This pride which has made many CRC people so successful can only be subdued by deliberate submission to God.

In the discipline of submission, Christians learn to submit to each other for the sake of God. As mentioned, mutual submission is for the sake of the unity of the body. According to John Stott, unity and holiness are the two great themes of Paul's letter to the

¹⁰ Harry Van Belle, "The Journey of the Reformed Dutch in Canada: 1st Generation: Reformed and Dutch but Not Canadian" *Calvinist Contact* (February 16, 1990): 13.

¹¹ Harry van Belle. "The Journey of the Reformed Dutch in Canada: 2nd Generation: Reformed but neither Dutch nor Canadian" *Calvinist Contact* (February 23, 1990): 13.

¹² Hutton *Uprooted*, 256.

Ephesians.¹³ Submitting to each other is of greater importance than insisting on one's own way. Mutual submission helps build the unity of the church. When congregations make decisions that not everyone agrees with, the natural tendency of the descenters is to withdraw from the fellowship. Some do it literally by going to another church while others do it emotionally. When Christians engage in the discipline of submission, they submit to the will of the body. Even if they personally disagree with a decision, they will remain fully committed to the fellowship.

In light of the different forms of spirituality within the CRC, a renewal of the discipline of submission can help lead to a deeper unity and appreciation for others. In 1979, Hank van Andel called the CRC members to mutual submission. He acknowledged the various opinions in the CRC and “encouraged the church not to work towards erasing these differences but to embrace them and to learn from each other. We ought to love each other in Christ, not condemn each other.”¹⁴ Sadly, his words seem to have been blown away like dust in the wind. Unity does not come easily. It must be deliberately developed, but there is hope. Rev. William Tuininga later wrote:

Things may get worse before they get better. I sense the Spirit of God shaking us up (God disciplines those whom He loves). We still have to deal with a good chunk of pride and greed (We are proud of our heritage and “zealous” to make good money). Yet a deeper unity is beginning to surface both within and among churches (denominations), a unity of the Spirit.¹⁵

¹³ John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 147.

¹⁴ Hutton, *Uprooted*, 126

¹⁵ Hofman, *The Canadian Story of the CRC*, 199.

The discipline of submission is vital to this deeper unity, which the Spirit of God is orchestrating. Community Church continues to struggle with the forces of individualism and unity. By the grace of God, unity appears to be edging out individualism. However, complacency must be avoided because division is still the church's natural tendency.

Individualism and a need for power which run deep in the CRC both call for a commitment to submission. The individualism is seen most clearly in the abundance of leaders and self-employed business people who crave independence from others.¹⁶ The power issue is most often displayed in the family. The biblical teaching of "male headship" has been used as permission for the father to act like a boss. To end a debate, the father will say, "Because I say so." There are times when this may be appropriate, and children do need to learn respect; but this card has been overplayed. Ganzevoort puts it very bluntly, "Wives were expected to be submissive and bow to the will of their husbands."¹⁷ In a letter to Hutton, he described the impact this had when the family experienced controversy:

Often the mother is powerless or else she takes the father's side and no one can ultimately trust her. Her ultimate loyalty is to him because he has control of all the goodies. The result is an alienated family that doesn't realize that they have been the victims of manipulation, one against the other. They only know that they have just cause to dislike each other.¹⁸

¹⁶ Hutton, *Uprooted*, 270.

¹⁷ Herman Ganzevoort, *A Bittersweet Land* (Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 1988), 109.

¹⁸ Hutton, *Uprooted*, 177.

There is also a plethora of stories detailing the struggle family businesses are having in transitioning to the second generation. The pride of the father is replicated in the pride of the son, and the result is a void of trust within the family unit.

These family dynamics were further complicated by the attitude “children should be seen but not heard.” Hutton included these comments about how children were raised, “Love was not demonstrated. What we thought, was not important, neither was how we felt about something. Who we were was only acceptable as long as we were what our elders expected us to be.... Our contributions... [were] not welcome.”¹⁹ Since this is not a parenting paper, no comments regarding how to parent are offered except this observation: these attitudes create adults who habitually force others to obey them. This may look like submission, but it is really oppression. The kind of submission that the Bible describes is a submission that is freely chosen, not forced. Biblical submission needs to be learned in all spheres of our lives.

This discipline is also tied to worship and Sabbath keeping. Worship leads to submission since all submission is “out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). When Christians actively engage in worshipping God, they become more willing to submit. Sabbath keeping, on the other hand, is the result of submission. Submission means that Christian let God care for them, which gives them time for Sabbath.

¹⁹ Hutton, *Uprooted*, 185.

Study

The discipline of studying the Bible has a rich history in the Canadian CRC but appears to be slipping away. Many can remember when various groups met to study the Scriptures and church doctrine. Most often, one of the group members would prepare an essay, which was read at the beginning of the meeting and then discussed. Even though these discussions often focussed solely on the correct interpretation of church doctrine, they did help members come to a basic understanding of doctrine and gain significant Bible knowledge.

It is not likely that the CRC will return to such a practice. However, the study of the Scripture needs new emphasis. In the last chapter, the use of Scripture was dealt with extensively. What needs to be added here is that concentrated study of Scripture is a vital component of Christian discipline. Among Paul's list of spiritual armour in Ephesians 6, the only offensive weapon is the "sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph 6:17). Christians will only be able to wield this weapon if they have taken time to be trained in it. Further, many people are afraid to speak about their Christian faith among unbelievers. The common explanation of this fear is "I don't know enough." Part of the answer to this problem is study. This should include both personal and communal study.

Community Church has seen a rise in Bible studies over the past several years. There has been an increased yearning for this form of community. The council has spoken about the value such groups can have, not just for Bible study, but also to meet some pastoral care issues. The council needs to pursue this farther and make room in the church structure for such groups to have a vital place. It may be time for the council to

prioritize the church's ministries to determine if some need to be ended in order for more important ones to flourish. Another manner in which council can help make room in people's lives for Bible study is to ensure that people limit their involvement in church ministries. Some people are still involved in too many ministries. They should be commended for their willingness to give, but need to be encouraged to receive as well.

Frugality

Frugality is often termed the discipline of simplicity. This is akin to the call of Jesus "to seek first his kingdom" (Matt 6:33). In this sense, frugality is a determination to simplify life so that people become more and more single-hearted, having one priority. Through the discipline of frugality, the Holy Spirit cuts the excess out of the believer's life if that believer intends to spend his or her life on the most important matter, the Kingdom of God. It helps identify those areas in life that are out of balance, that are too important and, therefore, holding the Christian in bondage. This discipline needs to be practiced when a Christian realizes he has become a slave to material things. Thus, it brings freedom to indulge in the kingdom life. Like so many disciplines, it is difficult because it requires believers to deny themselves. It causes a shift in focus from oneself to others. As frugality trims away excess, it becomes a way of living that undergirds all other spiritual disciplines by providing the seedbed of a single heart that is content, with or without. Through frugality, Christians learn to be "content in all circumstances" (Phil 3:11).

In 1979, Hank van Andel hinted at the need for this discipline in the CRC when he raised concern about “a growing materialism.”²⁰ CRC people have tasted the “good life” through increasing monetary success, the accessibility of culture through television and the Internet, and involvement in cultural activities. They have discovered that it tastes good. The discipline of frugality is an antidote to this materialism as people choose not to satisfy every desire. Appetites in the CRC have grown accustomed to being satisfied, and many are finding that it takes more and more to satisfy those appetites.

As mentioned in the last chapter, the discipline of Sabbath keeping involves celebration. It is important for Christians to celebrate as a form of thanksgiving to God and in anticipation of the world to come. However, that world has not yet arrived. Frugality is the discipline that keeps them anchored in this world in which many people have little reason to celebrate. Celebration and frugality are corollaries. They both need to have their proper place in the Christian life. A life without celebration lacks the joy inherent in the Kingdom of God while a life of only celebration causes addictions to the material things of this world. Thus, in the discipline of frugality, the Christian abstains from using money or goods at her disposal in ways that merely gratify the hunger for status, glamour, or luxury.

Frugality can be practiced in a variety of ways. Homes and vehicles can be purchased that are well below what can be afforded. Less expensive vacations can be taken which leave resources to help the poor. Commitments of time that have no

²⁰ Hofman, *The Canadian Story of the CRC*, 125.

kingdom value can be trimmed from calendars. Whichever way it is practiced, frugality's purpose is to trim away all activities and possessions that do not help the believer deepen fellowship with God. It results in singleness of heart so that deliberate and purposeful choices can be made to advance the Kingdom. However, since most CRC people live in the context of their families, frugality must often be a family commitment. This is an excellent opportunity for parents to instil the values of God's Kingdom in their children's lives. While encouraging their families to practice this discipline, parents must keep in mind Paul's instruction that they not exasperate their children (Eph 6:4). This is one of the great ways to teach children that Kingdom life naturally includes concern for other people and that satisfaction of every desire does not make a healthy life. This discipline allows people to determine if a desire should be filled or denied.

One of the distinct benefits of a life of frugality is that it creates more freedom, not just freedom from things, but freedom of time. Many people spend such inordinate amounts of time on themselves that there is no time left to help others. This is, of course, a symptom of the Canadian culture; unfortunately, it has been embraced by the church, and Christianity has been added to the list of things that need to be done.

Frugality also helps avoid one of the pitfalls of Israel. God warned Israel that, when she entered the land of promise and life was good, she should not forget God. She did forget God and became spiritually complacent. Material wealth always has a tendency to lull people into spiritual complacency. Frugality helps Christians return to their first love. It places God first.

Fellowship

Several things concerning fellowship have already been mentioned. However, with the history of disunity and schism in the CRC, there is plenty of room for the greater development of fellowship. Fellowship is often understood in terms of coffee time after the worship service on Sunday morning. Indeed, this is a very good beginning, but those who have gone on service trips know that there is a deeper fellowship which serving together can create. This is a further step towards biblical fellowship.

The Bible, however, calls for a fellowship that is even greater. In Galatians 6, Christians are instructed to restore the member of the fellowship who is caught in sin and to carry each other's burdens. This leads to a deeper fellowship than that which is normally experienced in Christian churches, a fellowship in which believers carry each other as sinners, praying for the grace of God to strengthen each other against temptation. This is not a fellowship that can be forced upon the church. This is the fellowship that is a gift from God; however, the church leadership can help create the environment in which this fellowship can take place. People need to tell the stories of the blessing this kind of fellowship brings to God's community.

Over half a century ago Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenged the church to plum the full potential which fellowship can offer the church. He wrote,

He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, not withstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final breakthrough to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as

believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners.²¹

He captures the essence of Christian fellowship, which every church ought to aspire to. It is a challenge which reminds the church that sin causes loneliness and the only way to have true communion is to remove everything that breeds loneliness.

This is the kind of fellowship in which the sinner can expose his sin to the light of God's grace, brought through the ministry of other Christians. Sin wants to hide in the dark because there it is safe to do its harm, but it must be exposed to the light. This kind of fellowship is rooted in two great realities: people who desire the things of God enough to willingly expose their own darkness and a Christian community in which sinners know they are safe to expose their sin. In the CRC, the memory lingers of people being forced to confess sexual sin before the entire congregation. This kind of practice is very unlikely to produce the Christian fellowship being described here. Such fellowship will only be developed in smaller settings where relationships have produced the trust necessary for exposure.

Conclusion to the Disciplines

These brief comments about several of the spiritual disciplines were not intended to be a "how to" manual on the disciplines. The purpose was to give some explanations of how practicing the disciplines might deepen Christian spirituality and how this might address some of the concerns mentioned in earlier chapters of this paper. It must be

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1954), 110.

remembered that the disciplines are exercises through which Christians deliberately pursue the grace of God. As they are drawn closer to God through these disciplines, sinful patterns in their lives will be loosed.

These last two chapters may have convinced some people to stay as far away as possible from many of the disciplines. They are hard and dangerous work. Both repentance and giving up material things and practices are painful. Many Christians are afraid to begin this difficult journey. Elizabeth Sherrill received some help overcoming this fear when she read the phrase, “like all living tissue, bone is constantly being broken down and reformed,” in a report on osteoporosis.²² The Christian life is similar. For growth to occur, there must be brokenness: acknowledging sinfulness, confession, and repentance. Christians often grow tired of these things and of retracing the same spiritual steps over and over again. Hope must not be abandoned because faith means believing what is not yet seen. As Christians abide in Christ, the old life will be torn away. “The confession of sin, the admission of guilt, will go hand in hand with renewal.... There can be no growth without pruning, no rebirth without death.”²³ This is always painful, but the reward is worth the pain. The reward will be a closer walk with God. It will be a life lived within the Kingdom of God.

²² Elizabeth Sherrill, “Journey into Rest,” *Christianity Today* 35, no. 7, http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/article_print.html?id=19797 (accessed November 25, 2008).

²³ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 6

THE CONTEXTS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The previous chapters examined various spiritual disciplines that help Christians abide in Christ and are, therefore, useful for Christian spiritual formation. Another important feature to examine concerning spiritual formation is the contexts in which this formation takes place. This chapter will examine three of those contexts: family, church, and the workplace. Home and church will be examined as places where believers gain knowledge and skill and the workplace as the testing ground. Schools also have significant influence on spiritual formation, but that context is outside the scope of this paper. The workplace is where Christians put their spirituality into practice. As they live out the Christian life, they discover what areas of their lives are not yet aligned with the Kingdom of Jesus.

The Family as the Primary Formation Unit

Regardless of the condition of one's family of origins, each person's spiritual formation begins in the context of his or her birth. A person's biological and/or adoptive parents and the places where a person is raised contribute significantly to the person's faith or lack of faith in God. Reformed people believe in a holistic view of humanity. The Bible speaks about the human heart, mind, soul, and body, but does not divide them. These different facets of the human being belong together so that what happens to a

person is experienced by each part. Thus, the kind of family into which one is born impacts one's spiritual formation.

Historically, the CRC counted its membership by families. In the 1990s, this counting was changed in favour of counting by individuals. This caused some anxiety because it was perceived as rejecting the denomination's covenantal understanding of family in favour of the individualism of North American culture. The rationale behind this change, however, was the reality that church life had changed so that counting by families left many people uncounted or miscounted. In many homes, only one or a few are members of the church. There were single parents, widows, and widowers. In the early years of the CRC in Canada, life was quite simple; everyone came to church, but, as the years went on, family life became messy.

This messiness needs to be taken into account when considering spiritual formation. Christian Reformed congregations are littered with single parents, divorced people, blended families, and homes in which only one or a few believe in Jesus. This is also the reality in Community Church. In this sense, life is no longer as simple as it used to be. This messiness and complexity does not negate the truth that the family will play the most significant role in spiritual formation. It is common knowledge that, whether for good or bad, parents have significant influence on their children. The desire of adopted children to find their birth parents is indicative of this reality.

The Bible clearly gives parents the primary role of instructing their children in the ways of God. Moses instructs the Jewish parents to impress the laws of God upon their children (Deut 6:7). Paul echoes these words when he instructs parents to bring up their

children “in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). Regardless of the impression that some Christian authors give, the Bible is not a parenting manual. In fact, the specific instructions for parenting are quite limited. Further, many of the stories in the Bible that refer to family life reveal parents who have failed miserably at the parenting task. Neither Abraham, Samuel, nor David, three great Old Testament believers, was very successful as a parent. The New Testament is almost silent on the topic. This ought to caution any Christian from claiming to have developed the definitive biblical model for parenting. There are, of course, many excellent resources available on parenting from a Christian perspective, but the reality remains that each parent will live that out according to his or her own personality and experience.

There are several things about parenting, however, that emerge out of this examination of the covenant. Fundamentally, it addresses the goal of parenting. One of the common mistakes that parents make is to focus on the outside, to focus on their children’s behaviour. This behaviour is important, but behind the behaviour is the heart. If the goal of the covenant is to form a people who walk in loving partnership with God, then this must influence the goal of parenting. It is not enough for Christian parents to be concerned about the behaviour of their children; they must have a greater concern for their children’s hearts. The goal of training children is to bring them to maturity in Christ.¹ This maturity means that one is able to assume responsibilities and make

¹ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 55.

contributions to society in personal response to Christ. Parents must desire to see the fruit of the Spirit developing in their children's lives.

Many Christian parents are also concerned that their children make a commitment to Jesus Christ. When such a commitment has been made, parents can abandon the role of nurturing their children's faith. A commitment made to Jesus is not the end of the matter; it is not the ultimate question. The larger issue is the desire to glorify God.² Many parents are tempted to be concerned only with salvation, or, to put it theologically, with justification. However, covenant theology urges Christian parents to pursue matters regarding sanctification or spiritual formation when considering their role as parents.

The words of Moses (Deut 6:7) and Paul (Eph 6:4) offer significant insight into the work of parenting. There is certainly a place for formal instruction in the faith in the home, but equally significant is the informal instruction which takes place. Moses suggests that the instruction takes place in the ordinariness of life. In the course of living, parents will find ample opportunity to train up their children in the ways of God. Parents need to make the most of those opportunities. The covenant way of life cannot be taught in a few lessons. It is a quality of life which must be lived by the parents. "Covenant living consists in living, loving, playing, working before the face of God, by the blood and Spirit of Christ."³

In order to make the most of these opportunities, Christian parents do well to reflect on God's covenant relationship with his people. One of God's favourite self-

² Bolt, *Christian and Reformed Today*, 31.

³ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 53.

descriptions is “father,” augmenting that image with maternal ones. Understanding this parental imagery of God will enable Christian parents to develop parenting styles which reflect God’s own relationship with his people. Jack and Judith Balswick proposed four sequential stages in a family relationship.⁴ These four are worth pursuing since they reflect the covenant relationship which God has developed with his people. The Balswicks developed them further than needs to be done in this paper. Here, the concern is the insights these stages give to the role parents have in guiding their children on the road of spiritual formation.

The nature of the covenant which God makes is the first quality of the parental role in spiritual formation. The unconditionality of the covenant is one aspect of its nature which is important in the family relationship. As the initiator of the covenant, God takes primary responsibility in seeing its purposes accomplished. There is nothing that is able to derail his covenant intentions. Thus, Christian parents create an unconditional environment for their children; nothing the children do can end the relationship. As with God’s covenant, the foundation of the Christian home must be security. There is nothing that can break the love which the parents have for their children. Just as God never closed the door on his people, so Christian parents never close the door on their children.

In examining God’s covenant, it was shown that, while the covenant was unconditional, the promises of the covenant were conditional. This is another aspect of

⁴ Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 21.

the covenant's nature, which is valuable for families. God expected his covenant people to live in obedience to him. He desired to bless them, but they could not receive the blessing if they lived in disobedience. Likewise, in the family situation, a Christian home can be tested by the rebellion of the children. The blessings which belong to a home can be thwarted when children refuse to live by the standards and expectations of their parents. Even though his people broke covenant many times, God refused to break covenant. Since he has committed himself to pursuing the covenant and its purposes until they are accomplished, Christian parents should not close the door to their children.

A second covenant aspect of the Christian home is grace. Grace is ultimately the divine act of forgiving human sin. Grace does not ignore sin as if it did not matter; it takes the curse of sin into God's own being. This grace is one of the key ingredients which enable the covenant to flourish. In a similar way, grace must abound in the Christian home. Contrary to a gracious home is a legalistic family. When laws are broken in such a home, the guilty party must pay the penalty, implying that love must be earned. Only those who obey the rules will receive love, and the better one is at keeping the rules, the more love one will receive.

This is not to say that there are never consequences for disobedience. Corrective discipline has always been part of God's relationship with his people. However, such discipline is not punishment in the sense of payment. Punishment is not a means for children to earn their way back into their parents' favour. Grace can be measured by the ability of the family members to forgive each other. Forgiveness plays a key role in

God's relationship with his children. He expects it to play a key role in the relationships of his people.

Empowerment is another key aspect of a covenantal home. It has been shown that, in covenanting with humanity, God had no intention of limiting humanity's potential, except that he would remain God. He created people with a tremendous amount of potential, and even sin could not erase that potential. Jesus reiterated God's dream for humanity when he called his disciples friends (John 15:15). They knew the father's business because Jesus had told them. After Jesus had left them, they were to go and do the father's business. They were to make decisions regarding that enterprise. Jesus went so far as giving them the "keys of the kingdom" (Matt 16:19).

Likewise the goal of Christian parenting is not to have children legalistically obey a prescribed set of rules. Rather, the goal is to empower the children to make discerning choices which reflect the values of God's Kingdom. Parents should have no desire to control their children, but rather to build in them a desire to pursue their full covenant potential. Children need to be guided and encouraged to develop a mature faith and relationship with God, which is not dependant on the faith of their parents. Parents should seek, not to control their children, but to help their children give control over to God.

Finally, intimacy is a fourth aspect of the covenant family. When Adam and Eve lived in the garden, they were naked and felt no shame (Gen 2:25). They were ashamed neither in the presence of each other, nor in the presence of God. After the fall, however, they were ashamed and tried to hide. Since then, people have tended to expose only what they feel is safe for exposure. As a result, there are many things people do not know

about each other. This is true within the marriage and family setting, as well.

Unconditional love, grace, and empowerment are intended to create an atmosphere in which people feel safe to expose their weaknesses.

This is a difficult, yet extremely important, task because the tendency to hide includes hiding from oneself. In the Christian family, parents seek to develop a home where the children are willing to face their own sinful tendencies. Only when people acknowledge their sin can they experience the fullness of grace. God's grace liberates his people, but, as long as they hide, they cannot experience that liberation. The Christian family is the place where children can be embraced in an intimacy which allows for both exposure and liberation.

As Christian parents seek to develop such a covenantal home for themselves and their children, they themselves must be intentionally pursuing their own sanctification. A great key to healthy Christian family life is parents who readily acknowledge they have not yet been fully transformed and are actively pursuing that transformation. As children experience their parents re-aligning their own hearts toward the Kingdom of God, they are encouraged to join them on the journey. When parents eagerly pursue the things of God, children are enticed to follow.

The historic practice of family devotions is not as strong as it used to be. It still seems to be practiced in many homes, but the historic understanding behind it seems to have dwindled. Its importance was reflected in the devotional, "The Family Altar," published by the Back to God Hour radio ministry. The title reflected the understanding that the family needed to gather together to meet with God. It was understood that the

family was the primary spiritual community and that parents were the front line disciplers of their children. This family devotion time was the prime opportunity to teach the children that they were covenant children. As covenant children, God was calling them to respond to him in faith, love, and obedience. Being covenant children does not mean, as some seem to believe, that they are automatically in favour with God.

Ways need to be found to recover this historic potential behind family devotions. It is regrettable that, in some homes, this practice has become an empty ritual, a legalistic practice that must be maintained to avoid God's wrath. The first means to revitalization is to cut away some of the extra-curricular activities. People are simply too busy. The follow-up to Sunday preaching is one way to revive this old practice. The elders can also regularly ask members in their district about this matter. The church library could have a shelf of family devotionals. Families which have finished a worthy devotional guide could donate it to the library for others to use. A parenting class, led by an older couple, could also be established. This class could be run every second year to encourage young parents and give them foundations for their work. This class should focus on the role of parents as disciplers.

The Church

Introduction

The second significant context in which Christian spiritual formation takes place is the church. This paper has worked from the assumption that the church is the covenant community. In order to develop the church's role in spiritual formation, it is necessary to

give a fuller definition of the church. Some people believe that the church is only for the saved. Even worse is the idea that the CRC is only for Dutch immigrants and their descendents. People who hold such views only want others who are like themselves to be in the church. The Bible presents a more complex understanding of the church.

The covenant community of Israel in the Old Testament consisted of a vast mix of people. When God introduced circumcision as a sign of the covenant, his instructions were that every male in the community, both born and bought, were to receive the sign of the covenant. It is obvious that this would include a vast array of people. Inclusion in the covenant was for everyone who was connected to the existing covenant community, and, therefore, anyone within that community who believed God would receive the covenant promises. One of Jesus' main points of contention with the religious leaders had to do with this issue. Through his parables, Jesus continually pointed out that being an Israelite was not enough to receive the covenant promises (cf. Matt 25:33-46). Their faith in God needed to produce the fruit, which God expected from his people (cf. Matt. 25:31-46).

Herein lies the challenge for the Canadian CRC, including Community Church. Like other churches, this congregation consists of many people who are working "hard to show the results of [their] salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear" (Phil 2:12 NLT) as well as people who are not. The challenge is that, within the church, all these people live together and, further, those who are not actively pursuing spiritual formation need to be challenged to do so. The church needs to see itself as the community of those called by God to deliberately enter into the process of Christian spiritual formation. However, the church will always consist of some people who have

not entered into that process. To help the church meet this challenge, the role of the pastor, the leadership, and the members with no special office will be developed from the covenantal framework.

The Disciple-making Pastor

Some years ago, Community Church drafted an excellent job description for its pastor. This was done to help both the congregation and the new pastor understand the expectations, which were part of this role. This document has served the church well and can continue to do so. However, this exploration of the covenant and spiritual formation suggests an addition. The job description states that the pastor's primary identity is that of a "herald of the gospel of Jesus Christ."⁵ It goes on to outline various tasks which flow from that identity but does not articulate the purpose of this proclamation.

This document should be revised to indicate that, in relation to people, the pastor needs to be a disciple-making pastor. Discipling is the intentional process of walking alongside other disciples "in order to encourage, equip and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ."⁶ The pastor's primary role among the people is to encourage them in the process of spiritual formation. In whatever venue the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ happens, its purpose is always to form people into fuller disciples of Jesus.

⁵ "Mandate for the Pastor," Community Church, Frankford, ON. October 2007. Available from church office (1-613-398-7681 or communitychurch@sympatico.ca).

⁶ Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 17.

The document also needs to clarify the people among whom the pastor works. There appears to be a distinction made between church members and non-church members. The minister is “pastor” to those inside the church and “evangelist” to those outside the church. However, it is very likely that there are people in the church who are not believers and people outside the church who are believers. The distinction between church members and non-church members should be removed. To use a biblical term, the pastor is “shepherd” to everyone. The church is the covenant community, comprised of people at many different places along the road of spiritual formation. Some of them have not yet entered into the process at all. Rather than placing people into categories, the pastor ought to be a shepherd to the community. Evangelism should be understood as the first step in the process of spiritual formation. Even then, evangelism can take many shapes and means.

Leaders Must Create the Context for Spiritual Formation

At Community Church, the main leadership body is called the council. It is comprised of the deacons, the elders, and the pastor. There are many other leaders who have important roles within the various ministries of the church, but this section is concerned with the council. The role of the leadership is obviously that of setting the vision and direction of the congregation. Even though this vision changes with time and circumstances, covenant theology suggests that the church is foundationally the community who are learning to walk with God.

This idea is not radical or new. However, reflecting on the history of the CRC, the church has usually been conceived as being static. For example, at one time the CRC called itself the “True Dutch Reformed Church.” This name did not last long, but it reflects that doctrine was of utmost importance at the time. Having the correct doctrine gave the church the right to call itself the “True Reformed” church. Again, doctrinal accuracy is extremely helpful in spiritual formation; however, it is not the only issue. As the leadership pursues the vision and direction of the church, it needs to keep at the foreground the reality that growing into Christ is the goal of this fellowship.

To help deal with this challenge, the council ought to develop a document which defines what it means to be a Christian, how Christians grow in the graces of the Holy Spirit, and what the expectations of church members are. This cannot be an exhaustive treatment of these issues; however, setting forth a framework will serve the purpose of integrating people into the church who are just beginning their walk with God, and it will give a place to those who have not even begun.

This document must articulate the basic covenant framework through which God has called people into relationship with himself. In this relationship, people walk with God and become his friends as they learn to conduct their lives according to the ways of his Kingdom. As a community, the church seeks to glorify God and fulfill his purposes for his creation. Through this community, God moves His Kingdom ever deeper into the world, breaking apart the kingdom of Satan. The leaders need to keep the church on this road, loosening its focus on itself, so that its focus can be on Jesus and his Kingdom.

The leadership must create the context in which spiritual formation can take place. To create this kind of context, the leaders themselves must be in the formation process. They themselves must intentionally be walking with God and seeking his Kingdom. Such leaders lead from the soul. In the past, leadership has been about keeping the structure in place, having the right knowledge, keeping the vision alive, and such things. In many ways, it has been inwardly focused, maintaining the organization. These are outside, surface matters. Such leadership is always in danger of the charge which Jesus laid against the Pharisees, “On the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness” (Matt 23:28).

Leadership concerned with spiritual formation begins on the inside. Such a leader first discerns his or her own soul and regularly allows God to infiltrate the heart with His Word and Spirit. According to Henri Nouwen, such leaders move from “relevance to prayer,” from “popularity to ministry,” and from “leading to being led.”⁷ Such leaders take their cue from Moses, the first leader of God’s covenant people, who is described as both a friend of God (Exod 33:11) and as the humblest man on earth (Num 12:3). As they walk with God, these leaders invite others to walk with them along the way. Paul’s letters to the churches are full of advice concerning spiritual formation, but only the pastoral letters are written to the leaders. The rest are written to the congregation and the leaders among them. The people are all called to help form each other.

⁷ These three moves are the three main sections in Henri Nouwen’s book, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroads, 1997).

The People Form Each Other

The New Testament writers seemed distinctly uninterested in church politics but extremely interested in building one another up into Christ. When writing about spiritual gifts, they greatly discourage exalting one gift above the other, except the gift of love, which is the greatest (1 Cor 13:13). All the gifts are given for the purpose of building up the body of Christ. The leaders must equip the people for works of service so that the whole body can grow together towards maturity in Christ (Eph 4:11-14). The clear implication is that the members of the church need to walk alongside each other in the process of spiritual formation. Paul complimented the Ephesians on their love for all the saints (Eph 1:15) and then prayed that God would give them “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation” so that they would know God better (Eph 1:17). This God-infused love is the context in which Christians give each other permission for mutual discipline.

In the church, as in many other contexts, love has been reduced to a warm welcome and a helping hand when it is needed. However, the Bible calls the covenant community to a richer and deeper love. This is a love which assists others with very specific acts of goodness. It is not a feeling but an action. It is rooted deep within the love of the triune God and understands that faith in him pushes believers towards acts of love. The Bible insists that this love includes walking with others through their roads of recovery from sin. It is a love which longs for the fullness of the Kingdom to be here on this earth.

The covenant community consists of people at different places along the spiritual formation spectrum. It is also comprised of people of all ages. The church, as the

covenant community, has a wonderful opportunity to help overcome some of the messiness of family life today. The church needs to provide opportunities for a struggling family to connect with another family or families who can walk along side them. The purpose of such a relationship is not to solve the problems, but to walk alongside stragglers in order to keep them in the race. This is especially important in families where one of the parents is absent. Further, the church can provide opportunities for intergenerational relationships, especially in situations in which extended families are either geographically distant or emotionally removed.

Christians need to recognize that other members of the church are not just “other members.” The terms *brothers* and *sisters* are frequently used in Scripture to designate members of the church. This familial image for church members suggests that they are responsible for each other. Historically, it has been the pastor’s job to do the spiritual care, but Moses longed for the day when all God’s people would receive the Spirit (Num 11:29). This desire was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, and the church is now the temple of the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:21-22). The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that the Spirit which anointed Jesus as prophet, priest, and king anoints us with the same anointing. Each Christian is now a prophet, priest, and king.⁸ In Christ, members of the church build each other up to “work out their salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 1:12). This work of participating in each other’s spiritual formation must not be reduced to a church program. It must be woven into the fabric of the church’s life. Programs can be tools, but,

⁸ *Ecumenical Creeds*, 25.

unless the people understand their role in each other's lives, no program will enable them take responsibility for each other.

Only in this way can the church fulfill its God-given calling to be the new community living the Kingdom and bringing the Kingdom into the world. It must always see itself as God's ambassador (2 Cor 5:17) under the direction and power of the Holy Spirit sent by Jesus to continue His work (John 20:21-23). In this way, the church lives out what she has long confessed to be, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.⁹ This is not a structural or institutional matter, nor is it strictly speaking, a theological matter; it is a practical, spiritual matter. It is the people of the community ingesting the reality of the Kingdom ever deeper into the fabric of their lives. It is the formation of this new community of Christ, living out the Kingdom in the world.

The Workplace as the Test Place for Authenticity

The final context for spiritual formation is the workplace. The workplace is to be understood as the environment in which people earn their income or spend significant volunteer time. It is true that not everyone has such a place, but it plays such an important role in most lives that it needs to be examined. The workplace should not be seen as a learning context but as a practicing and testing context. This is the place where Christians put into action how they have been formed. It is in this place that the Christian will meet many who are formed by a different faith and a different god. Thus, this is the context in which the values of the heart will undergo the most significant challenges.

⁹ *Ecumenical Creeds*, 7.

The workplace, more than any other, is the place where the Christian confronts the remaining rule of evil in this world. It is here that the Christian needs most of all to practice the values and attitudes of the Kingdom. This is where Christians discover what areas of their hearts remain unaligned with the Kingdom of Jesus; thus it is the place where repentance must be exercised. Here, believers in Jesus undergo the little conversions which align their hearts with their master.

The workplace must not be viewed as secular. The workplace is part of God's creation which is being tortured by the bonds of sin and is eagerly waiting for the day of full redemption (Rom 8:19-22). Christians enter into that workplace as covenant friends of God, trusting that, as they live their lives in faithful obedience to God, the Kingdom will be seen in that place. Fellow workers must not be seen as strangers, nor as projects to convert. Rather, they must be seen as children of God who are on their own journey of spiritual formation. They may be very misguided in their journey, but it should not be assumed that God has been absent from their lives. Jesus' followers must walk along side all of these and encourage them to enter into covenant fellowship with God.

Prayer is the first avenue with which believers enter into the workplace to accomplish these goals. Since prayer is the deepest form of partnership Christians have with God, it is the key for Kingdom living in the workplace. When Christians pray for the coming of God's Kingdom in their workplaces, they reflect God's desire to redeem the whole world. As they speak to God about their workplace, they can trust that God will show them how to act and what to say. His promise is that he will walk with them and, through them, bring forth his Kingdom. It is especially here that the rule of God's

Kingdom is visible on earth through the lives of his covenant partners. It is God's purpose that the blessings now enjoyed by the covenant community be shared with all people.¹⁰ God will enable his followers to live in such a way that this takes place.

It is also in the workplace where Christians need to be most in tune with their own hearts. They need to be on the lookout for "those evil desires" which still lurk in the dark corners. As a holy community, covenant people need to reflect their difference from the world. They are to live in the world, but their lifestyle reveals that they live by a different set of values and by a different power. As Christians walk in step with the Spirit, the world sees that God is powerful in transforming sinners into saints and accomplishing the purposes of his covenant, namely, populating his creation with covenant partners.

Implementation

As mentioned in chapter 4, the disciplines of Sabbath keeping and worship call for Christians to develop a rhythm of life, which develops fellowship with God. Before concluding this paper, a method needs to be developed for helping Community Church work out the spiritual formation developed in this paper. At the heart of the strategy will be a document called "Kingdom Rhythm." This document will explain the recurring elements of the kingdom life lived in covenant fellowship with God and encourage members to intentionally shape their lives around these elements. These rhythms are explained briefly here.

¹⁰ Kuyvenhoven, *Partnership*, 56.

The first is regular and varied use of the Bible. Without the Word of God, there can be no Christian spiritual formation. The tools for exposure to the Bible explored in this paper will be placed before the people as continual reminders of the first kingdom rhythm.

The second part of the rhythm is prayer. The document will explain that Christian prayers need to be diverse in method and content and should include both personal and communal prayer. Prayer needs to focus on the things of God and include intercession for other people, especially those not yet in covenant fellowship with God.

Sabbath keeping is the third element of the kingdom rhythm. This part of the rhythm includes Sunday worship, but is larger because it involves intentionally rooting out evil from the human heart. This part of the rhythm invites Christians to use the spiritual disciplines mentioned in chapter 5, as well as others, which are pertinent to particular vices that need to be removed from their lives.

A fourth part of the rhythm is service. This is the part of the rhythm where Christians deliberately give themselves for the benefit of others. This service needs to be given in three directions: towards the church, towards unchurched people, and towards the rest of God's creation. Here Christians exercise both God's mandate to humanity and Jesus' commission to the church, thereby extending the covenant promises of God to all creation.

Fellowship is the fifth element of the Kingdom rhythm. With this rhythm, members of the church intentionally develop relationships with other Christians for the purpose of helping one another live the Kingdom life, sounding out the notes of the

Kingdom rhythm. It is important to understand that these relationships are intentionally developed and take various forms. They can take the shape of a small group within the church, prayer partners, and/or missional cells.¹¹

This document will be distributed to the congregation and posted on the website, when it becomes available. Further, the preaching theme for the year 2009 will be “Kingdom Rhythms: Friends of Jesus.” These sermons will explore the things laid out in this paper for the people of Community Church. Such extensive coverage of this material will allow the church to fully engage with this material. After the year 2009, the sermons between Easter and Pentecost will return to this theme.

The Bible challenge in the weekly bulletin will be coupled with a column titled, “Kingdom Rhythms.” This column will give brief explanations of various Christian disciplines, explore significant covenant themes and tell stories of the benefits which have been experienced from practicing various disciplines. This column will be used to continually encourage members to engage in spiritual formations.

This document will also be used as a tool for family visitation by the elders. These visits will be used to encourage the members to develop this rhythm into their own lives. The elders will also be able to collect stories of things that are working well; with permission, these will be shared with the rest of the congregation. The council will also designate one half hour of its monthly meetings to reflect on these rhythms in the life of

¹¹ See page 102.

the church so as to determine how to best develop these things further. This will include the development of specific goals. Here is a list of potential goals for 2009:

1. 75% of the members will participate in a specific Bible reading program.
2. 10 members will commit to reading through the entire Bible in that year.
3. 50% of the members will be involved in a small group in which intercessory prayer is a significant component.
4. 75% of members will regularly pray for a specific unchurched co-worker, neighbour, or family member.
5. 25% of the members will become involved in a missional cell
6. Each ministry will engage in one work of service for the benefit of the church and one work of service for a person or group of persons outside the church.
7. A policy will be drafted that any service team going to Dominican Republic include at least one person who needs at least 70% of expenses covered by other people.

Each, year the leadership should set new achievable targets. This strategy is not meant to be given to a committee or to become a new program in the church. It is meant to be the underlying structure which encourages the growth of healthy Christians. Since God's covenant with humanity is fulfilled through abiding in Christ, this cannot be relegated to a small section of the church. It must be the church's foundation.

CONCLUSION

Entering into the process of spiritual formation through the matrix of covenant theology gives the Christian confidence in the journey. This confidence comes from the faith that God has invested himself fully into the Christian's life through the covenant in Christ. The Christian believes that, as surely as God made his promises to Abraham, God has promised the Christian to "be with him to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:20). The follower of Jesus also believes that the promises of the new covenant made through Jeremiah and Ezekiel are fulfilled in Christ. The fulfillment of these promises is realized through the work of the Holy Spirit within the believer. Covenant theology declares that God, through the work of his Spirit and Word, takes primary responsibility for the fulfillment of these promises in the life of the Christian. The constant presence of the Spirit gives the believer confidence that the work of spiritual formation is not in vain.

This confidence does not cause the believer to disengage from the process. Rather, it encourages the believer to fully participate in the process because she knows it will be successful. Believers engage in the spiritual disciplines, confident that, as they are immersed in the grace of God through these practices, the old ways of sin will be chipped away and replaced with the fruit of the Spirit. During those seasons when it appears the process has stalled or is losing ground, the Christian appeals to the promises of God for the assurance that the work will continue. Spiritual formation is a winding, often difficult pathway, without shortcuts, and it is unique for each traveller. It is a long process, but

success is guaranteed for all who believe and persevere. The Christian does not have hope in himself, but only in the powerful promises and work of God.

Covenant theology places spiritual formation at the centre of the Christian life. It understands that sin, which destabilized God's entire creation, inhibits humanity from fulfilling its God-given purpose. Sin keeps people from being God's stewards in his creation; it keeps them from pursuing his glory and leading the whole creation in a rousing chorus of praise to its creator. God did not abandon this plan for his creation when sin disrupted everything, but set out on the long and arduous journey of redemption. At the heart of his redemptive plan lives Jesus Christ, the God-man. As Christians abide in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, they are refashioned into the image of Jesus. This is the journey of spiritual formation.

Christians understand that at the core of life is God's work of reshaping them into his image bearers. God will not rest until this purpose is accomplished. There are important mental and physical components to the Christian life, but the priority is given to the heart. God intends to expel the sinful desires which reside within and replace them with a heart pulsating with love for God and humanity. Learning the truths of God and learning to live according to his ways are important features of the Christian life, but at its core is "knowing God" (Jer 31:34). Learning to be covenant partners with God is the fundamental dynamic of the Christian life.

From the perspective of covenant theology, spiritual formation is not relegated to the realm of the spiritual. It is a process that is deeply embedded in the physical world. Humans were created as physical beings with the capacity to have communion with God,

who is spirit. Sin ruptured the capacity humans had of communing with God. The process of spiritual formation restores this ability of the physical human to have communion with the spiritual God, but it does not lift the human out of the physical. Rather, it re-immerses her into the material creation, seeking to lead the physical world in giving praise to God again.

Jesus demonstrated God's interest in the renewal of His whole creation. He was as concerned about people's spiritual hunger as He was about their physical hunger. Jesus was as concerned about the storms that threatened His disciples as He was about the abuse of the religious leaders that threatened to send people to hell. Through his miracles of healing, calming the storms, casting out demons, and feeding the crowds, Jesus demonstrated God's intention to redeem the entire physical creation. In his resurrection, Jesus redeemed the first piece of the physical world, his own body. Paul declares that Jesus is the firstfruits of the new creation (1 Cor 15:20). The final vision in the Bible envisions the whole earth made new and God coming down from heaven to live with his people there (Rev 21). Samuel Volbeda ties together the spiritual and physical when he speaks about the renewal of God's people: "The waters of their spiritual life descend from the highlands of God's covenant grace. After passing through the reservoir of their soul, they inundate the wide fields of God's world in which they live, and make them wave with abounding harvest of glory to God...and happiness for themselves."¹

¹ Samuel Volbeda, "Studies in Practical Theology" (lectures presented to the Alumni of Westminster Theological Seminary in August 1939, page 45 of the hand-written manuscript in the Colonial Origins Collection of Calvin College and Seminary Library in Grand Rapids) quoted in Klooster, "The Kingdom of God in the History of the Christian Reformed Church," 221.

The process of spiritual formation restores humanity to its created place as steward of creation. Man's purpose was to fill the earth and to develop it to give glory to God. As humans come to know God, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, they are renewed in both their ability and their desire to see the creation full of God's glory again. Humanity again takes delight in the things God created because they are recognized as God's gift to humanity. The renewal of the human heart anticipates the day when the entire creation has been recreated.

Finally, covenant theology articulates the proper place of the church in the plan of God's redemption. The church is God's tool to bring his kingdom into the world. God's plan of redemption is not to form a church but to establish his kingdom. The heavenly host celebrate the redemption of "a kingdom and priests to serve" God (Rev 5:10), not of a church. The church remains God's humble instrument involved in a work which is far beyond its capability. Only because Jesus promised to be with his disciples to the very end (Matt 28:20) is it able to participate in this great work. In this promise lies all the potential of the kingdom. It is only through the power of Jesus that the church participates in kingdom work. Unless, the local congregation continues to draw strength from the vine, she will not bear any fruit (John 15:4). As the church keeps its eyes fixed on Jesus, the Spirit moves the people to join in the work of God as covenant partners.

The local church is not an end in itself, but rather a context in which people are encouraged to put their faith in God and align their lives according to his kingdom. The church is the community of the covenant, where the covenant life is developed for the sake of the kingdom. The church is God's agency instituted to train his covenant people

for kingdom service through the cultivation of their spiritual life. As the church fulfills its task, God's people are equipped to be covenant partners with him, establishing his kingdom rule in his creation.

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