

Sermon notes

1/24/10

Rich Lusk

The topic of unity is one we revisit with some regularity at TPC, and with good reason. The fragmentation of the church, and especially of the Reformed branch of the church, is a great scandal.

I think in general TPC does a good job practicing unity internally and externally, but there is always room to do better. I think our unique history as a congregation has helped us grow in this area. We have many who seen, participated in, and especially been victimized by the fights that characterize the Reformed world. We have no desire to return to that morass. Nor do we want to allow a victim's mentality to develop. Having been scarred by the ecclesiastical-powers-that-be, we have no desire to inflict the same harm on others. If anything, we might be overly sensitive about criticizing other Christian denominations and groups. I think we have also, for the most part, learned to distinguish majors/essentials from minors/peripherals, which has allowed us to grow with a great deal of diversity.

At TPC, we are learning more and more to be catholic (but not Catholic!).

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Books I'd recommend on unity:

Evangelical Reunion by John Frame  
One Lord, One Faith by Rex Koivisto

I am much closer to Frame than Koivisto on denominationalism, but both authors have a lot to offer. I could accept Koivisto's proposals more easily if he put more of a premium on visible and governmental unity, e.g, even if something like confessional denominations continue to exist, they should be connected in some way.

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Why are there so many contentions between Reformed Christians who are so close to one another theologically and yet anathematize one another over the smallest points of theology?

Rene Girard pointed that rivalries are created by similarities not by differences. In the modern world, we think diversity breeds contempt, but it's actually the reverse is true. Just think about sports: Teams that are similar in geography and tradition are most like to form a rivalry. So it is in the rest of life. Presbyterian subgroups fight with one another because they have so much in common (often including the same labels), not because they are really all that different from one another.

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John Calvin:

It may perhaps appear strange that he [Paul] should give the name of a Church of God to a multitude of persons that were infested with so many distempers, that Satan might be said to reign among them rather than God. Certain it is, that he did not mean to flatter the Corinthians, for he speaks under the direction of the Spirit of God, who is not accustomed to flatter. But some one will say, "among so many pollutions, what appearance of a Church is any longer presented?" I answer, the Lord having said to him, "Fear not: I have much people in this place"; keeping this promise in mind, he conferred upon a godly few so much honor as to recognize them as a Church amidst a vast multitude of ungodly persons. Farther, notwithstanding that many vices had crept in, and various corruptions both of doctrine and manners, there were, nevertheless, certain tokens still remaining of a true Church. This is a passage that ought to be carefully observed, that we may not require that the Church, while in this world, should be free from every wrinkle and stain, or forthwith pronounce unworthy of such a title every society in which everything is not as we would wish it. For it is a dangerous temptation to think that there is no Church at all where perfect purity is not to be seen. For the man that is prepossessed with this notion, must necessarily in the end withdraw from all others, and look upon himself as the only saint in the world, or set up a peculiar sect in company with a few hypocrites. What ground, then, had Paul for recognizing a Church at Corinth? It was this: that he saw among them the doctrine of the gospel, baptism, the Lord's Supper — tokens by which a Church ought to be judged of. For although some had begun to have doubts as to the resurrection, the error not having spread over the entire body, the name of the Church and its reality are not thereby affected. Some faults had crept in among them in the administration of the Supper, discipline and propriety of conduct had very much declined: despising the simplicity of the gospel, they had given themselves up to show and pomp; and in consequence of the ambition of their ministers, they were split into various parties. Notwithstanding of this, however, inasmuch as they retained fundamental doctrine: as the one God was adored among them, and was invoked in the name of Christ: as they placed their dependence for salvation upon Christ, and, had a ministry not altogether corrupted: there was, on these accounts, a Church still existing among them. Accordingly, wherever the worship of God is preserved unfringed, and that fundamental doctrine, of which I have spoken, remains, we must without hesitation conclude that in that case a Church exists.

In the sermon, I talked about the Bible's built-in hierarchy of truths. John Calvin says the same thing:

For not all articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all

men as the proper principles of religion...Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith...Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over nonessential matters should in nowise be the basis of schism among Christians?

J. I. Packer:

Time was when Western Christendom's deepest division was between relatively homogeneous Protestant churches and a relatively homogeneous Church of Rome. Today, however, the deepest and most hurtful division is between theological conservatives (or 'conservationists' as I prefer to call them), who honor the Christ of the Bible and of the historic creeds and confessions, and theological liberals and radicals who for whatever reason do not; and this division splits the older Protestant bodies and the Roman communion internally.

George Whitefield:

Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians? No! Any Presbyterians? No! Have you any Independents or Seceders? No! Have you any Methodists? No! No! No! Whom have you there? We don't know those names here! All who are here are Christians.

J. Gresham Machen:

Far more serious still is the division between the Church of Rome and evangelical Protestantism in all its forms. Yet how great is the common heritage which unites the Roman Catholic Church, with its maintenance of the authority of Holy Scripture and with its acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own Church. The Church of Rome may represent a perversion of the Christian religion; but naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all

Samuel Craig:

...there will be the full recognition of the fact that what they [that is, Reformed believers] hold in common with other evangelical Christians is much more important than what they hold in distinction from them. In fact while they will be as unflinchingly opposed to Rome as were their fathers they will not be blind to the fact that as the lines are drawn today — theism over against atheism; Christ the God-man over against the man Jesus; the cross as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice over against the cross as a symbol of self sacrifice; salvation as a divine gift over against salvation as a human achievement; the Bible as the revealed Word of God

over against the Bible as a purely human product; the moral law as a divinely imposed rule of life over against the moral law as an everchanging resultant of human insight and experience — Rome, at the points at which the battle rages most fiercely today, is our ally rather than our opponent.

Thomas Cranmer writing to Melanchthon in 1552, pleading with them to come to England for a general Protestant council in order to work out a doctrinal concord

But it cannot escape your notice, how greatly religious dissensions, especially in the matter of the Lord's Supper, have rent the church asunder... And it is truly grievous that the sacrament of unity is made by the malice of the devil food for disagreement, and (as it were) the apple of contention.

Cranmer to Calvin at the same time:

Our adversaries are now holding their councils at Trent for the establishment of their errors; and shall we neglect to call together a godly synod, for the refutation of error, and for restoring and propagating the truth? They are, as I am informed making decrees respecting the worship of the host: wherefore we ought to leave no stone unturned, not only that we may guard others against this idolatry, but also that we may ourselves come to an agreement upon the doctrine of this sacrament. It cannot escape your prudence, how exceedingly the church of God has been injured by dissensions and varieties of opinion respecting this sacrament of unity; and though they are now in some measure removed, yet I could wish for an agreement in this doctrine, not only as regards the subject itself, but also with respect to the words and forms of expression.

Cranmer to Bullinger:

We must not therefore suffer ourselves to be wanting to the church of God on a matter of such importance.

John Davenant, an English delegate to the Synod of Dort, from his *An Exhortation to Brotherly Communion betwixt the Protestant Churches* (1641):

With those Churches it is fitting to retain brotherly communion, which we will not deny but that they retain conjunction and communion with Christ, the Head and Foundation of the holy catholic Church. Yea, except we will yield and confess ourselves to be estranged from the body of Christ, we cannot but be their brethren, who are esteemed to hold brotherly communion with Christ, our elder Brother. For the band of holy brotherhood betwixt Churches themselves, cannot be broken at men's pleasures, except they be also broken betwixt them and Christ, who is the head of all Churches. If the Saxon count the Helvetian - or the Helvetian the Saxon Churches - so alienated and torn asunder from Christ by their errors, that they are neither founded in Christ nor by Christ the elder

Brother taken into the brother society of fellow-members, then they may pretend some reason why they renounce communion with them. But if in no wise they dare affirm this, we cannot have just cause to disclaim brotherly communion with those who Christ himself blusheth not to own, and call his brethren...

They who are founded in the same Christ, and rooted in the partaking of eternal life, ought to be founded and rooted in mutual charity. But no Protestant will deny, but that the Protestant churches are founded in the same Christ, our Lord and Savior. It ought therefore to be well weighed and considered whether the office and nature of charity itself doth not wholly detest this: to make an endless schism and rent betwixt churches, for some diversity of opinions. It was Augustine's judgment that "Christian charity could not be kept except in the unity of the Church, and that those who persist in discord belong to the lot and portion of Ishmael." For who will say that there is not brotherly hatred in schism when there is no other original and obstinate persisting in schism but brotherly hatred?

Most sure it is that the proper duties of charity cannot appear and shew themselves in these differences of the Protestant Churches. I appeal to the Apostle himself for my witness (Rom 12:9ff.; 1 Cor 13:5ff.). If we grant those Churches which we conceive somewhat to err in the faith, yet to be sanctified and preserved in Christ, the foundation of the Church, our faith though something the sounder will little avail us if our charity be wanting toward all the saints. For saving faith cannot be unless conjoined with charity or brotherly love as the Scriptures everywhere do witness. "For what shall a man's sound faith profit him, where the soundness of his charity is baned with the deadly wound of schism?" (Augustine).

Peter Leithart:

...whatever we end up saying about the calling and responsibilities of the PCA, OPC, CREC, or ministers in those denominations, it needs to be set in the context of the fundamental biblical claim that there is only one church because there is only one Christ. We Reformed ministers and theologians have to conduct ourselves in a way that manifests that we are not of Calvin, Luther, Zwingli, but members of one universal body.

Philip Schaff:

Luther and Calvin, if they should make their appearance now, would act very differently, in the altered state of things, from what they did three hundred year ago. Their main zeal would be directed no doubt against such purely negative pseudo-protestantism [Protestant Rationalism], as something altogether worse than popery itself..." And turning to the Protestant problem with rationalism he exhorts us: "Let us first with united strength expel the devil from our own temple, into which he has

stolen under the passport of our excessive toleration, before we proceed to exorcise and cleanse the dome of St. Peter.

Doug Wilson puts the superiority-complex well into perspective:

If an "Arminian" is elect and chosen, then his election is not imperiled through his failure to understand the ninth chapter of Romans. Paul did not say, at the end of the eighth chapter, that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ except for shoddy exegesis. And if a "Calvinist" is reprobate, then he cannot earn his way into the approval of God through a self-righteous mouthing of the doctrines of grace. ... But when both share in a common election, their duty is to maintain a unity of love, and to strive for a unity of mind which is only possible through diligent study and application of the Scriptures.

A man professing theology that claims that salvation is all of grace has no right to tear down fellow believers over minutia. Contend for the truth, yes, but let us speak it in a loving manner (Eph. 4:5), seeking reconciliation and unity of confession, not seeking division and a pat on the back for being a "sharp cookie." Let us not have standards for fellowship that exceed God's....Woe to the 'Calvinist,' who objects to the loose fellowship standards of God the Father!

Machen:

There are many who believe that the Bible is right at the central point, in its account of the redeeming work of Christ, and yet believe that it contains many errors....Such men are not really liberals, but Christians; because they have accepted as true the message upon which Christianity depends. A great gulf separates them from those who reject the supernatural act of God with which Christianity stands or falls...

Far more serious still is the division between the Church of Rome and evangelical Protestantism in all its forms. Yet how great is the common heritage which unites the Roman Catholic Church, with its maintenance of the authority of Holy Scripture and with its acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own Church. The Church of Rome may represent a perversion of the Christian religion; but naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all.

Doug Jones:

The goal of the gospel, the goal of the New Testament is to create a new community, a distinct community of faith, hope, and love. We are the image of God, and our God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a community of loyalty and love and sacrifice.

Jesus prays that His people, “all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn. 17:21ff).

If we, flesh and bone, are to actualize the oneness, the community of the Christian Godhead, then when we think about “creating community” in our churches and cultures, we should think of it in terms of incarnating the relations between Father, Son, and Spirit, of *incarnating the Trinity*. “On earth as it is in heaven.”

That community doesn't seek to dominate one another by violence or trick one another by sweet deals. It doesn't resort to manipulation or coercion. It doesn't allow one another to eat out of garbage dumps or treat one another as collateral damage. They don't indebt one another or exclude one another from their property. Father, Son, and Spirit each sacrifices and gives life to one another.

We often recite the famous love passage of 1 Corinthians 13 at weddings and other romantic occasions. But in fact, we should see it as one of the most thorough theological “definitions” of the Christian God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is “is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (1 Cor. 13:4-8).

This is our God. But, for the Christian, it's also what we aim for in economics, foreign policy, and politics. This is the kingdom we're to seek first. “On earth as it is in heaven.

Jeff Meyers:

In lamenting the sorry state of the church in modern times, many Christians tend to idealize the church. There is this enormous temptation for conservative Christians when they survey the state of the contemporary church to put before people an idealized, utterly unrealistic vision of the church. It is very easy to tick off a long list of problems in the churches of our time - doctrinal, moral, organization, theological, relational, whatever. It is almost just as easy to put forward a perfectionistic vision of what the church ought to be and be doing.

Consequently many people run here and there looking for the ideal church. If it's theology you want, you will never be satisfied with any of the actual churches available to you. If it's mission and mercy ministries,

then you will always be severely disappointed. Maybe it's friendship and genuine, deep, real fellowship (small groups or accountability groups). But alas, what local body of believers really practices the ideal. Whatever the ecclesiastical utopia you have idealistically constructed in your mind, you are going to be severely disappointed with the church as she actually exists in time and space, and in your neighborhood. There really is no greener grass; it's all pretty brown and weedy. Many people, therefore, are deeply alienated from and are frustrated by the church. They bounce from one church to another or from one leader to another in search of the elusive ideal community. When he had occasion, in his commentaries and sermons, to say something about Noah and the ark, John Calvin observed that it would have been stupefying for "Noah and his household to live for ten months in a fetid heap of animal droppings, in which humans could hardly breath." Noah and his family were shut up in the claustrophobic ark living "in filth that would suffocate the strongest man in half an hour. So the ark became a kind of grave for the living Noah." Given that the ark is a prophetic image of the church in the world. I have often recalled Calvin's comments and been comforted and reoriented about life in the church. It's realistic, not idealistic. It's brutally honest. The church often feels and smells like the ark must have. And yet, outside of the ark? The flood. The wrath of God. Death. Traditionally, the architecture of the church has embodied this vision. Because it looks like the inside of a boat, the area of the church where we worship is referred to as the "nave", from whence we get our word "navy." At any rate, I spent the week in Dallas at the 36th General Assembly of the PCA with 840 ministers and 291 ruling elders. Inside the ark, if you will. And it would be quite natural for me to come back and report on the stench. We could run down a list of all the disappointing aspects of the assembly, our denomination, and our fellow leaders. Some pastors will do just that. Or, conversely, I could simply hold my nose and make a cheerful, upbeat report on how great our denomination is, how excited I am about our ministries, pretending there are no foul odors in our wonderful, beloved PCA. Many pastors will make such reports. Indeed, a few years ago one commissioner to the GA, as we debated about a new sanctioned denominational logo, suggested that an appropriate one might be that of a cleaning lady sweeping the dirt under the rug. But both of these approaches would be wrong. And, surprisingly, both of these extremes are the result of thinking about the church in such idealistic terms that one must either keep the reality from people to make them think that the church is much better than she really is or be constantly complaining that the church fails so miserably that we need to form a new denomination so we can be pure. Instead, the ancient wisdom of the Spirit contained in one of the church's oldest creeds ought to be recaptured. "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." *I believe.* Whatever I see, whatever I smell, I believe, I trust that the church *is one, is holy, is catholic and apostolic.* This church, my church, my regional and local church (PCA). Not some romanticized church of the past or some imaginary church of the future. No. The only church there is. The one we belong to, the one that is assembled every Sunday and in countless places around the world in Jesus' name. The creed does not say that the church is

perfect. There is no hint of ecclesiastical utopianism here. It doesn't make us claim that the church is infallible. We do not confess that we will be best friends with everyone sitting next to us. Or that we will experience open and dangerously honest intimacy with every other member of the church. We are not told that the church will fix all our problems. Or that the ministry of the church will be able to solve all our troubles or heal all our maladies. Moreover, we are not promised that everyone's sanctification will progress with the same speed and upward improvement. Rather, we believe, we trust in what God has told us about his church in his Word: that she is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Bottom line: we must believe that our particular branch of the church, the Presbyterian church in America, is a member of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. We *believe*. We trust. Faith, not sight. Of course, we should strive to *manifest* the oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of our particular church. But that's an on-going project. It will never end short of the new heavens and earth. The ancient saying is true: one cannot have God for his Father unless he has the church for his mother. The church, like Noah's ark, may stink on the inside, but it sure beats drowning in the wrath of God on the outside. Lord, I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.

Anatole France:

It is rare for any master to belong to the school he has founded as firmly as his disciples do.

Franklin H. Little on Martin Bucer:

Butzer's great strength was expressed in his doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Both Lutheranism and Calvinism speedily fell into legalism, the piling of precept upon precept, the savage persecution of those who read the script differently, the brutal wars of religion which destroyed 80 per cent of the people and reduced the German lands to poverty and disease for generations. Neither the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577) nor the Calvinist Canons of the Synod of Dort (1618-19) satisfactorily expressed a consensus fidelium. Both signified a willingness to settle for particularity long after the ability to discuss charitably had atrophied. Both required abandonment of universal perspectives, the canonization of particular formulas, the eclipse of eschatology. Both, in their lack of hope in things to come, lack of confidence in God's continuing purposes, derived from a scholastic mind-set which was insufficiently chastened and governed by a vital doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Butzer could have instructed the brethren, but even in his own time he was accused of "enthusiasm," of sympathy with the "Anabaptists of Münster," of spiritualizing tendencies. Because he remained open to discussion and was willing to learn even from those with whom he had little in common, he was condemned by the dogmatic and inflexible for supposed instability and uncertainty of stance. Actually, he believed that the ultimate decision rested neither with hierarchy nor professional theologians but with the whole body of

believers.

Jeremiah Burroughs:

Perhaps you have some ministers or others come to your table, and they tell you a tale of such and such. Your heart is hot presently, but do you understand the matter? You begin to make a stir, but can you give an account of it? Be silent, forbear, and take heed of what you do. Meddle not in ways of strife till you understand where the controversy lies, and that from both parties....

Take heed you do not reject any from being your brother whom Jesus Christ, at the great day, will own as His, and whom God the Father will call His child....

Luther, in one of his epistles, said that there was no wickedness, no cruelty, that Zwingli did not charge him with. And in another epistle he complained that Carlstadtus was more malicious against him than ever any of his enemies had been. And as for Oecolampadius, Luther was so provoked against him that he called him the black devil. We may see what strange corruptions are working sometimes in the hearts of godly men....

This has been an old dividing way: if we can besmirch the chief of a party, we shall do well enough with the rest; wherefore let us make as ill interpretations of what they do as we possibly can. Let us fasten as ill things upon them which we can have any pretense for. Let reports be raised, fomented and spread, whether they be true or not. It makes no matter; something will stick.

Samuel Davies:

What an endless variety of denominations, taken from some men of character, or from some little peculiarities, has prevailed in the Christian world, and crumbled it to pieces, while the Christian name is hardly regarded?... what party-names have been adopted by the Protestant churches, whose religion is substantially the same common Christianity, and who agree in much more important articles than in those they differ. To be a Christian is not enough now-a-days, but a man must also be something more and better; that is, he must be a strenuous bigot to this or that particular church.... "Every man will find that he agrees more fully in lesser as well as more important articles with some particular church than others; and thereupon it is his duty to join in stated communion with that church; and he may, if he pleases, assume the name which that church wears, by way of distinction from others: this is not what I condemn. **But for me to glory in the denomination of any particular church, as my highest character; to lay more stress upon the name of a presbyterian or a churchman than on the sacred name of Christian; to make a punctilious agreement with my sentiments in the little peculiarities of a party the test of all religion; to make it the object of my zeal to gain proselytes to some other than the Christian name; to connive at the faults of those of my own party and to be blind to the good qualities of others, or invidiously to represent or diminish them: these are the**

**things which deserve universal condemnation from God and man; these proceed from a spirit of bigotry and faction, directly opposite to the generous catholic spirit of Christianity, and subversive of it.** This spirit hinders the progress of serious practical religion, by turning the attention of men from the great concerns of eternity, and the essentials of Christianity, to vain jangling and contest about circumstantials and trifles. Thus the Christian is swallowed up in the partisan, and fundamentals lost in extra-essentials....“You may, if you please, call yourselves presbyterians and dissenters, and you shall bear without shame or resentment all the names of reproach and contempt which the world may brand you with. But as you should not be mortified on the one side, so neither should you glory on the other. A Christian! a Christian! let that be your highest distinction, let that be the name which you labour to deserve. God forbid that my ministry should be the occasion of diverting your attention to anything else.

Jim Jordan:

The sectarian compares the weakness of other churches to his own supposed strength, and pronounces them apostate on that basis. The catholic notes the weakness of other churches, and because of that tries to work with them, and prays for them. The sectarian thinks history has ended; the catholic realizes that it has not. (If anything, by the way, ‘postmillennialists’ should be even more flexibly catholic than others, because they believe that history has a long way to go, and that theology and ecclesiology will be developing for centuries to come.)”

Schaff:

Christianity was such a Reformation, not simply of Judaism, but of Humanity as a whole." He goes on to insist that what Luther gave utterance to was already "darkly present to the general consciousness of his age, and brought out into full view that which thousands before him, in his own time, had already been struggling in various ways to reach. Genuine Protestantism is no such sudden growth, springing up like a mushroom in the night, as the papist, and certain narrow minded ultra-protestants, would fain have us believe. Its roots reach back to the day of Pentecost.

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, on being post-denominational:

It is clear from this Pew study that the old denominational affiliations no longer apply. The religious landscape in the U.S. is best described these days as "post-denominational." Post-denominational means that it is far less important whether you are Methodist or Baptist, or even Catholic, than where you fall along the continuum of fundamentalist to evangelical to progressive (liberal) to secular or unaligned. While some faiths or denominations generally are more evangelical or more liberal, each

tradition has a wide spectrum within it. If you are a liberal Christian in a conservative Protestant denomination, you may have more in common with a Reformed Jew than with the Christians in your own denomination.

Schaff vs. the multiplication of denominations and sects in Christendom:

If such were the fact, the Reformation must stand in direct contradiction to the Holy Scriptures, and be adjudged by its own umpire to condemnation, as a sinful work of man... The sect-system, like Rationalism, is prostitution and caricature of true Protestantism, and nothing else... Away with human denominations, down with religious sects! Let our watchword be: One spirit and one body! One Shepherd and one flock!... Rationalism and Sectarianism are the most dangerous enemies of the church at the present time. They are both but different sides of one and the same principle, a one-sided, false subjectivity, sundered from the authority of the objective. Rationalism is theoretic Sectarianism; Sectarianism is practical Rationalism....

...the Jewish dispensation looked always towards the gospel... in like manner the discipline of the Roman Church involved an inward struggle, that became satisfied at last only in the evangelical emancipation of Protestantism....

...in the very center of the religious life of the Catholic Church itself, as it stood at that time....The Reformation is the legitimate offspring, the greatest act of the Catholic Church; and account of true catholic nature itself, in its genuine conception: whereas the Church of Rome, instead of following the divine conduct of history has continued to stick in the old law of commandments, the garb of childhood, like the Jewish hierarchy in the time of Christ, and thus by its fixation as Romanism has parted with the character of catholicity in exchange for that of particularity.....

The unity must proceed from within, from the deepest ground of the religious life itself, and then it will provide for itself a suitable external form. What this will be, we are not prepared now of course to say. In any case, however, a living outward intercommunication must come to hold among all Christian churches, such as may furnish practical proof that they are not only one spirit but one body also, that is, the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

There's a world of difference between contending and contentiousness."

Martin Luther's Larger Catechism.

I believe that there is upon the earth a holy congregation and communion of pure saints ruled under one Head, Christ, called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, in the same mind and understanding, furnished with multiple gifts yet one in love and in all respects harmonious, without sects or schisms.

Martin Bucer, from his treatise, *Concerning the True Care of Souls and Genuine Pastoral Ministry*:

Those who call upon our Lord Jesus Christ in truth, whatever their outward customs and identity may be, we wish to acknowledge and love as our members in Christ the Lord. And they will also treat us in the same way, irrespective of the fact that we may not share the same ceremonies and church practices. For the fellowship of the Christian church consists not in ceremonies and outward practices, but in true faith, in obedience to the pure gospel, and in the right use of the sacraments as the Lord has ordained them. Everything else each church has to arrange as it finds best for itself. In any case this is something which the old holy fathers recognized and maintained.

Rupert Meldinius:

In perspectives, diversity; In essentials, catholicity; In all things, charity.

Jaroslav Pelikan:

There seems to have been room in the Roman Church for almost anyone and anything except Luther and the gospel he was proclaiming. In the very Italy from which Pope Leo X issued his decree of excommunication there were men whose scepticism denied basic Christian tenets; but they were not excommunicated (here Pelikan adds via footnote: "as Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randall Jr. have observed, 'the fifteenth century Italian Aristotelians...were not enough concerned with Christianity to be violently anticlerical" cf. the "Introduction" to *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* [Chicago, 1948], p.10 - EH). Whatever may have been the status of Leo's own religious life — and our reports on this vary somewhat — some of his predecessors on the throne of St. Peter had been no more pious, and a good deal less virtuous, than Cicero or Plato; but they were not excommunicated. Luther's own contemporary, Erasmus, certainly disagreed with much of what Roman Catholicism represented, and he made his disagreement exceedingly vocal; but Erasmus was not excommunicated. Yet Luther was. Why?

The answer to that question is exceedingly complex. Its roots lie in the situation of imperial and papal politics in the first half of the sixteenth century, and the triangle of pope, emperor, and princes that is the framework for so much of Luther's Reformation. In addition, there is a theological answer to the question, lying at the very foundation of Reformation theology. Irritating and troublesome as these other men and movements may have been to the Roman Church, the Reformation alone constituted a basic threat to the medieval theological and ecclesiastical system. For the Reformation had as its central Protestant principle the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the uselessness of human or ecclesiastical merit in the process of salvation, the free forgiveness of sins

for the sake of Jesus Christ. If all this were true, then the traffic in merit and grace dispensed by the hierarchy was worse than useless. This was the threat of the Protestant principle to the ecclesiastical establishment, and against this threat the pope reacted when he excommunicated Luther.

Yet by his teaching of justification by faith, Luther stood in the continuity of the faithful in all generations. He was proclaiming the gospel by which and for which the church lives. The pope excommunicated him and condemned justification by faith alone. As far as Luther was concerned, the pope had thereby also condemned the gospel. And so, in Luther's eyes, it was Rome that had left Luther, and not Luther that had left Rome. As long as the Roman Church would tolerate the gospel it remained the church for Luther, despite its error. But when it condemned the gospel and forced Luther out, it became sectarian. If, as Luther maintained, the church is where the gospel is, then it followed that by condemning the gospel Rome was condemning the church. It was in this spirit, and not in a spirit of boasting, that Luther said of Worms: "Then I was the church!" Because he was contending for the gospel and the gospel made the church and Rome condemned the gospel, Rome had condemned the church as represented in this case by the church's loyal servant, Martin Luther. Luther believed he was standing for the same gospel for which the church had stood before it became corrupt and condemned him. When it condemned him, so he believed, it was forsaking the gospel to which it had previously been loyal, while he continued in his loyalty. Thus Rome turned its back on the church, while Luther remained with the church. Such was Luther's interpretation of what happened when he severed his relations with Rome.

This interpretation is of great importance in the determination of Luther's responsibility for a divided Christendom. He was convinced that as there was no church without the gospel, there was no church unity without the gospel either. Therefore, the gospel was the only valid basis for true church unity. It is inaccurate then, to maintain that Luther left the Roman Church because he was dissatisfied with this or that in its doctrine or practice. For he was an obedient rebel; or, as he put it, "By the grace of God, we are holy apostates."

A failure to understand Luther's Reformation as the work of "holy apostates" and obedient rebels has caused various interpreters, some of them sympathetic and some of them critical, to attribute Luther's Reformation to false grounds and to evaluate it on the basis of a false assessment.

Doug Wilson:

The same Paul who tells us to labor to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace also tells us the basis of that unity. He tells us that we as Christians are to walk in a manner worthy of our calling as Christians

(Eph. 4:1). Our demeanor in this is to be one of humility and patience (v. 2). With this attitude, we are equipped to obey his next command, which is the command to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (v. 3). This unity is to be kept by us, not created by us. Armed with the right attitude, assigned the right task, what we now need is the right foundation. What foundation does Paul declare as the basis of this unity?

There is already one body because there is one Spirit. There is one hope of our calling. One Lord. There is only one faith. There is only one baptism. And above, through and in us, there is one God and Father (vv. 4-6). In heaven is the triune God, and on earth we find a common confessed faith and a common baptism—Word and sacrament. It is striking that there are no governmental bonds referred to here; the bonds are of another nature entirely. He does not list one holy Father in Rome. Nor does he say one ecumenical headquarters in New York. He does not refer to summit leadership conferences in Colorado Springs. When Paul is appealing to Christians to maintain the unity they already have, he appeals to them on this basis—one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

Of course, this does not mean that government is irrelevant to this question of unity. In the next breath, Paul goes on to say that the one Lord ascended into heaven, and from that exalted place He gave the gift of godly ministry to men. "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11). The reason He did this was so that these officers would labor in the perfecting of the saints, building up the body of Christ *until we all come to the unity of the faith* (vv. 12-13). The task before these officers is the presentation of a perfect man, a Church that has grown up into the measure of the fullness of Christ (v. 13).

In short, our foundational unity is trans-denominational

Doug Wilson:

The vexed question of church unity is like the woman in the gospels—the more the physicians treat her, the worse she seems to get. In large measure, this is because church leaders (naturally enough) tend to place the locus of unity in *government*. But we need to reexamine this. Of course, governmental unity among all Christians is certainly to be desired, but is it the foundation of all unity or an instrument that will be used by God to advance that unity? Is governmental unity the foundation or the final fruit of a biblical striving toward unity? Fortunately, the Bible tells us where to look the answers to these questions.

The same Paul who tells us to labor to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace also tells us the *basis* of that unity. He tells us that we as Christians are to walk in a manner worthy of our calling as Christians (Eph. 4:1). Our demeanor in this is to be one of humility and patience (v. 2). With this attitude, we are equipped to obey his next command, which

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This means the saints are exhorted to have an attitude of humility and patience as they endeavor to preserve that measure of unity they already have, a unity created by the Spirit of God. At the same time, they clearly do not yet have the *full* measure of the unity that God intends for His Church. Because of the unity we have, we are to strive for the unity we do not have. So Paul teaches first that we have a unity that must be preserved. He also teaches that we do not yet have full unity, for that is the pastoral and eschatological goal of those faithful officers, given by Christ, who labor in the Church. And the unity we already have is a unity based upon the unity of God, the unity declared in baptism in the triune Name.

Faithful pastors therefore advance the work of true unity. Unfaithful teachers disrupt that unity and so their lying ministries must themselves be disrupted. As unity grows under a faithful ministry, we are no longer children, tossed to and fro by televangelists, or carried about by every contradictory wind of doctrine to blow out of the *magisterium*. The work of true unity is not advanced by an irenicism that tolerates the "sleight of men." A shepherd who tolerates wolves is a shepherd who hates his own sheep. A shepherd who loves his sheep is one who fights the wolves. And the wolves in sheeps' clothing don't like this, not at all, and so they always

raise a great cry—*unity!*

In dealing with this threat, faithful pastors do not declaim from the pulpit about "wolves abstractly considered." They have name names, like Hymaneus and Alexander. And that is why it is treachery to the cause of true unity to refuse to point out obvious departures from the faith—regardless of the honored position of the one departing. "If we or an angel from heaven . . ." If there really were an unbroken *magisterium*, a united confession going back to the apostles, a unanimous consent of the fathers, no one would be more excited about it than I. But when such authority is claimed, and cannot be established from the Scriptures, and contradicts itself in a thousand ways even when evaluated in accordance with its own principles, a faithful minister can only label it as a deception.

But pastors are to labor to this end of unity by speaking the truth *in love*, in order that the already unified body might become unified. We are growing up into our head, the Lord Jesus Christ. From Him, the whole body is being joined together—and the picture here of being joined and compacted as every joint supplies is an image of being knit together *in the womb* (vv. 15-16). There is an essential unity in an embryo, but there is also a much higher unity toward which the embryo is growing. Many complaints about the "disunity" of the Church are actually complaints about how God knits in the darkness of the womb. We look over His shoulder and have the temerity to criticize what He is doing there. But we must go by what the Word says, and not by what we see.

So as we grow up toward this unity, to extend the metaphor, we necessarily fight false teachers who want to introduce their birth defects into the process. As we love one another in all humility and stand for the truth in love, we advance the cause of unity in truth. God directs how this process will finally culminate. Our task is not to oversee the whole process, but rather to be faithful and obedient in our small portion of it.

We therefore affirm a doctrine of apostolic succession, but this is not a succession of ordinations. That is not the basis of unity. Rather, it is a succession of baptisms, and all that those baptisms represent. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. There will be more on this in another letter. But we receive our inheritance from our Christian past, and we perpetuate it as we evangelize non-believers and bring up our children in the faith. We do so by means of Word and sacrament, preaching and baptism. This is the unity we have received from God. As we recognize that all covenant members have received this common inheritance, this gives us the foundation from which to work on improving that unity. We are an embryo in the womb. To look for full governmental unity *now* is to look for a kid in the second trimester to grow Aaron's beard, so that the oil can run down it, to use a grotesque image.

This is why the postmillennial vision is so important. Postmillennialism argues (on exegetical grounds) that the Church will see days of glory in

the future far surpassing anything we have seen up to this point. Postmillennialism argues that the *Church is in fact still an embryo*, and that we will one day be a perfect man. We are not yet that perfect man. Assuming that this is God's decree (that *will* come to pass) means that I am obligated as a faithful servant to work and labor in the direction of that decree. I assume that you are postmillennial in your eschatology, but I want to show why this is so important for classical Protestants. Without it, there is no way to keep Protestant churches from distintegrating into a sect mentality. If God has no plan for the Church in history, then we need not have one. If there is no *telos*, toward which we are growing, then we do not have to have any regard for it. In another variation of this, if the "perfect man" that the Bible talks about is manifest only in heaven, then there is no pressing need to strive toward that perfect man on earth.

Consequently, in my view, the error of Protestant sects is that of assuming that God has no earthly plan for the history of the institutional Church—in short, that there is no embryo. What you see around you is what God wanted from the beginning, which is to say, a fragmented, scattered collection of churches. All things will be put right in heaven, they affirm, but in the meantime the earthly pandemonium is actually a design feature.

But the contrary error of Rome is that of assuming the embryo is already fully grown in all essential respects. But this means an *a priori* inability to see a new historic work of the Spirit. The historic Protestant looks at the current problems and affirms that God is sovereign over all such apparent impediments. The sin *will* be dealt with, and some things that looked like a bad business to us will actually be revealed as having a larger divine purpose. When God wants to knit a perfect man throughout the course of a sinful, fallen world, He does so. The fact that He knows what He is doing should be apparent to us by now. But we continue to write Him off, as though His prophecies on this subject will somehow fall to the ground.

This means that I believe in the eventual reunion of all covenantal communions. This extends even to the Jews, as Paul notes in Romans 11. If wild olive branches could be grafted into the cultivated tree and yet grow, what will happen when the natural branches are grafted back in? Life from the dead. The only communions that will not be grafted back into the one olive tree will be those communions that no longer exist. The church in Ephesus had her lampstand removed, and the church is no longer there at all. No one is there except for the tourists among the ruins.

Paul expressly warned the church at Rome that she was vulnerable to the same judgment that befell the Jews, and that she had to guard against the hubris that set the Jews up for their fall. I do not believe they heeded the warning, just as the Jews did not. But this does not slow God down any—let God be true and every man a liar. If Rome was cut out, she can be grafted back in. If Rome was not cut out, but only radically cut *back*, she will flourish and bear evangelical fruit once again.

So this is what I mean by eventual reunion: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one church

Trinity Reformed Church (CREC) made this declaration about the one holy catholic and apostolic church:

Trinity Reformed Church recognizes itself as part of the ancient Christian Church established by the apostles, rejoicing in the "faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jud. 1:3). We are thankful for the fellowship we share with all the faithful in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church throughout the ages. We affirm with the apostle that there is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:5). Therefore with the holy fathers, we confess that one faith as it has been handed down in the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, the Definition of Chalcedon, and Athanasian Creed. On this basis we cheerfully recognize the Trinitarian baptisms of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, receive them (and all others who confess this ancient faith) to our celebration of the Eucharist, and warmly welcome them into membership in our congregation. Because there is one body and one Spirit, we insist that the unity of the body of Christ is fundamentally something to be preserved through humility, gentleness, and love in the Holy Spirit and is not dependent upon institutional forms, church polity, or bureaucratic decisions (Eph. 4:2-3). Likewise, in submission to the apostle's instructions, we seek ecclesiastical maturity which rejoices in all of the ways the saints are being built up and equipped for ministry, striving for the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, until we reach mature manhood, the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:14). Standing firmly in the Reformed and Protestant branch of the Church, we are committed to enriching and deepening our understanding, practices, and doctrines, fully expecting continued reformation and renewal in the entire body of Christ.

**Gratitude for the rich and fruitful heritage of the Reformed faith** At the same time, this tradition of "*semper reformanda*" ("always reforming") has periodically been a subject of confusion and misrepresentation. The Reformed tradition at its best, far from willfully dividing and abandoning the one true Church, seeks to preserve that Church which the apostolic, patristic, and medieval fathers established and has continued in the lives of all the faithful throughout Christendom. Yet, some within the Reformed tradition itself today misinterpret ongoing reformation and preservation of this rich catholic heritage as an abandonment of historic Reformed principles. Some think they see a trajectory in our reformational progress which leads back to Roman Catholicism or leans toward Eastern Orthodoxy. Individuals who claim that we are moving this direction after having studied and worshipped and lived in our community have dramatically misread our aims and purposes. Furthermore, such interpretations fail to appreciate the deep catholicity found in the Reformed tradition and display ingratitude for the great sanctifying work our sovereign God has done in His Church by the faithful labors of

protesting catholics over the centuries. While we affirm our fundamental unity with all the saints within the body of Christ, including those in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, as well as our great appreciation for the many gifts, insights, and contributions they bring to the broader Church, we equally affirm our great thankfulness for our own history and tradition. Our commitment to the Reformation and those central claims of the Protestant Reformers is unwavering and as robust as ever, and our thankfulness for this rich and fruitful heritage has only deepened as we have grown. In particular, we are grateful for and committed to those summaries of the faith found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, The Three Forms of Unity, and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. At the same time, we do not understand this gratitude to be at odds with a genuine catholicity and love for the saints throughout the body of Christ. Rather, we are most thankful for the insights and concerns of the Reformed tradition because of how hopeful we are that God will be pleased to use us to bless and build up the broader Christian Church.

**Catholicity and the ultimate, infallible authority of Holy Scripture**In keeping with this hope, we reject views which place the ultimate, infallible authority of the Scriptures in competition with other sources of authority since Christ is Lord over all, and His Word cannot be broken (Jn. 10:35). The sixty-six books of the Bible in their entirety are this perfect, God-breathed Word and comprise the only ultimate, infallible source of tradition for the Christian Church (2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Thess. 2:15, 3:6, 14). With the Reformers, we insist that liturgical idolatry is a most dangerous temptation and sin for many within Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. This includes the veneration of man-made images, statues, relics, Eucharistic elements, the invocation of the saints, as well as other practices and traditions which are not according to Scripture. Likewise, we warn all the faithful to flee those doctrines or practices which, whether in doctrine or in practice, undermine the fundamental and sovereign graciousness of God in salvation. Finally, while we consider divisions in the body of Christ most grievous to the calling of the Church, and we confess that the Reformed tradition has contributed its own failures to this state of affairs, we do not believe that abstract considerations of church polity, apostolic succession, or institutional unity rise to the level of weightier matters of the law. Therefore, however helpful the study of those issues may be, they must not jeopardize genuine Christian fellowship, justify the denunciation of the least in the kingdom of God, or result in disparaging the validity of the ordinations or sacraments of other churches that worship our Triune God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Individuals who join communions that effectively excommunicate their Protestant brothers and sisters contradict their search for catholicity, and ironically, the goal of unity comes at the expense of further divisions in the body of Christ. We desire to be of one mind with all the saints, not by coercion, but by the same patient love of our brothers and sisters shown by Christ in His patient love for His Bride, the Church.

**Toward greater unity and purity of the body of Christ**As we hope and pray and continue to work toward the greater unity and purity of the

entire body of Christ, we do so committed to the most central callings of the Church: humble submission to Scripture and the proclamation of the gospel, the centrality of faithful worship and celebration of the sacraments, and loving God and neighbor with all that we are, which includes caring for the poor as well as widows and orphans in their distress. And this, we confess, is the way to grow up together with all of Christendom "into Him, who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (Eph. 4:15-16). Adopted by the Elders of Trinity Reformed Church on Thursday, August 14th, 2008

Schaf insists that Protestantism has a right to exist only as long as we offer to the rest of the Church significant correction in areas that need it. A sect

loses its right to exist, in the same degree in which the body from which it is a secession has corrected the faults that led to it... If sects would be true to themselves, they must as soon as they have fulfilled their commission unite themselves again with the general life of the Church, that they may thus as organic members of the body acquire new vital energy; and the Church, on her side, should make special efforts to gather once more under her motherly protection and care, the children that have forsaken her and are now estranged from her bosom. To this duty the Reformed Church is specially called, as the largest part of these modern separatist movements have sprung from her communion.

John Frame:

Theologians have seemed to me to be less and less able to develop substantial arguments for their proposals. Often they simply express their preferences, quote people who agree with them, distort and caricature the positions of those who disagree, and then consider their case to be established. Many don't seem to have a clue as to how to make a cogent theological case.

Luther:

I'd like all my books to be destroyed so that only the sacred writings in the Bible would be diligently read. For one is referred from one book to another, as it happened in the ancient church, when one turned from a reading of the Bible to a reading of Eusebius, then of Jerome, then of Gregory, and finally of the scholastics and philosophers. *This will happen to us too.*"

John Nevin:

The present state of Protestantism is only intermistic. It can save itself, only by passing beyond itself. In this country particularly, our sect system is an evil that may be said to prey upon the very vitals of the Church. The

evil itself however is but the index of a false element, incorporated with the life of Protestantism itself. The case then is not to be remedied, by any merely external change. We are not called to a crusade against sects as they stand; as though storming them to the ground, we could do for Christianity all that is needed in this direction. Only as the sect principle can be reached and cured in the inward habit of the Church, may any such revolution, in connection with the openings and orderings of God's providence,) be expected to take place, as the existing crisis demands.

Nevin:

Truth can be said to advance, only as error is surmounted and thrown into its rear. But this requires that the error should always, in the first place, make itself known and felt... In this view the Middle Ages form properly speaking no retrogression for Christianity. They are to be regarded rather as the womb, in which was formed the life of the Reformation itself.

Lesslie Newbigin:

The Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move – hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord, who will gather all into one. Therefore, the nature of the Church is never to be fully defined in static terms, but only in terms of that to which it is going. It cannot be understood rightly except in a perspective which is at once missionary and eschatological.

Newbigin:

I believe that the divinely willed form of the church's unity is at least this, a visible company in every place of all who confess Jesus as Lord, abiding together in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers,. Its foci are the word and sacraments, and the apostolic ministry. Its form is the visible fellowship, not of those whom we choose to be our friends, but of those whom God has actually given to us as our neighbors. It is therefore simply humanity in every place re-created in Christ. It is the place where *all* men can be made one because all are made nothing, where one new humanity in Christ is being daily renewed because the old man in *every* man is being brought to crucifixion through word, baptism, and supper. Its unity is universal because it is local and congregational.

Newbigin:

How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. I am, of course, not denying the

importance of the many activities by which we seek to challenge public life with the gospel - evangelistic campaigns, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences, and even books such as this one. But I am saying that these are all secondary, and that they have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community.

Insofar as [the church] is true to its calling, it becomes the place where men and women and children find that the gospel gives them the framework of understanding, the 'lenses' through which they are able to understand and cope with the world.

Cyprian:

Although the church of Jesus Christ is found in many different places, she is one church, not many. After all, there are many rays of sunlight, but only one sun. A tree has many boughs, each slightly different from others, but all drawing their strength from one source. Many streams may flow down a hill-side, but they all originate from the same spring. In exactly the same way each local congregation belongs to the one true church.

Calvin:

They exclaim that it is impossible to tolerate the vice which everywhere stalks abroad like a pestilence. What if the apostle's sentiment applies here also? Among the Corinthians it was not a few that erred, but almost the whole body had become tainted; there was not one species of sin merely, but a multitude, and those not trivial errors, but some of them execrable crimes. There was not only corruption in manners, but also in doctrine. What course was taken by the holy apostle, in other words, by the organ of the heavenly Spirit, by whose testimony the Church stands and falls? Does he seek separation from them? Does he discard them from the kingdom of Christ? Does he strike them with the thunder of a final anathema? He not only does none of these things, but he acknowledges and heralds them as a Church of Christ, and a society of saints. If the Church remains among the Corinthians, where envyings, divisions, and contentions rage; where quarrels, lawsuits, and avarice prevail; where a crime, which even the Gentiles would execrate, is openly approved; where the name of Paul, whom they ought to have honoured as a father, is petulantly assailed; where some hold the resurrection of the dead in derision, though with it the whole gospel must fall; where the gifts of God are made subservient to ambition, not to charity; where many things are done neither decently nor in order: If there the Church still remains, simply because the ministration of word and sacrament is not rejected, who will presume to deny the title of church to those to whom a tenth part of these crimes cannot be imputed? How, I ask, would those who act so morosely against present churches have acted to the Galatians, who had done all but abandon the gospel (Gal. 1:6), and yet among them the same apostle found churches?

Schaff on Reformed and Lutheran relations:

Both churches have accomplished, and are still accomplishing, a great and noble work. Let them wish each other God's speed, and stimulate each other to greater zeal. A noble rivalry is far better than sectarian envy and jealousy. There have been in both churches, at all times, men of love and peace as well as men of war, with corresponding efforts to unite Lutheran and Reformed Christians, from the days of Melancthon and Bucer, Calixtus and Baxter, down to the Prussian Evangelical Union, the German Churchn Diet, and the Evangelical Alliance. Even the exclusive Church of England has entered into a sort of alliance with the Evangelical Church of Prussia, in jointly founding and maintaining the Bishopric of St. James in Jerusalem.

The time for ecclesiastical amalgamation, or organic union, has not yet come, but Christian recognition and union in essentials is quite consistent with denominational distinctions in non-essentials, and should be cultivated by all who love our common Lord and Saviour, and desire the triumph of his kingdom.

Norman Shepherd:

If we could get our Roman Catholic neighbors to see that the Bible talks about covenantal love and loyalty, and not about the merit of good works, and if we could get our evangelical Protestant neighbors to see that the Bible talks about covenantal love and loyalty, and not about cheap grace, then at least one major obstacle would be removed preventing us from seeing that the true church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. We would have a catholic church that is reformed according to the word of God. This is the church that Jesus is building today.

Jonathan Bonomo on "12 Principles of Protestant Catholicity":

The following is a list of twelve principles, or theses, of Protestant Catholicity, *according to me*. They may or may not represent the thinking of other contributors here. As *principles*, they are not framed in the form of an essay containing supporting arguments. I nevertheless hope that laying these out will provide something of a framework for understanding where I and perhaps some others may be coming from with regard to our ecumenical concerns.

**1. *The Centrality of Jesus Christ***

Jesus Christ himself, and not mere speculation about him, is the tie which binds all Christians together.

**2. *The Essential Unity of the Church***

All Christians are members of one another because of their union with Jesus Christ, their common Head. There is therefore but one Church: holy, catholic, and apostolic. Accordingly, striving to bring into a fuller outward expression this unity which we already share in Christ is the duty of every Christian, commensurate with the command of the Apostle (Ephesians 4:3).

### ***3. The Diversity of the Church***

The Church catholic is one, but not necessarily uniform. Where secondary matters are concerned, agreement on each and every particular is not necessary for real unity to exist. The Church catholic includes particular assemblies which may differ on matters not touching the essentials of our faith, but it is by no means to be identified with or reduced to these assemblies.

### ***4. The Supremacy of Historic Creedal Orthodoxy.***

The great Creeds of the historic church are the outward expression and reflection of the Body of Christ on earth concerning the faith once for all delivered to her. They are thus to be for the Christian church a rule of faith for all time. Those bodies therefore which fall out of line with the doctrines delineated by the great ecumenical Creeds—namely, the Apostles', Nicene, and Chalcedonian—are to be considered outside the bounds of the catholic Church. Those various bodies, however, which find their Christian identity as being rooted in the doctrine contained in these Creeds ought to be engaging in continual conversation toward the goal of a greater understanding of each other and eventual reunion with one another. The common ground we find in our Creeds ought to be the starting point of our conversation, and our secondary differences should be held in their proper place as subordinate to the great catholic doctrines of our common Faith.

### ***5. The Heinousness of Schism***

Schism is as much damaging to the body of Christ as propositional heresy, for it is a direct assault upon Christ himself, being an assault upon his Body, which the Apostle for good reason refers to in holy Scripture as "Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12).

### ***6. The Hope for Inter-Confessional Unity***

All Christians ought to hope for a day when believers in Christ from all the various orthodox confessional traditions can exist in one visible Body while yet retaining their confessional identities. This may seem impossible from our perspective, but with God all things are possible. The same One who strengthened Luther to say "Here I stand" is also more than able to soften our hearts toward one another and give his Church a universal conviction in her own catholicity which will cause all of our disputes over secondary matters to fade into the background in light of the beauty of the common salvation we share, which has been freely granted to us by the One who has "delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

### ***7. The Catholicity of the Reformation***

The Reformation was fundamentally a movement within, not outside of, the catholic Church. It was not a revolution, but a reformation—a reformation of that which has existed from the day of Pentecost to now: the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church. Thus, all groups which have their roots in this catholic movement are members of the one Church of Jesus Christ. There is a great need in our day to recognize and proclaim the fundamental catholicity of the Reformation.

### ***8. Non-Protestant Communion are Christian Churches***

The great ancient communions of East and West which did not accept the message of the Reformers—namely, the Roman and Greek communions—remain Christian communions with a valid ministry of Word and Sacrament, for in their midst—however corrupted we may think their positions to be—salvation through Jesus Christ may be found.

#### **9. *Sola Scriptura*, not *Solo Scriptura***

The Bible is the supreme doctrinal authority for the Christian church. But the Reformation doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* has been badly misunderstood, misrepresented, and misapplied in our day. God has given the Scriptures to his Church to be *her* source of authority, by which *she* is led by the Spirit of Truth into all the truth. It is exactly this which is missed in popular applications of *Sola Scriptura* in our day. The Scriptures are for the Church, to be interpreted and expounded upon within the context of the church's life, as she is led along by the working of the Spirit to reveal to her the glorious truths contained therein. Thus, it is imperative that the Church look to how she has understood the Scriptures in previous ages and hold such historic teachings in reverence. It is also imperative that we adhere to the *regula fidei*, as contained in our historic Creeds, as the guiding principle to a proper, orthodox interpretation.

#### **10. *The Need for an Apologetic for Our Times***

What is needed in our day more than anything is apologists for unity, not more schism. There is a rightful place to defend the propositional truths of orthodox Christianity and such defense is invaluable in the church's fight against the schemes of the evil one. Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognize that Christ is just as much—perhaps more so—glorified in the manifest, visible unity and concord of His Body as he is in the proclamation of propositional truths. It is, after all, the unity of the Church by which Christ said in his dying prayer that the world will know that he has sent us. And therefore, the church ought to acknowledge and strive toward the fulfillment of both aspects of our Lord's prayer in the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel: "Let them be one" and "Sanctify them in your truth." But in our fragmented cultural and ecclesial context, in which we fight so many common enemies but have nevertheless continued to blindly throw blows at one another, what needs to be proclaimed now more than anything else is the unity and catholicity of the one Church of Christ.

#### **11. *The Need for a Proper Christian Epistemology***

There is a need in our day to reconsider the simplistic way of thinking which pervades evangelicalism and induces Christians to blindly accept the idea that Foundationalism and the ideals of Enlightenment rationalism are the only valid ways of attaining to a knowledge of truth. From a proper Christian perspective, truth ought to be conceived irreducibly as an incarnate, crucified, resurrected, divine Person, through faith in whom all of our seeking of understanding must be mediated. It is only when the church as a whole becomes aware of this and of its implications for inter-denominational conversation that unity will become possible.

#### **12. *Moving Past the Hermeneutic of Suspicion***

The practice which is so common in our day of skeptically looking at other Christians who may not be of our particular "brand" of Christianity

with suspicion must cease. The proper Christian way of interacting with professing brothers and sisters should be one of “innocent until proven guilty” and not vice versa. We ought to be eager to embrace one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, *not* to find something wrong on account of which we can disclaim each other as such.

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A few years back, some of us who had concerns about the direction of Reformed/Presbyterian culture put together a document entitled “Presbyterians and Presbyterians Together” in order to address the issue and reframe current debates. While the project cannot be declared a success (far from it!), I still believe it was the right thing to do:

### United in Mission

We are followers of Christ and heirs to Presbyterian and Reformed traditions, particularly as embodied in historic confessional standards. As such, we are committed to our Reformational heritage and believe it has an indispensable role in the mission of the Triune God, alongside and in cooperation with other churches, in our local communities, in North America, and throughout the world.

We embrace the highest view of Scripture's absolute authority and trustworthiness and a fidelity to the Reformed theology of our doctrinal standards. These commitments are in no tension with the church's missional calling to function, by Christ's Spirit, as an alternative society within our dominant cultures. These commitments do not undermine, but support the larger shape of that calling:

- worshipping our God who meets us in Christ through Word and Sacrament.
- proclaiming his Gospel of grace to the ends of the earth.
- serving others in deeds of love and mercy, embodying God's justice and peace.
- engaging and countering our cultures with the renewing power of Christ.
- nurturing healthy, growing, and reproducing churches.
- developing gifts the Spirit has granted to men and women among God's people.
- uniting with other Christians in mission as an expression of Reformed catholicity.

In these areas God calls us in Christ, empowered by his Spirit, and guided by his Word, to proclaim and be a sign of the reign of God to the eyes of a watching world.

To remain faithful to this calling, we must not allow legitimate differences and diversity within our own tradition to become obstacles to witness or to obscure the Gospel's power in forming a new humanity around the person of Jesus Christ.

### Together in Diversity

The Reformed tradition, particularly as expressed confessionally, represents a definite set of dogmatic contours, doctrinal boundaries, and exegetical trajectories. And that is a tradition we happily and warmly embrace as our own, in conformity with Holy Scripture.

Nevertheless, the Reformed tradition itself has evolved, and even in its formative years, always included differing perspectives on matters of theological detail. Moreover, our tradition typically allows those submitting to its fundamental system of doctrine nonetheless to dissent conscientiously from specific confessional expressions and propositions where such dissent is neither hostile to the system as a whole nor strikes at the vitals of religion, as determined by the judgment of our gathered presbyters.

There are numerous areas in which acceptable differences historically exist. Among others, these include:

- how we interpret the biblical doctrine of creation as to chronology, timing, and process
- how we characterize the pre-lapsarian covenant, particularly as to probation, grace, merit, and reward, and its relationship to and distinction from the covenant of grace
- the way we prioritize and integrate the tasks of biblical theology, historical-grammatical exegesis, apostolic typology, redemptive historical thinking, and study of ancient contexts
- the relative role we grant to specific experiences of conversion in relation to practices of Christian nurture and the ordinary means of grace within the covenant life of God's people
- how we best characterize the spiritual life of covenant children prior to their coming to a maturing faith through the ministry of the Word
- whether we regard sacraments truly to offer Christ and whether, when effectual, they confer grace instrumentally or are only occasions for the imparting or promise of grace
- how we interpret and enact biblical teaching on worthy participation in the Lord's Supper
- how we apply the regulative principle of worship practically to worship style and order, frequency of communion, the church year, and the like.
- how we translate scriptural teaching on the Jewish Sabbath into a new covenant understanding of resting upon Christ and celebrating the Lord's Day.
- how we construe and implement biblical principles of church polity in accordance with our respective church orders
- how the church rightly relates to the civil magistrate and wider culture while maintaining her proper spiritual identity and mission.
- the way we apply Scriptural teaching on election to the lived experience of God's people as the church visible.
- how we confess the return of our Lord and the final judgment in relation to the millennium and progress of the Gospel.

Of these differences, some are more matters of doctrinal content, emphasis, or articulation, while others are more matters of pastoral application or expression of our doctrine.

Such diversity, we believe, is healthy and welcome as part of the ongoing life of God's people as we seek to grow up into unity of faith and live together in the peace of Christ. John Calvin himself writes, For not all articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion...Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith...Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over nonessential matters should in nowise be the basis of schism among Christians? (Institutes 4.1.12)

We lament our past failures to love our brothers and sisters as we ought, the ways we have broken the unity of faith over inessentials, and how we have countenanced foolish controversies, strife, and disputes within God's church.

In virtue of the church's mission, we purpose together to seek truth, all the while bearing patiently with and listening carefully to one another. We thereby seek to resolve our differences in the bonds of peace and unity, as is befitting those who confess the name of Jesus Christ, seek to live the Christian story, and work to advance his kingdom.

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TPC elder David Smolin wrote the following paper on Reformed catholicity vs. Reformed eccentricity to help articulate what we're trying to do in our church body (sorry for the formatting problems!):

#### Reformed Catholicity v. Reformed Eccentricity

This note will discuss that theme in general terms. Subsequently, I plan to write something on a number of the CREC Memorials to which we have to respond. My discussion of the Memorials will incorporate this theme of Reformed Catholicity v. Reformed Eccentricity.

In very simple terms, I perceive "Reformed Catholicity" as anchored simultaneously in two parts:

(1) "Reformed" Our theological distinctives are anchored in Reformation theology (in the broader sense which includes Anglican and Lutheran as well as the narrower sense of Presbyterian).

(2) "Catholicity" We recognize that we are joined in Christ to a broader catholic „universal" church which is defined theologically by Trinitarian Orthodoxy, and thus includes the wider evangelical church, Wesleyans, charismatics, moderate neo-Orthodox Protestants, Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholic, etc. This relationship has both contemporary and historical elements: it means that in Christ we are a part of one universal church existing in the world today, and also part of the one catholic and apostolic church in history.

By contrast, I perceive "Reformed Eccentricity" as simplistically anchored

in a "Remnant Theology" perspective. Remnant theology is an OT perspective which derives from the OT chronology in which most of Israel would, over time, fail the various tests of faith. Indeed, in one sense Jesus turns out to be the one true covenant keeper of Israel, who recapitulates the history of Israel but is faithful at all points to the covenant. Reformed Eccentricity misapplies this OT paradigm to both the history of the church and relations within the contemporary church, and hence tends to produce an endless series of divisions, each based on the view that their particular movement represent the true „remnant%oo of the church. Thus, as contrasted to the two points of Reformed Catholicity named above, we could characterize Reformed Eccentricity as follows:

(1) "Reformed" A set of theological distinctives interpreted narrowly to largely exclude other Reformation-derived churches (i.e., Anglicans and Lutherans), and which leads to a constant narrowing, as each division and movement within Presbyterian claims a theological warrant to see itself as the true "remnant of the remnant of the remnant."

(2) "Catholicity" Under remnant theology the attitude toward other churches tends to be largely negative, as large parts of the church are written off as equivalent to the old apostate „Northern Kingdom of Israel.%oo Hence, there is no felt obligation to maintain any kind of unity, in Christ, with those outside of the "remnant" church. The emphasis instead is on maintaining fidelity to the distinctives~generally in theological doctrine-- that define one as the true remnant church.

At the risk of repetition, I would summarize the attributes of Reformed Catholicity and Reformed Eccentricity as applied in various areas:

#### I. Reformed Catholicity v. Reformed Eccentricity and Our Relationships to Other Churches

Reformed Catholicity tends to be optimistic, not only eschatologically (i.e., post-millennial or positive a-millennial), but also in its approach and relationships to other churches and traditions and the world at large.

Confident in Christ,s victory and in the perseverance of the church, Reformed Catholicity perceives reformed congregations as joined in Christ to a larger church well beyond the bounds of Presbyterianism.

Reformed Catholicity is encouraged by the progress of the broader church, even when it is not specifically in our theological „camp.%oo Thus, reformed catholicity, while unafraid to note its differences theologically with some of the teachings of other traditions, nonetheless has the theological optimism to believe that Christ is building his church and doing great things for the kingdom, even through parts of Christ,s church that do not embrace the particularities of Calvinist or reformed doctrine.

Further, reformed catholicity finds encouragement in the movement of other traditions toward certain Reformation doctrines and emphases, such

as reading the scriptures in the language of the people or teaching about justification, even when those churches fail to fully embrace reformed doctrinal formulations.

Reformed Eccentricity may be eschatologically optimistic (i.e., post-millennial or positive a-millennial), but despite this doctrinal optimism it operates according to the OT paradigm of „remnant theology.“ Broad and significant parts of the church are totally written off (i.e., Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Lutherans, Charismatics, Wesleyans, etc.) Then, living in the cramped and limited confines of the totally reformed (the first remnant), reformed eccentricity is ever looking for a doctrinal basis to condemn significant parts of the conservative Presbyterian world. Hence, one is always in the mode of becoming the remnant of the remnant of the remnant, and the acceptable church shrinks to the vanishing point. Reformed Eccentricity often has its fiercest theological combats within the relatively small world of conservative Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, but these doctrinal battles are of little interest or relevance to the wider church. Yet the doctrinal warfare within conservative Presbyterianism is taken extremely seriously by the combatants, because the implicit remnant perspective suggests that whoever is left standing is Christ's only true and faithful church on the earth. Thus, the world of reformed eccentricity is like life in the Soviet Union under Stalin, where insiders are periodically „purged.“

## II. Reformed Catholicity v. Reformed Eccentricity in Relationship to the Church in History

Reformed Catholicity embraces the entire history of the church, East and West, as truly being „church history.“ Therefore, it finds wisdom and guidance in the Church Fathers, Eastern and Western, the Medieval Church, etc. This means a willingness to read and learn from those outside of the specifically „reformed“ tradition of Western Christianity.

This does not mean that everything the church has done or taught throughout its history is correct, but it means that as reformed Christians we are a part of one holy catholic and apostolic church that has existed in various places and cultures over the past two millennia.

Reformed Eccentricity tends to read and refer to a very limited subset of historical Christianity. Other than Trinitarian Orthodoxy and Augustine, the Church Fathers are ignored (and large parts of Augustine are also ignored, because of his high sacramental theology and embrace of the Roman Church of his day). The middle ages are seen as a time of spiritual darkness. It is as though the history of Christianity leap-frogged from the Book of Acts to selected portions of Augustine, and then jumped over a millennia of history to Luther. Even Luther turns out to be little more than a stepping-stone, because his sacramental theology is either ignored or detested. The Reformation is seen principally through the lens of Puritanism, or perhaps Southern Presbyterianism, as Calvin (like Augustine) is himself reduced to a small subset of his actual teachings.

The import of this historical method is of course profoundly pessimistic, because it in essence writes off 90% of the history of the church. This attitude toward church history is another manifestation of the implicit remnant theology of reformed eccentricity.. (Thus, when the church splits between East and West, the East is implicitly written off as an apostate church and the West contains the Remnant; then within the Western Church Puritan Calvinism is the remnant amidst the apostate ruin of Catholicism and the failure of organized Lutheranism to fully reform.

Once again, reformed eccentricity sees church history through a lens in which it is the remnant of the remnant of the remnant.)

### III. Reformed Catholicity versus Reformed Eccentricity: the Battle for the Heart of Liturgical Presbyterianism

The average low-church Protestant who comes to worship at Trinity Presbyterian Church will immediately notice that our worship service is „high church,%00 and similar in many ways to Anglican, Lutheran, and even Roman Catholic services. This raises an immediate set of questions which can be answered in either a „reformed catholicity%00 or „reformed eccentricity%00 manner.

The reformed catholicity approach embraces the implicit connections of liturgical worship: connections to the wider liturgical parts of Christ,s Church (including Anglicans, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox), and historically back to the long history of the church, which has been primarily liturgical in its worship. The liturgy becomes a part of our „catholicity.%00

Reformed eccentricity, however, perceives liturgical Presbyterian worship as sharply disconnected from the other liturgical churches, as a part of maintaining the view that those traditions are apostate or at least egregiously in error. From this perspective, liturgical Presbyterianism attempts to virtually re-invent liturgical worship as though Anglican and Lutheran forms of worship (for example) were irrelevant or totally different. Liturgical worship thus becomes primarily another way, within the combative and divided world of the totally reformed, to distinguish a „remnant;%00 liturgical Presbyterians view themselves as the „true remnant%00 among the reformed, even as other movements within conservative Presbyterianism (such as full subscription or Southern Presbyterianism) view liturgical Presbyterianism as apostate and themselves as the true remnant. Thus, from a „reformed eccentricity%00 point of view liturgical Presbyterianism is profoundly sectarian, rather than „catholic.%00

### IV. Reformed Catholicity v. Reformed Eccentricity: Remnant Politics v. Majoring in the Majors

As a matter of personal observation from many years in the Reformed world, I would note that one difference between Reformed Catholicity

and Reformed Eccentricity occurs in secondary areas. Churches driven by reformed eccentricity seem to attract a significant number of people with eccentric or unusual political views. Thus, churches driven by Reformed Eccentricity seem to attract a disproportionate number of people with extreme anti-government views. These political views sometimes become a part of the theology and culture of the churches, to the degree that being a part of the „remnant%oo is seen as intertwined with sharing a certain set of anti-government political views.

By contrast, it should be a goal of „Reformed Catholicity%oo churches to „major in the majors,%oo rather than being known for a set of intertwined theological and political beliefs that appear eccentric to most Christians. This does not mean that political topics should not be discussed~for as a Christian law professor I certainly see the relevance of Christianity to law and government! Rather, it means that the church as an institution clearly differentiates between the clear teachings of Christianity to which the church must always adhere, and the often controversial applications of Christianity to the myriad political and legal issues of the day. We cannot give the impression that we have the same confidence about the meaning of 9/11, the correct level of governmental taxation, or who should be the next President, as we have about the identity of our Lord and Savior~for when we make mistakes about some of the legal and political issues of the day (as we most certainly will do), we cannot allow those errors to undercut the witness of the church to the fundamental truths of the gospel.

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I realize that this summary of „Reformed Catholicity v. Reformed Eccentricity%oo may be controversial. However, they will help frame my coming comments on the CREC Memorials. In addition, having watched developments in Reformed Churches for many years, and having responsibility as an elder to help guide this church, I feel compelled to express these thoughts. I have seen too much damage done to the church through these tendencies I am labeling „Reformed Eccentricity%oo to be silent. We have a wonderful opportunity, by God,s grace, as Trinity Presbyterian Church is well-positioned to be a faithful, useful, and influential part of Christ,s kingdom. In order to do so, however, we must be aware of some of the tensions and negative currents that could so easily pull us in the wrong direction.

In Christ,

David Smolin

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Some years ago, I put together this off-the-cuff list of qualities that characterize truly catholic churches:

I don't think catholicity has much of anything to do with denominational membership. I think denominations are more or less invisible to God. Or, to the extent that he sees them, they are temporary, necessary evils in his providence. You cannot judge catholicity merely by denominational affiliation. You have to be *somewhere* -- and so we have a denominational home. But that denominational connection does not give us our primary identity as a church. I cannot see how being in the CREC in itself is any less catholic than being in any other denomination (e.g., one of the Anglican splinter groups). A denomination, by definition, is anti-catholic in its very existence. Or, to put it another way, there is no one denomination that can be identified with the catholic church we confess to acknowledge in the creed. In a denominational era, one must strive to be catholic in spite of his denomination -- though some denominations make catholicity more of a possibility than others.

Catholicity also has nothing to do with age. All of us have the right to trace our faith right to the apostles, indeed back to the old covenant saints. Those who refuse us this right are the most sectarian of all! I kind of chuckle when Anglicans look down on PCA or CREC people because their church goes back to the 1500s. How is that any better, in the grand scheme of things, that going back to the 1970s or 1990s? Even the Roman Catholic church only came into existence in the 11<sup>th</sup> century with the East West split. In truth, none of denominations as they exist today, can trace themselves back to the apostles. There have been too many changes, permutations, etc. Our apostolic roots are baptismal, doctrinal, and missional.

So what does it mean to be catholic today?

Mostly it's an attitude. It's how you view the church and how you love your fellow Christian. Catholicity is just the new command of John 13 in action.

But we can still define catholicity a little more objectively.

To be catholic means to recognize all the baptized (minus open apostates) as fellow members of the family God. That's to be contrasted with sectarians, who refuse fellowship to others whom they should recognize as Christians.

So: Are there sectarians within the Roman Catholic Church? Yes. But there are also some catholics.

Are there sectarians within the PCA? You bet. When the "anti-federal-vision" party is refusing to say we're Christian brothers, because we have denied their technical theological definitions, that is the height of sectarianism. But there are many catholic Christians and churches in the PCA as well.

There are no doubt sectarians and catholics within most denominations, including Anglicanism and the CREC.

What makes up catholic? I could make a long list here, but here are a few things:

1. Confessional breadth. Recognize the ecumenical creeds as the basis of Christian unity and then view the Reformed confessions as building upon that base. Also, take into account both the diversity and family resemblance that the Reformed confessions have with one another.

2. A willingness to embrace into our community and commune with all other baptized Christians who uphold the basics of Christian orthodoxy (e.g., the ecumenical creeds) and morality (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:9-12). We also must recognize and respect the disciplinary and governmental actions of other church bodies.

3. An appreciation for what other traditions within Christendom do well, past and present.

4. A willingness to work with other churches in mission and ministry (as opposed to focusing narrowly on denominational projects). Collaborate with other Christian groups when possible.

5. A worship service that represents the mainstream Christian tradition for the last 2000 years, and uses forms and music that come from a wide range of Christian traditions.

6. We have the willingness to be self-critical of our own tradition. Many don't want to be challenged by anything in the Bible or in the Reformed tradition that might be different. But this is just domesticating and taming the Bible.

7. A refusal to build the church upon distinctive lifestyle choices, such as homeschooling or no-birth-control or ??????. A catholic church will be much accomodating and flexible, within certain parameters, of course. There is a bounded toleration.

8. The ultimate form of catholicity is paedocommunion. I really wonder if paedocommunion might do more than just about any other single thing (other than weekly absolution and communion) to change and mature the culture of a church. If you're willing to commune with such small children, it really opens the door to fellowship with a wide variety of child-like (and even childish) grown-ups. I often think the marginalized (the poor, the intellectually weak, children, the elderly) do not do very well in Reformed churches.

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Doug Wilson has rightly made the point that when you leave behind an error, it looks to those who are not joining in your correction that you are headed for the opposite error. If you get out of the ditch on one side of the road, it's going to look to people still in the ditch that you are headed for the ditch on the other side – when in reality, you might be finally getting to the middle of the road. This is why “slippery slope” arguments, e.g., “You’re on the road to Rome!” are not very helpful. Those who move out of shallow forms of American evangelicalism will most certainly look like they are “on the road to Rome” if they recover Calvin’s sacramental and liturgical theology.

At the same time we have to remember that you really *cannot* leave one error behind without actually heading for another....so be careful!!

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So many Reformed scholars gerrymander “orthodoxy” underneath their own feet. In reality, the Reformed tradition has always had quite a bit of diversity, certainly in terminology, and quite frequently in doctrine. Today, sadly, many Reformed theologians, in an overreaction to postmodern relativism, are drawing the lines of this “bounded diversity” way too tightly.

How do I feel about being “Reformed”? I certainly see myself as loyal to the Reformed tradition, as the best expression of biblical teaching, but I also see a lot of issues today, especially among those who supposed to be our leaders.

Remember when the New Orleans Saints could not win a game so their fans started wearing paper sacks over their heads at games? That’s how I feel about the Reformed tradition today: I am still a loyal fan, but so long as we are being led by a bunch of losers, it’s hard to get excited about it. I’ll keep cheering on the Reformed tradition, but I also hope for better draft picks in the future who can lead us back to the “promised land” of Reformed catholicity.