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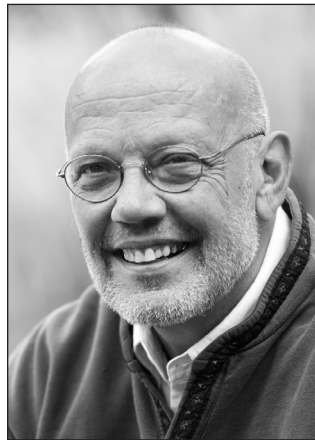
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What about a Bicentennial?

Mr. and Mrs. CRC



by James Calvin Schaap

Dr. James Calvin Schaap is Professor of English at Dordt College and the author of 25 books of various genres. His stories and articles have been honored by the Associated Church Press, the Evangelical Press Association, and the Iowa Arts Council. He authored Dordt's Jubilee play, *Vision at Work and Play*, a history of the Christian Reformed Church; *Our Family Album*; as well as devotionals and the World War II biography of Diet Eman, *Things We Couldn't Say*. His novel *Touches the Sky* was given an *Award of Merit* by *Christianity Today* in 2004, as was his *Startling Joy*, a collection of Christmas stories, in 2005. In 2006, he published three books—*Speaking of Pastors*, *Crossing Over: Stories of Asian Refugee Christians*, and *In His Feathers: the Letters and Journals of Sharon Bomgaars*. In addition he wrote the original script for the documentary *The Reckoning*, a film which won first place this year in the New York Film Festival, and has just completed another novel. He has been teaching literature and writing at Dordt College for thirty-one years.

Just a few years ago, in a place not all that far from here, an old man and his wife walked up to me after a performance of *Our Family Album*, a variety-show history of the Christian Reformed Church. I don't remember his face; today, I couldn't pick either of them out of a crowd if I'd wanted to. But what the man said that night is the only response I can quote from that series of productions. He reached for my hand, pumped a shake or two, and said, simply, "Thanks." His wife nodded her approval, and the two of them walked away.

Slowly I think I came to understand what the two of them meant, a couple I'm going to call Mr. and Mrs. CRC. What they'd witnessed that afternoon was for them, reared as they were in the grueling early decades of the twentieth century, not just history; it was their story, an intimate biography that never mentioned their names or flashed pictures of their family vacations. That play was, literally, their own story, their own family album.

Here's what they saw and heard: Johanna Veenstra, the Dutch language, Calvin College Franklin Street campus, World War II memories, post-war immigrants' thick brogues, Johnny Vander Meer, no baseball on Sunday, Peter Eldersveld, our Indian cousins, white peppermints, common grace, and women in ecclesiastical office. Theater—art—had brought the two of them to life on stage; and when people applauded, their joy was for them.

That time is behind all of us who are cradle CRC, of course.

Like Yankee Dutch or *Purpaleanie*, even the most precious stories we tell are embedded with images that date as quickly as our photographs. Sietze

Buning's poem "Excommunication" lauds the heroics of one Benny Ploegstra, who stood in the pew on the Sunday he was booted from the Carnes church for his drinking. Today, we *treat* alcoholics; today, mostly, we lapse memberships. My thirty-year-old daughter would not be moved by that poem as her grandparents were because her grandparents remember maybe too well what happened in Carnes church. In a way, they were there.

The world is bursting with choice today, and what empowers us more and more is the increasing value we lay upon our own decision-making.

In the fifties, a gang of working stiffs from west Chicago, come June, loved to chase up north to Wisconsin to angle for walleye or small-mouth bass in some inland Wisconsin lake. They'd gather on Sunday night, gulp down coffee at the De Young house, then wait patiently until 12:01 before jumping in their pickups and leaving—so deep and abiding was the sabbatarian ethos of a faith tradition. They'd wait for the clock to strike midnight because they lived under the authority of a way of life created by their church, their denomination, their tribe: they were, first and foremost, Christian Reformed.

Silly?—sure. But there was a time when pastors were *dominees*, and elders kept righteous track of who did or didn't partake of Holy Communion. Making profession of faith for Mr. and Mrs. CRC meant facing a catechetical grilling. It was a rite of passage suffered in a smoke-filled room like something out of film noir. Steeples reigned over small towns throughout the continent. People accepted the rule of the church or got the heck out of Dodge.

If H. J. Kuiper, long-time *Banner* editor and something of a pope, is watching us now, he must be mystified, because time and circumstance has

radically altered both shape and shadow of the denomination he served.

People of my generation, the boomers, as the generations following, do not identify with the CRC as deeply as the couple who thanked me for presenting their lives on stage that night.

Today, both literally and figuratively, there is no Carnes church.

New paradigms

Today the new paradigms that shape us, even as a denomination, are created, for the most part, by forces much larger than we are—forces like technology, globalization, and our own ever-increasing affluence. In many ways, the world is flat—economically and socially but also religiously. Today, CRC members meditate with Sufi, a medieval Islamic poet; they spend prayerful weekends in silence at South Dakota monasteries; they practice yoga. Today, the widest read, Dutch-surnamed writer in the CRC may be Henry Nouwen.

The world is bursting with choice today, and what empowers us more and more is the increasing value we lay upon our own decision-making. Few of us are as willing as our grandparents to submit to a minute hand on a Sabbath's eve. The church, the school, the medical professional, and the academic—all have less authority when individual choice reigns over our decision-making. Today what characterizes our lives in almost every arena is the decline of deference to virtually all forms of traditional authority, including the church—and, certainly, the denomination.

The old man who thanked me mightily might assume that the dramatic changes in the ways in which we see denominational life have been caused by a decline in orthodoxy. He's wrong. The fact is, we live in a different world.

I'll leave it to theologians to declare whether or not we're more "of the world" than we've ever been; what's unmistakable, however, is that we are far more "in the world" than we were when we were a minute ethno-religious sub-culture in a teeming nation of nations.

A Decline in Deference to Authority

Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* recently, Peter J. M. Nicholson, president and chief

executive officer of the Council of Canadian Academies, explained the increasing homage we give to our wants and the decline of deference we pay to traditional sources of authority as “a nearly universal feature of advanced societies.” He goes on to say that “We are witnessing a sociocultural change whose roots run deep in the nature of economically advanced societies. But our understanding of that profound change remains rather shallow and limited largely to a description of the symptoms.”

Nicholson cites Ronald Inglehart at the University of Michigan and Neil Nevitte at Toronto for their work with the World Values Survey, a study which “establish[es] convincingly that ‘the new citizens are less likely than their predecessors to be satisfied with any form of authoritarianism. ... Citizens cut from the newer cloth are more attracted to formations that are bottom-up.’”

Example. On the Dordt College campus these days, two forms of intercollegiate athletics are highly attended: lacrosse and hockey. Both are team sports. Both arise from the students. There is no authority in place for either, no bureaucracy, no adult supervision.

At all five denominational colleges, student-run worship has prospered for a decade already, when voluntary chapel participation languishes. Grass-roots enthusiasm has created new institutions and communities. As exciting as the successes of these programs may be, it’s important for all of us to recognize that the authority of the old institutions fall victim.

Mr. and Mrs. CRC grew up in a western Michigan dominated by an auto industry that is all but gone, a landscape overshadowed by smoke-stack factories that have left the region and even the nation. We’re in a new world, a post-materialist culture, where building things, creating objects—like furniture in Grand Rapids—is no longer the rule of life. Some say we’re no longer “materialists,” even if, in a biblical sense, we certainly may be, as we always have been.

Our affluence has created a generational shift toward what some call “post-materialist” values—“self-esteem, quality of life, and the search for personal fulfillment,” as Richardson puts it. “When those postmaterialist values are combined with the

empowering tools of universal education, a rights-oriented political culture, and the Google search engine, we should not be surprised that more and more people today regard *ex cathedra* expert authority with skepticism, if not outright hostility.”

Will there be a bicentennial? The answer to the question will likely be determined by social and cultural forces outside the denomination, forces which are both more powerful and more destructive on all denominations—not just the CRC—than any problems within our own fellowship.

The Supremacy of Choice

Today, no bit of denominational history is as acutely derided as Synod’s 1928 decision on “worldly amusements”—“thou shalt not dance, play cards, attend movies.” For two, almost three, generations, from Paterson to Pella, those rigorous imperatives came to define us, even when they were violated.

Ironically, the CRC was probably never quite as “modern” as when it tried to stamp its individual members with a behavioral bar code for quick and easy check out. Directives such as the decision on worldly amusements demystify faith, make it a children’s game of chutes and ladders.

The idea of the CRC laying down such precise decrees for holy living is unimaginable today. We’ve grown, matured, progressed; we’re in far better shape. The church wouldn’t even try to prescribe behavior.

According to Peter Jones of Westminster Theological Seminary, as a culture we’ve moved away from “reason and its aridity, but also from its hubris. We’re moving into a new world where the new hubris really is that ‘I am divine, and now I’m in touch with the divine.’” It’s not as if authority doesn’t exist in our culture; it has simply shifted from institutions like the organized church to ourselves as individuals. We write our rules. We determine our own fate. We choose. As the sociologist Peter Berger says, as a culture “we have moved from destiny to choice.”

Our consumerist society pitches its wealth of goods to what we think we need, our wills constantly flattered and tempted. Today, we choose from a half-dozen varieties of Cheerios. Today, any hymnal is outdated the moment it’s released

because we write our own hymns and spiritual songs. If we don't like the ones we have this week, our singer/songwriters will create two or three more for Sunday.

Forty years ago, I decided to attend Dordt College because I didn't think I could play basketball at Calvin. My best friend in high school—we were co-captains of the basketball team—was a preacher's kid from the Reformed Church in America. The two of us decided independently to attend denominational colleges 500 miles away in two adjacent northwest Iowa towns, and we never even considered going to the same school because, despite our friendship, we were of separate tribes: he was RCA; I was CRC. Denominational authority was that strong.

Today, recruiters at any of the denominationally-affiliated colleges will tell you that very few students matriculate at their schools out of denominational loyalty. Today we choose. *We* are the ultimate authority for our decision-making, and that kind of major cultural shift jeopardizes denominational life in every fellowship, not just within the CRC.

Last year, *Time* put a Mylar-mirrored cover on its end-of-the-year edition in an effort to put “you” or “us” on the front because, it argued, the real Person-of-the-Year for 2006 was and is the individual, or, perhaps more strongly stated, “me.” “The tool that makes this possible,” they said, “is the World Wide Web[.]...a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter. Silicon Valley consultants call it Web 2.0, as if it were a new version of some old software. But it's really a revolution.”

Today, we choose. We rule. We determine. We're all deciders.

Today any one of us can rewrite the encyclopedia; today, we form new communities on my-space, then abandon them just as quickly. Today the old journalistic elite have lost clout because today, thanks to blogs, the power lies with the people. In almost every professional field—even medicine—those who formerly wielded authority have lost significant authority to the information deluge that has arrived in all of our homes by way of new technologies.

Not long ago, the *NY Times* ran a feature story

titled “Going Church to Church To Find a Faith That Fits,” and featured a young lady named Emily Hoogenboom, a recognizable surname in local bingo establishments, the fourteen-year-old daughter of what the *Times* called “an evangelical family.” According to the article, Emily attends multiple churches every Sunday, sitting first through what the *Times* called “the staid worship” of her parents’ Forest Ridge Community Church, an RCA congregation in Monument, Colorado, but then jamming with “4,000 other worshippers at an evangelical megachurch listening to six singers, backed by a band and a swaying choir of 250 people.”

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“A number of Christians are regularly attending different churches in the course of a week or a month, picking and choosing among programs and services, to satisfy social and spiritual needs. They are comfortable participating in multiple churches.” That's the news story the *Times* uncovered.

Emily's mother, Tracy, 49, explained. “I saw that my parents' relationship to Christ and my relationship to Jesus Christ were different, and my kids aren't going to relate to Jesus Christ the same way we do.... And that's to be expected because Jesus Christ is your own personal lord and savior.”¹

In our world, as in our churches, personal choice reigns supreme, even in Saviors.

Not long ago, a student of mine told me that I really ought to try Bridge of Hope, Sioux Center CRC's closest approximation to a with-it congregation—plenty of praise-and-worship music, etc. She said, glowingly, I'd love it because you're so free

to express yourself in that fellowship. Then she shrugged her shoulders. “There’s times, however, I’ve got to go to Bethel [a very traditional worship style] just to settle my nerves.”

Some sociologists of religion have called the phenomenon “cafeteria Christianity,” a dispensation given to youth (especially) amid the dramatic array of inviting possibilities created by our own ecclesiastical pluralism. Many argue that religious tastes have far greater currency than a religious heritage.

Carol Lytch, author of *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*, describes this “heightening of personal autonomy” as a “trend across American church life that affects people of all ages. It is a sense that people have that they must choose their religion instead of being introduced into the wisdom of a tradition that weaves them into the generations of believers of the world who live a way of life as followers of Christ.”²²

Our choosing creates obvious benefits. In terms of curriculum, requirements will forever be less appealing than electives. When people choose, they invest more fully than if they are merely the recipient of a tradition. I was a rebel at Dordt College when I was a student there. I sometimes chafed at authority I wasn’t comfortable with. Life has changed. At Dordt today, we have far fewer rebels because our students have chosen to attend where they do.

Geographic Mobility and Globalization

But denominations—ours and every other—face immense antagonism from an even wider array of forces. For a comprehensive overview, I can’t suggest a better compendium than *Divided by a Common Heritage*, a splendid sociological study by Calvin College political scientists Corwin Smidt and Jim Penning and their Hope College colleagues Donald Luidens and Roger Nemeth.

The cultural realities that Smidt et al list as detrimental to denominationalism include geographic mobility. Today, we move. Few of us stay in one place.

A year or so ago, I was amazed to discover that, of forty twenty-year-old students in two writing classes, close to 60 percent had been on work groups, study tours, evangelism programs on a

continent *other than* North America. It’s likely most of their grandparents never left North America. Our geographic mobility, made possible by our affluence, can and does have debilitating effects on denominations of all flavors.

And more. South of the border, the strongholds of the CRC are in the northern tier of Midwestern states, places to which people are not moving. Over half of the U.S. population now lives on the coasts, and, sadly enough, as Smidt et al point out in their study, the CRC has not done particularly well in those high-growth areas. What’s more, demographic trends—let’s not forget low birth rates—are not particularly favorable to sustaining the life of the CRC.

Today individuals shift professions—not just locations, but professions—five times in their lives. We are all more mobile and less rooted.

The globalization of faith itself prompts new difficulties as well. Not long ago, I was listening to the story of Lao woman Dokmai Vongphakdy, who told me her story of escape from war-torn Laos, the dangers of crossing the Mekong River. Laotian soldiers were not sympathetic to those who wanted to escape. Frequently, daily, people were killed, picked off easily. During her trip across, Dokmai remembered praying, praying fervently to a God she claims, today, she didn’t even know, a God whose outline and story were not at all familiar to her, the God of the universe, whoever that might be, the God who simply had to be there, listening to all the prayers of all the people who needed him. All she knew then, she says, is that she pleaded for a blessing.

A story like Dokmai’s stretches an otherwise settled view of God.

The Effect of Education

Another phenomenon that Smidt et al note is the relationship between education and denominational loyalty. Just twenty years ago, 90 percent of the students enrolled at Dordt College were from the Christian Reformed Church; today, that percentage has dropped to sixty. However, fewer than half of the alumni of Dordt College are in the CRC. The higher the level of education, sociologists say, the lower the commitment to institutions such as religious denomination.

I once wrote a *Banner* story on the now-disbanded congregation at Bejou, Minnesota, where, at the time, only seven people worshipped—average age of about 70. But they bristled at denominational officials who suggested they simply disband and worship with the Lutherans. Both fellowships were in their death throes; when necessary, they boarded the same life raft, the Lutherans serving basement funeral lunches in the CR church and vice versa. Yet, when denominational officials suggested they join the Lutherans, they were angry. “We’re Christian Reformed,” they told me.

Education eases us out of that level of intense tribal identification.

The Rise of Spirituality

For decades, even generations, all kinds of secular academics argued that denominationalism would eventually die, more so that religion itself would die because faith was superstition, a characteristic of an unenlightened people. Advanced societies would esteem reason, not revelation.

For decades, even generations, all kinds of secular academics argued that denominationalism would eventually die, more so that religion itself would die because faith was superstition, a characteristic of an unenlightened people.

Relentlessly, modernity made war on all manner of faiths, including Christianity, until our present age, when something we still rather uncomfortably call post-modernism replaced it, an era that may well have begun officially with fall of the Berlin Wall.

The word *postmodern* almost defies definition; but we can, even if we choose not to use it, locate some significant alterations in the fabric of our cul-

tural life in the last thirty years or so without too much trouble. One of those significant changes abides in our collective (which is to say cultural) understanding of spirituality, religion, and faith itself. Dramatically, what has *not* occurred, despite the nearly century-long assurance of modernity, is the disappearance of faith.

For decades, CRC theologians feared modernism, the tenets of reason come to rule out the mystery of the scriptures and the Christian life. In the town where I grew up, the local Orthodox Presbyterian church organized dramatically on a Sunday morning in 1935, when the pastor led most of the congregation out of the sanctuary and away from the much-despised modernism of the United Presbyterian Church to which that congregation had belonged. What that congregation feared was modernism and, ultimately, secularism. They had good reason—the tenets of reason applied to the Christian faith makes tenuous some of Christianity’s most beloved and central doctrines—the virgin birth and the resurrection.

Amazingly, however, the modernists have lost. Secularism has fallen on hard times in a great awakening of religious faith and fervor—albeit in a coat of many, many colors. Far from disappearing, faith, in innumerable shades, is a growth industry all across our world, largely because spirituality is hot, an orgy of it, in fact—druids, Native ritual, Zen Buddhism, meditation, the monastic life, wiccan, and paganism, to which we might add an even more exotic list: magic, alchemy, astrology, and numerology. The most frequented web site genres are spirituality and sexuality. This new season of television is awash with spiritualism—vampires and zombies in real life situations. Spirituality is hot stuff at the box office.

Sadly, spirituality is also the seat of our deepest fears: today, it animates our wars.

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, a rabbi from Indianapolis and the author of many children’s books, offered a definition of spirituality—as opposed to religion—on NPR’s *Speaking of Faith*. When Moses descended from the mountain after speaking with God in the wilderness, the Bible says his face was aglow—that’s spirituality, she said. But under his arm he was lugging along a brand new tablet of stone containing the Ten Commandments—that’s

religion. Something very human within us attracts us more fervently to that spiritual glow than a cold tablet of stone.

The Reformed tradition—and the CRC historically, traditionally—has been more adept at thinking about God than at touching him. If we pare down the doctrine of regeneration into its two traditional component doctrines, we can say it this way: we're far better at laying out the highway signs on the long road of sanctification than we are at orchestrating the rush and joy, the immediacy, the exultation of the justification moment. For a long time, even within our own ranks people considered us, like other northern European fellowships, the frozen chosen. James Ward, one of the first CCM artists to find a place in CRC circles, once told me that he didn't really like playing to audiences at Calvin or Dordt because students didn't know how to react emotionally. Pentecostals whisper prayers in the wake of a moving musical rendition; when the final notes of the piano slowly die, the concert hall is alive with a seething meditational appreciation. Students at CRC colleges, he once told me, knew only how to clap—so they did, more than occasionally at the very wrong time.

The CRC may not be particularly well-suited for an era when a thirst for spirituality vastly outweighs our desire for any particular practice of religion, and an era some describe, in fact, as being “post-doctrinal.”

The Nature of our Relationships

Technology and the busy-ness of our world have affected the nature and quality of our relationships in a fashion that can quite easily put denominationalism—and all our fellowships—at risk. Clarence Page, a columnist at the *Chicago Daily News* and essayist on *The News Hour*, claims that social fragmentation is occurring at every level of society, perhaps most interestingly in the way in which we gain and maintain friendships. He cites researchers at Duke and the University of Arizona who have determined that “We Americans have more ways to connect to one another in the Internet age, yet we report that our number of close confidants has dropped from about three to about two. And there's more here too. About one quarter of all Americans claim to “have no confidants at all out-

side of their families, two times the percentage of just twenty years ago. “It's not hard to imagine why,” Page says. “Friendships are built over time, and increasingly we don't have enough. The world has speeded up, and so have we.”

I'm sometimes amazed at how few of my students know each other. At the end of the semester, some student will point at another in a different corner of relatively small classroom and say, “Well, I agree with what she says,” as if that person has no name. To a generation almost fanatically interested in what they call “relationships,” their own sometime seem quantitatively at least, quite limited.

Clarence Page goes on to speculate about the practice of faith in a society in which friendships appear to be diminishing. “We're not surprised then to see religion repackaged in today's new American mega-church, stadium-like cathedrals where whosoever will may come and meet a ready-made community of fellow seekers to check out before you commit, no obligation, whatever works.”

Technology and time itself—our busy-ness—are not conducive to human groupings of any kind, much less national organizations like religious denominations, whose relevance seems to many, many of its members increasingly ineffectual.

A Loss of Ethnic Identity

Thus far, I've been speaking mostly about cultural characteristics that affect all denominations. But what about this one in particular—the Christian Reformed Church of North America?

This fall, Dordt College has a football team. Among CRC-affiliated colleges, we're alone, even though several Christian high schools fielded football teams years ago, and thousands of CRC men, like me, played football at public high schools. Yet, it will be impossible for me to watch the Defenders take to the gridiron this fall and not think of Dr. James Bratt, whose meticulous study of the CRC examined every last one of a legion of denominational controversies thematically, by way of the denomination's immersion into the broad national culture, the accommodation called “Americanism.”³

To much of the world, the word “America” conjures images drawn from our culture of celebrity. America means Hollywood, the Super Bowl, million-dollar men with a forty-inch leap or thun-

der thighs. America means football. At Dordt College, we've arrived. I can just about hear Bratt's shrewd chortle.

Perhaps the least shocking thing I could say right now is that the roots of the CRC are in a Dutch immigrant culture. But that immigrant Dutchness is fading, as ethnicity eventually does in a culture that defines itself metaphorically as a "melting pot." (I'm not unaware of Canada's preference for "the mosaic," but I'm not so sure that the same phenomenon isn't occurring—and will continue to—among the ethnic Dutch north of the border.)

There may well have been more glue to hold us together during our first 100 years than our ethnicity, but being Dutch was no trifle. Right here at my side is a half empty sleeve of King Peppermints. I admire African-American gospel hymns, but I'd be an embarrassment in the choir. It's taken me years to understand why the loss of the buffalo was such a horrific disaster to Native people—and I'm still not sure I understand. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* put me in stitches, not because I'm Greek but because I could lay the template of my own people's customs over those drawn from Greek America. Ethnicity cannot be easily be refashioned, like a haircut. But it is, unquestionably, receding.

My first boss, an Irish Catholic from the Bronx who'd spent his professional career as a high-school administrator in Wisconsin, once told me that among his peers, the Dutch enclaves of the state were respected—both Dutch Catholic and Dutch Calvinist—as being great places to work because parents in those communities deeply (and uniquely) respected the work of their teachers. I don't think I have to tell most of you that a penchant for order is an ethnic characteristic. Drive across Iowa sometime and you'll see the difference between Dutch towns and many others. "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" is actually in the Bibles read daily by some Dutch people.

I like to believe that a firm commitment to what we call "the Reformed faith" sat at the heart of a people's commitment to denominational life for the last 150 years, but we all know that's not the whole story. Ethnicity defined us. It was what we were—in many communities, "the Dutch church." The CRC probably clung tenaciously to a

rigid view of the Sabbath to distinguish ourselves from other American Christians, to hold on to an identity, even when Sabbatarianism had either disappeared or had long ago been secularized in the Netherlands. The first real Dutchman I ever met smiled when I told him I was Dutch too. Then he said, "You're the kind who can't ride bikes on Sunday [which I couldn't]. We got rid of those years ago."

A quarter century ago already, Richard Ostling, Senior Correspondent for TIME and a member of the CRC back then, once told me, "The Christian Reformed Church will die—all ethnic denominations do in American culture."

At Dordt College at least, a new Defender football team illustrates vividly that my son is right, that Jim Bratt is right, and that Richard Ostling is right—whatever ethnicity is, no matter how deep or difficult to define, within the CRC today some may well believe there is still too much; but that doesn't mean it isn't disappearing.

The question is, will it take the CRC with it?

... we're far better at laying out the highway signs on the long road of sanctification than we are at orchestrating the rush and joy, the immediacy, the exultation of the justification moment.

Rising Congregationalism

Other factors are also at work—factors like congregationalism. The church of which I am a part supports a few ministries of our own, not the denomination's. We know the people involved; they've lived and worked among us, sometimes grown up in our church. In many ways, it's easier for us to give to folks we know than it is to those whose names are passed along on fliers from 2850 Kalamazoo Avenue.

Even in a small town like Sioux Center, the five CR churches worship differently. For years, one could go from Patterson to Bellflower to Edmonton and ease through worship within the exact same liturgical rhythms. When I went on vacation with my parents when a boy, they would determine where we could go to church on Sunday by checking the *Yearbook* because they knew that visiting a Christian Reformed church would be just like worshipping at home. I remember attending a Winona Lake Bible Conference when I was kid, my cousins and I laughing uncontrollably at the expressive antics of the folks beside us, yelling amens and hallelujahs. I thought I was in a madhouse.

Not long ago, I asked someone at Calvin Seminary to name and describe the really vital CR churches in the Grand Rapids area. He did—as many as a half-dozen, without hesitation. But when he described them, it was very clear that their vitality was entirely unrelated to each other's and, furthermore, based honestly on an acceptance of their uniqueness, not their unity. We are “bloom- ing where we're planted.”

Nonetheless, our growing congregationalism, a strength, to be sure, probably arises at the expense of denominationalism.

A related issue arises in every conversation I've ever had on these matters north of the border. Canadian nationalism is a larger dimension of our own growing congregationalism. If, say, southern California churches should be, first of all, southern California churches and not CR churches, then shouldn't Canadian churches similarly assume the importance and dignity of their own national independence?

Approximately 40 percent of the CRC lives north of the border, as many members as live in western Michigan. What's more, those numbers create a much more visible presence demographically on the more slimly populated Canadian landscape than do those CRC members who live south of the border in a nation that is many times bigger. As we become more diverse, more local, more congregational, the withdrawal of Canadian CR churches from a weakened denomination seems not only plausible but inevitable.

Diminishment of a Third Way

Although my parents changed over the years, I remember a time when they weren't sure of Billy Graham, a man they thought to be simply “saving souls.” There was an implied diminishment in that description because my parents—at that time—held more defiantly to a mission they considered more encompassing. As inheritors of the doctrine of God's sovereignty, they felt a bit unsure of extending to man, even the Rev. Billy Graham, the task they believed only God could do; salvation, after all, belongs to the Lord. “Saving souls” lived in the neighborhood of “cheap grace.”

On the other hand, my parents understood the problems associated with theological liberalism. As I've said, I grew up in a town where the Orthodox Presbyterians had walked away from the PCUSA because of its proximity to “those [who] questioned the full authority of the Bible and ended up denying every biblical doctrine that modern secular thinking found disagreeable.” My parents understood theological liberalism or modernism.

What that left them with was what some have called a kind of “third way,” a view of their tradition and fellowship that was neither fish nor fowl on the American Protestant landscape—neither liberal (like the mainline churches) nor fundamentalist, like so many of their American evangelical brothers and sisters.

But other than a few scholars at our colleges and seminary, do people really care at all about what Smidt et al call “a Reformed heritage”? After listening to lots of CRC men and women in the last year or so, I don't think so.

One of the effects of the immense polarization which characterizes the culture of the USA today—and that of our churches—is the diminishment of our believing there may be a “third way,” a distinctive “Reformed” approach to church and life. The tremendous gulf separating people today over issues like abortion, gay rights, and stem-cell research have made it difficult for any of us to stand outside two virulently opposite camps in the culture wars, to position ourselves in a kind of “third way.”

Consider this. As Smidt, et al, point out so clearly, our historic fights have been theological

and they've been ours: supra-lapsarianism versus infra-lapsarianism, common grace and special grace, pre-mill or post-mill or a-mill.

Today the issues that separate us are not simply our own, not particular to us; they belong to the broader culture. We've all become grunts in the opposing camps of the culture wars. Like everyone else, today we go to war about abortion and women's rights or gay rights.

Today the issues that separate us are not simply our own, not particular to us; they belong to the broader culture.

Perhaps no single argument illustrates the extent of the CRC's immersion in North American culture more vividly than the fact that the immense polarization which characterizes the political and social culture of our world is mirrored perfectly within our denomination. The less than triumphant reception that greeted President George W. Bush at Calvin's 2005 Commencement prompted, in my own family, epic battles that neither I nor my siblings remember pleasantly. Why? Because today our ecclesiastical fights *are* the great cultural battles of our time. Our church battles are political battles.

If today there is a "third way," it's not clear what it is. We're at war.

What Smidt et al conclude on this issue is pertinent here. "In many ways," they conclude, "contemporary expressions of 'Reformed' Christianity are more reflective of the mainstream evangelical flow than of the Reformed tradition." To be Reformed, they say, means—to many of us—to be mainstream evangelical. And more:

So powerful has been this pull that one could posit that the adoption of this form of popular evangelicalism is doing more to undermine the rich confessional legacy of Reformed Christianity than all of the so-called "secularization" forces of modernity. (146)

The Importance of Evangelicalism

One story. I was visiting an adult discussion group in the heartland when I read this quote to those in attendance. Some folks looked at me as if they weren't exactly sure what was being suggested. "Let me try to explain it this way," I said. "It may well be that more people in the Christian Reformed Church today find answers to important questions in Dr. James Dobson than in any one thinking about contemporary issues within the denomination."

A woman, right at my elbow, said immediately, "I work for James Dobson!"

I told myself that it would have been nice to have a second chance at the explanation I'd just offered.

Just one of the great divides in our denomination today is the one which separates two decidedly different views of what is called "the evangelical subculture." That woman's response represents one side of the ledger.

On the other side is a representation of (often) young intellectuals—many of them trained at denominational colleges—who believe Dobson and the entire evangelical enterprise is little more than a quasi-religious manifestation of American consumerist ideology: if we attend the pretty church down the street, worship joyfully with our friends, drive away in our SUVs, and stop for brunch at Applebees, we can piously sing along with the praise songs on our CDs as we retreat from engaging the world and the culture.

Let me speak personally here. My mother adores almost everything about evangelical culture today—eschews cable TV because she can't hear her favorite preachers; my son disdains what he sees in the movement in nearly equal proportion.

The relative importance of "the evangelical subculture"—it's inherent truth, its perceived righteousness—divides my own family, as it does many of ours. As it does us.

When Andy Kuyvenhoven retired as *Banner* editor, he offered us this possibility—that our greatest enemies were materialism and fundamentalism. I don't believe that he was wrong.

The Angry Children of Mr. CRC

It's probably impossible to number the thousands who have left the denomination in the last

few decades for more conservative fellowships like the United Reformed Church. Some claim that number is as high as 30,000. On the other hand, no one could keep track of the number who left for more progressive fellowships, slamming doors because the pace of change on matters like women in office has been interminably sluggish or that worship is simply too plodding. In the last thirty years the denomination has hemorrhaged from every possible orifice, and it's as much a blessing as a wonder we've survived at all. But we have. Sort of.

In the past year I've traveled hither and yon through denominational neighborhoods, visited with many good folks, talked to and with adult Sunday school-type gatherings on matters related to the future of the denomination. I've spoken with hundreds of people—young and old, rich and poor, professors and ranchers, moms and dads, grandpas and grandmas—and I've come away feeling that, like a family, we regard ourselves and our past with tenacious intensity that sometimes—quite often, in fact—feels much, much more like hate than love. Listening to too many adults speak about their relationship to the church of their youth is like being trapped inside any of a dozen Alice Munro short stories where parental authority simply refuses to die, no matter how primally we scream out its demise. Traditionalists may despise the kind of praise-and-worship liturgies the church growth movement has spread throughout Christendom; but, at the same time, they may embrace a woman pastor, even seek one. Those who wouldn't think of singing without raising their hands to invoke the Holy Spirit may home-school and balk at women deacons.

On the edges of denominational life, many create a straw-man centerpiece out of what they believe they've left behind—a Mr. and Mrs. CRC on a hardwood bench, half asleep when they're not slapping their kids—images that probably no longer exist. I heard little but disdain about the CRC from members of a “community church” who could unite around one principle: that they were pulsating with the Holy Spirit in a way the old cold fish in Carnes CRC could never do.

On the political left, George W. Bush *has become* the antichrist, and those CRC members who

side with him (and those numbers are legion) are hung out to dry on fish hooks. The theological right relegates the dying of the light to liberals who fiendishly upset creational order by advocating women as preachers. High church folks stick up their noses at low-church kitsch. Traditionalists despise media screens. P and W's hate the *Psalter*, no matter what color—and all of those dinosaurs who insist on holding them. Neo-Kuyperians disdain the me-and-my-sweet Jesus pietists. Pietists think Neo-Kuyperians should shut up and work on their personal relationship with Jesus. Pro-life militants think the church today is too lukewarm to be anything but spit out.

Perhaps that kind of defining by negation is the psychological heritage of a people who began their own institutional life by breaking away to maintain purity. From the beginning we've defined ourselves by what we're not; and that kind of definition, I fear (especially in a post-doctrinal age), does not promise a lively future.

I don't know that I've hit all the arguments for our demise, but there are many. For reasons I never understood well, my father stood four-square against gambling of any kind, even local fund-raising raffles. They were to him anathema. Nonetheless, I'm going to employ a metaphor here that I can get by with because my father isn't here to criticize. If I were a gambler—which I'm not—it would be silly of me not to see that the good money today would have to be placed on the immanent end-of-the-road for the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

The Future Generations

From the outset, I've been talking about the future—what it might be. Given that focus, it may seem late in the game to get to what might be the most important feature of that future—Mr. and Mrs. CRC's grandchildren and great-grandchildren. What we know about them, for certain, is that they are, like every other, a brand new generation. So who are our kids? How do they see themselves or create a vision of what will be the pageant of their lives?

Studies abound—all of them helpful—but perhaps the best because most comprehensive was undertaken and released by the National Study of

Youth and Religion, a team of researchers led by Dr. Christian Smith at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and funded by a major grant from the Lilly Foundation.

The results of their studies, interviews with thousands of youth, include the following:

- American teens see religion as a positive force in their lives;
- Very few appear to be leaving the faith or even searching for meaning and truth in arenas other than that given to them by their parents;
- They tend to see their faith as a protection from difficult forces around them;
- Their affiliation with a church fellowship has positive effects upon their behavior—they are not as likely to engage in “delinquent risk behaviors” as are their peers who are not associated with a fellowship in church or synagogue;
- They are also more likely than their non-churched peers to have a bright outlook on life, to do well in school, to enjoy good relationships with peers and with parents.

In this highly spiritual age, it might not be surprising to note that 84 percent claimed faith in God, that another 12 percent expressed some ambivalence, but that only three percent of the thousands of kids surveyed claimed they had no belief whatsoever. Just about half the number surveyed claimed that their faith was “very” or “extremely” important in their lives.

Interestingly, in an age of “cafeteria Christianity,” close to 80 percent of those teens claimed they intend to be a part of the same congregation as their parents when they are twenty-five years old.

All of that seems encouraging, especially when we consider—as I’ve tried to show—that the “authority” of the church has been in decline for several decades. If teens don’t see themselves departing from the ways of their parents, our membership may well not decline, although there are, of course, considerably fewer of them than there are of us.

What the National Study of Youth and Religion turned up was not all so encouraging, however. While kids seem to have few problems with the character of their parents’ faith, they also seemed

to *know very little* about that faith—whether that faith is Roman Catholic or Protestant or Jewish.

That dearth of knowledge prompted researchers to create a moniker for the polyglot faith attested to so universally: “moralistic therapeutic deism,” they called it because “for most teens, religion doesn’t mean much beyond trying to be a

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good person,” they said. “God, according to these teens, is a being who tries to help people accomplish that, but doesn’t demand much else.”

The Mother Church and the CRC

That lack of knowledge may help explain a phenomenon which has led Catholic leaders to call segments of the younger generation “Generation John Paul II.” Young men in seminaries and young men and women in Catholic colleges and universities are pursuing a more conservative approach toward the practice of their faith than their parents did. According to Laura Goldstein, writing in the *NY Times*, “The ‘millennial generation’ of young Catholics—those born in 1982 or later—has returned to traditional religious attitudes and behavior, more than generations born before the start of World War II,” expressions of faith and worship “more familiar to their grandparents than their parents.”

Trust an old story-teller here—a story is nothing without surprise. Listen to this one: perhaps the values of Mr. and Mrs. CRC are being reborn in their grandchildren—if not reborn, perhaps reexamined.

Twenty-five years ago, I wrote a book titled *CRC Family Album*, a collection of stories about CRC members from all over the continent. “Who

are we? What are we up to? What do we think of ourselves?”—those kinds of questions I asked each subject.

Time after time people answered, “The preaching of the Word.” Were I to begin a similar project today, my guess is that I wouldn’t hear that answer so frequently.

But just recently I was amazed and gratified to hear Calvin seminary students use, unequivocally, very similar words. “When you look ahead ten years to your own ministries in the churches where you’ll serve, what do you see as the most important task you face?” They answered, without hesitation: “the preaching of the Word.” And when I told them they were disgustingly old-fashioned, they shook off my disparagement as if my words were museum dust in a museum.

Like the Roman Catholic seminarians and college students returning to a tradition of church life they never really knew, is it possible that contemporary seminary students are becoming more—dare I say the word?—“traditional”?

Let me go a little farther. These seminarians told me they were robbed of the knowledge of their own religious heritage by parents who seemingly didn’t care whether or not they attended catechism or Sunday school. That indifference, they claimed, was going to change. The church, they said, has to do a better job of educating its kids—and parents have to take charge. To me, shocking.

Preaching is important because, to them, worship is important. I was amazed to hear them say that fracturing families in worship is wrong—that our nearly universal adoption of “children’s church” is something which must end because, they told me, worship is “a family experience.” When I told them that they didn’t have a prayer of passing that idea in most churches, they shrugged their shoulders as if to say it is a matter of principle: worship and all of church life is a family thing.

“What’s it going to be like,” I asked them, “—this church you’re going to serve?”

“Lots of potlucks,” one of them said, and the rest assented—dare I say it?—hungrily.

Today, potlucks are as much a part of cultural history of many CR churches as the old red *Psalter*. What those seminarians meant is *potlucks* as symbol and metaphor. They want to create the familial

atmosphere that potlucks connote—something, pardon my French, *gezellig*.

It seems to me there is a return here, a return as clear as that ongoing among the Roman Catholics. And yet it’s *not* a return, per se. The food at those potlucks may well include jello salad and ham buns, but it will also feature humus and burritos, kimshi and Pineapple Mango salad, fry bread and okra.

The muscle of this “return” will be manifest—and the fervor was evident in the passion of their answers—in this generation’s *having chosen* their own course of action. They are not simply heirs to a conventional culture, shadowing their parents; some of them may be “cradle Christian Reformed,” but they’ve not come to where they are by way of a vacuum-sealed ethnic or ecclesiastical pipeline. They believe they’ve made a choice. And that choosing brings a tenacity to affirmations we might characterize as “traditional,” affirmations about preaching and church education that have been weakening for decades.

This is all crystal ball, but then, so is the topic. Where will we be in 50 years? No one knows. I certainly don’t claim to be prescient.

But nothing in my travels around the denomination was quite so affirming of a view that we *will* celebrate a bicentennial than a visit with a dozen seminarians who entirely surprised me with what they believed and how deeply they believed it.

New Life for Denominationalism

It is common knowledge that booming Protestant congregations today are likely to be independents. Mega-churches eschew denominational legacies as limitations to their growth. Yet some Protestant congregations are re-investing in the foundations which are the legacy of their particular denominational life. Dr. Nancy T. Ammerman, Professor of the Sociology and Director of Graduate Programs at Boston University, describes this countertrend:

Those congregations that are most mobile and the most full of switchers and the most highly educated, precisely the ones you think would say that denominations are most passé, are saying, no, I really want to know what it means to be an Episcopalian. I want to know what it means to be a Lutheran. I want to study about it, and I want to learn and

really invest in an identity and a tradition. We see both kinds of things going on, both a re-valuing of identity and an erosion of identity.⁴

Numbers of fellowships are looking more closely at the foundations of their individual theological traditions, according to Ammerman, hoping to find something of substance within those traditions, something of lasting value.

Arguments for the dissolution of denominational cultures also fail to recognize what's obvious to anyone who's been watching denominational life in the Christian Reformed Church in North

A year ago, Christianity Today featured a cover story with this title: "Young, Restless, Reformed: Calvinism is making a comeback and shaking up the church."

America. In many areas denominationalism is very much alive—specifically in those areas where we might well expect it to have remained most vibrant—in areas more rural than urban.

Interestingly and even ironically, what many urban churches want to recreate is the kind of community that exists within rural areas and small towns. Just as city planners are placing great value on the creation of identifiable communities within their sprawling housing developments, many urban congregations seek to nurture a small-town atmosphere. Some city churches would love more potlucks.

Ammerman's research shows that those churches who determine to nurture a sense of their denominational identity do so intentionally: "Those for whom denomination is a salient identity," she claims, "seemed to be working rather consciously to make it so."⁵ What such churches are saying, to themselves and to others, is "we study and try

to integrate the theology of the church—the traditional theology of the church. We study the Bible. We celebrate the Eucharist in a very traditional way. We're going to present this wonderful rich tradition we have in a way that is open."

The CRC has a tradition. I'm not sure how many of us would call it "wonderful and rich." But if the Christian Reformed Church desires to play a particular role within North American Christendom, it probably needs to be more intentional about that task and not assume that its goodly heritage will be passed along like a tube of peppermints or a genetic propensity for cleanliness. Congregations that value heritage must work at perpetuating historic legacy.

What is Worth Being Intentional About?

"What does it mean to be 'Reformed'?" If my discussions with ordinary members of the CRC reveal anything, it is that we aren't sure. If some of us want to be intentional, then we will need to determine what is precious and peculiar.

Let me return to Richard Ostling, the *Time* magazine senior editor who told me a quarter century ago that the Christian Reformed Church (of which he is a member) *will die*, precisely because all ethnic denominations eventually are tossed into the American melting pot. The important question the CRC faces, he told me a quarter century ago, is not whether or not it will pass away, but what gift from the tradition is worth perpetuating. The salient matter for discussion is not what of us will die, but what part of us should live on.

In the Christian Reformed Church today, *there is no consensus on that answer*. If we are to be intentional, no task may be as formidable as our determining what ideas sit at the very heart of being "Reformed."

Not long ago, I asked a number of bright young people who were "joining the church," appearing before the consistory (I was a member), what they thought the word *Reformed* might mean. None of them had an answer, but the oldest, a young man, son of a strong CRC family, who'd gone to a Mennonite high school in Canada, although he'd graduated from Dordt, told us he really didn't have any idea about that word. "I know almost everything there is to know about Menno Simmons," he

told us, “but I don’t know a thing about Calvin.”

Perhaps we might begin with this word—*Calvinism*, a word with as much bitter aftertaste for some of us as the phrase “worldly amusements.” While some of us have been eschewing the word for its unsavory connotations, some evangelicals have been drawn toward it with notable intensity. A year ago, *Christianity Today* featured a cover story with this title: “Young, Restless, Reformed: Calvinism is making a comeback and shaking up the church.” What they noted was

a resurgence of Reformed theology among young people. You can’t miss the trend at some of the leading evangelical seminaries, like Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, which reports a significant Reformed uptick among students over the past 20 years. Or the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, now the largest Southern Baptist seminary and a Reformed hotbed.⁶

Consider that *Gilead*, one of the finest novels in the last decade, was written by Marilyn Robinson, who not only considers herself a Calvinist but regularly worships as one. That novel creates a living, breathing Calvinist preacher whose compassion and humility deconstruct traditional caricatures like Arthur Dimmesdale and “Sinners in the Hands of Angry God.” And consider that Ms. Robinson accomplished that same task earlier in a book titled *The Death of Adam*, a collection of essays than may well have done more to out John Calvin from his crypt than anything written by an apologist theologian. I’m not sure the word *Calvinist* is any more dead than the word *Reformed*. Maybe we’ve just been too anxious to bury it.

In a recent *NY Times* op-ed, David Brooks makes the claim that Barack Obama is an avid fan of Reinhold Niebuhr. When Brooks asked Obama whether he’d ever read Niebuhr, Obama said, “I love him. He’s one of my favorite philosophers.” Most would affirm Niebuhr’s credentials as a “Reformed” theologian.

But why did Obama feel such a kinship? “In a rush of words,” Brooks says, Obama explained that he found Niebuhr helpful for giving him “the compelling idea that there’s serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain.”

And more. “And we should be humble and

modest in our belief we can eliminate those things.” And yet more. “But we shouldn’t use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away ... the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.”

There has been a significant rise in interest in Reinhold Niebuhr in the last few years. He may well have been the last rock-star theologian, and the last gasp of a blue-blood Presbyterian hegemony in American political life, an era that probably ended with the presidency of John F. Kennedy. But most consider Reinhold Niebuhr “Reformed” for reasons that have to do with his assertions about man’s innate sinfulness and the importance, therefore, of our being “humble and modest,” as Obama said, in what we believe.

To be *Reformed*, to be *Calvinistic*, may not be an anachronism.

If, as a culture, people are looking to Niebuhr for some kind of guidance—as Obama obviously is—then it’s likely that others as well may be attracted to his thought on the basis of the paradox which Obama himself locates in the Niebuhr’s writing—the manifest importance of our work, as Christians, in the world, but the importance, even the necessity of our not being triumphalistic about it. That paradox is itself a restatement of what some consider to be the twin towers of Calvinist theology—the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man.

But while the last several years down here, south of the border, have, without question, created an unprecedented opportunity for evangelical Christians to have a voice in the political conversation, that opportunity may well have led more to failure than to success. Too often, Christians have sounded like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

Perhaps no other single political event in the recent past has been as startling as the 2006 elections in the U.S., because a significant number of people have seemingly returned to what we might call a middle ground. They have walked away from the polarization that has existed within American culture in the last several years—a polarization which has existed also within us—and have returned to a more nuanced view of what is happening all

around. Not long ago, President Jimmy Carter said that he thought Christians are more divided today, in our culture, than they have been “in any time since the Christian faith originated.”⁷ Historians may differ, of course, but the gulf is spacious, and it runs directly through families, like mine.

Let me propose a possibility—that the tremendous success afforded to evangelicals in the Bush era may well have been less than helpful in the greater cause of Christ’s kingdom, and that the diminution of the power of the religious right may grant to a kind of “third way” more credibility than such a viewpoint has had for at least a decade—maybe more. A movement back to the center may well offer “the Reformed tradition”—and the CRC—new and strong opportunities to work in the kingdom, and for the kingdom.

An analogous situation perhaps. Not long ago, I asked Rev. Paul Mpindi, head of the Back to God Hour’s French-Speaking ministries, how it was possible for someone like himself, a strong proponent of Reformed theology, to find a place on a continent where Christianity was growing astronomically every day, but the form was Pentecostal.

I maintain that you don’t try to do what Pentecostals do best. They bulldoze places through one-on-one and mass evangelism. They emphasize the ministry of the Holy Spirit (which is good), and they promise in most instances health and wealth (which is not good).

Then follows the typical pattern: people are caught in the maze for a couple of years, then prosperity and health do not always follow. They start asking questions. They grow frustrated.

Then we come with the calm, well-thought, and biblically-based Reformed theology, which acknowledges all the aspects raised by Pentecostalism but frames them in the sovereignty of God. Yes, God saves spiritually, physically, and economically, but He is obligated to nobody. God is not a teller machine. He is the Creator, the Lord we have to worship and serve. We should expect everything from Him, even the things we do not like, etc.

This is what I have been preaching for eight years. Listeners’ responses to our broadcast have grown from 80 a month to 35,000 a month in 8 years! Reality never backs wealth-and-health Gospel. But only the teaching on God’s provi-

dence and reliability lasts.

In the push and pull of all of our lives as individuals as groups, there will always be a need for stability in the creative process, for reason as a means of being thoughtful about revelation, for sanctification as a guide and process to understanding even our grand and glorious justification moments. Billy Sunday will always be a part of the family of God, but so will C. S. Lewis. Dutch

What the Christian Reformed Church has brought to the table in North America, in a way that is unique, is a world-and-life view that begins in a commitment to the Lord but doesn’t stop there. It includes just as strong a commitment to the world God loves, a commitment that begins in earnest awareness of that world and not in retreat from it.

Reformed history in North America includes both Theodore Frelinghuysen and R. B. Kuyper. Some people will always love “Kumbayaa,” while others prefer “Onward Christian Soldiers.”

Perhaps it’s time to get serious at trying to answer the question Rev. Jerry Dykstra asked recently in a *Banner* article: what really does hold together that old bar stool his father, another Mr. CRC, once hammered together? He returned to that question in a subsequent article but never really gave an answer—other than to say it was nice bar stool. Sure. We need to be intentional about the

glue—or nails—or at least the design by which his father created that stool.

My own Ideas

The strong piety which characterized us in the past is not our special gift to North American culture; the pious are all around us in a thousand different flavors. While piety is central to our identity, our heartfelt commitment is only the beginning of our most important legacy.

What the Christian Reformed Church has brought to the table in North America, in a way that is unique, is a world-and-life view that begins in a commitment to the Lord but doesn't stop there. It includes just as strong a commitment to the world God loves, a commitment that begins in earnest awareness of that world and not in retreat from it.

Krista Tippett says North American Christians each contribute a significant piece of the all-encompassing breadth of Christianity: “the Anglicans saw ‘common prayer,’ she says, “Lutherans saw the Bible, Mennonites saw pacifism, Calvinists saw intellectual rigor, and the Quakers saw silence.”

Her characterization is not inaccurate: the traditional strength of the CRC has been “intellectual rigor” created by a worldview that insists this world cannot and should not be overlooked in our soulful aspiration for the next.

Without a doubt, strengths can be weaknesses. In the very human antagonism all of us feel between head and heart, in our own Reformed confessional tradition head has most often triumphed, sometimes—often?—at the expense of heart. No question.

But measure the words of Phillip Yancey, who once told me that the CRC has had an influence in American evangelicalism that's vastly greater than our meager demographics. That influence has been largely intellectual, which is to say, thoughtful, in character. The gift which we've brought to the table in North America is the gift of faithfulness which is as thoughtful as it is deeply committed.

Nowhere on the landscape is that gift as clearly visible as in the hundreds of Christian educational institutions that this denomination's own have established, often without regard to personal cost, often by early morning newspaper routes, by rasp-

berry picking, by roadside markets to meet ever rising tuition costs.

Can Christian schools be clannish? Of course. Can they drive good Christian people apart in communities? Without a doubt. Can they become cultural fortresses? Surely. Can they wrongly codify righteousness? Yes, they can.

Despite those very human weaknesses, Christian education—from pre-K to the Institute of Christian Studies—is, I believe, an uniquely blessed contribution to both North American culture and North American evangelical culture, a brick and mortar symbol of a particular creed which insists that all of life belongs to God our Maker.

But the schools themselves are not our greatest gift. Our greatest gift is the confessional foundation in which those schools—all of them—have been nurtured, a theology which insists on God's immense sovereignty over all of life, because “from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To him be the glory, forever. Amen.”

It's that idea, that truth, which is worth our vigilance, a truth which has its own story—from Augustine to Calvin to Bavinck to Kuyper (add your own names here). About that story and that vision of things we need to be intentional because that truth is worthy of continuing institutional life, not because it's somehow ours, not because it's even a goodly heritage, but because it is the gospel's own truth.

Here's the way Richard Mouw puts it in *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*: “For some of us, at least, to be a Calvinist today also means that we will have to work at keeping alive the memories of older sayings and teachings in the hope that there will soon come a day when many others will want to learn such things again.”

What else has it given us? The Back to God Hour, which is not to say “The Hour of Power”; CRWRC—one of the first relief organizations to reach tsunami victims in southeast Asia two years ago; publications that have been blessings to Christendom long before there was anything like the CBA; professional missions programs; Calvin, Dordt, Trinity, Kings, Redeemer, and a growing international influence, because “the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they

that dwell therein. For he has founded it....”

Thus saith the Lord.

A Tale of Two Churches

Three decades ago, my wife and I moved from Arizona to northwest Iowa and joined the very traditional First Christian Reformed Church, the church of the Reverend B. J. Haan.

“Will there be a CRC in 2057?” That’s a question I’ve asked a score of people in the last several months, and one of the most common answers was “yes, but it won’t be what it is today.”

Sunday evening services at First Church years ago—week in, week out—began with a ten-minute hymn sing. One of the song leaders (there were only three, all practiced church musicians) was a much beloved professor of history—short, bald, and blessed with huge voice—who, as if he were some rogue buck sergeant, regularly upbraided the faithful for missing the correct musical punctuation.

Thirty years ago, First Church was always packed, even the balcony, even—mostly—at night. Bona fide “oncers” were around, but there weren’t many. Thirty years ago, with that commanding prof at the helm, the whole roof jumped with our singing, several hundred souls booming out much beloved hymns in four-part harmony.

By a pilgrimage through local churches, my wife and I now worship with a different congregation, but in the very same building as old First Church. Today, that building is, at best, half full. On Sunday nights (we’re still among the traditional) we worship—but the gathering is far smaller, smaller and, well, “oncer.” On Sunday nights, a praise team stands up front and tries to inspire the

meager faithful. Anyone can lead. You don’t have to be a musician; you just have to want to praise the Lord. We’re far more democratic. But even with the praise team at the front leading maybe a hundred souls, we barely reach a decibel level high enough to reach the vacant balcony.

Much of what we sing frequently has the feel of ballads, not anthems; they’re introspective, love songs that carry no marching orders; instead, music nurtures us in the therapeutic character of our culture: Jesus is love, and he loves me. Even if the sanctuary were packed, the more contemporary music itself couldn’t generate the massive timbre that once filled the very same physical space.

It would be dewy-eyed for me to believe that the full house on Sunday night worship in ye olde church grew unprompted from pure and pious hearts. Back then, the community itself—an impressive accountability group if there ever was one—made worship, rightly attended, mandatory. The catechism made clear that church discipline was one of the keys of the kingdom that dangled from the belt loops of the consistory.

Today, worship is attended only by those who choose to be there.

The building doesn’t look the same either. We no longer sit fore to aft. The pews are gone, and individual chairs spread in rows that fan out from a small stage on the starboard side so that the front is more accessible. No one is all that far from the preacher, who’s become a pastor. We want intimacy, not authority—love, not discipline; grace, not brimstone.

Today, often, we come up front ourselves for communion instead of waiting for the elders to pass the elements. Today, in almost every way, participation in worship means far, far more than sitting and standing and sitting and then listening to a man hold forth for approximately thirty-five minutes. Today, the power is to the people. Like everyone else, we’ve added a fellowship hall.

“Will there be a CRC in 2057?” That’s a question I’ve asked a score of people in the last several months, and one of the most common answers was “yes, but it won’t be what it is today.”

Who could have guessed, a half century ago, that people who worshipped in the building we worship in today would be discussing—as many of

us already have—the issues related to the viability of the second service; who would have guessed we'd have elders who are oncologists—or women, for that matter? Who could have known that Sioux Center, Iowa, would be one-quarter Hispanic, or that Dordt College would play football?

Who knows what fifty years will bring? Who knows if the Lord should tarry? Who knows where the continent's coastlines will run in a half century? Who knows if we'll have gasoline?

A Cowboy Church

A couple of months ago, I spent one wonderful night in the spacious country home of Art and Karen Terpsma, rural route, Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, where the immense rack of a trophy elk spreads out over the dining room. Art shot it not all that far from their farm, and if you sit there for long, he's likely to tell you the story.

That night, I remember standing out on the porch for awhile, in a gentle foothills snow; his cattle were calving, and he said it hadn't been a particularly blessed year—unseasonable cold, the stock cows suffering through endless complications. Their daughter zipped up her auburn coveralls and went out on the four-wheeler to check the moms. Out there on the porch, Art told me he thinks he's not going through it again, another round of calving—he's not getting any younger, and the pressure is killing him. Blasted U. S. self-centeredness has played havoc with Alberta cattlemen. It's a wonder my head wasn't up there on the wall too.

Art and his wife Karen and their kids—they're all grown—have a cowboy band, country-western hymns and songs. They lead mid-week services at a come-as-you-are fellowship where just about anything goes, they claim, smiling. It's not exactly "Christian Reformed," but it's what they love, what they do, and what they do for the Lord and his kingdom.

Some nights on the weekends, they get together in that room of the great elk and jam, get their music ready for worship—the whole family. And every third Thursday or so, they hold forth at a cowboy church right there on Cowboy Road, a church plant that's not CRC, a community church thing.

They attend Rocky Mountain House CRC and have for years. Art's been an elder more than once, gone through some tough stuff too—he was there when the pastor's wife was killed not long ago in an auto accident. It was Mary's job—she had no choice—to tell the pastor's daughter her mother was gone. They've been through some things, and they've got some miles on them; but the church is important to them—in their work and in their play and in their worship.

If the CRC doesn't survive, think of Art and Karen and their children as being our legacy, beating out country-western ballads that celebrate Jesus in a honky-tonk church on Cowboy Road.

Think of, say, Billy Hybels as our legacy, born and reared CRC but now the pastor of Willow Creek. Think of Peter Kreeft, another CRC kid. Google him sometime and you'll find out as much as you might care to know about the Roman Catholic church he serves. Think of Marchienne Rienstra, from a seminary down the road. Think of both my sisters—a special-ed teacher and a social worker; neither is CRC. We've all lost family, I'm sure. But the kingdom hasn't.

Will We Be?

When I was finishing *Our Family Album*, I asked Harvey Smit if I could be relieved of having to write the final chapter, the chapter about our future. Who am I to poke around what no one knows—I'm not a historian, a sociologist, or even a theologian, I told him. I don't even live in Grand Rapids.

"Do it," he said.

And now I'm at it again, taking a shot at playing the clairvoyant. What will we be in fifty years? Lots of us care, but the fact is, God only knows.

Even though my family is intact, my barns are standing, and my flesh isn't bedeviled with boils, the scripture that comes to mind as I finish up here is that excoriating monologue that brings the book of Job to a thundering close, where God says,

Where were you when I created the earth?

Tell me, since you know so much!

Who decided on its size? Certainly you'll know that!

Who came up with the blueprints?

How was its foundation poured?

and who set the cornerstone

While the morning stars sang in chorus
and all the angels shouted praise?
Who took charge of the ocean
when it gushed forth like a baby from the womb?
That was me!

I hear those roaring rhetorical questions because no one knows what we'll be in fifty years. Should our Lord tarry through another half-century, God almighty will still *own* his people, his

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church, and his world; and he will have his way with us—the pietists, the neo-Kuyperians, the Dobsonites, our country-western crooners, those who love the tradition and those who despise it, young and old, weak and powerful in Grand Rapids and Grand Prairie, Sioux Center, Byron Center, Pease and Celeryville, in Holland, Holland Marsh, Holland Center, Hollandale, and New Holland. And that's not all either—how about new church plants in Clifton, Cochrane, Bangor, or Olathe—places with strange names like Living Mosaic, The Tapestry, The River, Neuvo Horizonte or Jesus te Llam.

Those of us who own up to a sovereign Lord and Creator who loved this very world so much he sent his son—we will be his and He will be ours, no matter what letters or words we inscribe on our shingles.

Just more than a century ago, 1905 to be exact, my great-grandfather took his son, a seminarian, down the road from Orange City to the Carnes

Christian Reformed church. There, he listened as his boy held forth, the first sermon the old man ever heard his son preach. The next morning, my great-grandfather didn't wake up. He'd died in his sleep. That there is no Carnes Christian Reformed Church doesn't mean I don't have a story.

On this denomination's 150th anniversary it's a blessing to realize that we have a past, that we have a present here, tonight, and that we have a future whose specs no one knows, even if the outlines are a given.

We need to treasure all those blessings—our past, our present, and our future, as God's beloved gifts to us, his people who, for 150 years, have been called "Christian Reformed."

Endnotes

1. Neela Banerjee, December 30, 2005
2. http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/downloads/interview_transcripts/Lytch_Interview.pdf
3. See James Bratt's *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Eerdmans, 1986).
4. *Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly*. Interview. Nancy Ammerman. May 3, 2002.
5. "New Life for Denominationalism," in *The Christian Century*. March 15, 2000.
6. September, 2006.
7. *Speaking of Faith*, April 26, 2007.

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