HOW TO PLANT A REFORMED CHURCH

The Church Planting Manual of the
United Reformed Churches in North America

Second Edition, 2025

Contents

Copyright

Dedication

Glossary of Terms

Preface to the Second Edition

Introduction

Phase I: Evaluating a Mission Field

Phase II: Growing a Core Group

Phase III: Worshiping as a Church Plant

Phase IV: Organizing as a Church

Advice for Church Planters

Introduction to Appendices

Appendix 1: What Is Church Membership and Why Is It Necessary?

Appendix 2: Why Do We Need Creeds and Confessions?

Appendix 3: Biblical Principles of Tithing and Giving

Appendix 4: What Is Reformed Worship?

Appendix 5: What about Infant Baptism?

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How to Plant a Reformed Church:
The Church Planting Manual of the United Reformed Churches in North America

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to past, present, and future church planters in the URCNA.

May God build His church.

Glossary of Terms

Church planter: A minister called to labor beyond the field of an organized church as a home missionary under the supervision of his sending consistory. The church planter's calling is to develop the core group and church plant into an organized church.

Classis: A broader ecclesiastical assembly of United Reformed churches within a particular geographical area.

Consistory: The elders and minister(s) in a local church.

Core group: The beginning nucleus of families and individuals within a church plant.

Council: The term used to describe the consistory and deacons meeting together.

Joint Venture Committee: A group of two or more congregations partnering together to support a particular mission work.

Sending church: The overseeing and primary supporting church of a church plant.

Preface to the Second Edition

It has been nine years since the publication of the first edition of this church planting manual in 2015. That edition was the work of the Missions Committee of the United Reformed Churches in North America. Synod Niagara 2022 brought about a number of changes to the work of missions in the URCNA. Most significantly, The Missions Committee of the URCNA was replaced with two distinct committees: a Synodical Committee on Home Missions (SCHM) and a Synodical Committee on Foreign Missions (SCFM). Synod also encouraged each classis in the federation to establish its own classical committee on home missions (CCHM).

In 2023, the SCHM revised the first edition of *How to Plant a Reformed Church* to bring it up-to-date with changes and new terminology introduced at Synod Niagara 2022. The SCHM has published that revised manual electronically at www.urcna.org and at www.urcnamissions.org. This revision contained no substantive changes but only minor revisions and corrections, as well as slightly improved formatting.

The SCHM submitted this second edition of *How to Plant a Reformed Church* to Synod Escondido 2024. Building upon the revisions of 2023, the SCHM has also introduced more substantive changes to our church planting manual. Most of these changes reflect a more proactive approach to church planting, as opposed to a more responsive approach that has sometimes characterized our efforts in the past. The SCHM believes the work of missions is an essential function of a healthy church, and each and every church should be seeking opportunities to carry out the Great Commission in its particular context. We also believe the new infrastructure that integrates classical committees on home missions with the SCHM affords every church more opportunities to play an active role in the cooperative work of church planting, whether or not they choose to oversee their own church plant. In addition to encouraging a more proactive approach to church planting, this edition clarifies the four phases identified herein and makes general improvements throughout.

It is our committee's hope and prayer that our federation will continue to grow in wisdom and maturity in its home missions activities, and thus it is our desire occasionally to augment and revise this handbook as the Lord provides opportunity to do so. While we do not anticipate substantive revisions at every synod, we believe that once or twice every decade a new edition of the church planting manual may be presented to the churches for their approval. We invite all our churches and church planters to assist us in this effort, and welcome input for any suggested changes or revisions.

Introduction

This manual is a suggested strategy for church planting in the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA). The original Missions Committee of the URCNA wrote this manual in partial fulfillment of their mandate to develop helpful guidelines for the assistance of consistories and church planters in the work of missions. It is not intended to say everything that needs to be said on the vast subject of church planting. Instead, it provides consistories, church planters, and core groups with a plan for and advice on establishing a congregation in the URCNA.

At the time of the manual's first publication, churches throughout the federation were quite reactive in the work of church planting—it often happened that a consistory would look to engage in church planting in response to some group or individual within or outside of the congregation that desired to start a plant. While our churches need to remain properly responsive to such interest, the Synodical Committee on Home Missions desires to see the federation develop a far more proactive culture of evangelism and church planting for the increase of the Kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus commanded his church to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20) by proclaiming the gospel (Luke 24:46–49). Following the lead of the apostles, consistories need to commit to ongoing prayer for the local church's participation in God's mission to the world (Acts 13:1–3; 1 Tim. 2:1–7). Consistories should take initiative in church planting by identifying fields where people are in need of a sound gospel witness, and by partnering with other churches of their classis to reach those people.

Why Should We Plant More Reformed Churches?

All churches are obligated to pursue the fulfillment of the Lord's Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18–20). The book of Acts reveals how this is fulfilled through the planting of churches and the ordinary means of grace. After receiving the power of the Spirit (Acts 2:1–4), the apostles preached the gospel (2:14–36), baptized believers with their children (2:37–41), and began meeting regularly with those who "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). Thus, the first new covenant church was established. This same pattern unfolds throughout the entire book of Acts as the apostles went throughout the world preaching Christ, baptizing believers

and their households, and planting churches with appointed elders to oversee the new disciples (Acts 14:21–23).

The necessity of the local church for the making of disciples can hardly be overemphasized. This is our Lord's chosen means for gathering his redeemed people, feeding them with his Word, receiving their worship, nurturing their faith, and binding them together as a community rooted and established in love (Rom. 12; Eph. 4; Phil. 1:27–2:11). The local church is a manifestation of the *people* who belong to Christ; it is also the *place* where he meets them through the means that he has ordained. By gathering this people in this place, Christ grows his disciples and equips them to bring the gospel to other people in other places. It should be evident that the local church is both the goal of church planting and the means by which it continues.

Because the church must continue to fulfill the Great Commission until the return of our Lord, true churches need to be planted where few or none exist. We must be committed to the task of making disciples not only by the weekly means of grace in our own congregations but also by planting new congregations. Our missionary task, as the *Church Order of the URCNA* (*CO*) says in Article 47, "is to preach the Word of God to the unconverted," which is often "performed beyond the field of an organized church." This vital duty is "to be carried out by ministers of the Word set apart to this labor, who are called, supported and supervised by their consistories." Since we have agreed that "the churches should assist each other in the support of their missionaries," each of our congregations should prioritize church planting in the URCNA over all other mission-related endeavors.

Who Should Plant Reformed Churches?

Individuals do not plant churches. Churches plant churches. The biblical and Reformed method of church planting requires more than one gifted person launching out on his own to start a new work. It requires a large team of people gifted by the Holy Spirit and operating in different capacities. At a minimum, a church plant needs a consistory that will provide oversight and financing of the work; the advice of its classis; an ordained minister who will serve as the church planter; and a highly devoted core group of people who are willing and eager to share the ministry through regular fellowship with each other and outreach toward others.

In addition to these parties, a church plant may also benefit from involvement by the missions committee of its classis, by joint venture committees (composed of members from multiple congregations who partner together in the support of a particular mission work), and by the Synodical Committee on Home Missions. It should be stressed, however, that within

our federation each church plant is to be under the oversight of one particular consistory which shall seek the advice of classis before sending a minister to the field (*CO* 47). While the overseeing consistory bears the greatest responsibility in the work of church planting, it is not alone in this effort, and should take full advantage of its classis.

When Should We Plant More Reformed Churches?

We should plant more churches when God provides us the opportunity to do so. Given the fact that large parts of North America are without sound Reformed churches, the harvest is indeed plentiful and the laborers are few. Truly, we must "pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matt. 9:37–38). But we must also pray that the Lord of the harvest will open doors of opportunity so that these laborers can be sent (Col. 4:2–3).

The book of Acts is replete with examples of how the Lord directed church planting in the apostolic era. Acts 13–14 reveals how Paul and Barnabas were set apart by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of missions. The church of Antioch sent them through the regions of Cyprus, Lycia, and Galatia, preaching the gospel. This led to the planting of churches in the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch Pisidia, where Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (Acts 14:21–23). When they returned to their sending church at Antioch in Syria, they "gathered the church together" and "declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27). In our day, the local church must pray that God would direct and enable as he did at Antioch—to be more specific, that he would direct consistories where to send a gospel witness, and that he would enable us to identify and train evangelists who can be sent to make and grow disciples of Christ for the establishment of new churches.

Paul's "Macedonian Call" in Acts 16:6ff is a different example. At that point in history, the Holy Spirit prevented Paul, Silas, and Timothy from going to Asia and Bithynia, yet called them to go to Macedonia instead. This led to the planting of the church at Philippi, "a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony" (v.12). In our day, we should not expect God to grant us new revelation as to when and where he would have us plant churches. Nevertheless, he still opens doors of opportunity at particular times, in particular places, and with particular people. When a family or a group of people in an area where no Reformed churches exist contacts a local consistory (or one of the missions committees in the URCNA), and says, "Come over here and help us," we should respond eagerly, and yet prayerfully. It may not be possible in every situation to plant a church, but consistories, classes, and missions committees must at least investigate the possibility of planting a church when new opportunities arise and when new fields of gospel ministry become apparent.

Planting a daughter church is an opportunity that is rarely given adequate consideration. Many larger congregations (75 families or more) are to the point of overflowing in their present facilities. Instead of expanding the current church building, they should consider the possibility of expanding the Kingdom by planting a daughter church in another part of town. We tend to like large churches in North America, and favor the look of a full house; but by limiting building occupancy to 80% capacity our congregations will better maintain an evangelistic impulse, and will better communicate to visitors that there is room for them in the church. Indeed, it can hurt to part with beloved members of the local church family. But, following the logic of our Lord who taught that it is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35), we should realize what blessed gain is to be found in giving up a sizable group who are sent to establish a sound gospel witness elsewhere for the making of more disciples.

Where Should We Plant Reformed Churches?

It is prudent to focus our efforts on planting where no Reformed churches currently exist. As our Lord commissioned his apostles to expand their gospel witness from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8), so we must look to expand the gospel ministry to places where there is no Reformed witness. Presently, there are huge geographical areas and many major cities in the United States and Canada that have no United Reformed congregation—in some cases they are utterly lacking any Reformed or Presbyterian presence.

When opportunities arise to plant a United Reformed congregation, we must find answers for at least two important questions: (1) Why do the interested parties want to plant a Reformed church in this particular place? (2) Are there any confessional Reformed or Presbyterian churches within reasonable driving distance?[1]

In some large metropolitan areas, there may be good reason to plant a United Reformed congregation even if some Reformed or Presbyterian congregations already exist. Population centers of over a million may need to be served by a number of congregations serving diverse communities in the downtown area, suburbs, or exurbs. When we engage in this work, it is important that we communicate with any congregations affiliated with the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) and work cooperatively with them.[2]

How Should We Plant More Reformed Churches?

Church planting can only be accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit and the means that God has chosen to bless. The New Testament is clear that Christ uses his gospel to create his church. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). We cannot approach church planting, therefore, in the way a retail corporation approaches the

establishment of one of its stores in a new location. Church planting is not dependent upon demographic studies and shrewd business decisions. It is dependent upon the Holy Spirit who uses the Word of God to draw sinners to Christ, to create faith in their hearts, and to make them disciples. We are called to go out with a humble and yet expectant dependency upon the power of God's Word and Spirit so that we might be faithful in the task of proclaiming Christ. "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?" (Rom. 10:14–15).

Yet we must also be wise and orderly in our efforts. Our dependence upon the Holy Spirit does not mean that we should be haphazard in our approach to church planting. God is not a God of confusion but desires all things in his church to be done "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:33, 40). The way the apostles sought to fulfill the Great Commission was no exception. They were methodical in their approach to making disciples. When Paul preached the gospel in synagogues or in crowds of Gentile unbelievers, his goal was always to establish a congregation with its own elders and deacons so that disciples would be made through Word and sacrament, and Christ would be formed in them (Gal. 4:19). It is wise, then, for us to be strategic and orderly in our attempt to plant churches.

To that end, this manual recommends a four-phase plan for church planting, in which each phase provides the opportunity to evaluate God's provision and to deliberate the wisdom of proceeding to the next phase. The following four phases make up the next four chapters of this manual.

1. **Phase I: Evaluating the Mission Field.** *In the first phase, a consistory initiates the process by identifying and assessing a potential field, exploring interest, developing a vision, obtaining advice and support from its classis, and consulting with neighboring NAPARC churches regarding plans to launch a new work.*
2. **Phase II: Growing a Core Group.** *In the second phase, a core group begins to meet under an overseeing consistory to study the Bible and to pray so that they may grow in love for each other and in gospel partnership.*
3. **Phase III: Worshiping as a Church Plant.** *In the third phase, the consistory calls worship services every Lord's Day at the church plant, and continues to supervise its development.*
4. **Phase IV: Organizing as a Church.** *Once the church plant possesses sufficient size, financial stability, and qualified men for office, it is ready to begin the process of organization. In this fourth and final phase, the church plant organizes as a particular church in the URCNA with its own officers.*

It is our prayer that this manual will be of benefit to consistories, councils, classes, missions committees, joint venture committees, church planters, core groups, and every Christian who longs for a Reformed church to be planted in a town where no such church exists. May the Lord of the harvest continue to strengthen us and give us wisdom and courage as we seek to join in his mission by bringing the gospel to all peoples for the making and growing of disciples of Jesus Christ.

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1. 1. See the helpful discussion on this topic in *Planting an Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2008), p. 21 ff: "One of the most basic questions asked of anyone who is involved in church planting is, 'Why are you starting a new church?' Implied is the question: 'Aren't there already enough churches here?' It is neither biblically correct nor wise to answer, 'Because these folks can't get along with others in their present congregation,' or, 'Because they just don't like the other churches in town.' . . . There are, however, at least three examples of Biblical justification for starting new churches which can help to clarify and direct our church planting efforts . . . (1) There is a special opportunity to plant this church in this place at this time . . . (2) This center of population and influence needs the ministry of the new church we will plant . . . (3) These fellow believers need our help to carry on what Christ has begun among them."
2. 2. For more information see "NAPARC Golden Rule Comity Agreement," May 1984, accessed July 24, 2024, https://www.naparc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/InfoDoc-9-NAPARC-Golden-Rule-Comity-Agreement-1984.pdf.

CHAPTER I

Phase I: Evaluating a Mission Field

Since the church's missionary task is to preach the Word of God to the unconverted, consistories should always be seeking new mission fields in which to fulfill this task. While a general desire to plant churches is praiseworthy, it can be useful for a consistory to be aware of specific avenues by which a church planting opportunity may present itself.

How Does a Consistory Begin the Planting Process?

There are a number of different scenarios which may lead a consistory to initiate the church planting process.

Scenario 1: Parachute

A consistory or classical committee on home missions (CCHM) identifies a town or city in which there are few or no churches belonging to NAPARC, and decides to drop a planter into the region for the purposes of developing a core group (hence the name, "parachute"). In this approach, the church planter or planters attempt to start a church from scratch. The key element to such an approach is to focus primarily on evangelism and secondarily on making contacts with people who may desire a Reformed church. In towns or cities where there are colleges, the planters may decide to link planting efforts with campus outreach. Given the challenging nature of the parachute model, strong support and a long-term commitment from the consistory or classis is essential.

Scenario 2: Member Relocation

A member family of a United Reformed congregation relocates to an area where there is no church belonging to NAPARC. They contact the nearest consistory and/or CCHM, and ask about the possibility of planting a church in their new hometown. This contact initiates the evaluation process.

Scenario 3: Grass-Roots

A number of Christians in a particular location discuss the need for a Reformed church in their area. This group of people may already be meeting on a weekly or otherwise regular basis. Similar to the previous scenario, these people contact a nearby consistory and/or a CCHM, and make their desires known. In response to this query, a consistory or missions committee may begin to investigate the circumstances, and determine if planting a church in the area is feasible.

Scenario 4: Daughter Church

A consistory identifies a sizable number of members in their congregation who live some distance from the church. If this particular location presents opportunities for new growth and evangelism, they may consult with these members to determine if there is adequate interest in, and proper motivation for, starting a church in this location. The initial interest may also arise from the members themselves, in which case they should bring their thoughts to the attention of consistory as soon as possible. The consistory can then investigate this possibility and make inquiries of the congregation. This may include informational meetings open to members and visitors who are interested in being part of the core group. Such a church plant is often called the "daughter" of the overseeing "mother" church. Daughter churches, especially when blessed with spiritually mature members and/or elders and deacons, often have the benefit of organizing more quickly.

Scenario 5: Planter-initiated

A minister or seminarian within the URCNA, having identified a field that he believes is ripe for mission work, prayerfully begins to pursue the possibility of planting there. He first approaches his consistory or a CCHM and proposes his idea to them. If the consistory or classical committee is convinced that the idea has merit, they begin to investigate the possibility of planting a church. Consistories and CCHMs would do well to connect with seminary students in their classis and in nearby Reformed seminaries to encourage them to consider planting a United Reformed church.

How to Evaluate a Potential Mission Field

Regardless of which scenario unfolds, the investigating body, either a consistory or a classical home missions committee, should determine several important matters before moving to Phase II.

1. *How many people and/or families appear interested in being part of this new work?* In some ways, the urgency of the consistory's investigation will depend upon the number of families and individuals who have informed the consistory of their desire for a church plant. For example, if only one family has contacted the consistory and made known that they are praying for a Reformed church in their area, the consistory should discuss this information, but may choose to wait before acting further. On the other hand, if five families have approached the consistory, the elders should expedite their response.
2. *Why does this group want to plant a Reformed church?*

If a consistory is approached by a potential core group, they should first seek to determine why this group is interested in planting a United Reformed congregation. The goal of church planting should always be not only to care for the sheep but also to reach a new community with the gospel. It is critical that evangelism and disciple-making be a part of the plant's DNA from the outset. The following are some questions which the consistory should seek to answer early in this process:

1. Does this group have genuine concern for the lost as well as a strong desire to reach them with the gospel?
2. Is the group dissatisfied with the churches in their area? Why?
3. Has this group recently left another church? Why?
4. Do other NAPARC churches exist within reasonable driving distance?
5. What is the ecclesiastical background of the members of this group, and is there reasonable expectation that they can work well with one another?

3. *Will the demographics of this particular area be an asset or a liability to church planting?*
   Demographics alone should never be the driving motivation for planting a church, but a consistory should nevertheless consider demographic factors in their evaluation of a mission field. What is the size and composition of the local population in this area? Is the area growing in population, or is it in decline? Does the population have a high degree of transience, or are they more stable? How accessible is this city to neighboring communities? All of these factors could make the work of church planting more or less feasible, humanly speaking.

4. *Where would the core group meet for a weekly Bible study in Phase II?*
   Local geography is an important and often-overlooked factor in church planting. A consistory should prioritize consideration of the specific location of the church plant as soon as possible, and find a location for the Bible study that supports this ultimate goal. Often, a member of the initial core group is willing to host this study in their home, and there are many benefits to this scenario. However, if the location of this home is not near the ultimate target location for the plant, it may be wise to rent a facility in a more desirable location.

5. *What is the feasibility of overseeing an initial weekly Bible study?*
   It is optimal for the teacher of the Bible study to be an ordained United Reformed minister. Where this is not possible, he should be a licensed exhorter, an elder, or a male member of the sending church who is competent to teach, and does so under the direction

and oversight of his consistory. While it may be tempting to begin with a local volunteer, there may be serious tradeoffs to this scenario. Consistory should prioritize the quality of this teaching. Whoever the teacher is, the council must determine if he is to be paid a stipend and, if so, the amount.

Furthermore, consistory should seek to have one or two elders present at each meeting. If distance or other circumstances do not permit this level of oversight, the teacher of the study should provide audio recordings and/or regular reports to the consistory which can be evaluated at their monthly meeting. Proper oversight of a study entails a serious commitment from the consistory, and the feasibility of providing oversight should be carefully considered in the evaluation stage.

6. *What is a reasonable estimate of the financial cost of this plant?*
   Planting a church ordinarily requires a significant financial commitment. The consistory must call a church planter, that is, an ordained United Reformed minister dedicated to the weighty task of establishing a new congregation. The council must see to it that the church planter's material needs are fully met so he can focus on the work of the kingdom without the hindrance of worldly concerns. There is also the considerable cost of a rented or purchased facility where the church plant can meet for worship on the Lord's Day, along with all the incidentals needed for worship (chairs, Bibles, songbooks, etc.).

   The financial cost of a church plant, however, should not immediately deter a consistory from consideration of planting a church. First, investments made for the Kingdom of God are *never* a loss if faithfully done in accordance with God's Word. Second, as a federation of churches that have covenanted with one another, we have formally agreed to help each other in the support of our missionaries. Third, over time a growing portion of the cost will not be borne by the overseeing church but by new members who join the group. Church planting is not only a spiritual mandate but also a wise investment in the future vitality of our federation.

   When counting the cost of planting, we should remember that there is strength in numbers. Article 47 of the *Church Order of the URCNA* expresses the commitment of every church in the URCNA to support our missionaries. A local consistory that requires financial assistance in order to fulfill its missionary mandate should work with their classis and, if necessary, form a joint venture committee to share the burden and ensure funding for the church plant.[1]

Informational Meeting

Early and regular communication with all interested parties is key to the success of the church plant. Early in the process, the consistory should hold an informational meeting open to anyone interested in participating in the church plant. At this meeting, complete information about our federation should be given to those in attendance who are new to the URCNA. A member of the consistory should explain in detail our history, confessional standards, and principles of worship, as well as the process of how a new United Reformed church comes into existence. If a consistory requires assistance in presenting this information, they may invite a member of their CCHM to attend the meeting.

Involvement of Classis

Wisdom is found in a multitude of counselors (Prov. 11:14). Therefore, a consistory should seek the advice of its classis as early as possible in any church-planting effort. Classis can then review the consistory's proposal, offer helpful feedback, connect the consistory with a classical home missions committee, and in some cases begin to assist the mission work financially. CCHMs offer the flexibility of offering consistories advice between regularly scheduled classis meetings.

Changes to our Church Order at Synod Niagara 2022 have made seeking classical advice in church planting a necessity. Since the United Reformed Churches are not independent of one another, the calling and sending of missionaries is to happen only after a consistory has sought the advice of its classis. Article 47 of the *Church Order of the URCNA* (ninth edition, ratified 2023) states:

The church's missionary task is to preach the Word of God to the unconverted. When this task is to be performed beyond the field of an organized church, it is to be carried out by ministers of the Word set apart to this labor, who are called, supported, and supervised by their consistories. A local consistory shall seek the advice of classis before sending a foreign or home missionary to a field or removing a foreign or home missionary from a field. The churches should assist each other in the support of their missionaries.

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1. 1. *Church Order of the URCNA,* Article 47, " . . . *The churches should assist each other in the support of their missionaries."* Joint venture committees are encouraged by the URCNA 2001 report, *Biblical and Confessional View of Missions*.

CHAPTER 2

Phase II: Growing a Core Group

The purpose of Phase II is to develop a mature core group and prepare it for worship services. The mechanism for this development is ordinarily a weekly Bible study.

The Importance of the Weekly Bible Study

The most important step in gathering, establishing, and developing a mature core group is to hold a weekly Bible study. This meeting helps the group not only to grow in their knowledge of and love for God and His Word but also to grow in their knowledge of and love for each other, as they learn together about the URCNA, its beliefs, and its approach to worship. Studies of this sort are usually held on a weeknight and run for several months, but in some cases, they may continue for a year or more. Among the wise choices of subjects for the group to study are Paul's letter to the Ephesians (which focuses on the doctrine of the church), his letter to the Romans (which unfolds the beauty of the gospel), and the Three Forms of Unity (which familiarizes the group with the confessional standards of the URCNA).

Whether the weekly Bible study takes place in a private residence, in a church building, or in some other public space, the core group should be very intentional about being hospitable people and practicing hospitality. Participants in the group will need to do much studying, learning, and planning with each other; yet for them to be knit together in genuine love, they must also learn of one another's needs and strengths, pray with and for each other, sacrificially serve each other, and help each other in serving people outside the group. As Christ has welcomed them for the glory of God (Rom. 15:7), so also they should welcome one another, and look for every opportunity to extend a warm welcome to people from outside the group. Hospitality is a key ingredient for the core group to grow into a church plant that functions as a healthy body.

The Bible Study Should Foster Growth in Spiritual Maturity

The teaching of the Bible study should aim to edify believers through instruction in the Christian faith. Some of the indicators by which the consistory can measure the spiritual maturity of the core group are as follows: their growth in knowledge (1 Cor. 1:4–5; Eph. 1:17; Phil. 1:9–10; Col. 1:9–10); their love for the saints (Rom. 12:10–13; Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4); their evangelizing of others (Col. 4:5–6; 1 Pet. 3:15–16); their willingness to give financially (1 Cor. 16:1–2; 2 Cor. 8–9); their possession of potential future leaders (1 Tim. 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9); their practice of hospitality (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2); their compassion toward those in need

(Luke 10:25–37; Rom. 12:13; Gal. 6:10). In time, if it is feasible, the members of the Bible study should be encouraged to worship with the overseeing church in order to grow in their understanding of the URCNA.

The Bible Study Should Foster Numerical Growth

As with spiritual growth, the numerical growth of the church plant is a work of the Holy Spirit. It is God who gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). Nevertheless, he uses our efforts to that end. For this reason, the consistory and core group should consider the many ways in which they can spread the word about the Bible study and the plans for a future church plant.

1. *Word of Mouth*
   Word of mouth is the most effective and time-tested method of growing a Bible study, and it is also the easiest to start immediately. The core group as well as the members of the sending church should do all they can to let their friends and neighbors know about the new work through personal conversation. Indeed, the desire and willingness of the core group participants to invite friends and family is absolutely integral to the health and success of the church plant. It should be pointed out, however, that members of the sending church who live in the geographical area of the Bible study may be encouraged to participate with the core group, but under no circumstances should they be pressured to do so. The numerical growth of the Bible study must be organic in nature, increasing by means of the Holy Spirit's gathering together people who desire to participate.

2. *Internet and Social Media*
   Having an attractive, user-friendly and up-to-date website is vital in our day and age. It is important to make a good first impression by means of a website, which is often the first glimpse that many people will get of the church plant. Developing a website that advertises the weekly Bible study and indicates plans for a future church plant is an indispensable means of informing the public and establishing contacts in the targeted area. The website should be linked to the sending church's website. It is also recommended that one or two email contacts be referenced on the website, and that those receiving emails send an appropriate reply in a timely fashion.[1]

   Social media is also an effective means of getting the word out, and provides the simplest way for a new church plant to tap into existing relational networks throughout the URCNA. Those in the core group can use various social media platforms for easy sharing of information about the church plant with others in the community, including audio and video recordings or event notices. One can also run paid advertisements on social media that are affordable and can be targeted to particular audiences within a specified driving

distance of the church plant. Social media sites and platforms also provide tools that help to measure and improve advertising effectiveness.

3. *Radio Advertisements*
   The consistory should consider making use of local Christian radio stations, especially those that air popular programs with Reformed teaching such as *Renewing Your Mind* or *The White Horse Inn*. A thirty- or sixty-second advertisement placed before or after one of these programs can be costly, but in many cases it has proven to be a superb method of reaching people in the targeted area who are interested in Reformed Christianity. Radio stations are often willing to offer reasonable rates to churches, and usually provide professional services in producing the advertisement.

4. *Fliers in Public Places*
   A method less costly than radio advertisements is the placement of fliers in strategic places such as local Christian bookstores, libraries, community centers, and coffee shops. Many of these establishments are happy to grant permission to post such a flier. This is an easy way to get information to the public about the work of the church plant. With the advancement and accessibility of publishing software, creating attractive leaflets and fliers has become very simple.

5. *Conferences*
   A one or two-day conference on Christianity is another way of introducing the church plant to both believers and unbelievers in the community. The consistory might consider bringing gifted speakers from Reformed seminaries or from the pool of ministers within its classis to teach on a particular subject of interest. At the conference, plenty of information about the church plant and its regular meetings should be available in print for distribution to the attendees. Moreover, follow-up contact should be made with every attendee, which is possible through registration rosters.

   There are many ways to get the word out about a church plant today. It is important to cast a wide net and to try all kinds of methods, remembering that what works in one field might not work in another. Be willing to experiment, and don't put all your eggs in one basket. You cannot know what will work best in your area unless you try the various means of advertising.

The Bible Study Should Foster Growth in Financial Commitment

Before the consistory launches a public worship service (Phase III), they should determine the amount of financial support required to call and pay a minister (*CO* Arts. 2 and 47) and whether or not sufficient funds exist. The consistory should clearly communicate budgetary

needs to the study participants and enquire of the core group concerning their commitment to support a minister and to work toward financial self-sufficiency. They should also notify their classis of any need they might have for assistance.

No two church plants are the same. Some core groups will have a depth of financial resources that enables them to shoulder a large portion of the burden. Others will begin with fewer resources and therefore require greater support from the overseeing church and classis. Either way, the consistory should communicate the needs to the group and encourage them to join them in prayer for the Lord's provision.

The Bible Study Should Foster Growth in Leadership

The consistory should also form a steering committee that operates under its direct oversight in the development of the church plant and in assisting the teacher or church planter as needed. The steering committee should report to the consistory at its monthly meeting in order to provide updates on the progress of the work. Members of this committee should consist of the appointed teacher (or the church planter), at least one elder from the consistory, one deacon, and three or four male members who are regular attendees of the church plant. If the sending church is a good distance from the church plant and its regular attendees are not members of the sending church, it will take extra time to bring the local attendees into church membership and to discern who is qualified to serve on the steering committee. Service on a steering committee can provide lay members of the group the opportunity to grow their leadership skills and demonstrate giftedness for serving in the office of elder or deacon.

If there are insufficient resources to form a steering committee in the core group, the consistory should assign an elder and deacon to serve the church plant and help identify potential leaders.

Identify and Secure a Location for Worship Services

As the core group grows in size and maturity, the consistory should enlist its assistance in seeking to locate an adequate facility for worship services on the Lord's Day. Such places might include a local school, a Seventh Day Adventist or other available church, a synagogue, a community center, a theater or playhouse, or any other vacant building available for rent. Another option is to rent the building of another Christian church and to work out a system of staggered meeting times in the shared space.

This is an important decision in the life of a church plant, and it should be thoroughly and prayerfully discussed and deliberated. Whatever the venue, several things should be

considered:

- Is this building adequate for worship services?
- Is this a good location for the targeted area? Is it well-known in the community, visible, and in a highly-trafficked area?
- Is the rent within the sending church's budget for the plant? While frugality is a virtue, the consistory should avoid prioritizing short term savings for an inferior venue. How long will this facility be available, and will it be a source of stability for the group over time? The consistory should avoid moving the location of the church plant too many times.

Call a Church Planter or Secure Pulpit Supply

Before calling public worship service, the consistory must either call a church planter or secure pulpit supply. It is crucial to call a dedicated pastor to serve as a church planter as soon as possible. In most cases the success of a plant greatly depends on a good church planter. While church planting requires the involvement of an entire sending church and its leadership, the church planter serves as the public face and representative of the new work. Recruiting guests and visitors as new members of a core group requires the consistent presence of a church planter who faithfully proclaims the gospel, conducts follow-up meetings, and projects confidence that this fledgling work can be considered a reliable source of Christian nourishment.

If hesitant to call a church planter for fear that the plant may fail, a consistory might prefer to hire a man who can serve as a regular preacher (stated supply) in the absence of a full-time pastor. But this reasoning can backfire by drawing out the planting process, leading to weariness and exhaustion among the members of the core group. At the beginning of the planting process, the overseeing consistory should recognize that a dedicated church planter is an integral part of moving to Phase III, and should ensure that adequate commitment to the work and to its financing are in place when the time comes. The consistory should also remember that, though a plant might fail, no work is a failure where the gospel was proclaimed for the making and growing of Christian disciples.

If sufficient funding for a minister is a concern, an overseeing consistory should seek to secure assistance from other churches within classis or from a classical fund as early as possible. While the calling and oversight of a man are duties belonging to a single consistory, his financial support from the beginning of the process may and often should come from numerous places, especially from the classis to which the overseeing consistory belongs. By adopting this model of broad financial support, we may ensure that church planting is not

merely the responsibility of our federation's large and wealthy churches but can be undertaken by any local congregation with the requisite vision and passion for the work.

Since a core group or church plant may dissolve, it is prudent for a church planter's letter of call clearly to articulate the overseeing consistory's plan to provide for the planter should the work not develop into an organized church. For example, the consistory may stipulate a duration of financial support to be provided until a new call is secured, or they may stipulate a planned deployment into a different field of ministry.

What Are the Qualities of a Good Church Planter?

As the consistory considers calling a church planter, they must look for the right man. It is not as simple as looking for a pastor or seminary student who is searching for a call. The difficult labor of church planting is not for everyone. It is a specialized work of ministry that demands certain qualities and strengths. In addition to the characteristics of godliness listed in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, the church planter should possess, at a minimum, the following eight characteristics. While every United Reformed minister should exhibit these characteristics to some degree, they will be of particular import for the man called to church planting.

1. *He has a passion for the gospel.*
   The church planter must have a passion for the gospel and be clearly marked by such zeal. He should be a man who is confident that the gospel is the means the Holy Spirit uses to create and sustain the church of Jesus Christ. He should be so gripped by the gospel that he loves to proclaim it every week, firmly believing it to be the message that most glorifies God. He should have a deep conviction that the message of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is not only for the conversion of the sinner but also for the sanctification of the saint. He should be convinced that the gospel is the means for motivating people to do good works and live godly lives. He should be committed to preaching that makes the person and work of Christ central to every sermon.

2. *He is firmly committed to the Three Forms of Unity.*
   The church planter must be a man who loves the Three Forms of Unity and is passionate about teaching them to others. The confessions form the theological basis upon which the church plant is established and help protect the unity of its members. Because the URCNA are confessional churches, the church planter must be willing and able to help the core group understand why we believe and confess the Three Forms of Unity.

3. *He has a passion for church planting.*
   The church planter must be a man who is not put off by "the day of small things." He must have a missionary mindset and enjoy the challenge of laboring for the establishment of a

new church. He should be a man who understands deeply that church planting is spiritual work from beginning to end (1 Cor. 3:6–7).

4. *He has strong leadership skills.*
   The ordinary challenges of an established church are usually intensified in a church plant. The church plant is small, fragile, and underdeveloped, and therefore it requires a strong leader.[2] The church planter must be a good communicator and able to work with a wide variety of people. He must be a networker who develops new relationships. He should be able to handle stress and disappointment. He should also exhibit a firm grasp of and devotion to biblical ecclesiology and church polity. Given his responsibility to guide and nurture this new work, he should be well-versed in the doctrine of the church and in the *Church Order of the URCNA*.

5. *He has a vigorous work ethic.*
   Although the church planter should receive proper oversight and plenty of help from his consistory and sending church, he will inevitably serve in many different roles. The church plant does not yet have the luxury of its own local elders, deacons, committees, or secretary. Church planting inevitably requires a lot of hours and thought. It is imperative, then, that the church planter be an energetic, self-motivated man who is able to manage his time well. He must have the patience and endurance to labor like a soldier, athlete, and hard-working farmer (2 Tim. 2:1–6), while properly prioritizing time for his family and for his own rest and refreshment.

6. *He has exceptional gifts for preaching and teaching.*
   In most cases the church plant will not survive if the preaching is poor. Few people will be willing to commit to a struggling new mission work if the preaching is weak. While it is the Holy Spirit who makes the preaching of the Word effectual, he also equips men with certain gifts, and does not equip them equally. The consistory must be honest and loving in their evaluation of possible candidates for the work. They should find a man who is, among other things, a strong and gifted preacher. But he must also be a gifted teacher, capable of making complicated doctrines clear and easy to grasp. He must be able to answer with patience and skill the many theological questions that people raise. He must be able to help the core group understand why we believe and confess the Word of God as summarized in the Three Form of Unity, why we regulate worship according to Scripture, and why we follow Reformed principles of piety and practice. It often proves to be particularly helpful if the church planter has some background in or exposure to non-Reformed churches and is able to sympathize with those coming to understand Reformed theology for the first time.

7. *He has a genuine love for people and a servant's heart.*
   The church planter must genuinely love people and serve them in a manner which displays that love. A church plant is not well served by a planter who is unable or unwilling to invest time and energy into the people. A consistory should ask the following questions and observe the candidate to see if they are true: Does he initiate conversations and enjoy speaking with people? Does he remember their names and life circumstances? Does he spend time with his congregants? Does he have empathy and take into account the perspectives of his audience? Does he interact well with the youth and the elderly? Does he welcome, appreciate, and sympathize with people from various cultural backgrounds? Does he encourage others with his words? Does he serve those in need?

8. *He must be a man of prayer.*
   Last in our list, but certainly not least in importance, is prayer. Is this man notably committed to the practice of "continuing in prayer" (*CO* Art. 2)? Does he understand that church planting is spiritual work from beginning to end, and thus requires him to labor in prayer? Does he share the apostle Paul's passion to pray for mission works and the spread of the gospel (Rom. 1:10; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 1:16–21, 3:14–19, 6:18–20; Phil. 1:9–11; Col. 1:9–10, 4:2–4; 1 Thess. 5:17; 2 Thess. 3:1–2)? Understanding the indispensability of prayer, a church planter will not expect God to bless his labors apart from continually asking God for the grace of the Holy Spirit (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 116; Luke 11:5–13).

Sending Two Church Planters

Throughout the modern history of the Reformed church, the expectation in most congregations has been that one gospel minister, aided by a lay team of elders and deacons, will suffice for the work. The corresponding expectation has been that the task of church planting can also be managed by one pastor, even though the man often labors without the aid of a local team of elders and deacons. Given the difficulty of the church-planting task and all that is required of the church planter, it would be wise for consistories to consider the wisdom of sending a team of two men to do the work. While the practice is not prescribed in the Bible, it is the clear pattern we find in the apostolic church (Matt. 21:1, Mark 6:7, Luke 10:1, Acts 13:1–3, Acts 15:39–41).

Many ecclesiastical bodies will naturally deem the sending of two men as cost prohibitive. But before reaching that conclusion, they should consider not only the liabilities of sending one man (unaccountability, egocentrism, loneliness, burnout) but also the benefits of sending two. The two men may have complementary giftedness well-suited for an effective division of

labor; they may regularly encourage one another, pray with and for each other, hold each other accountable and challenge one another; their teamwork would render each man less vulnerable to attack by seen and unseen adversaries. Many other things would need to be considered in assessing the feasibility and desirability of sending two church planters, yet in some cases the benefits of the practice may outweigh the cost.

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1. 1. The council of the sending church may even consider hiring a professional not only for developing a website but also for improving Search Engine Optimization (SEO) so that the website will rank higher in the Search Engine Results Page (SERP), and thus receive more traffic when people search for a Reformed church in the area.
2. 2. For some good books on leadership, see “Recommended Resources” page at urcnamissions.org/home-missions.

CHAPTER 3

Phase III: Worshiping as a Church Plant

In Phase III the church plant begins to hold public worship services, and continues to grow spiritually and numerically under the oversight of its consistory until it is ready to organize as a congregation within the URCNA.

Call Worship Services

Once the consistory has secured a location for Sunday worship services, has called a church planter or acquired pulpit supply, and is convinced that the core group possesses the spiritual maturity and numerical stability that are essential to the healthy operation of the ministry, they are ready to call worship services on the Lord's Day.

The consistory must decide how many worship services it will initially convene on the Lord's Day. The *Church Order of the URCNA* mandates that "the consistory shall call the congregation together for corporate worship twice on each Lord's Day" (Art. 37), and many consistories will determine that it is best to begin with such a schedule from the start.

However, the Church Order does not prohibit a consistory from calling only one service for a church plant. In some cases, it is necessary for the plant to have only one worship service due to building and scheduling limitations. In other cases, it may be wise because it allows the plant to maintain a consistent focus on hospitality and outreach while easing into its more public life. When the sending church is geographically close enough to the participants of the plant, the overseeing consistory may wish to consider calling only one service for the church plant so that participants can attend a service of the sending church each Lord's Day; this will give them opportunity to witness and participate in the operation of a mature Reformed church, and to become more familiar with the overseeing consistory.

The consistory must also approve the liturgy of the worship services. It is not necessary that the liturgy of the church plant be identical to the liturgy of the sending church. Provided the liturgy is in accordance with the regulative principle of worship and within the bounds of the Church Order, there is room for some variance. The church planter, perhaps after consulting with the steering committee, should bring to his consistory the liturgy he would like to use, and ask for their advice and permission. The consistory should keep in mind the circumstances of the church plant and the desires of the steering committee.

Consistorial Presence

It is the consistory that calls and regulates worship services (*CO* Arts. 37–38). It follows that a consistory cannot exercise proper oversight of its church plant unless it regularly observes the plant's worship services. Therefore, an overseeing consistory should make sure that at least one elder either attends each worship service of the plant or views the service through a video feed.

This may be accomplished in a number of ways. One option is for the consistory to create a schedule in which the elders rotate in attending services of the church plant. This has the advantage of allowing all of the elders on the consistory the opportunity to participate more intimately in the oversight and shepherding of the church plant. This scenario may only be realistic, however, if the church plant is a reasonable driving distance from the sending church. Another option is to assign one or two elders of the consistory to the church plant who are always present at its worship services. These elders would become familiar with the people and trusted by them, which would enable more effective shepherding. This scenario may work particularly well when an elder who desires to be a permanent part of the new congregation lives close to it. Of course, there are instances in which the consistory as a whole is too far from the church plant to practice oversight through regular physical presence. In such cases the consistory should arrange to have at least one elder view live or recorded video of worship services.

When possible, the overseeing consistory should encourage other members of the sending church to visit the plant. This practice will be a great encouragement to church plant participants, not only aiding their singing but also strengthening their fellowship. It also benefits the sending church, whose members get to witness what the Lord is doing to advance his Kingdom through their church planting efforts.

Offerings

Offerings should be collected from the very first worship service, providing the core group with the opportunity to participate joyfully in biblical giving. The council of the sending church should determine from the beginning how the offerings will be handled at the church plant. A transparent and consistent procedure should be followed for collecting and counting the money.

The council must also decide how the collected funds will be processed. Should the money received from the offerings at the church plant be placed in an account separate from the sending church's general fund? Would it be better to put that money toward the sending church's general fund which includes a budgeted line item for the support of the church plant?

Will the money from the offerings be transported immediately to the sending church each Lord's Day or deposited at a nearby bank? The council should decide what is best for their church and church plant.

For this reason, it may be wise to have a deacon present at the church plant during worship services. This deacon can be made responsible for collecting and processing the offerings received at the plant. The deacons should also train selected men from the core group (perhaps those on the steering committee) in their procedure for collecting and counting. If no deacon from the sending church can be present for the plant's worship services, trustworthy men belonging to the plant must be selected to handle the collecting and processing of offerings.

Membership in the Church Plant

Because the church plant is not yet an organized congregation within the URCNA, there is no official membership in the church plant itself. When we speak of membership in the church plant, we are referring to those who attend the church plant but have membership in the sending church. Such membership creates a covenantal relationship between the consistory and the members of the church plant. It is necessary for the consistory to shepherd and govern these members, as well as to exercise discipline when necessary. Without this membership, the consistory has no official authority over or pastoral obligation to those participating in the church plant. The consistory should realize that they have just as much responsibility for their members at the church plant as they do for their members in the local congregation of the sending church.

As attendance increases at the church plant, it is likely that many of the gathered group will come from a variety of ecclesiastical backgrounds. Some will be completely new to the concept of church membership. Brought up in the radical individualism common to North American Christianity, some may even find the idea of formal membership in an established church to be antiquated, unnecessary, and legalistic. The church planter and consistory must exercise great care for these sheep and patiently help them come to a biblical understanding of belonging to Christ's church (see Appendix 1).

The church planter, then, bears great responsibility in educating people about church membership and proper oversight. It is critical that he and the consistory make clear that the church plant is under the spiritual oversight of the body of elders at the sending church. This is important for helping those in attendance to avoid the mistake of thinking that the church plant is an independent work or the sole endeavor of the church planter. To that end, the church planter or an elder might consider practices such as stating before every worship

service, “Welcome to Reformed Church. We are a church plant and mission work of Reformed Church.” Similar verbiage should be printed in the bulletin and posted on the church plant’s website. Another helpful custom is for the visiting elder to accompany the church planter to the pulpit just before the worship service begins, and then for the two men to shake hands in order to demonstrate fellowship in an official manner. Such practices are not trivial, for they help communicate to those in attendance that biblical oversight is in place, and membership is with the sending church.

It is also imperative that the church planter ensures those desiring membership fully understand the binding nature of their membership vows before they take them. Ideally, this instruction will occur in a new members’ class conducted by the church planter or the pastor at the sending church, and will be reiterated by the elders during the membership interview. It should be explained that, while bylaws vary from church to church, there are only seven ways membership can be terminated in a United Reformed congregation:

1. by transfer of membership to another Reformed or Presbyterian church within NAPARC with whom the URCNA has some ecclesiastical affiliation;
2. by non-disciplinary release to affiliate with a different Christian church;
3. by death;
4. by excommunication of a professing member (*CO* Article 55);
5. by exclusion of a mature baptized member (*CO* Article 59);
6. by exclusion of a member due to resignation (*CO* Article 56);
7. by erasure of a member due to loss of contact (*CO* Article 64).[1]

The church planter must explain these details carefully to those pursuing membership. This helps new members understand more fully what they are doing when they take vows and join the church.

The church planter should do all he can to encourage the members of the church plant as they submit themselves to the consistory and await the day when elders will be ordained in their own church. He should be sensitive to the fact that they have taken some risks in committing to the church plant, and are in a somewhat irregular situation. A wise church planter will keep a shepherd’s eye on the needs of his parishioners, and stay in close contact with his consistory until the time comes for the plant to organize as a church.

Sacraments

The sacraments are very helpful as instruction to the members of the church plant. The believer's faith in Christ is strengthened by witnessing baptisms and celebrating the Lord's Supper. Moreover, since the sacraments at the church plant are to be administered by the overseeing consistory, the attendees of the church plant are able to see proper oversight taking place during worship.

The consistory must decide how the sacraments will be administered in the church plant. They determine the frequency of observing the Lord's Supper, the policy for fencing the Table, and the kinds of elements to be used. It may not be necessary for the consistory to insist that the church plant completely conform to the sending church in these practices, provided everything falls within the bounds of Scripture and the Church Order and has received the permission of the elders. In deciding on its sacramental policies for the church plant, the consistory should seek to do everything in "a manner . . . most conducive to the edification of the congregation" (*CO* Art. 46).

Necessary Criteria for Organizing as a Church

Before a church plant can proceed to organize as an official congregation within the URCNA (Phase IV), there are three main criteria which must be satisfied:

1. *Sufficient Size*
   While "sufficient size" is not defined as a particular number of souls, it is fair to say that the church plant should at least be larger than a few families before it organizes. If it organizes prematurely, it runs the risk of failure. For example, if a newly-organized church consists of only three or four families, what will happen to it if one or two of the families move away? Unless the Lord is pleased to add more families to the work, the church will in all likelihood collapse for lack of financial viability. On the other hand, a new church with at least ten committed families is more capable of sustaining unforeseen reduction in their numbers.

   Care should be taken by the consistory, church planter, and steering committee not to push too quickly for the organization if the numbers are still very low. Pray that the Lord will provide more families, and wait patiently for him to give the increase. Remember the words of the apostle Paul: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6). At the same time, the church plant should continue to reach into its community with a gospel witness.

2. *Financial Stability*

It is ideal for a church plant to be self-sustaining before it organizes. If the people are to mature as a congregation, they must be committed to the biblical practice of giving; they must be able to support their pastor, pay the rent or mortgage on their meeting place, and provide for the poor within their congregation apart from assistance from outside sources. The church plant, therefore, must begin working toward financial self-sufficiency as soon as possible.

3. *Suitable Men for Office*
   A church plant cannot organize as a church until the Lord provides qualified men for office. From the beginning, the consistory, core group, church planter, and sending church should commit to praying that God would supply such men. Potential leaders should be identified, encouraged, and nurtured by the church planter and consistory. As noted above, the steering committee is often where some of this development takes place. It provides the church planter and consistory with an excellent opportunity to witness the character and competence of potential officers. In addition to this, the church planter and/or consistory should teach an officer training course that provides solid instruction in biblical leadership, basic theology, the ministry of the church, confessional standards, spiritual care, worship, discipleship, etc.

Once the consistory, along with the church planter and steering committee, is convinced that the church plant possesses sufficient size, financial viability, and suitable men for office, it is ready to proceed to Phase IV.

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1. 1. See *Church Order of the URCNA,* Articles 55–59 and Appendix 8.

CHAPTER 4

Phase IV: Organizing as a Church

The purpose of Phase IV is to transition from church plant to organized church in the URCNA. This process will ordinarily require the completion of the following eight steps:

Step 1: Request Advice from Classis

In accordance with Article 22 of the *Church Order of the URCNA,* the consistory must receive the concurring advice of its classis before proceeding to organize the church plant into a particular congregation. The advice of classis will have already been sought before the sending of a home missionary to the field, and the classis should be kept aware of the spiritual and numerical growth of the church plant throughout its journey to organization. Nevertheless, the consistory will need to seek the advice of classis when it believes the time has come for organization. If the classis concurs with the consistory's desire to organize the church plant into a United Reformed congregation, the consistory may proceed to the next step.

Step 2: Nominate and Train Men for Office

In accordance with Article 12 of *Church Order of the URCNA,* the council of the sending church must nominate male confessing members of the church plant who meet the biblical requirements for office and indicate their agreement with the Form of Subscription. The council may give members of the church plant opportunity to direct attention to suitable men; an announcement inviting them to do so should be coupled with instruction from the Bible on the spiritual qualifications for the offices of elder and deacon and instruction from the Church Order on the duties of these offices. If the identified men have not been trained for office, such training should take place before they are nominated by the council.

Step 3: Elect Elders and Deacons

The consistory will hold a special congregational meeting for those in the church plant who are members of the sending church. At this meeting, the men nominated for office will stand for election. Electing its own officers is an encouraging and vital step in the maturation of the new congregation.

Step 4: Transfer Memberships to the Newly Organized Church

Those in the church plant who are members of the sending church must request that the consistory transfer their memberships to their newly organized church. This can be done in one act by producing a list with all the members' names, having the members sign the list, and attaching this list to a membership transfer request letter addressed to the clerk of the overseeing consistory. The church planter and consistory should explain this process to the members who are being transferred so that everyone fully understands what is happening.

Step 5: Hold an Organization Service for the Ordination of Officers

After the new officers have been elected and the overseeing consistory has acted on the transfer of memberships, an organization service should be held in which Elders and Deacons are ordained. The overseeing consistory should be present at this service during which their oversight officially ends. This is an important opportunity for the new congregation to hear the ordination vows of and charges given to their newly elected leaders. They will also receive a charge as a new congregation and give thanks to God for his faithfulness.

Step 6: Establish Bylaws

The newly-formed consistory must establish bylaws for the newly-organized church as soon as possible, for bylaws stipulate numerous matters of the local ministry that are integral to the life and peace of the church but are not determined by the Church Order, applying the principles of the Church Order to a congregation in its particular setting. The consistory of the sending church should assist the new officers in writing bylaws as needed; it is ideal for this to have been done before the organization of the new church.

Also, bylaws are necessary documentation in most cases for the legal process of incorporation with a state or provincial government. In the United States, a church does not have to be legally incorporated in order to be recognized as a non-profit organization and receive tax-deductible gifts. However, incorporation may be desirable for other reasons, and each church should make its own determination whether to incorporate.

Step 7: Establish Bank Accounts and File as a Non-Profit Organization

The newly-formed council must set up a bank account for the church if one does not yet exist. Churches should consider if they want or need to file as a non-profit organization with the government. In the United States, it is called 501(c)(3) status; in Canada it is called TC3010 registered charity. The consistory of the sending church should assist in these tasks as needed.

Step 8: Call a Pastor

The newly-formed council has as one of its first tasks the calling of a minister. It is often the case in the URCNA that the man previously called by the overseeing council as the church planter will now be called as the pastor by the newly formed council. This is an important opportunity for the local congregation to confirm the church planter in his local call, and for the council to establish a financial package and its own terms of call (*CO* Art. 10). The sending church should assist in this process as needed. If it is necessary or desirable for any reason to search for a new pastor, the newly-formed council may conduct their search according to *CO* Arts 6–8.

In some sister NAPARC churches, men have developed gifts uniquely suited to developing church plant core groups to the point of organization, at which point they ordinarily move to a new church planting call. One potential advantage of this practice is that it enables the specialized gifts and experience of church planters to be used repeatedly in the church. While this is not currently a widespread practice in our churches, we may wish to consider the wisdom of this practice, and apply it more frequently in our circles.[1]

The Organization Service

The organization service discussed above in Step 5 is an important moment in the life of the church, presenting an ideal opportunity for the new church to celebrate the Lord's gracious provision over the long course of missionary labors. As already indicated, the overseeing consistory should plan to be present, and, of course, the rest of the members of the sending church should be invited to attend the organization service. This is also a wonderful opportunity to invite all of the churches of classis to join in the celebration and bear witness to the missionary calling shared by all our churches. For this reason, this special worship service is not usually called on the Lord's Day, in order to provide an opportunity for representatives from the churches of classis to attend.

Due to the presence of many guests from sister churches, this service is often one of the largest gatherings in the short life of the new congregation, and therefore also presents an excellent opportunity to promote the church to the community and invite fellow believers from other churches to come and bear witness to their ecumenical unity. It represents a date that should be remembered in the life of the church, and celebrated for years to come.

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1. 1. Regional Home Missionaries in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church typically serve this function. Called by a local presbytery, they shepherd core groups to the point of

organization, and assist them in the search and call of a permanent pastor.

CHAPTER 5

Advice for Church Planters

The work of church planting is an exciting and joyous endeavor. Those engaged in this work have the special privilege of seeing a new congregation of Jesus Christ take shape in a particular place so that the Kingdom of God expands in this world for the salvation of sinners, for their worship of God, and for their discipleship under the Lord Jesus. A church planter will be continually getting to know new people (some of them new believers), and he will be constantly developing new things in the mission work—all of which adds to the excitement. But it is imperative that he not allow these many blessings to make him unrealistic about the great difficulty, potential dangers, and many disappointments that are almost always a part of this work.

Church planters are pastor-teachers who labor in a ministry that has much in common with the work of the average local pastor of an established congregation—praying, studying, teaching, evangelizing, discipling, administrating, worshiping, etc. But he must do all of that very demanding work of the ministry while at the same time working on a host of things that the average pastor in an established church may rarely, if ever, have to consider—e.g., laying the foundation of a new congregation; shaping its infrastructure, policies, worship services, ministries, and congregational life; identifying and training its first set of ordained leaders; and tending constantly to numerous practical and administrative matters from the janitorial to the technological, and everything in between. His overseeing consistory will guide and help him to some degree, and the Lord will provide him with some helpful servants within the church plant. The vast majority of the work, however, will fall to the church planter, who will quickly find that the difficulty of pastoral ministry is virtually doubled in this calling.

Of course, there are also unique dangers that a church planter must be prepared to face. The small group of believers that gather around his teaching and preaching will be especially vulnerable to attack and corruption. Wolves and hypocrites will come, and their purpose will not be to build up the fledgling body of Christ. The church planter himself may become so consumed with his work that the Evil One will have no difficulty in sowing seeds of discord and bitterness in the man's family. Because of the relative smallness and immaturity of the plant itself, in addition to the extreme difficulty of the work, there are real dangers involved in church planting.

Finally, there are usually many disappointments that go with this work. After attending for some time, certain people will just stop coming. Not once, but perhaps numerous times, financial support may dip to an alarming level. Certain efforts will simply fail to materialize.

The church planter will never see in the sheep as much fruit as he wants for the praise of his Lord. Moreover, it is possible that the church plant will only last a couple of years, and then have to close its doors. On the other hand, it may take quite a number of years before the plant can organize, and when it does so, the church planter may have to leave, making way for a new pastor.

Given the great difficulty and disappointment often involved in this work, it is vital that the church planter be a man not only of exceptional gifting and stamina, but also of abiding faith and humility. Each and every day he will humbly need to embrace his calling to be a servant, trusting Almighty God to regenerate sinners, to preserve and sanctify his sheep, and to give increase as he determines. Moreover, if the church planter is truly humble, he will also carefully consider advice about church planting from those who have gone before him and who labor with him. The remainder of this chapter is an attempt to share some advice with church planters about the kind of men they will need to be and the sort of work they will need to do in order to be faithful and effective in their calling. Church planters, take heed![1]

Maintain a Vigorous Commitment to the Mission of the Church

There are few things more detrimental to a church plant, or to the church planter himself, than confusion about the church's mission, or a lack of focus in maintaining it. Without maintaining this clarity and commitment throughout the development of the plant, the church planter can very easily lose his way, so that he begins to neglect what is essential, spends time and energy where he should not, and potentially gives a distorted identity to the future congregation, if one is established at all.

As a church planter, you need in the first place to be clear in your own mind as to the mission of the church of Christ. In whatever terms the church plant will verbalize its own particular mission statement, make sure it is not a mission other than, or even supplemental to, the mission the risen Lord Jesus gave his church! Your mission is to make disciples by the faithful and prayerful use of the divinely appointed means (Matt. 28.18–20). This is the mission our Lord gave to his church, and it is the mission which must define and drive every church plant from the very beginning. If your goal is merely to lead worship until enough disciples have gathered and committed themselves to the establishment of a self–sustaining congregation, you will likely have a very unhealthy congregation, if one ever forms. Remember that a church plant, like any true church, exists to offer God joyful and biblical worship (1 Pet. 2:4–10). It serves as God's ambassador in calling sinners to be reconciled to him through Christ (2 Cor. 5:18–21). It builds up these disciples in their Christian faith and in their love for God and each other until each member of the body attains to that maturity that is in Christ

Jesus, its head (Eph. 4:11–16; Col. 1:27–29). The church planter must remain clear about the identity and mission of the church.

In addition, you must see to it that you maintain a vigorous commitment to that mission of the church in everything you do *and* in everything the church plant does. This mission of making and growing disciples of Christ will be fulfilled by the church plant, and then continue to be fulfilled in an established congregation, only if it is your expressed mission statement, constantly held before your people, normative for all your labors as church planter, owned by the leaders you seek to train for church office, and evident in everything that happens in the life of the church plant. If your daily work as a church planter does not contribute to this mission, you probably should not be doing it. If you cannot see how your work contributes to this mission, you will probably be executing it poorly.

Because this mission of the church is so important and yet so very difficult to fulfill with faithfulness, it is imperative that you recognize not only your inability to carry it out alone, but also your need for accountability in doing your part. For this very reason, God gave you the elders of the overseeing consistory (Acts 13:1–3), and he will provide you with new elders in the church plant, should it please him to grow and establish one (Acts 14:23). The elders in the sending church must be continually engaged in this work with you—even from a distance. From the beginning, make sure that they share with you a clear commitment to the mission of the church, that they are willing to hold you accountable to that mission, and that they maintain a personal involvement in the discipleship of those who are gathering around your ministry. Finally, do not wait for previously ordained servants to arrive at the church plant, ready to be installed as officers. From the start, you should search for mature men who manifestly love Christ and others. You do not want elders or deacons who view themselves primarily as board members. Such officers will only help you execute board meetings! As soon as possible, identify spiritually qualified men who are gifted for service as church officers, challenge them to aspire to ordained service, and seek to train them for the very personal and spiritual work of elders and deacons. But do not focus solely on the future; begin early to enlist these men in helping you maintain the mission of the church plant in the present. Having a plurality of local leaders is essential to an established congregation, and it is also a great benefit to the hard work of planting a church in preparation for the day of its organization.

Devote Yourself Daily to Growth as a Man of God

Making disciples and growing them up to maturity is a task which will elude you if you are not personally holding fast to Christ, and seeking continually to grow more mature in him. Your

service to God and others as a church planter will very quickly become stale, potentially false, and dangerous to you and others apart from your daily feeding upon Christ through his Word, resting in who he is and in all he has done, and prayerfully savoring your Triune God. Remember that the first thing every minister of the Word is called to do is pray (Acts 6:4; *CO* Article 2).

While a personal walk with God is essential to your work, you must not think of your devotion to God as a useful means to achieving the goal of successful church planting, which is an idolatrous exchange of loving the true God for loving your work. Your fundamental calling is to grow in faith as a disciple of Christ and a child of God. It is in Christ alone that you must find your true identity (not in being a church planter). It is in the Lord God that you must find your strength (not in your skill set). It is in the grace and love of the Triune God that you must find your joy (not in the success you will long to achieve).

Men are qualified for this calling as church planters only if they remain above reproach (1 Tim. 3:2). However, your ordination does not somehow guarantee your being or remaining a blameless man of God. “Keep a close watch on yourself and the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). By an active faith in Christ, and prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit, seek at all times to walk in godliness, and to have integrity as a man of God who bears a consistently godly character in the entirety of your life. “Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:22), and “give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all” (Rom. 12:17). This is not only about your qualification for office; it is ultimately about the honor of God’s holy name and the well-being of the church plant. Remember, as goes the shepherd, so go the sheep.

One particular area of integrity for which you must strive throughout your ministry is time management. This is essential not only for avoiding burnout from the massive amount of work you will have to do each week but also for maintaining balance in life for your own well-being and for the health of your relationship with others. With the help of your overseeing elders and, if you have one, your wife, figure out what amount of time is typically needed each week for the following: your work (all duties that directly affect the plant and those who are part of it); your rest (relaxing, reading, exercising, and adequate sleep each night); service (some time devoted each week to serving people in the community who are not part of the plant); and last, but certainly not least, family (who are entitled not only to a good deal of your day off and the vast majority of your vacation time but also to a couple of uninterrupted hours each day). If any of these areas of life are neglected for long, you, your family, and your ministry will suffer. Try to plan out your year, month, week, and each day, in order to manage time according to a balanced, workable schedule. And of course, you must always maintain

the humble recognition that God alone controls your time, and he will invariably allow countless interruptions.

Church planters have to be committed to a continual process of learning and growing as disciples of Christ. Make a practice of regularly sitting at the feet of those whose teaching through print and audio, or in person, will help you grow as a godly man and as a church-planting pastor. Always bear in mind that you are not the first church planter! Between your own federation and a number of other denominations, there is an abundance of resources. Be humble and wise enough to make good use of them. Moreover, your wife, if you have one), your overseeing elders, and a couple of mature men in the church plant should all be enlisted in helping you see where you need to grow and how you interact with others. However, a pastoral mentor who knows you well, and has already done this work of church planting, is truly invaluable. As busy as you will be in the care of your family and your fledgling flock, be careful to keep in contact with a few close colleagues in the ministry, and be humble enough to identify one (preferably your senior in years, maturity, and experience) who will help and counsel you in a way few others can.

If there is one area of your life which requires special attention, it is your loving service to your own family and fellowship with them. You are the Lord's under-shepherd in the care of souls in the church plant, but can any of them be as precious to you as the souls of your own wife and children? Make sure not to give the cold leftovers to this precious little flock. Often ask your wife if she feels you are married to her or to the church plant, and arrange for others to ask her this question as well. The demands of your work can lead you to feel that you must sacrifice time with your family in order to give just a little more attention to your work. It will happen on occasion, but you must not let it become the norm. Your service to Christ and his church can never be any better than your loving service to your own family. "If someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" (1 Tim. 3:5). Shepherd your family each day by teaching and directing them in God's truth, by leading them in the joyful worship of God, and by creating a godly and loving aroma in your household. Realize that your most powerful teaching, among your family especially, will come through your way of life. You must always bear in mind your duty to model before them a consistent faith in God and love for others. Be sure to schedule adequate time with your family and vigorously guard it; then make good use of that time by loving and serving them, enjoying your time with them, and lavishing upon them affection, gentleness, and mercy.

Shepherd Your People by Knowing and Serving Each One of the Sheep

There is a special intimacy and affection that you should have with your wife and children, but the pastoral care you give to them really is of a piece with that care which you are to give each soul in the church plant. You have the unique calling to establish a new congregation of Jesus Christ, which will require you to focus a great deal of your attention on evangelizing, organizing, studying, teaching, and preaching. But remember that you are also the pastor of each soul that the Lord is pleased to gather around your ministry, and with each one of them you need to strive to be "like a nursing mother taking care of her own children" and "like a father with his children" (1 Thess. 2:7, 11).

Your people need to know that you genuinely love them not only by your working hard to give them sound nourishment from the pulpit but also by your declaring to them the whole counsel of God from house to house (Acts 20:20, 27). For that personal teaching to be effective, you have to be a shepherd who knows his sheep, and they have to know that you care deeply for them because of the interest, compassion, and service you devote to each one. In addition to the friendliness you show to all attendees on the Lord's Day, also strive to get to know each one of them by inviting them into your home and by making it your custom to visit them where they live and work. This will take continual effort and very deliberate planning, scheduling, and execution, but it will be well worth it. You can shepherd the people well only if you work to know each one personally and demonstrate timely compassion to them when they are in need. With most of them, you will eventually become a trusted friend and counselor to whom they look for guidance and from whom they more willingly receive correction. Of course, this personal knowledge of, and connection to, each person in the church plant will also greatly increase the effectiveness of your preaching.

Being a loving spiritual parent to each one of those people who attend or become part of the church plant will also require you to make sure that they are enveloped into the life of the church family, that they are loved and served by others, and that they find a way to use the gifts God has given them for the good of others in the church. In addition to all of these very practical matters, you must be especially devoted to an activity that can seem impractical and rarely yields immediate results—prayer. Prayer for each soul is a critical part of your calling; yet for the pastor who would rather spend time with his books than with his people, these prayers will be infrequent, perfunctory, and vacuous. Make time to pray much for each of the people that become part of the plant and in order that those prayers can be regular, personal and specific, reach out to your people, take a real interest in each one, and pray often with them.

Love Lost Sinners Enough to Serve and Evangelize Them

As a church planter, you are a pastor–teacher and evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5). Your calling is not only to be God's ambassador in urging sinners to be reconciled to him through Christ but also to equip the saints to be witnesses for Christ in their own lives (Phil. 2:14–16). In addition to preaching the gospel with regular and explicit exhortations for sinners to repent of their sins and believe in Christ, you must also train your people how to be witnesses for Christ by defending the faith, by commending it to others through loving service, and by sharing the truth with their neighbors in a winsome manner.

As important as all your preaching and teaching will be in this connection, you must also make it your common and evident practice to be involved in your community, to reach out to unsaved people, to befriend and serve them, and to share the gospel with them. This way of life should be a model for your people to follow, and an indispensable means of adorning the gospel and spreading it to others because of your love for them, which flows from Christ's love for you. The church plant you serve cannot ever adopt the attitude that it exists primarily to be a new church home for believers who could not remain at some other church. Numerical growth will happen in this way to some degree, but your people must know that the church plant, like any congregation, is called by God to go and make new disciples, not to attract old ones. We should expect the Lord Jesus to increase the numbers of the church plant as it practices being a community that lovingly serves and witnesses to lost sinners.

It will be important for you to instruct your people continually about church growth. Concern that a church will grow in numbers can be a sinful preoccupation rooted in greed and competition. On the other hand, concern for numerical growth can and should be rooted in a godly desire to see the Lord glorified through the increase of redeemed worshipers! Teach your flock that its concern and preparation for growth in numbers, and its practice of witnessing to others, are integral to their own growth in Christian maturity and faithfulness to God. If he "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4), then his children should share that desire, and demonstrate it through loving service toward neighbors and through courageous and compassionate witnessing to the lost. Model this before your people as a matter of your own faithfulness. And teach them to leave the results to our sovereign God and Savior, who is pleased to bring others into his kingdom through our imperfect love of our neighbors and our feeble witnessing to them.

Strive to Be an Effective Servant of the Word

The church planter is a pastor–teacher, a minister of the Word who says with Paul, "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16). He knows that he is accursed if he preaches

anything other than the one true gospel (Gal. 1:8–9). While he is under obligation to preach it, he is also very happy and eager to do so, for it is his privilege to proclaim that good news which is the power of God for salvation to all who believe (Rom. 1:14–16). Consequently, as a church planter you will have to spend a great deal of your time and energy studying the Scriptures so that you might faithfully communicate the truth to others. Only do not imagine that you have fulfilled your calling by adequate study and clear communication of the truth.

To be an effective minister of the Word, you must always take care that God's Word is actually reaching people and renewing their minds for the transformation of their lives (Rom. 12:1–2). For an effective ministry, you must strive for your labor in the Word, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to equip the saints "until we all attain the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12–13). Watch yourself and your teaching, but also pay attention to the sheep, and see to it that they are being fed and growing, that the word of the kingdom is bearing fruit in their lives for God's pleasure (Matt. 13:18–23). Here are a few things that will help you effectively teach the sheep of Christ to believe and walk in the truth.

You are to declare to the saints the whole counsel of God, denying them nothing in his Word that is profitable for walking in faith and repentance (Acts 20:20f, 27). If God regenerates sinful hearts and brings them to faith through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17), and this faith is then nourished and sustained by that same word (1 Cor. 2:2–5; Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 4:11–16), it is absolutely critical, further, that you preach Christ and his gospel from all Scripture (Luke 24:27). This task will require that you carefully plan out a preaching and teaching schedule in advance so you may provide the sheep of God with a balanced diet in the Word. You ought to teach through your favorite doctrines and books of the Bible, but avoid an unhealthy preoccupation with your interests. God's children will grow up to maturity only if they are fed with the regular and robust preaching of the gospel, and trained under the whole counsel of God.

Most helpful in this connection will be your firm commitment to the practice of being a confessionally Reformed minister of the Word who continually labors to commend our doctrinal standards to the people involved in the church plant. Whether or not you begin with two services on the Lord's Day, make sure to incorporate the Three Forms of Unity into all of your teaching and preaching—even into the very life of the church plant. It would be foolish to expect all new converts and visitors to take up and read the Three Forms of Unity with adequate understanding, but do find helpful ways of commending the confessions to them as well. Provide all the people with their own copies of the confessions, and encourage the use of them in their homes. Indeed, these documents are old, but they are not boring or intellectual. By your wise and winsome use of our doctrinal standards, convince your people that our

confessional Reformed identity is not about being traditional or intellectual, but rather about being a true church of Christ that is captive to the all-sufficient Word of God. Make good use of these treasures in all that you do, not only to give the church plant a confessional Reformed identity, but also to give your people a steady and healthy diet in the whole system of God's truth.

Finally, make it your ambition every week to prepare a delicious feast in the Word for God's sheep to enjoy each Lord's Day. Do not think that they are going to come in droves and stick with you to the end on account of good sermons alone. They will not! But you must prioritize your preparation for and delivery of sermons in such a way that the people will know this is the single most important means of God's grace for their nourishment and growth. Seek to be a servant of the Word in a very practical way each day of the week, opening up and applying the Scriptures at every opportunity. But guard your time for sermon preparation, study thoroughly, soak the whole process of sermon writing in prayer, and give as much attention to how you will deliver the sermon as you give to studying the sermon text. Christ Jesus is the manna from heaven, but you will have to do more work than Moses in providing God's people with this true food. Preach the Word, not only, but pray much and study hard to preach it well. Moreover, remember that you are a minister of the Word not only during the sermon but in the way that you lead the congregation through the whole worship service. Do the work that is needed to craft a service rich in the use of Scripture, intelligible to the people, and smooth-moving from beginning to end. Your leading of the saints in the worship of God is a crucial aspect of an effective ministry of the Word. Remember, *lex orandi lex credendi*—the law of praying (through the church's liturgy in public worship) is the law of believing.

Make Sure That All Things Are Done Decently and in Good Order

While Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:40 apply most directly to the public worship of God, the church planter will have integrity in his ministry and peace among the people only if he gives constant attention to the many details of administration and communication. In an established congregation these details naturally receive the pastor's attention to some degree, but in the early phases of church planting you will be required to do almost all of it yourself. This may not be what you consider the most enjoyable aspect of the ministry, but make no mistake—it most definitely is a major part of church planting. The church plant will suffer if you are careless here; but careful attention to detail will make for order and peace, all to the glory of God who "is not a God of confusion but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33).

Give thought especially to worship services, but also to every other meeting of the people, whether for study, fellowship, planning, outreach, evangelism, or leadership training. With a clear purpose in mind, carefully plan out what should take place at each meeting so that it might be most productive and honoring to the Lord. Do not neglect your personal decorum; good content should have good packaging and delivery. Be thoughtful about your mannerisms, your attire, your voice, and even your mood. In every way, you should strive to be a servant who honors the Lord and reflects well upon him. Of course, these things must also be a concern for all those in the church plant who are appointed to greet or serve in a similar capacity.

Communication within the congregation and to those outside of it are also a matter of great importance for a church plant. In addition to the weekly bulletin announcements, church planters will want to develop the use of a website, email, and possibly social media, as well as a number of printed forms of communication (brochures, newsletters, etc.). Be clear in your own mind, and make it clear to your people, what the purpose of each form of communication is and how it is to be used, received, and processed. Do not be haphazard with any of your words, especially those sent through electronic or printed means, but choose and use them carefully. Also, be sure to give adequate opportunity for the people to communicate with you, with their other leaders, and with each other. The people need to be kept informed, and deserve to know how decisions affect them; and they also need a way to practice healthy communication with others, everyone speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:16).

Another key element in administration is orderliness and soundness in the church plant's meeting place. Always remember, and look to impress upon others, that the church is not just a place. It is where God's people gather to serve him. Cleanliness and functionality, safety and comfort, bathroom accessibility and supervision of children, food and drink, tasteful and appropriate décor, and sound and lighting, as well as any set–up and clean–up, are all important concerns. In many instances, these items will not be all that you would like them to be or even what you need, but be sure to attain an adequate measure of good order in these details. In a word, virtually everything about the church plant, its being and doing, should communicate as much as possible that you are the church of Jesus Christ, engaged in the worship of the Great King and the discipleship of His royal children.

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1. 1. Much of the material in this chapter was inspired by "Doing the Work of an Organizing Pastor," chapter 4 of *Planting an Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2008), 49–70.

Introduction to Appendices

The following appendices are included for the benefit of church planters and new members. Frequently, new members come into a church searching for answers to important questions that many people in our Reformed churches have not necessarily raised. For example, “Why must I become a member?”; “What is tithing?”; or, “What is Reformed worship?” We have included these five appendices to assist the church planter in providing answers to these common questions. We recommend that these appendices be published into separate booklets to distribute to visitors, or that this material be used in an inquirers’ or new members’ class.

Appendix 1: What Is Church Membership and Why Is It Necessary?

"What is the point of church membership? I am already a Christian and have a personal relationship with Jesus. Why do I need to become a member of a church?" Chances are, we asked these very questions when we first encountered a Reformed church. Church membership is a foreign concept to many. Due to the radical individualism common to American Christianity, many today find the idea of formal membership in an established church to be antiquated, unnecessary, and maybe even legalistic.

Church membership also goes against the popular notion in our culture that "organized religion" is inferior to "spirituality." The former is disparaged as passé at best and hatefully intolerant at worst, while the latter is readily embraced as chic and healthy. Organized religion is viewed as something very particular which manifests itself in narrow doctrines, liturgical customs, and exclusive tradition. Spirituality, on the other hand, is seen as something universal which can express itself in a wide variety of personal faiths and individual practices that generally seek one common goal: self–improvement. Influenced by this mode of thinking, many professing Christians believe they can have membership in the invisible church while opting out of membership in the visible church.

Sadly, things do not appear to be improving. According to some market research gurus, established churches are becoming a thing of the past. Some of the so-called experts project that in the future many Americans will derive all their spiritual input from the internet. If this is true, some may not see the point in being inconvenienced by attending (let alone becoming a member of) a church when they can get the same spiritual benefits in private. Why then do Reformed churches require membership? What exactly is church membership anyway?

What Is Church Membership?

Church membership is a formal and binding covenantal relationship between a family or individual and Christ Jesus, the Head of the church, through incorporation of this family or individual into the visible body of Christ in this world, namely the church. It begins with the understanding that Christ possesses an invisible church composed of all those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 13:8, 20:15, 21:27); that he has established a visible church on earth; and that this visible church is the community where the elect of God are normally gathered, protected and preserved (Matt. 28:18–20; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 54).

God first instituted the visible church immediately after the fall, when he separated the seed of the woman from the seed of the serpent and established the seed of the woman as a people united by his promise of salvation (Gen. 3:15). He further established his community when he made his covenant with the patriarch Abraham and his offspring (Gen. 12, 15, 17). He fulfilled his promises to Abraham, first in the nation of Israel and the land of Canaan, but then more fully in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Gal. 3**:**16, 29). Throughout the unfolding drama of redemptive history, from Abraham to Christ, God kept his people as a visible covenant community marked by the covenantal sign and seal of circumcision.

With the completion of Christ's earthly ministry and the inauguration of the new covenant, however, God no longer confined his visible church to one people (national Israel) and one place (the land of Canaan). Having satisfied God's Law by his life, death, and resurrection, Christ commissioned his apostles to preach the gospel, baptize, administer the Lord's Supper, and make disciples of all nations. As the book of Acts reveals, the apostles fulfilled this commission by planting churches (Acts 2:42). Beginning in Jerusalem, Christ added daily to his church those who were being saved (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4). The visible covenant community became a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Exod. 19:6), made up of people ransomed "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9).

After the apostles died, the visible church did not cease to exist. The New Testament makes very clear that Christ intended for his visible church to continue until the end of the age. He ordained the office of pastor to feed his flock with the preaching of the gospel so that his sheep will be healthy and grow to maturity (Rom. 10:14–17; Eph. 4:11–16; 2 Tim. 4:1–5; Titus 1:5–9). He has supplied his church with the tangible elements of ordinary water, bread, and wine in the sacraments, which the Holy Spirit uses to nourish our faith (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:17–34; cf. John 6:41–58). He gave the office of elder so that his people will have guardians over their souls and governors who keep order (Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–7, 5:17; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1- 4). He maintains the purity and peace of his church through the exercise of discipline (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14–15; Titus 1:10–14, 3:9–11). He has provided the office of deacon for the care of the poor and needy in the congregation (Acts 6:1–7; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8- 13, 5:3–15). He pours out gifts upon his church so that each believer will use them for the benefit of others (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:15–16). The New Testament reveals that Christ established His church to be an observable, identifiable society with its own organization and structure, and composed of real flesh and blood members.

Church membership, therefore, is about belonging to this visible community as manifested in a local congregation. The church is not a store frequented by loyal customers. Nor is it a voluntary association of individuals who are loosely united by consumer preferences or

cultural practices. Rather, the church is the *people* who belong to Christ, and the *place* where Christ meets them through the means he has ordained.

When a family or an individual pursues formal church membership, they are saying, "We are Christians, and therefore belong to Christ and his body." They and their children pass through the waters of baptism, acknowledging that they are part of something much larger than their own private, spiritual experience. They recognize that Christ has set them as living stones in his one temple (Eph. 4:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:4–5) and has gathered them as sheep in his one flock (John 10:1–29; Acts 20:28). They take public vows in the holy assembly of God's people, in which they profess their faith in Christ and their willingness to submit to his Lordship and the government of his church. Likewise, the congregation receives these disciples of Christ and acknowledges their own obligation to these new members as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Why Is Church Membership Necessary?

"All of this sounds great," one might say, "but I just want to *attend* this church. Why is it necessary that I become a member?" Some people recognize the visibility of Christ's church and enjoy attending worship services, but view membership as little more than an unnecessary formality. The Bible, however, gives us at least three reasons why membership in a local congregation is essential.

Spiritual Nurture through the Word

Christ is the Head of his church (Eph. 1:22–23; 4:15), the King of his kingdom (Matt. 28:18; Heb. 2:8–9; 1 Cor. 15:25; cf. Ps. 110:1). He was not only crucified and raised from the dead, but also exalted to the right hand of the Father in heaven. In other words, Jesus saves but also rules. And the way he rules his citizens is through his Word and Spirit, chiefly through the officers he has appointed in the local congregation. Consider the exhortation the writer to the Hebrews gives at the end of his sermon-letter: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb. 13:17). This is Christ's design. As his subjects and possession, we must submit to what *he* has ordained.

This can only be done through church membership. Membership in a local congregation creates a formal relationship between the elders and the congregants. This formal relationship is a covenant that obligates the elders to watch over the souls of those who belong to Christ. It is part of our submission to our Lord. We never mature beyond the nurture of the church. No Christian can sustain himself as a self–feeder. We cannot be our own pastors. Rather, God has

commanded us to submit ourselves to the preaching, teaching, and oversight of those shepherds whom he has placed over us in his love.

It has been the historical practice of Reformed churches to require a public vow to that end. For example, the fourth and final vow of Public Profession of Faith, Form Number 1 in the *Liturgical Forms and Prayers* of the United Reformed Churches in North America asks: "Do you promise to submit to the government of the church, and also, if you should become wayward, either in doctrine or in life, to submit to its admonition and discipline?"

According to the command of God, elders are responsible to care for the souls over which they have been appointed (Heb. 13:17). One of the ways elders care for church members is through family visitation, the historic practice of ministering the Word to families in their homes (Acts 20:28). Family visitation is a blessed opportunity for Christ's servants to bring his Word close to the hearts of his children and for the elders to help bear some of the burdens of the family, which are best communicated in the personal setting of the home. Surely, elders will do their best to care for occasional or even frequent church attendees. But they are bound to care for those church members who have been entrusted to them. Those who absent themselves from God's plan for the spiritual nurture of themselves and their family take great risk in doing so.

Spiritual Nurture through Accountability and Discipline

One of the ways in which Christ watches over our souls through the leaders in the local church is by the exercise of church discipline. Church discipline is the practice of applying the Word of God to members of the congregation who are in rebellion (i.e. unrepentant of a particular sin) or involved in some public scandal that affects the health of the church as a whole. The purposes of church discipline are the restoration of wayward disciples, the preservation of the church's doctrine, the peace and purity of the congregation, the protection of the church's reputation in the eyes of the unbelieving world, and the honor of God's holy name.

Christ gave his church the authority to exercise formal church discipline when he said to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19). Reformed churches have understood these keys to be the preaching of the gospel and the exercise of church discipline. The Heidelberg Catechism puts it like this:

> Q. 83. What are the keys of the kingdom?
>
> A. The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance. Both preaching and discipline open the kingdom of heaven to believers and close it to unbelievers.

Q. 84. How does the preaching of the gospel open and close the kingdom of heaven?

A. According to the command of Christ: The kingdom of heaven is opened by proclaiming and publicly declaring to each and every believer that, as often as he accepts the gospel promise in true faith, God, because of what Christ has done, truly forgives his sins. The kingdom of heaven is closed, however, by proclaiming and publicly declaring to unbelievers and hypocrites that, as long as they do not repent, the anger of God and eternal condemnation rest on them. God's judgment, both in this life and in the life to come, is based on this gospel testimony.

Q. 85. How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by Christian discipline?

A. According to the command of Christ: If anyone, though called a Christian, professes unchristian teachings or lives an unchristian life, if after repeated brotherly counsel, he refuses to abandon his errors and wickedness, and, if after being reported to the church, that is, to its officers, he fails to respond also to their admonition—such a one the officers exclude from the Christian fellowship by withholding the sacraments from him, and God himself excludes him from the kingdom of Christ. Such a person, when he promises and demonstrates genuine reform, is received again as a member of Christ and of his church.

Reformed churches confess this because it is what the New Testament teaches. Jesus gave instruction on discipline and public excommunication in Matthew 18.15–20. Paul wrote a whole chapter to the church in Corinth describing how sexual immorality amongst Christians defiles the church, and that the offender, if unrepentant, is to be excommunicated and delivered to Satan (1 Cor. 5). See other examples in 1 Tim. 1:18–20; 2 Tim. 2:14–18; and Titus 1:10–14, 3:10–11.

Without church membership, however, the church cannot fully use the keys which Christ has given to her. The elders cannot excommunicate an unrepentant offender who was never in communion with the church in the first place. Church membership, therefore, provides every member of the congregation—including the minister and elders—with accountability. It allows the elders to fulfill their duty of ensuring that purity of doctrine and holiness of life are practiced (Titus 1:9; Heb. 1:17); it permits the deacons to care for the needy within the church (Acts 6:1–7; 1 Tim. 5:9); and it makes every member in the congregation responsible for his doctrine and life.

Spiritual Nurture through the Sacraments

Church membership allows a disciple to participate in the sacraments and thereby receive the spiritual benefits which the Holy Spirit provides through them (1 Cor. 10:16). A person who

does not join a true congregation of Christ's church, however, does not have this privilege. Christ's sacraments are inseparably related to membership in his church.

For example, one does not have the right to be baptized without joining the visible church. Christ instituted Christian baptism as a one–time, initiatory sacrament that not only signifies the washing away of sins with his atoning blood, but also identifies the baptized person as a member of God's visible covenant community, much as circumcision did in the old covenant (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 2:39). Thus, one is to be baptized *into* church membership, and in this way placed under the oversight of a local body of elders. Baptism cannot be separated from church membership (Eph. 4:4–5).

Likewise, one does not have the right to partake of the Lord's Supper without church membership. Christ established the Supper as a holy meal for the members of his church. It not only signifies his body and blood offered on the cross, but also nourishes the faith of repentant sinners (1 Cor. 10:16; John 6:22–60). As the governors and overseers of the church (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28; 1 Tim. 3:1–7), the elders have the responsibility of supervising participation in the Lord's Table, and ensuring, as much as possible, that people do not partake in an unworthy manner (1 Cor. 11:17–34). The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes the New Testament's teaching in this way:

> Q. 81. Who are to come to the Lord's Table?
>
> A. Those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins, but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life. Hypocrites and those who are unrepentant, however, eat and drink judgment on themselves.
>
> Q. 82. Are those to be admitted to the Lord's Supper who show by what they say and do that they are unbelieving and ungodly?
>
> A. No, that would dishonor God's covenant and bring down God's anger upon the entire congregation. Therefore, according to the instruction of Christ and his apostles, the Christian church is duty–bound to exclude such people, by the official use of the keys of the kingdom, until they reform their lives.

In the URCNA, we have sought to apply this teaching by requiring a public profession of faith and membership in good standing for all who come to the Lord's Table.

The bottom line is that participation in the sacraments requires biblical church membership. While Christ has appointed the sacraments as visible signs and seals of the gospel for the nourishment of our souls, he did not design them to be individualistic practices.

The sacraments are acts of divine service to his assembled people on the Lord's Day. He condescends to his flock so that he can feed them with his means of grace.

Thus we confess in Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, "We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person, of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself." The fact that in this life the visible church is imperfect and mixed with hypocrites gives no Christian the right to depart from it. Except in otherwise extraordinary cases, a person cannot belong to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church without also belonging to a visible manifestation of the same, which, according to the New Testament, is the local congregation that preaches the gospel, administers the sacraments, and exercises church discipline.

If we profess to be Christians, we must practice the Christian faith according to the Word of God, not according to our opinions. The New Testament makes it clear that every Christian is to be baptized into the body of Christ and held accountable for his doctrine and life. It tells us that for our good God has provided us with pastors, elders, and deacons, as well as the communion of saints in the local church.

If you have been baptized but you are not a member of a true congregation of Christ's church, you are living an irregular life that the New Testament does not recognize as Christian. The Lord calls you to repentance. He calls you to come home to the safety and benefit of his sheepfold. We urge you to join a true church, a body of believers that confesses the truth, submits to the authority of Christ as delegated to elders, and meets each week to worship God and receive Christ through Word and sacrament. You are not free to roam as a spiritual drifter on the internet or as a perpetual visitor from church to church. Find a good church and join it, for in this life we can do no better than to take up our place in the body of Christ, receive the means of grace, and enjoy the communion of saints.

Appendix 2: Why Do We Need Creeds and Confessions?

A Reformed church is a confessional church. That is to say, it stands with the historic Christian faith and Protestant Reformation by confessing certain doctrines to be true. Those doctrines are summarized in ecclesiastical statements known as creeds and confessions. Without those creeds and confessions, a Reformed church loses its identity. Indeed, without creeds and confessions, no church can avoid an identity crisis.

For some, such an emphasis upon creeds and confessions might seem a little strange, perhaps even alarming. Why should a Bible–believing church hold so firmly to uninspired and fallible documents written by men? After all, we have the Bible, which alone is the inspired Word of God and is the only rule for our faith and life. Why should Christians bother with things like the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort?

Those are fair questions. What follows is a brief explanation of why we use creeds and confessions in the URCNA. In short, we do so because they serve Christ's church by preserving, protecting, and providing: They *preserve* the church's unity in the truth, *protect* the church from heresy (false teaching), and *provide* the church with instruction.

Creeds & Confessions Preserve the Church's Unity in the Truth

It is often said, "doctrine divides, but love unites," or "doctrine divides, but practice unites." The idea behind both of these statements is that an emphasis upon theology will cripple Christ's church by leading her into debates over theology. Instead, the church should focus on loving each other and doing good works. In fact, one of the most popular evangelical leaders in America recently said, "The first Reformation was about doctrine; the second one needs to be about behavior . . . We need a reformation not of creeds but deeds."

To pit doctrine against love or practice, however, is to create a false dichotomy. Paul repeatedly commends the churches for their faith in Christ and love for one another (Eph. 1:15, 3:17; Col. 1:4; 1 Thess. 1:3, 3:6; 2 Thess. 1:3; Titus 2:2, 3:15; Phlm. 1:5). Our unity as Christians is based on the truth we confess (i.e. doctrine). Our responsibility to love one another and perform good works is always to be done in response to that truth. To divorce doctrine from love and good works is to profess a religion different from Christianity, for Christianity is based on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, our love for one another and duty to perform good works are commanded of every Christian (John 13:34f, 15:12; Eph. 2:10; Titus 3:8; 1 John 3:10–23, 4:7–5:3). But the gospel is a message to be believed, not a mode of behavior. The gospel is the message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ who alone saves sinners from the wrath of God. This message is received through faith alone in Christ alone. When that message is believed with true faith, a change in behavior will be the result. To elevate deeds above creeds, however, is to distort Christianity into mere pietism and moralism. Indeed, it is to base our unity on something *other* than the truth.

This is why we must confess essential doctrine. To neglect essential doctrine is to neglect the foundation of our unity. In the church, our unity is not based on our ethnicity, political party, or consumer preferences. Our unity is based strictly on the gospel and the biblical truths we confess. That is why we call our confessions the Three Forms of *Unity*. We stand as a diverse people from every tongue, nation and tribe, but united in our confession.

Moreover, unity is not something we can produce artificially. Only God can create this unity, and he has done so in Jesus Christ. We are simply called to maintain this unity. Writing to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul tells Christians to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). In the very next verse he says, "there is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:4–6). He states these seven articles of the Christian faith in what some New Testament scholars believe was a creed new converts recited just before they were baptized and received visibly into the church. The point Paul makes is very clear: there is no unity apart from the truth.

Someone might ask, "Why not use the Bible alone? The Bible is the only written authority and inerrant rule for the faith and life of the church. Creeds and confessions, on the other hand, are documents that are capable of error. Why don't we just say, 'No creed but Christ' or 'No creed but the Bible'?" The answer is very simple. Creeds and confessions are necessary because they are ecclesiastical statements about what we believe the Bible to teach. Statements like "No creed but Christ" or "No creed but the Bible" are actually self–contradictory. Those statements are creeds in themselves.

The word "creed" comes from the Latin *credo,* which simply means, "I believe." A creed is simply a summary of what one believes. And a confession is similar. A confession is a more detailed explanation of the Christian faith. The word "confession" comes from the Latin *confessio,* which means "I acknowledge." Virtually every Christian has a creed and a confession of some sort, whether he realizes it or not.

Let's say you asked a Christian friend about his beliefs. Your friend, wanting to be faithful to the Word of God, says, "I believe the Bible." This, of course, is a good answer, but it is very general and broad—the Bible is a big book! You then ask, "And what do you believe the Bible teaches? What does it teach about God? What does it teach about Christ? What does it say about salvation?" At that moment, your friend is forced to make a creedal statement. He is forced to make a confession. As soon as he begins to summarize what the Bible teaches about God, Christ, salvation, or any other doctrine, he has made a confession! This is what Peter did in Matthew 16 when Jesus asked him, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." He made a confession.

A personal confession is a good and important thing. But as one body of Christ, we ought to confess the same things. We need to be in agreement on the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Especially those churches which hope to be obedient to God's command to demonstrate practical unity must make a unified confession if they are to walk together (Amos 3:3). Creeds and confessions are an aid to that end. They summarize essential apostolic doctrine and allow us to stand united as Christ's church with one believing heart and one confessing tongue. They help preserve the church's unity in the truth.

Creeds & Confessions Protect the Church from Heresy

It is interesting to note that creedal statements often appear in Scripture. For example, in Deuteronomy 6:4 we find the great *Shema:* "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." Jews have recited this creed since the days of Moses. It was an important creed because it protected the Israelites from the heresy of polytheism, the belief that there are many gods. When Israel received this creed, they were in the process of being brought out of Egypt where they had lived for hundreds of years. Egypt was a culture steeped in polytheism. There were deities for virtually every conceivable area of the universe. There was a god for fertility, a god for agriculture, a god for rain, a god for the sun, etc. Coming out of Egypt and into the promised land of Canaan, it was vital for Israel to know that there is only one true and living God. He alone is the Creator of the sun, moon and stars, who filled the air with birds, the sea with fish, and created all animals and mankind. He is sovereign over all. This simple creed, the Shema, helped to protect Israel from the falsehood of polytheism.

We also see creedal statements in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul seeks to correct the terrible heresy circulating in the Corinthian church which denied the bodily resurrection. The first thing he does is quote a creed with which they were familiar. He says, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in

accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3f). He then unpacks that little creed throughout the rest of the chapter, explaining that one cannot deny the resurrection of the body without also denying the resurrection of Christ (and thus the gospel!). Essential doctrine, therefore, had to be stated briefly and clearly in order to protect the flock from wolves who would lead Christ's sheep astray.

This pattern is pervasive in the New Testament. The apostles had to state the truth unambiguously in order to protect the church from heresy and harm. This is a pastoral responsibility that has continued in the church throughout the ages. Each time a new heresy has threatened the purity of the truth, the church has had to respond by clearly stating the essential doctrine that Scripture teaches.

For example, in the fourth century the church faced a great crisis when the heretic Arius attacked the doctrine of the eternality and divinity of Christ. Arius said he believed the Bible. He was even trained at one of the best schools of his day and ordained. Yet, thinking he was acting in the interest of the truth, he denied essential Christian doctrine and led many people astray. Thus, the church responded to this situation by looking carefully at Arius' teachings, and then rightly condemning them as heresy. The church, represented by ecumenical delegates, wrote a creed in response to Arius' doctrine in order to protect believers. That creed is the Nicene Creed.

As heresies arise and attack the church, it is necessary for the church to respond by summarizing particular doctrines in Scripture in order to refute false teaching. This is a charge given to the church. Paul told young Pastor Timothy, "Preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will heap up for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into silly myths" (2 Tim. 4:2–4).

Likewise, the apostle John says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Creeds and confessions are an aid to that end. By believing and confessing a clear system of biblical doctrine, the church is better equipped to protect Christ's sheep.

Furthermore, creeds and confessions protect us from ourselves. Each of us reads the Bible with philosophical presuppositions. We are fallen people. We bring baggage to the text we are interpreting. While creeds and confessions do not guarantee that we will have an infallible interpretation of Scripture, they nevertheless provide a safeguard. Like rails upon which a train runs, our confessions keep us on track. Take away the rails, and you have a disaster. Likewise, when an individual Christian tries to read the Bible completely detached from the

historic Christian church, and refuses to check his interpretation with what the church has confessed through the ages, he is bound for disaster.

Creeds & Confessions Provide Instruction on the Essentials

Creeds and confessions help us "connect the dots" of the Bible. They instruct us on the doctrine which arises from the story of redemption. They are one of the ways the church fulfills her responsibility to "Go . . . and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that [Christ has] commanded" (Matt. 28:18–20). The church has the responsibility to teach apostolic doctrine, which has been laid as a foundation for our faith (Eph. 2:20). This is why it is named the Apostles' Creed—not because the apostles themselves wrote it, but because it is a faithful expression of apostolic doctrine which Christ commanded his church to teach.

Additionally, this is why the Reformation gave us rich catechisms. The Heidelberg Catechism goes through the Apostles' Creed and explains it, line by line, so that we are instructed in what we believe and why we believe it. It teaches us what God requires of us in each of the Ten Commandments, and what it means to pray each line of the Lord's Prayer. It educates us about the law and the gospel, and how we are to live in gratitude to God with a life of good works. It organizes biblical doctrine and teaches us in a question-and-answer format so that we will know the basics of Christianity.

When we understand the creeds, confessions, and catechisms, we should be able to confess them as our own. In 1561–62 the Reformed churches sent a copy of the Belgic Confession to the Roman Catholic King of Spain, Philip II, along with a letter that said that they were ready to obey the government in all lawful things, but that they would "offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to fire" rather than deny the truth expressed in their confession. To the glory of God, and for the good of his church, we should have such a commitment to the truth.

Reformed Christians are confessing Christians. That is to say, they are members of confessional churches that hold to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints and confessed during the Protestant Reformation. In our confession, we are, by God's grace, "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27).

Appendix 3: Biblical Principles of Tithing and Giving

Most Christians are familiar with the offering in worship. Plates or baskets are passed down the pews and filled with money that comes from the pockets of worshipers. This should not be an uncomfortable experience for Christians, but a joyful opportunity to express our love for God and commitment to make disciples in the world. But what does God require of us in the offering? How much and how often should we give? To answer these questions, we must consider what the Bible says about our duty in financial giving.

The Tithe of the Old Testament

We begin with the Old Testament and what it calls the "tithe." The word tithe means a tenth. Today it is common for many Christians to speak of "tithing" or "giving a tithe" to describe their financial giving even though the amount they are giving is not a tenth of their earnings but some other amount which they have determined for themselves. The tithe, however, is a tenth. It was an ancient form of worship, predating the Mosaic Law.

The book of Genesis tells how the patriarchs practiced tithing as an act of worship. Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek, a priest of God Most High, giving him a tenth of all the spoils from battle (Gen. 14:17–24; cf. Heb. 7:1–2). Later, we read of Jacob vowing to God, "of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you" (Gen. 28:22). These tithes were not given in response to any specific laws about tithing. They were simply expressions of gratitude to God for his mercy and grace. Abraham and Jacob were pleased to worship the Lord by offering a tenth of their income.

Later in redemptive history, God commanded his people to give a tenth of their income for the support of the ministry. As part of the Mosaic Law, God commanded the Israelites to provide for the maintenance of the temple and the Levites. The Levites were the one tribe of Israel who did not receive a portion of the land which God graciously gave to Israel. For the Levites, the priesthood was their inheritance (Num. 18:24; Josh. 18:7). As priests, they were to serve the other tribes. In order to provide for their survival, God appointed the tithe: "To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do" (Num. 18:21). A tenth of one's regular agricultural increase—the means of survival and gain for the Israelite—was to be set apart as an offering to the Lord: "Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD's; it is holy to the LORD

. . . And every tithe of herds and flocks, every tenth animal of all that pass under the herdsman's staff, shall be holy to the LORD" (Lev. 27:30, 32).

Deuteronomy 14:22–29 points out that when these tithes were taken to the tabernacle, a portion would be eaten before the Lord in joyful fellowship with the Levites and the poor. Far from being a burdensome obligation, the tithe was meant to be an occasion of jubilant worship and fellowship.

Tithing, therefore, was an important part of Israel's covenantal life with God. It was also a great sin to withhold tithes. To do so was to steal from God. Through the prophet Malachi, God indicted Israel for the sin of withholding tithes: "Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you" (Mal. 3:8–9). Conversely, if Israel would show their trust in the Lord by obeying him with the tithe, they would have their needs met and be blessed. "Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need" (Mal. 3:10).

Giving in the New Testament

The New Testament gives no explicit command for tithing. The strict tithe seems to be linked to the old covenant, that is, God's covenant with the nation of Israel. Nevertheless, there is some continuity between the old and new covenants when it comes to giving. Just as Israel was to provide for the priests in the old covenant, the church is to provide for the ministry of the gospel in the new covenant. Paul makes it very clear that the ministry of the gospel is to be supported with the resources of the church. The apostle gives very straight–forward teaching on this topic in 1 Corinthians: "In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (9:14).

Writing to Timothy, Paul quotes some general laws from the Old Testament and applies them to the ministry of the Word: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,' and 'The laborer deserves his wages'" (1 Tim. 5:17f). Likewise, writing to the Galatians, Paul says, "One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches." (Gal. 6:6)

But it is not only the pastor's livelihood that a congregation is to support. A congregation must also express the communion of the saints in its use of financial resources. Near the end

of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul tells of his plans to deliver collected funds for the poor Christians in Jerusalem:

> At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. (Rom. 15:25–27; cf. 1 Cor 16:1–4)

To this end, every Christian should be mindful of his responsibilities in supporting the budget of the congregation to which he belongs, so that the aforementioned needs are being met. Giving to worthy parachurch organizations such as Christian radio programs or sound Reformed seminaries can be a noble use of our resources, but such giving should never replace the Christian's support of a local church and its missionaries. The support of the local church must always come first, for it is only the church that baptizes, administers the Lord's Supper, and exercises discipline. God has ordained the local church as the primary means for making disciples and establishing the communion of saints.

So, How Much Am I to Give?

If the compulsory Levitical tithe was particular to the Levitical priesthood and the New Testament does not explicitly command a strict ten percent of one's income, just how much should the believer give? Paul gives us at least three important guidelines. But notice that, for Paul, the question of *how much* we should give is never to be separated from *how* we should give. Giving is an act of worship and a spiritual matter. Thus, we should consider carefully the following three principles.

Give freely and cheerfully.

Paul says that "Each one must give as he has made up in his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). In the New Testament, there is no prescribed amount that one must give. The amount that you contribute is something that only you can decide. But however much you give, do it with joy! Do not give to the work of the kingdom out of any sense that you have been pressured to do so. Give cheerfully or do not give at all. As one writer has put it, "God loves the one who gives cheerfully, and if God has not yet cheered your heart with the gospel, so that you delight to think you can contribute to the gathering and the perfecting of other saints, work on that issue first."

Give consistently.

Again, in his correspondence with the Corinthians, Paul gives us direction. He says, "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper" (1 Cor. 16:2). Establish the practice of setting aside a certain amount of your resources for the work of the kingdom, just as you would anything else in your monthly budget and financial planning. While ten percent is not a strict requirement for the new covenant, it is nevertheless an excellent guideline. Christians do well to make ten percent of their income the minimum of their giving, as it is an expression of their joy in the Lord and gratitude for salvation. Once again, we look back to the example of Abraham and Jacob who were both pleased to give in this way. But whatever amount we decide to give, we are, according to the apostle Paul, to do so with consistency on a weekly or monthly basis. The support of the local church is not dependent upon the state, but upon the regular giving of the members of the congregation.

Give as the Lord prospers you.

Notice those last words in Paul's command above: "as he may prosper." In other words, our giving should be in proportion to what God, in his providence, has given us. As God is pleased to increase the amount of our income, our giving should increase accordingly. Again, we see how the old covenant practice of tithing can be applied wisely in the new covenant. Setting aside ten percent of our income, whether we make a little or a lot, helps us to give as the Lord prospers us.

We must remember that all of our resources come from God and are properly his, while we are stewards of his resources. As Paul says, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). Likewise, Jesus warns in Luke 12:48, "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required." The question every Christian must ask himself in this regard is, Am I being faithful with what God has entrusted to me?

In his Sermon on the Mount, our Lord said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:19–21). What we do with our resources is a telling sign of what we value.

Do we consider our giving an investment in the kingdom—not an investment to reap financial reward here on earth, or hope for a bigger mansion in heaven as the health–and–wealth preachers would have us believe—but an investment in the advancement of the gospel

and in the edification of God's people until the Lord returns? As those who have been justified and adopted by virtue of the person and work of Christ, we are already most abundantly blessed! We already have "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven" for us (1 Pet. 1:4). We are, therefore, to be heavenly minded with our resources in this life.

Thus, as we have opportunity to worship the Lord with the offering each week, may each of us experience the joy of giving, and seek to bring him glory with everything he has entrusted to us.

Appendix 4: What Is Reformed Worship?

We live in a place and time of unparalleled individual freedom of choice. We choose how we dress from an almost endless number of options. We decide whether we want our books in paper or digital format. Young people graduating from high school or college enjoy a host of vocational opportunities. Our culture trains us to think that we should be able to have things our way. In the 1990s, Burger King advertised its menu with the slogan, "your way, right away." In the 1980s, AT&T advertised themselves as "the right choice" for telecommunication and technology needs. Since the 1970s, abortion advocates have referred to their movement as pro–choice, a very clever appeal to that value which seems to enjoy sovereignty in our society.

This emphasis on choice and individual freedom has significant implications for how we view worship. With the combination of personal mobility and the increasing smorgasbord of church flavors, Americans today have almost limitless latitude in terms of how, where, and when we worship. To be fair, these worship options are not necessarily bad or to be avoided, but they do challenge us to sift through the options with biblical wisdom.

Many people seem to weigh their worship options on the scale of personal preference and emotional attraction: "I like more energetic worship, so I attend church X" or, "I prefer more contemplative worship, so I go to church Y." Too seldom do people reflect on worship by asking the following kinds of questions: "Does God have anything to say about how I worship? Should something more than my feelings and preferences determine how and where I meet with God? Is there an authoritative guide to Christian worship? What kind of worship pleases God?" To answer these questions, we must turn to Scripture.

Worship is Standardized by Scripture

God reveals in his Word that he is deeply concerned about how he is worshiped. He reserves for himself the right to decide how his people will worship him. In the old covenant, he made this supremely clear to his people when he gave them his law. The first two of the Ten Commandments require that we worship God alone, and only in a way that conforms to his will (Exod. 20:3f). The Second Commandment in particular reveals that Israel was not free to worship God any way they pleased but only in a way that pleased God. In our Reformed churches we call this the "Regulative Principle of Worship"—the proper application of the Second Commandment such that all worship is done in accordance with the Word of God. The Heidelberg Catechism explains clearly what God requires of us in this commandment:

Q. 96. What is God's will for us in the Second Commandment?

> A. That we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his Word.

In other words, not everything that moves us emotionally (like an image) is appropriate for worship. The governing question in many modern churches is, "What will produce a stimulating spiritual feeling?" The question ought to be, "What does God want worship services to look like?" While no single church or tradition answers that question perfectly, many churches today are no longer asking the question. Nadab and Abihu should have asked that question. God commanded them to worship him in a particular fashion. Ignoring the details about acceptable worship, they offered "strange fire" to God, for which he consumed them with his own holy fire (Lev. 10:1–2).

This principle that God regulates worship flies in the face of much of what passes for worship today. Instead of being regulated by Scripture, much worship nowadays is regulated by personal preference, and driven by an itch for innovation. But our lawgiver governs our worship with full authority. He still says to his people, "Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it" (Deut. 12:32; cf. Matt. 28:20). We are not free now in the new covenant to offer God our own strange fire in worship. Rather, we must "offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28f).

The regulative principle of worship is often perceived as a confining and stifling thing that would remove joy and vibrancy from the worship of God. But the truth is, when our worship is regulated by the Scriptures, we have the assurance that our liberty to worship God in an acceptable way is protected from the attempts of man to bind our consciences to do in worship what is designed only to please man. To be ruled in worship by the all–sufficient Word of God is not confining and limiting but actually something that liberates us from the false rule of man, and liberates us for the true worship of God.

Worship Is Structured by Scripture

Not only does the Bible stipulate what particular elements of worship are acceptable to God, but it also suggests to us the overall covenantal structure that worship should have. A covenant is a binding relationship between two or more parties. Worship is a formal covenantal meeting between the Great King and his subjects.

God delivered Israel out of Egypt so that his redeemed people could meet and renew covenant with him (Exod. 6:2–9). Contrary to contemporary opinion, worship is not meant to be an evangelistic crusade. The gospel must always be faithfully preached with both

unbelievers and believers in mind. But the worship service is primarily a holy convocation between God and his covenant people, namely professing believers with their children.

Though this teaching often goes unrecognized, Scripture clearly assumes the involvement of the whole family in worship (Deut. 31:10–13; Eph. 6:1–4; Col. 3:18–20). It should not surprise us that God's commandment regarding the manner of proper worship should contain generational curses and blessings (Exod. 20:5f). Our worship services give our children an early and often unshakeable impression of who God is and how we must relate to him. Services which suggest that we can approach God on our terms, governed only by the limits of our imagination, give our children a dreadfully defective impression of who God is and how we must find him. Seeker–sensitive worship can even threaten one's commitment to the biblical Christ, by whose merits alone we can approach God (Heb. 10:19–22).

Another aspect of covenantal worship that the Bible reveals to us is the dialogical nature of our meeting with God, so that the two covenant parties are drawn together in conversation with one

another. While Scripture does not provide us with an explicit liturgy for a worship service, it nevertheless reveals the basic elements. The book of Acts tells us that the first new covenant congregation "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). As the rest of the New Testament makes clear, these are the essential elements of a worship service: the preaching of the Word ("the apostles' teaching"), the communion of saints ("fellowship"), the sacraments ("the breaking of bread"), and prayer and singing ("the prayers").

These elements help form the dialogue between God and his people. God speaks to us in his Word and sacraments, and we respond to him in prayer and song. He calls us to worship, and we respond by pledging our dependence upon him (Ps. 124:8). God then announces his greeting of grace and peace to his covenant people (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3–5; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1f). We confess our sins (Ps. 51), and cry out with our needs (Ps. 18:6). God responds with forgiveness (Ps. 32; Ps. 130:3–6) and with his provision for us in his Word and sacraments (2 Cor. 5:18–20; Heb. 12:25; 2 Tim. 4:1–5; 1 Cor. 10:16; Rev. 12:6, 14). We worship him for his goodness (Ps. 147). He sends us forth with his blessing (2 Cor. 13:14). This historic and sound pattern of worship helps to make our covenant meeting with God a spiritually rich one, as God's gracious word to us enlivens us to respond in accordance with his will.

Worship is Saturated with Scripture

Contrary to the practice of some churches, Christian worship is inherently verbal, not visual. The Second Commandment explicitly condemns making images of God, not just because it is impossible for God to be adequately represented by an image, but because God will not permit us to draw near to him by the use of images that will distract us from his Word. The golden calf was not another god but Israel's attempt to serve Jehovah by visual means, when they should have waited for his Word (Exod. 32:4f; cf. Deut. 4:9–19). By implication, the historic Protestant church has been critical of the use of images to represent any of the three persons of the Trinity, including Christ.

Images give a biased impression of God based on the artist's creative abilities and theological proclivities. A beautiful image of Christ would stand in contrast to his description in Isa. 53:2: "he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." An Anglo–Saxon image of Christ, apart from being historically inaccurate, would communicate an ethno–centricity. A cartoonish image of Christ runs the risk of stripping the second person of the Trinity of the dignity which he deserves. It is not simply that a visible image of Christ would fail to communicate his divinity (thereby implying a separation of his two natures), but that every image of Christ is necessarily an attempt to make an image of God. For a time, God saw fit to send to earth his Son as his fleshly image (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). But then, after taking this image back to heaven, he gave us his written Word, which sufficiently reveals God to us. At this present time, we do not see the Word made flesh, but we are to hear him (1 Pet. 1:8f). Not by crucifixes and paintings are we to see Christ, but through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, those "pictures" of Jesus which have been prescribed by the Lord himself.

When God called Israel out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, it was abundantly clear that he had center stage, and that his speech should stop every mouth (Deut. 5:4f, 23–27). When the church gathers for worship God still speaks (Heb. 12:25–27). We honor God's Word the way Cornelius received Peter: "Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord" (Acts 10:33). This means Scripture must be read (1 Tim. 4:13), preached (2 Tim. 4:2), and sung (Col. 3:16). God's revelation should even permeate our prayers (Matt. 6:9–13).

Worshipers Are Sanctified by Scripture

In the worship service, God serves his people with his Word and sacraments. These are God's ordained means of grace to sanctify his people. Before he went to the cross, Jesus prayed to the Father, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). The preaching of the

gospel is the means God uses not only to grant us faith (Rom. 10:17) but also to strengthen it (Rom. 16:25). Likewise, the Lord's Supper is a real communion and participation in the body and blood of Christ in heaven (1 Cor. 10:16; cf. John 6:51–58). These means of grace are indispensable to the sanctification and spiritual growth of every Christian.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God revealed that our very lives depend on hearing and receiving his Word: "Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live" (Isa. 55:2–3). In the new covenant, God feeds his people with this food for the soul. This is why Jesus commissioned Peter with the words, "Feed my lambs . . . Feed my sheep" (John 21:15, 17). Just as physical food provides nourishment for the body and gladdens the heart, the spiritual food God provides in Word and sacrament gives the believer spiritual nourishment and everlasting joy.

Curved in on ourselves in selfish introspection and idol worship, we need an external Word, a voice that comes from outside of ourselves to interfere with our make–believe worlds and to tell us the truth. We need to hear that surprising message of a holy God justifying the wicked through Christ. The "living preaching of his Word," as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it in Question 98, is God's ordained means to accomplish this. It is an intrusive act by the Holy Spirit, driving us out of ourselves and directing our faith to the promises of God, which are all "yes" and "amen" in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20).

The primary purpose of going to church, therefore, is not to serve God, but to be served by him. The same Lord who once rose from supper, laid aside his outer garments, tied a towel around his waist, and washed the feet of his disciples, continues to condescend to his followers, and to serve them in Word and sacrament. He summons us to a corporate, festive event in the call to worship. Each week, through the Ministry of the Word, he spreads a table in the wilderness, setting before us excellent food and drink for the soul.

Our response to this feast is to worship God with reverence, zeal, and joy. In the worship service, God does not bring us to the terror of Mount Sinai but to the festal gathering of Mount Zion above (Heb. 12:18–24). Yet, he is still a holy God and a consuming fire, and must be worshiped with both gratitude and awe, and in full accordance with his Word (Heb 12:28f).

Appendix 5: What about Infant Baptism?

"Why does your church baptize babies?" This is a common question asked by visitors to a Reformed church. Since the historic practice of baptizing the children of believers has fallen on hard times, what used to be the norm among Protestants is now a foreign concept to many. Consequently, the doctrine of infant baptism can be a difficult hurdle for a person who is interested in joining a confessional, Reformed church.

So why *do* Reformed churches baptize children? The answer is simple: *We baptize the children of believers because they belong to the covenant and people of God.* While this answer is simple, it nevertheless requires some explanation. As with many doctrines, such as the Trinity or the deity of Christ, the doctrine of infant baptism requires a broader approach to Scripture than reading a few proof-texts. In order for us to understand this doctrine, we must first think about God's covenant of grace with his people, and the nature of his church.

Perhaps the simplest approach to understanding this doctrine is by beginning with the Heidelberg Catechism's concise explanation of infant baptism:

> Q. 74. Should infants, too, be baptized?
>
> A. Yes. Infants as well as adults are in God's covenant and are his people. They, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith. Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.

There are four parts to this answer which we should consider carefully: (1) there is one covenant of grace; (2) in the old covenant, God included children in his church; (3) in the new covenant, God still includes children in his church; (4) there is a promise made in baptism that must be believed.

There is One Covenant of Grace

The Heidelberg Catechism makes the claim that the children of believers "are in God's covenant and are his people." What is this covenant to which the Catechism refers?

The concept of covenant is important for Christians to grasp because it is the organizing framework of the Scriptures. A covenant, simply defined, is a formal agreement, with oaths and promises, creating a solemn relationship between its parties. Most of us are in a number

of different covenants. Marriage, for example, is a covenant between one man and one woman. A mortgage is a covenant between the lender and the borrower. In Scripture, we find covenants between God and humans throughout redemptive history. Anyone who has read through the Bible even once knows that God's covenant-making is central to the story. God makes covenants with such key figures as Noah, Abraham, the nation of Israel, and David. While there are many different covenants of various natures and purposes recorded in the Bible, there is ultimately one covenant in which the benefits of redemption are bestowed upon God's people, a covenant we rightly call the "covenant of grace." In this covenant, God promises salvation to sinners through faith in Christ, who merited salvation for his people through his life, death, and resurrection.

The covenant of grace begins in Genesis 3:15, just after Adam and Eve were expelled from the holy garden as punishment for having sinned against God. Although Adam, our federal representative, plunged the entire human race into sin and death (Rom. 5:12–19), he subsequently received a promise from the Lord that a Champion would come to bruise the serpent's head, and merit eternal life for his people (Gen. 3:15; Rom. 5:14–21; Rev. 12:4–11). That is to say, Christ would be sent as the second Adam to fulfill the work that the first Adam failed to do

(1 Cor. 15:21–22, 45). In this promise, we see the beginning of the covenant of grace. God promised to send a mediator, and to take for himself a people, the offspring of the woman, separating them from the offspring of the serpent.

The covenant of grace continues as the Bible traces the lineage of God's redeemed people (the offspring of the woman) from Seth to Abraham (Gen. 4–11). Once Abraham is brought into the picture, the speed of the story slows down. God then expands upon his covenant of grace by making particular promises to Abraham. He would make of Abraham "a great nation" (Gen. 12:2), and in him "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3). He would give Abraham an offspring numbered as the stars in heaven (15:5), and a land for them to possess (15:7). God then sealed these promises with a solemn covenant ritual involving the shedding of blood. He passed between severed animals, swearing an oath that he would fulfill his promises to Abraham (15:8–21; cf. Jer. 34:18–19).

God fulfilled these promises later in redemptive history. From Abraham came the twelve tribes of Israel, who grew in number like the stars in heaven (Deut. 1:10). After freeing them from slavery in Egypt, God brought them into the Promised Land.

In Joshua 21:43–45 we read,

> Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

As the Bible moves from the Old Testament to the New Testament, God fulfills these promises in an even greater way. In Galatians, the apostle Paul tells us how one becomes a true descendent of Abraham. In Galatians 3:7–9 he says,

> Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

What does all of this show us? It shows us that there is *one* plan of salvation for the *one* people of God, whom the Bible describes as the seed or offspring of Abraham (Gal 3:29; cf. Rom. 2:28–29; 11:17–20). There is no other way to be a child of God than to be included into Abraham's covenant. Thus, when Reformed people speak of "*the* covenant," we are speaking of the one covenant of grace that was first promised in Genesis 3:15, was expanded in detail to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, and 17, was finally fulfilled in Christ, and continues until the consummation of all things. Anyone who ever has been or will be saved, during any period of human history, is a member of this one covenant of grace. Salvation is always the same: by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone, the one Mediator of the covenant.

In the Old Covenant, God Included Children in His Visible Church

Having looked briefly at the covenant of grace in redemptive history, we must now ask the question, *if believers participate in the covenant and people of God, what is the status of their children?* The Old Testament reveals that God not only allowed the children of believers to be brought into his covenant and visible people, but that he also commanded them to be included. In Genesis 17:6–8 we read of God reminding Abraham of the promises he made in his covenant, which extended to

his offspring:

> I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your

> offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.

God then commanded that a covenant-sign be given to Abraham and his descendants. That covenant-sign was circumcision. In Genesis 17:9–14 we find God's direction to Abraham:

> As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

Circumcision was a "sign of the covenant." The bloody ritual of cutting the flesh in the male reproductive organ signified the covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants when he walked between the bloody animal halves. This was no mere formality; to be circumcised meant to receive a sign of the deepest spiritual significance. Circumcision even pointed to the realities of regeneration and justification (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Rom. 4:11). It was a sign carved in flesh as a constant reminder of God's promises to Abraham and his descendants.

While this covenant sign did not guarantee that every recipient of it possessed the spiritual realities that it signified, it nevertheless functioned in every case as the official act of consecration, so that each recipient was made a member of the covenant community. Every male in Abraham's household, whether sons or servants, as well as every male in the covenant community thereafter, was to receive this sign in his flesh if he was to be identified with God's covenant people. Conversely, anyone who rejected the sign of the covenant was to be cut off from the covenant community. To reject the *sign* of the covenant was to reject God's *promises* in the covenant. Ultimately, it was to reject fellowship with the God who walked between the severed animal halves as a guarantee of his promises to Abraham.

In the New Covenant, God Still Includes Children in His Visible Church

Regarding the children of believers, the Heidelberg Catechism says in Answer 74, "Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old

Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism." The covenantal sign that is administered upon initiation into the visible church is no longer circumcision, but baptism (Col. 2:11–12). Like circumcision, baptism is a one-time, initiatory sign and seal of God's covenant promise, which marks out an individual as belonging to God's visible covenant people. Like circumcision, baptism is for the believer *and his children*.

Our Baptist brothers often argue that the children of believers should not be baptized until making a credible profession of faith because the New Testament never gives an explicit command or example of infant baptism. To this we must ask: Where in the New Testament do we find an example or command to *exclude* the children of believers from the visible church? Defending the doctrine of infant baptism in his day, the great Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield put it in the most straightforward of terms when he said, "The argument [for infant baptism] in a nutshell is simply this: God established his church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until he puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of his church and as such entitled to its ordinances." Clearly, no such command to remove the children of believers from God's covenant exists. On the contrary, Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14).

More importantly, however, is the obvious trend in the New Testament of including those who once were excluded from the church. The greatest example of this is the gospel going out to the Gentiles. People who formerly were not of the physical family of Abraham but were "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12) are now in Christ Jesus "no longer strangers and aliens" but "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). We also see this in the fact that baptism was applied to females as well as males (Acts 8:12), in contrast to circumcision, which was only for males. Thus, Paul says, "there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). While there is still a distinction between men and women with regard to their assigned roles in the family and the church, baptism shows that men and women are the same in terms of personal worth to God, for both are created in his image (Gen. 1:26–28) and equally redeemed in Christ. Christian women, therefore, are not to worship in a separate courtyard as they did at the Jerusalem temple. They are to worship alongside men in the congregation (Col. 3:18–19).

Considering these things, are we really to think that while God includes Gentiles into his covenant people and includes women more fully by extending to them the covenant sign just as he does to males, that he also takes an opposite position with regard to the children of believers? While God extends his grace more abundantly in the New Covenant by including

those who once were excluded, why would he then *exclude* children who once were *included*? Indeed, first-century Hebrew parents that became Christians would have been horrified at the suggestion that their children were now outside of the covenant of grace.

On the contrary, the apostles brought good news to parents. Preaching on the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed the gospel to a large audience of Jews and Gentiles and told them to repent and be baptized in Jesus' name. He concluded by saying, "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39). Those who are "far off" are the Gentiles, now included in God's covenant. But notice that Peter specifically points out that the promise is still "for your children." Children of believers are not excluded from membership in God's covenant community but included, just as they were from the beginning.

For this reason, Paul addresses the children of believers as members of the covenant of grace: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord" (Eph 6:1). He reminds them of the Fifth Commandment in the very next verse, showing that New Covenant children have the same responsibilities and privileges as Old Covenant children. They are to be raised as disciples of Christ: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4; cf. Deut 6:4–9). Clearly, these children are considered members of the visible church no less than they were in the Old Covenant. As such, they should receive the sign of the covenant and be baptized.

There Is a Promise Made in Baptism That Must Be Believed

The promise to which Peter referred in his Pentecost sermon is mentioned in Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 74. It says that our children, "no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith."

For this reason, parents must take great care to catechize and pray for their children, bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). It is why parents are required to take vows at the baptismal font, promising to the utmost of our power to teach our children and have them taught the doctrine of salvation. Baptized children must not only grow up with the understanding that they have been "received into the Christian church" and "distinguished from the children of unbelievers" (Heidelberg Catechism 74), but must—in light of their baptism—be asked the questions, *Do you believe the gospel?* Do you trust that Christ's blood alone washes away your sins as certainly as you see water washing away dirt from the body?

Do you believe what is signified in your baptism?

If he rejects the gospel, then the waters of baptism are not a sign of blessing, but a sign of judgment. Like the unbelieving Israelite whose circumcision symbolized the cursing of being "cut off" from the favor of God, the New Covenant child who rejects what is signified in his baptism will become like those unbelievers who perished in the floodwaters of God's judgment while Noah and his family were brought safely through water (1 Pet. 3:20–22).

On the other hand, the covenant child who believes the gospel, embracing Christ with a true faith, is able to see in his baptism God's pledge and token that gives us assurance that we are as really washed from our sins spiritually, as our bodies are washed with water (Heidelberg Catechism 73).