

# ***Affirming Baptism and Forming Faith***

Faith Formation Committee  
Christian Reformed Church in North America  
Draft 15 – January 15, 2010

\* \* \*

**[Note: sections in italics here indicate those sections of material that are also addressed rather directly in our document “Children at the Table”.]**

\* \* \*

*Since we began our work late in 2007, our committee has had the privilege of listening to voices from throughout the CRC, to engage in scriptural and theological study, and to reflect on the significant challenges and opportunities of contemporary ministry and denominational life. Our mandate from Synod challenges us both to express and hone a biblical vision for faith formation and to provide specific guidance on the question of children at the Lord’s Supper. We strongly sense that our approach to the more focused question of children at the table must be seen in context of an overarching biblical vision for the sacraments and faith formation.*

*This document, “Affirming Baptism and Forming Faith,” is one attempt to express such a vision. The document is designed to express widespread feelings of both concern and opportunity in contemporary ministry, reflect our continuity with the confessions, create an outline for teaching, for gathering additional resources, and serve the cause of spiritual renewal in the church. More specifically, this document expresses several key themes embedded in the formation of our faith and found in our work to date:*

- 1. BAPTISMAL IDENTITY. Our identity is found in our union with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Practices of faith formation are designed not merely to teach biblical literacy or to promote certain behavioral choices, as important as these are. Rather, the ultimate purpose of faith formation practices is to deepen our sense of identity as God’s children, united to Christ. The importance of this task is underscored by the identity crisis that many of God’s children are facing today.*
- 2. MILESTONES. Public, liturgical, prayerful celebrations of milestone moments (such as profession of faith and other such events—see Part II.2-3) promise to reinforce baptismal identity, convey the church’s love for each individual, and express a warm invitation to deeper participation in the life of faith (see, for example, Joshua 4: 21-24).*
- 3. EXPECTANT URGENCY. Growth in the faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. We do not produce it, but we should pray for it, long for it, participate in it, and be prepared to suffer in it—themes poignantly conveyed in Paul’s description of his attitude toward the Galatians as being “in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19).*
- 4. LIFELONG LEARNING. We never graduate from the school of faith formation. Each chapter or season of life includes its own challenges and opportunities that can aid or impede growth. We*

*must resist any practice or language that unwittingly conveys the impression that we graduate from learning when we make our Public Profession of Faith. We must also resist any practice or language that implies that those who are farther along in the journey of faith no longer face questions and struggles.*

5. *HOLISTIC FORMATION. Our practices of formation are aimed at helping us love God “with your heart, soul, and mind”, and “your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39) We are eager to resist approaches to formation that are merely cognitive or merely affective or that separate our love of God from our love of neighbor. We aim that the whole person is formed after the pattern of Jesus Christ. Only through such holistic formation will true biblical maturity be evidenced.*

*The form of this document is something of an experiment. Unlike a standard Synodical report, the audience for this document is not primarily Synod, but rather any individual or group engaged in a study of faith formation and the sacraments (e.g., teachers, parents, a church council, a small group, a college or seminary class). Once we arrive at a complete provisional text, additional study materials can be compiled for each section, and a shorter summary version can be prepared for other audiences.*

*One of the features of the document that has already occasioned many constructive conversations is the purposefully ambiguous use of the “we” at the end of each section. It is the committee’s intention that we understand that “we” not to refer to our committee, nor even to synod, but rather to the collective whole of the denomination. This is why each of the final statements in each section begins “we call on each other. . .” It is our desire to conduct our work in such a way that these statements genuinely express our common convictions.*

*To this end, this document has been developed through a process that has already been very collaborative. Over 50 pastoral correspondents and several seminary students offered feedback on earlier drafts of this material. We have engaged twenty CRC Classes in workshop discussions. We have welcomed helpful feedback about both the content and form of this statement from delegates to Synod 2009, from church councils, and from individuals throughout the denomination and beyond. Following the recent Synod, we have responded to the advice we received by editing this document.*

*We are pleased to have also completed our major document entitled “Children at the Table: Toward a Guiding Principle for Biblically Faithful Celebrations of the Lord’s Supper”. We are making it available to the churches now and will be presenting it to the Synod of 2010, asking that Synod endorse the major principle presented as the basis for our continuing work. We are eager for Synod’s consideration and response. We have also provided a Bible Study on I Corinthians 11 and a series of Sermon / Worship Series Suggestions to complement these documents. (These can be found on our website at [www.crcna.org/faithformation](http://www.crcna.org/faithformation).)*

## **PROLOGUE**

### **Discerning Faithful Sacramental Practice in Contemporary Culture**

The sacraments are indispensable gifts of God, and are of vital significance for the church's task to make and form disciples of Jesus. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are clearly mandated by scripture, in rich and evocative texts which both point back to God's dealings with Israel and to the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and which point ahead to the fullness of the coming kingdom. The confessions of the church affirm that God "confirms [our faith] through our use of the holy sacraments" (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q/A 65), and that God "added these to the Word of the Gospel...confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us" (*Belgic Confession*, art. 33). The *Contemporary Testimony* echoes these confessions: "God meets us in the sacraments, communicating grace to us by means of water, bread, and wine" (*Our World Belongs to God*, 2008 edition, par. 37). The sacraments are indispensable gifts of God which not only express, but also form and nurture faith.

Nevertheless, the contemporary practice of the sacraments involves several complex challenges. In many contexts, the liturgical practices around the sacraments have changed more in the past generation than in past the four centuries, generating new and sometimes competing perceptions about their meaning and purpose, as well as very different ways of celebrating the sacraments. New emphasis on visual communication offers both opportunities and challenges for contemporary sacramental practice, forming in people inside and outside the church a new capacity for perceiving meaning in visual and dramatic actions, but also so surrounding us with significant visual and dramatic forms of communication that the unique role of the sacraments can be obscured. Further, members of our congregations have more sustained contact with the entire spectrum of Christian traditions than in previous times, exposure that generates many competing perceptions about the meaning of sacraments. In a time of significant change, it is wise for all of us—working together as denomination and in partnership with our ecumenical partners worldwide—to discern and then promote biblically faithful sacramental practices.

## **PART 1: BAPTISMAL IDENTITY**

### **1.1 Baptism and the Grace of God**

The marvelous grace of God given through Jesus Christ and conveyed to us through the work of the Holy Spirit is the foundation of baptism. Through this sacrament, God takes the initiative and declares that we belong to him. It is God who acts through baptism, working to nourish, sustain, comfort, challenge, teach, and assure us. A richly symbolic action, the celebration of baptism stirs our imaginations to perceive the work of God and the contours of the gospel more clearly. "By Baptism we are received into God's church and set apart from all other people . . . that we may be dedicated entirely to him, bearing his mark and sign. It also witnesses to us that he will be our God forever, since he is our gracious Father" (*Belgic Confession*, art. 33).

We call on each other to celebrate the wondrous grace of God signified in baptism in all the liturgical and pedagogical avenues available to us.

### **1.2 Multiple Scriptural Images for Baptism**

As the New Testament unfolds the meaning of baptism, it teaches us that baptism is a single celebration that conveys several layers of meaning. It is at once a sign of the washing away of sin (Acts 2:28, Acts 22:16), a sign of our union with Jesus' death and resurrection (Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:12), a sign of the promise of new birth in Christ (I Peter 3:21-22), a sign of incorporation into the one, universal church (Ephesians 4: 5, I Corinthians 1:13, 12:13), and a sign of the covenant and kingdom of God (Ephesians 1:13, Colossians 2:11). While the image of washing away sin has long been primary in Reformed theology and liturgy, the celebration of baptism should highlight each of these aspects of New Testament teaching.

While we gratefully recognize the rich blessings of the washing imagery in baptism; we also call on each other to affirm and teach the full range of scriptural imagery for baptism.

### **1.3 Baptism and the Drama of Redemption**

When God called Abram to leave his country, his people and his father's household God gave him a new identity, promised to make his name great and cause him to be a blessing to all the peoples on earth. (Genesis 12:1-3) Later God identified his arrangement with Abram as a covenant to which God would be faithful forever, which would involve both Abraham and his descendants for the generations to come, and should be signified by circumcision. (Genesis 17:1-14).

In the New Testament baptism functions similarly, as a sign of God's covenant to which he will always be faithful, involving us and our descendants as his covenant children, and signified by the water of baptism. Paul says that in our baptism we have a "circumcision not performed by human hands" and that we are "circumcised by Christ". (Colossians 2:11,12)

In baptism God identifies us as his covenant children, pledges his faithfulness to us, and calls us to faithful obedience as his body in the world.

We call on each other to see the entire story of God's redemptive work expressed in our baptism, and to proclaim that his gift of a new identity is at the heart of his drama of redemption.

### **1.4 Baptism as a sign of both forgiveness and life-long dying and rising with Christ**

One way to summarize this rich scriptural teaching is to note how baptism is a sign of both the believer's justification and sanctification. It is a sign of both the washing and cleansing of our sin and also of our being "set apart . . . that we may be dedicated entirely to God" (*Belgic Confession* 24). John Calvin referred to this as a "double grace and benefit from God in baptism," which includes both that "God wills to be a merciful Father to us, not imputing to us all our faults" and that "God will assist us by his Holy Spirit so that we will have the power to battle against the devil, sin, and the desires of the flesh, until we have victory in this, and to live in the liberty of his kingdom" (*Calvin's 1542 baptismal liturgy*). The Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of clothing to describe these two dimensions of the sacrament. Paul declares that "you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who

were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26f.). But this status of being clothed with Christ includes the call to continue putting on the character of Christ: “as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12). The unfathomable gift of a new status implicitly comes with a call sustained by a promise, for “he who began a good work in (us) will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). In this context, we take note of the tendency in some preaching and teaching about baptism to focus only on justification—a narrowing which can undermine our perception of God’s grace throughout life and our lifelong practice of affirming baptismal identity (see section 2).

We call on each other to proclaim both the gift and the calling that comes to us in our baptism.

### **1.5 Baptismal Identity**

In all these ways, baptism points us to our ultimate identity in Christ. This identity should shape our habits, our piety, and our daily life. The Christian life is a daily dying to sin and rising with Christ. As the Belgic Confession concludes, “this baptism is profitable not only when the water is on us and when we receive it but throughout our entire lives” (*Belgic Confession*, art. 34). This statement echoes John Calvin’s concern that “The benefit which we derive from the sacraments ought by no means to be restricted to the time when they are administered to us, as though the visible sign conveyed with itself the grace of God only at that moment when it is actually being proffered . . . the benefit of baptism lies open to the whole course of life, because the promise which is contained in it is perpetually in force” (*1549 Articles concerning the sacraments*). This benefit blesses both infants and adults, and infants gradually grow to appropriate this benefit as they mature. Our baptismal identity in Christ reminds us of the astonishing work of the Holy Spirit to transform and renew our entire being—our dispositions, desires, knowledge, imagination, emotions, and more—in the image of Christ (Colossians 3:10, II Corinthians 3:18; 4:15).

Baptism thus offers us our ultimate vocation, that of being disciples of Jesus, a vocation that includes, but is always more important than our careers, our hobbies, even our families. This comprehensive character is described by Paul at the conclusion of one of his key descriptions of living out this baptismal identity: “And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).

We call on each other to speak explicitly with people of all ages reminding them that their identity is found in God’s claim on them, a claim made visible in baptism.

### **1.6 The Inclusion of Infants**

The inclusion of the children of believers in the covenant of grace is engrained in God’s plan of redemption. Covenant infants have a relationship with God (cf. Psalms 22:9-10; 71:6; 139:13; Jeremiah 1:5) and, therefore, covenant blessings are promised to them (Genesis 17:7; Acts 2:39). If crossing the Red Sea pictures baptism, it would be impossible to imagine Israel leaving the children on shore until they were old enough to cross on their own (I Corinthians 10:2). Jesus embraced infants as citizens of

his Kingdom (Luke 18:16) further suggesting how children need not be excluded from baptism. Paul refers to baptism as receiving the circumcision done by Christ (Colossians 2:11-12). For these reasons, Reformed Christians, joining with many major Christian traditions, have concluded that Scripture gives us warrant for including covenant children in the sacrament of baptism. As the Belgic Confession concludes, “Truly, Christ has shed his blood no less for washing the little children of believers than he did for adults” (art. 34).

We also take note that some other Christian traditions refrain from baptizing infants, at times in conjunction with constructive criticisms of those who do. We are particularly grateful for their warnings to us about allowing the practice of infant baptism to erode our commitment to teach our children the faith and to challenge them to express their faith in Christ. Indeed, infant baptism should heighten, not erode our commitment to invite our children and youth to claim their baptismal identity.

We call on each other to celebrate that infants of believers are covenant children who are warmly invited to taste God’s grace through the sacrament of baptism and to regularly invite children and youth to consider the claim of God on their life and to express their faith.

### **1.7 Baptism as Ritual Action**

There are many reasons to be cautious about ritual action. The Bible gives priority to hearing the Word as the means of grace (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4; Luke 10:16; Romans 10:14-17), forbids the use of images bearing the wrong message (Exodus 20:4; *Heidelberg Catechism* Q/A 98), declares the Old Testament ceremonies as fulfilled in Christ (Colossians 2:17), and defines faith as the conviction of things not seen (John 20:29; Hebrews 11:1; II Corinthians 5:7).

There are also many reasons to value healthy ritual actions, including the redemptive intentions of the Creator for both ear and eye (Proverbs 20:12), Jesus’ explicit command to baptize (Matthew 28:19), and Jesus’ participation in ritual practices (Luke 22:14-23, John 13:1-11), including his own baptism (Matthew 3:13-17). Such concrete, physical, symbolic action is designed, says the Belgic Confession, to “represent better to our external senses both what God enables us to understand by his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts”. This embodied nature of baptism is significant for congregations in many ways. It is a source of encouragement not only when we receive baptism, but also when we witness it. It demonstrates that grace comes to us as fully embodied creatures, created in God’s image.

We call on each other to recognize the ritual and sensory character of baptism in ways that deepen the congregation’s participation, while resisting any semblance of ritualism or formalism.

### **1.8 The Covenant Community in Baptism**

Baptism is not intended to be a private action, but one which takes place within the worshipping community. God speaks publicly about the covenant position of the one being baptized. The recipients of baptism are publicly welcomed as members of the covenant community. And the community responds with its vows to receive baptized persons in love, to pray for them, and to encourage and sustain them in the fellowship of believers (cf. Form for Baptism of Children and Baptism of Adults). The covenant community lives out its vows by loving, praying for, encouraging,

teaching, mentoring, and offering models of grace-filled, faithful living to every member of the congregation.

We call on each other to take such vows seriously and faithfully provide the support, encouragement and ministries needed to foster healthy growth of faith in all who are baptized.

## **1.9 The Significance of Baptismal Identity in Contemporary Culture**

Claiming baptismal identity is especially important in the context of contemporary culture which is hungry for healing, hope, and significant relationships. Baptism clearly anchors our spirituality in the church, and resists any church-less form of spirituality. Baptism frankly acknowledges that the Christian life may involve suffering for Christ, resisting any form of spirituality that is sentimental or therapeutic. Baptism grounds us in the grace of God, resisting any spirituality that is moralistic. Baptism calls attention to the beauty, glory, holiness, and gracious sovereignty of a triune God who is intimately involved in creation and in the life of the church. In doing so it resists any notion of God as removed or isolated. Baptism draws us into the world-wide redemptive work of God who is making all things new through the work of his Son Jesus Christ.

We call on each other to discern and resist the spirits of the age that seek to undermine the meaning or significance of baptism, and to take steps to affirm its deepest meaning and significance.

## **PART 2: AFFIRMING BAPTISMAL IDENTITY AS A LIFELONG PRACTICE**

### **2.1 Remembering and Affirming Baptism Throughout Life**

While baptism is rightly celebrated only once, affirming our baptismal identity is a life-long practice. The Belgic Confession reminds us, "...this baptism is profitable not only when the water is on us and when we receive it but throughout our entire lives" (Art.34). John Calvin likewise affirmed: "we must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore, as often as we fall away (i.e., newly committed sins into which we fall after baptism), we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins" (*Institutes* 4.15.3).

We call on each other to remember and affirm our baptismal identity throughout our lives. We call on parents to regularly remind children of their baptism and its significance.

### **2.2 Nurturing Baptismal Identity in Congregations**

Our baptismal identity in Christ is nurtured through a variety of scripturally-mandated practices and disciplines of prayer, learning, obedience, witness, fellowship, and service. For this reason, congregations teach people of all ages, including very young children, to pray, to understand the Bible, and to engage in service in both the church and society. Our church education, fellowship, and service programs are part of how we live out our baptismal vows. Speaking explicitly about the connection between these aspects of church life and baptism is constructive—and it may be a bit too rare in some

contexts. When the connection is clear, then we more easily understand that our learning, fellowship, and service in congregational life are not merely activities of self-enrichment. They are expressions of our identity in Christ. They are ways for each of us to embrace and live out of this identity.

We call on each other to speak more intentionally about the connection between baptismal identity and congregational programs for education, service, and mission.

### **2.3 Milestones: Multiple Occasions for Publicly Affirming Baptism**

Public celebrations of milestone moments promise to reinforce baptismal identity, convey the church's love for each individual, and express a warm invitation to deeper participation in the life of faith (the milestone imagery is suggested, for example, in Joshua 4: 21-24). There are particular occasions when our focus on baptismal identity is especially important.

1. Public profession of faith is an especially important occasion for looking back at God's hand on us, affirming his grace for us, and looking ahead to continued obedience (see also Section 3 below).
2. In corporate worship, we regularly affirm our faith in receiving the assurance of pardon, in regular professions of the creeds, in the baptism of others, at the Lord's Table, and at other key milestones in congregational life. Nearly every worship service offers us opportunities to affirm our baptismal identity.
3. Further, we affirm baptismal identity in significant public moments in the lives of individual Christians, including marriage, ordination, commissioning services for particular ministries, being welcomed into a new congregation, or reaffirmation of faith after a time of estrangement from the church, even at the time of death. At times, the language of baptism may be too obscure in our celebrations of these events. Renewing awareness of how each of these moments is a part of living our baptismal vocation offers rich possibilities for renewed faithfulness.
4. This perspective also provides a framework for marking significant life moments of many kinds: for example, pregnancy, miscarriage, significant birthdays and anniversaries, graduations, new employment or unemployment, retirement, hospitalization, recognition of an addiction or recovery from an addiction, significant moves, and more. In each of these significant times of transition, individuals, families, fellowship groups, and congregations can joyfully affirm "we claim our identity as children of God" and pray "Spirit of God, help us live out our identity in this new circumstance."
5. Other times of affirmation can occur at special moments in the life of a congregation, including celebrations of significant anniversaries or dedications of new ministries or facilities, marking times of crisis or difficult decisions, opportunities to welcome or say farewell to a pastor.

All such occasions, and many others, are fitting times for individuals or congregations to intentionally and explicitly remember baptism, claim again the promises of God in Christ, and renew commitment to baptismal living. Speaking explicitly about baptism in all these events is an important antidote to any sense that baptism is an isolated ritual, disconnected from the Christian life.

We call on each other to regularly celebrate our public affirmations of baptism at multiple occasions to sense the journey of our lives and the faithfulness of God's grace, and our oneness with each other.

We call on churches to do further work in providing very practical resources for worship and congregational life and to eagerly share these with other congregations.

## **2.4 Affirming Baptism in Many Cultural Contexts**

We celebrate the many ways that the formation of children and youth comes to expression in the many varied cultures represented in God's growing family, in and beyond the CRC. Through the varied cultural expressions within the CRC, we see the fabric of God's redeeming work in breaking down dividing walls and creating one new people. (See Ephesians 2:14ff.) We acknowledge that "the church, in its unity and diversity, is God's strategic vehicle for bringing into being his new creation." (1996 *Acts of Synod*, p. 230) While we recognize that race, ethnicity, and culture are significant for self-identification, we uphold that "Christians find their deepest identity in union with and in the service of Christ" (1996 *Acts of Synod*, p. 232). We are grateful for the variety of approaches to nurturing faith and teaching scriptural truths that arise out of diverse cultural contexts. We are grateful for the ways that various cultures express, for instance, passion for prayer, cultivate faith through family and other inter-generational relationships, tell stories that affirm God's grace, and mark significant occasions in the growth and development of each child and young person.

We encourage each other to learn from and about faith formation practices in many times and places.

We challenge each other to develop and refine faith formation practices that embody the fullness of the gospel in ways that are at once deeply contextual and counter-cultural.

## **2.5 Remembering and Affirming Baptism in Family Life**

Since parents and guardians have such a significant role in nurturing their children's faith, they should make every effort to regularly teach their children about the meaning of baptism. Parents and guardians can use the occasion of a baptism in the family or in the church family to teach their children about the promises and mystery of the sacrament of baptism. Remembering and celebrating a child's "baptism birthday" can be a particularly significant time for learning and growth in family life. Parents and guardians need to frequently speak to their children about baptism, and model the importance of baptismal identity in their own lives. They can find support and encouragement in the fact that they do not carry such tasks alone, but are supported by the entire congregation.

We call on parents and guardians to teach their children about their baptism, to make possible their participation in the life of the church, and to nurture their sense of baptismal identity.

## **2.6 Affirmation of Baptism instead of Rebaptism**

The experience of spiritual renewal and repentance are remarkable gifts of God to individuals and to the church. Requests for rebaptism that come from individuals are thus occasions for gratitude and joy for the work of God in their life. The church's response to these requests should reflect this gratitude.

The response should also be aware of the complex messages that rebaptism can convey, including the strong resistance to rebaptism articulated in the Reformed Confessions. The Belgic Confession concludes, "we believe that anyone who aspires to reach eternal life ought to be baptized only once without ever repeating it—for we cannot be born twice." (Art. 34) More specifically, re-baptizing can easily convey three false impressions:

- (1) that God's promises were not really given in one's original baptism,
- (2) that the congregation or denomination in which a given member was originally baptized is not a legitimate part of Christ's body, and
- (3) that personal experience is the sole barometer of the presence of God.

For these reasons, Reformed churches in many cultural contexts have responded to requests for rebaptism by planning for public celebrations of *affirmation* of baptism. These celebrations offer praise and thanks for the sovereign grace of God, providing a memorable, visible, and public milestone for both the congregation and the individual.

We call on each other to strengthen joyful practices of affirming baptism and reaffirming baptismal vows, rather than rebaptism, as the appropriate pastoral response to requests for rebaptism.

## **2.7 Affirming Baptism in Contemporary Cultures**

Affirming baptism is a particularly significant act in many contemporary cultural contexts. In an age in which people long for a sense of belonging, affirming baptism rehearses that we belong to Christ and to the body of Christ, the church. In a culture of consumerism, baptism affirms that we know to whom we belong and the radical transformation of our values. In an age of individualism, baptism affirms our inclusion as members of Christ's body. In an age which tends to evaluate people on their achievements, baptism affirms that our identity as children of God is a gift that does not depend on our own efforts. In a world that belongs to God, baptism affirms our calling to identify movements of providence within history and culture that can serve to extend Christ's rule and reign. In a world of self-promotion, affirming our baptism calls us to a life of self-giving mission that seeks first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33), that finds our greatness in our service (Mark 10:43-45), and unselfish service that seeks out the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40).

We call on Christians and churches everywhere to refuse to allow the world to force us into its mold and to regularly affirm that our baptism calls us to remain true to our mission for God in this world (Romans 12:1-2).

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

### **3.1 Public Profession of Faith as an Affirmation of Baptism**

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

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

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

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

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

*However, there is no single age which the church is able to mandate for public profession of faith. Indeed, in God's sovereign grace, congregations have witnessed profound professions of faith by believers of 8 and 88. Professions of faith arise out of individual initiative as the Holy Spirit leads. For this reason, congregations need not passively wait for individuals to step forward, but should rather eagerly and sensitively invite children and youth to take the significant step of publicly professing their faith.*

*We acknowledge readily that several contemporary factors have recently eroded this practice, including the extension of adolescence as a distinct stage in one's life cycle, the reluctance of some churches to impose any expectation of a formal profession of faith, the practice of welcoming of young children to the Lord's Supper, and —for some—prolonged periods of formal education at a distance from a young person's congregational home. These factors, nonetheless, do not offer grounds for setting aside this practice, but only for becoming more intentional about it. Congregations that offer warm, personal*

*invitations to each child and young person to explore making profession of faith by probing their doubts and questions, developing Christian practices of Bible study and prayer, and discerning their gifts for service will have served them well.*

*We call on each other to intentionally create a culture in our congregations in which we eagerly tell our stories of faith formation as a means of mentoring and encouraging others.*

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

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

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

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

### **3.3 Young Children and Profession of Faith**

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

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

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

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

### **3.4 Persons with Disabilities and Profession of Faith**

*Healthy congregations include all who seek to belong to the body of Christ by professing faith in him—including persons with disabilities. Healthy congregations welcome all people with the message: “Come to Jesus. Belong to the people of God. Give and receive love and acceptance—and participate by*

*sharing your gifts with brothers and sisters in this faith community.” The invitation to profess one’s love for Christ and to live in community with fellow believers is offered to all in the measure in which they are able to respond to it—with no age requirement, no physical, emotional, or cognitive prerequisite! The invitation has no higher goal than to extend Christ’s love to all, to deepen the fellowship of believers, to integrate the gifts of all, and to strengthen the witness and work of the church in this world.*

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

### **3.5 Profession of Faith and Confirmation**

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

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

### **3.6 Profession of Faith and the Mission of God**

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

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

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

### **3.7 Profession of Faith and the Worship of the Church**

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

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

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

### **3.8 The Significant Role of Parents and Guardians**

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

*We call on parents to understand that the faith development of their children is primary among all the tasks of parenthood. We call on each other to take an active supportive role with parents, not only*

*reminding them, but also providing support, encouragement, counsel and training in their tasks of faith formation.*

### **3.9 Profession of Faith and Lifelong Discipleship**

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

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

### **3.10 Profession of Faith and Contemporary Culture**

Public profession of faith goes hand in hand with the church's calling to be a prophetic voice in contemporary culture. Obligated to speak out against injustice and wickedness in the world, the church errs seriously when it suppresses the faith by remaining silent. It must sound a loud and clear voice for the voiceless that embraces all, without exception, with the love of Christ (Proverbs 31:8-9; I Corinthians 14:8). In the faith formation of its members, young and old, the body is equipped to profess its faith, staking the claims of Christ in every sector of modern society. The profession of its members ought not be an expression of world-flight Christianity that trumpets platitudes over a fortified wall of isolationism, nor a profession submerged by or indistinguishable from the deafening noise of this world. The church's public profession of faith and the faith formation of its members must be in line with the Bible and the Reformed tradition, but, as truly reformed and reforming, the church must be determined to be a clear voice for today with an ear for the times.

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

## **Part 4 – The Lord's Supper as Sign and Seal of God's Grace.**

### **4.1 The Lord's Supper, Baptismal Identity and the Grace of God.**

In Baptism, God speaks to us, sealing his covenant and pledging his covenant faithfulness. In the case of an adult baptism, he seals to the covenant to one who has responded in faith. In the case of infant baptism, he seals his covenant to a child of believing parents who does not yet understand. In both

cases, God acts in grace. The sealing of the covenant to such persons gives them each an identity as one who belongs to God.

Similarly, the Lord's Supper is a sign and seal of God's gracious forgiveness through Christ Jesus. Through the sacrament we act in remembering Jesus' death on the cross as atonement which makes satisfaction for our sins. Through His death and resurrection our sins are forgiven and we are declared righteous before God. The Lord's Supper is, therefore, the visible means by which we see God's invisible work in us through the power of the Holy Spirit" (Belgic Confession, art.33) In this sacrament we remember his gracious sacrifice, and Christ confirms to us that we are forgiven, nourishes our new life in Christ, and confirms that we are members of God's covenant family. As in baptism, it is God who acts through the Lord's Supper, working to nourish, sustain, comfort, challenge, teach and assure us. Ephesians 2:8-9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast."

We call on each other to celebrate the wondrous grace of God signified in the Lord's Supper in all the liturgical and pedagogical avenues available to us.

#### **4.2 Multiple Scriptural Images for the Lord's Supper.**

The New Testament teaches us that the Lord's Supper is a celebration that conveys several layers of meaning. It involves both memory and hope. It serves as a thankful remembrance of the entire life and ministry of Christ; a celebration and proclamation of Jesus' real, spiritual presence with us, of the forgiveness he offers, and the spiritual nourishment he provides; a celebration of the unity of Christ's body, the church; and a meal of hope in which we anticipate the heavenly feast of Christ's coming kingdom. (*The Worship Sourcebook*, Section 8, p.305-306).

As the story of the New Testament unfolds the meaning of the Lord's Supper as instituted by Christ, we are struck by the beauty of the multiple images that are given to us in Scripture. Not only did Christ teach us that this is a time for remembrance (I Corinthians 11:24) and proclamation (I Corinthians 11:26), it is also a time of eager anticipation of the heavenly feast (I Corinthians 11:26). He reminded the disciples that this sacrament was a sign of the atonement represented in the Passover feast (Mark 14:12-16) and therefore a time of assurance of God's forgiveness (Matthew 26:28). It is also a time of spiritual nourishment (John 6:35) and a participation in the oneness of the body of Christ (I Corinthians 10:17). We are to find, therefore, when we come to the Lord's Table that we can expect Christ to manifest himself to us (Luke 24:28-31).

We call on each other to emphasize and proclaim the richness of this sacrament as represented in these multiple images. We also call on pastors and worship leaders to plan celebrations of the Lord's Supper that takes these multiple images into careful consideration.

### **4.3 The Lord's Supper and the Drama of Redemption.**

The mission of God unfolds within the drama of redemption and is demonstrated in the Lord's Supper. Beginning in the Garden of Eden and progressing through history to the consummation of all things, Christ carries out the redemptive plan of God.

Our first parents were given the cultural mandate and were nourished with the garden's abundance in order to accomplish the mission. In disobedience, they ate of the forbidden fruit, failing the test and were banned from the Garden. God, in his mercy, however, had already been busy orchestrating his grand drama of redemption in Christ, with the plan that the seed of the woman would ultimately crush the head of the serpent.

In keeping his promise through Abraham to bless all the nations, God rescued his people from Egypt and represented this deliverance through the Passover. Israel was unfaithful to God's covenant and was exiled. However, God graciously preserved a remnant he would return to the land and through which he would bring forth the Messiah promised already in Eden.

Jesus, perfectly faithful to the mission of God, became the bread of life to which the Scriptures had pointed from the beginning. Before his atoning death, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, symbolizing his body and blood. As he continues to prepare the table, this meal becomes for the New Testament church today a vital means of grace not only to rehearse the drama of redemption, but also to empower God's people with the Spirit of Christ in their efforts to participate in carrying out the mission of God.

We call on each other to celebrate this sacrament with the expectation that God will nourish us in preparation for our efforts to carry out his mission in the world.

### **4.4 Nurturing and Feeding our Spirits at the Table.**

When we come to the table we come in faith bringing our hunger for Life.

We trust Jesus' words, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6: 35). At the table we follow the exhortation of the Psalmist who declared, "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him" (Ps. 34: 8). Through participation we respond to the Lord's gracious invitation given through Isaiah, "'Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isaiah 55: 1). The LORD delights in nourishing his people, and we respond by coming with grateful, but empty, hearts to his bountiful

table, so that we sing together “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (Ps. 23: 5).

For this reason, we trust that “...just as truly as we take and hold the sacraments in our hands and eat and drink it in our mouths, by which our life is then sustained, so truly we receive into our souls, for our spiritual life, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Savior. We receive these by faith, which is the hand and mouth of our souls” (Belgic Confession, art.35). “...The celebration of the Lord’s Supper nourishes our faith and stirs our imaginations to perceive the work of God and the contours of the gospel more clearly” (*The Worship Sourcebook*, Section 8, p.305).

We call on churches to celebrate the riches of God which nourish our spiritual lives, and to invite his people to bring their hungers and longings to him, believing that the community that hungers and thirsts for righteousness will be blessed with filling (Matt. 5: 6).

#### **4.5 The Life-Giving Imperatives for the Table.**

*We participate in the supper as part of the “dance of grace” in which the Lord leads and we respond, the Lord provides and we receive. Our response involves our entire life. Paul summarizes significant dimensions of this response in I Cor. 11: 17-31, where in action words, mostly in the imperative form, he calls believers to respond: “take,” “eat,” remember,” “examine yourself,” and “wait for each other.” These imperatives are not prerequisites for earning the right to come to the table, but rather they exemplify our grateful steps of response as a community that has entered into the wondrous dance of grace. Such steps are life-giving; they expand our capacity to receive and to become contagious with the new life that Jesus pours into us.*

*We call on churches to celebrate the privilege we have in engaging this covenantal dance, carefully avoiding all language which implies that we earn the right to come by our actions*

#### **4.6 The Lord’s Supper as Healthy Ritual Action.**

It is significant that Jesus commanded us to “do this”, calling for specific actions that we perform together. While we may well be cautious about ritual actions which can become mere ritual, it is nevertheless important that Jesus Himself commanded the church to observe the Lord’s Supper which symbolizes his body and blood, broken and shed for God’s people. The Holy Spirit uses the Lord’s Supper to bring blessing to the church. It is not an ordinary meal with other humans, but fellowship

with Christ himself. Through it we are reminded that we are saved through Jesus' death and resurrection.

John 6:53-56 *"Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him'."*

The Lord's Supper is also a seal confirming that we belong to God. The participation in the eating and drinking and the sharing in the benefits of Christ's body and blood given for us, nourish and refresh the spiritual union among believers and with the Lord.

The Christian community is glued together in such a repeated ritual action. A sense of belonging is created and identity as God's beloved people is fostered. Our hearts and minds are linked when we partake of this meal so that faith is strengthened. We are connected once again with the core of the Christian belief and what life is all about. We are reminded of who we are and whose we are. We are empowered to move forward in faith.

Therefore, we believe there are several foundational claims that shape this ritual action to be a healthy one for the Christian Church. It is a celebration of grace, not human achievement. It is not an end in itself, but also points beyond itself to God's grace and covenant faithfulness. It is a sign of a covenant relationship with God that is based on promises. And it is deeply personal, but never private. (*The Worship Sourcebook*, Section 8, pp. 306-307)

We call on each other to celebrate the ritual and sensory character of the Lord's Supper in ways that deepen the congregation's participation, while resisting any semblance of ritualism or formalism.

#### **4.7 Coming to the Table in a Hospitable and Healing Community.**

*When we are united to Christ, we also live in union with all those who belong to Him, and the Lord's Supper celebrates and affirms both of these realities.*

*Jesus pointedly prayed "...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21). Many New Testament references, in addition to Jesus' high priestly prayer, speak of the unity of the body (see I Corinthians 12: 4-13, Ephesians 4: 3-6). This same theme is expressed in the earliest communion liturgies available to us ("As many grains are gathered from many hills into one loaf..."). Through this corporate act we are called to practice hospitality, discern the body and wait for each other (I Corinthians 11: 17-34). This communal character of the sacrament requires that we honor church discipline, call all believers to come to the table without lingering resentments, forgive as the Lord's forgiveness has been received (Colossians 3: 13), and call to repentance all who undermine the unity of the body (I Corinthians 1: 10). Our confessions therefore speak of this Holy Supper as a*

*privilege for those who are “born again and grafted into his family: his church” (Belgic Confession, art.35)*

*We call on churches to celebrate our unity in Christ, and repent of all actions, words and attitudes which undermine this unity.*

#### **4.8 Children and Others at the Lord’s Supper**

*The Scriptures and our Confessions have taught us that the church’s celebrations of the sacraments should be marked by a spirit of welcome for all those who come with hunger and trust. They have also taught us that a spirit of exclusion of any other than those who are unrepentant, hypocritical, unrepentant and ungodly (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 81-82) would violate the soul and spirit of the sacrament. For this reason, Paul points to the divisions within the life of the Corinthian church and claims “...your meetings do more harm than good” (I Corinthians 11:17).*

*Since Christ desires to nourish and sustain the spiritual life of all his children, the church must be careful to pay attention to those who might easily be overlooked or neglected. Persons with cognitive disabilities or dementia are to be welcomed to the table in a way that is appropriate to their abilities that they may be nourished by the Lord. Similarly the church must be concerned about young children and youth who are growing in faith and able to fulfill the imperatives for the Lord’s Supper in an age-appropriate way. To exclude them would be to deny them the very nurture that their faith formation requires.*

*We call on each other, therefore, to be sensitive and welcoming toward those who might easily be overlooked or neglected, such as children and others of limited ability.*

#### **4.9 The Key Importance of the Lord’s Supper in Contemporary Culture.**

When one considers our contemporary culture, the Lord’s Supper is ever relevant to the faith and life of God’s people. In a climate of individualism, the Lord’s Supper provides a communal context of shared faith and identity; in a culture of consumerism, the Lord’s Supper points to that which can truly satisfy; in a visual age, the Supper proclaims the truth of the gospel in visible signs and seals; as differentiation diffuses society into ever-increasing numbers of components, the Lord’s Supper turns our attention to the King whose sovereign claims embrace every sphere of life; in a culture where people feel broken and “homeless,” the Lord’s Supper warmly invites them to the hearth of God’s family; and in a world with a relentlessly growing divide between the haves and the have-nots, the

Lord's Supper provides a level playing field for all believers under the cross and energizes each to reach out to those in need.

Since the Lord's Supper is a visual means, in a visual age, its message can be powerful. We must, therefore, pay attention to the messages we are transmitting in its celebration for it is capable of either effectively communicating the message of the gospel or of seriously altering it. It is able to communicate a joyful invitation and a beautiful welcome to be experienced by all who come trustingly. Or it may signal an unwarranted exclusivism regarding those who might not be considered in the inner circle. Even the manner of its celebration can carry important messages that must be carefully examined.

We call on each other to carefully and thoughtfully examine the messages of our observance of the sacraments in our current culture to discern their faithfulness of the intent of the Scriptures, and to identify any mistaken messages being conveyed.

We call on each other to make sure our observance of the sacraments is a clear proclamation of a world-view which brings all things under the rule of the living Lord, until he comes again and his glorious kingdom will be on display for all to see.

## **Conclusion**

### **5.1 Expectant Urgency**

Faith, both its presence and its growth, is a gift of God given to us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 16:14, I Corinthians 12:3, Galatians 5:16-26) We do not produce it, but we should pray for it, long for it, participate in it, and be prepared to suffer in it—themes poignantly conveyed in Paul's description of his attitude toward the Galatians as being "in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." (Galatians 4:19). This dramatic imagery challenges us to live, teach, pray, and worship with expectant urgency for the faith formation of all members of the body.

### **5.2 Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our Faith**

In all our efforts from baptism through the life of full obedience, we celebrate the grace of God which unites us with Jesus Christ. We affirm and proclaim that Jesus is the "author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2) and we take comfort in the promise that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Phil. 1:8)

**To him be all glory now and forever!**

[Note: the final version of this document is dependent on the actions of Synod in response to recommendations made.]