

BY JAMES K. A. SMITH

Buried Treasures?



To flourish in the
future, we need to
value our past.

I **MAGINE** that you've been invited to the home of new friends. You've driven by their house a few times and noticed that it's a gorgeous Arts and Crafts masterpiece—an exquisite work of craftsmanship dripping with the sort of quality and heritage that's rare in our modern world.

Based on what you know, you expect to be ushered into an interior lifted right out of a Frank Lloyd Wright museum. A foyer leading to a parlor lush with warm wooden trim and mission style cabinets in dark oak finishes. Morris & Co. wallpaper hand-blocked on cloth, and floors covered with sumptuous handwoven carpets. A dining room featuring the ancient handcraft of custom glass, leading to an elegant, classic kitchen.

In short, you're eager to visit the house because, if you're like me, it seems to promise everything you love about architecture and design. You're expecting a house that stands out precisely because of its anachronism, its connection to traditions—of craftsmanship, quality, and design—that have been lost in a culture more driven by pragmatism, speed, and the bottom line.

Imagine your surprise, upon entering the house, to find something starkly different.

Garish linoleum covers the precious tile that you just *know* lies beneath on the

entryway floor. Dropped ceilings have shut down the transcendent space of what would have been 10-foot ceilings. At some point in the '70s, someone decided that orange AstroTurf was better than classic hardwood. At some point in the '80s, someone must have surmised that tacky mirrors were more contemporary than stained glass. And as you make your way into the kitchen, you notice that someone in the '60s, armed with pea-green plastic, thought he could improve on the ancient craftsmanship you just know is dying to breathe underneath all that renovation.

You find yourself reeling from the cognitive dissonance between what you were expecting when you were outside and what you find on the inside.

Finding Treasure

I offer that as a sort of allegory, but it will make more sense if I share a bit of my testimony.

I was not raised in the Christian Reformed Church. I am a convert to the Reformed world-and-life view, a pilgrim who has made his way to the Reformed tradition, and the Christian Reformed Church in particular, as my confessional and ecclesiastical (and intellectual) home.

I converted relatively late to Christian faith, having been raised in a non-Christian home. I came to Christ through a sector of Christendom that was on the more fundamentalist end of evangelicalism. But in my sophomore year at college,

I made my first discovery of the Reformed tradition: in older voices like John Calvin and B.B. Warfield, but also in more contemporary voices like Francis Schaeffer and Alvin Plantinga. For me, it was like finding buried treasure.

What attracted me to the Reformed tradition? It was not any *one* thing. Instead, it was a kind of seamless cloth of related emphases that, I think, are the unique “apostolate” of the Reformed tradition, and the CRC in particular. That is, the CRC is a unique expression of the Reformed tradition that tends to hold together an array of gifts that in other places are separated. I've especially appreciated the following four distinct emphases:

1. A celebration of a covenant-keeping

Lord. Central to the Reformed tradition is a unique emphasis on both the unity of the narrative of Scripture and a strong sense of our *communal* identity as “a people.” There is an entire theology packed into the pronouns of Scripture. From the opening *us* of the creational word in Genesis 1:26 (“Let us make human beings in our image”), to *them* in Genesis 1:27 (“male and female he created them”), to the plural *you* of the creational mandate in Genesis 1:29 (“I give you every seed-bearing plant”), God's creation is laden with plurals!

And all those *you's* throughout the Bible are plural. Those of us formed by the individualism of North »



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American culture tend to read Scripture as if it were addressed privately to each of us (to *me*). But I think our indigenous and Korean brothers and sisters hear Scripture more clearly on these matters: the *you* is *us*. It's not *me*, but *we*. It's just this sort of communal emphasis that the Reformed tradition's covenant theology highlights—which is also why it yields a holistic, unified reading of Scripture as the one unfolding story of God's covenant with his people.

2. **An affirmation of the goodness of creation.** Contrary to the dualism and functional Gnosticism of wider evangelicalism—a focus almost exclusively on the spiritual—the Reformed emphasis on the goodness of creation (especially as taught by Abraham Kuyper) is one of the real gems in the Reformed treasure chest, and one that distinguishes the CRC's heritage from other, narrower versions of Reformed theology.
3. **An exhortation to “make culture” well.** Growing out of an affirmation of the goodness of creation, the Reformed tradition values good work as an expression of God's calling. But it is also discerning and knows that God desires culture and institutions made for the flourishing of creation. It is precisely this emphasis on culture that informs our concerns about justice: think of the laments in *Our World Belongs to God*, which recognize the range of ways God wants to delight us but also the plethora of ways that we've fallen short, creating institutions and practices that run counter to the grain of the universe.
4. **A connection to our catholic heritage.** This might seem a little strange, but

for me, becoming Reformed was a way of becoming “catholic.” What do I mean by that? The Reformers were not revolutionaries—that is, they were not out to raze the church to the ground, get back to some “pure” set of New Testament church principles, and start from scratch. They didn't see themselves as leapfrogging over centuries of post-apostolic tradition. They were *re-forming* the church. And in that respect they saw themselves as heirs and debtors to the tradition that came before them. Indeed, they understood the Spirit as unfolding the wisdom of the Word over the centuries in the voices of Augustine and Gregory the Great, in Chrysostom and Anselm.

To say the Reformed tradition is “catholic” is just to say that it affirms this operation of the Spirit *in history*, and thus receives the gifts of tradition as gifts of the Spirit, subject to the Word. This is inscribed in the very heart of the Heidelberg Catechism, which explicates the Christian faith by unpacking the Apostles' Creed—a heritage of the church catholic.

Let me unpack that last point just a little more. What I mean to emphasize is that the Reformed tradition is not just a set of doctrines, nor is it just a unique

worldview. It is also a unique nexus of practices, including worship, that represent the accrued wisdom of the Church led by the Spirit. (You can find a wonderful summary of this in the prologue to Faith Alive's *Worship Sourcebook*.)

Worship is where we meet God, and worship is how the Spirit forms us into the people of God. So how we worship is an intentional, embodied, received expression of what it means to be Reformed—and the shape of that worship is a gift from the “catholic” heritage of the Spirit at work in history.

This tapestry of interrelated themes, often rent asunder in other traditions, has led the CRC to produce a unique configuration of ministries.

Buried?

Covenant, creation, culture, and catholicity—these themes drew me to the Reformed tradition. And I was surprised to find that one denomination held all of them together—no mean feat! Again, it was like discovering buried treasure. Christians and new converts all over the world are finding in these gifts of the Reformed tradition a new, deeper spirituality that conforms them to the image of Christ. When folks like me discover the Reformed tradition, we ask in amazement, “Where have you *been* all my life?”

But permit me one observation. As someone who looks on these Reformed emphases as incredible gifts of the Spirit—welcome nourishment compared to the spiritual impoverishment I knew before—I'm puzzled as to why so many CRC congregations, institutions, and agencies seem almost eager to *paper over* some of these emphases.

As a pilgrim and convert to the Reformed tradition in all its fullness, I came running to the CRC expecting to



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find inside all the riches of an Arts and Crafts masterpiece. Instead, often enough I've found something more like the garish orange living room—something that aims to be an “updated” version of the faith covering up the riches underneath.

Now, I think I understand why this might be: some have been rightly concerned that what was often valued as “Reformed” was really just “Dutch.” And they rightly understand that the proclamation of God’s kingdom, and the invitation into the people of God, is not a matter of taking on the particularities of some ethnic heritage. So we have spent a generation sifting the tradition, as it were, in order to separate the dross from the treasures of the Spirit.

That’s a crucial concern. Yet I worry that something else has happened along the way: that we have inadvertently fallen into the trap of thinking that Reformed Christian faith is a kind of “content” or “message” that can be distilled and then dropped into other so-called “relevant” or “contemporary” containers.

But the Christian faith—and the Reformers understood this—is not just a set of doctrines or beliefs, a know-*what* message that we come to believe. Christian faith is also a kind of know-*how* into which we are apprenticed—it is an understanding of the world that we absorb through practice. And that understanding is embedded in the received practices of Reformed worship—which is precisely why the Reformers were so concerned about the shape of worship.

The Reformers did not think worship was just a pragmatic matter of getting people’s attention and disseminating a message. Rather, worship is a formative encounter with a living, active, covenant-keeping Lord. The Reformers appreciated that we are indebted to the accrued wisdom of the Church, which, led by the

Spirit, discerned certain nonnegotiable elements of the *form* of worship that carry all the distinctives of Reformed Christian faith. We are what we worship; we are also *how* we worship.

So if we’re considering the future of the CRC and the nature of Reformed identity, we might do well to ask ourselves some uncomfortable questions:

- Have we papered over the riches of our Reformed heritage?
- In our desire to be relevant, have we buried the treasures of Reformed identity?
- In our quest to be contemporary, have we overlooked the missional resources in Reformed particularity?
- In sifting the dross of an ethnic heritage, have we tossed out the treasures of the Spirit?

Our Future

I worry that in trying to update the Reformed tradition, in trying to be contemporary and relevant, we’ve sometimes abandoned the historic wisdom of the tradition. Sometimes we’ve done so because we think this is “the future” of the CRC—that if the CRC is going to survive, we need to “get with it” and start to look more like others. But that, my friends, is to bury exactly the riches we

have—and the riches that others are looking for.

If the CRC wants to become generic evangelicalism or bland Protestant liberalism, there’s really no reason for us to exist. There are others already like that.

But I want to testify that people all over the world are hungry for the treasures we’re sometimes embarrassed by: there are Christians in Indonesia and Nigeria, Vancouver and San Francisco, who are hungry for what we take for granted. There are young people all over the world who don’t yet know Christ who will be drawn to him not by another “event” that looks like the concert or club they went to last weekend, but by the strange transcendence of Reformed worship in all its unapologetic fullness—and who will see that these are the practices of a people concerned with justice and flourishing *in this world too*.

I fear we spend a lot of energy trying to figure out how to be like others when others are actually envious of what we already have. I want to suggest to you that the richest future for the CRC might be in remembering the riches of our heritage—sifted and refined, to be sure. And with that discernment, I want to provocatively suggest that the future of being Reformed might be catholic. Our future is most hopeful, I think, when we think of it not as a renovation project but as an intentional, careful *restoration*. ■



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