

Grace and Gratitude: A Reformed Charism and Vision for Ministry

Charles A. Wiley

Editor's note: This essay originated as a presentation for an orientation gathering of the Company of New Pastors.

Recently I was speaking with a pastor of a very strong and healthy church who told me that his congregation would be planting a new congregation the next year. In the discernment process leading up to this bold decision, he told members of the congregation that they needed to be able to answer three questions:

- (1) Why plant a church?
- (2) Why should this particular congregation plant a church?
- (3) Why plant a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation?

Strong answers came quickly to the first two questions. But answers to that third question were less compelling—which made these congregational leaders just like the rest of us in the PC(USA). We have a hard time articulating the PC(USA)'s theological and spiritual vision in a compelling manner. The institutional survival of the PC(USA) denomination, our various presbyteries, or even the congregations involved is not worthy of our effort. We aren't doing all this just to keep the lights on. That's not why we signed up.

Our inability to articulate our identity is rooted in our history. You can ask any group of pastors and

elders, "Why are we called Presbyterians?" Someone will answer quickly, "Because we're ruled by elders." That's the right answer, of course, and it gets to an important affirmation of the parity of teaching and ruling elders that is important to us. Nonetheless, it doesn't *really* answer the question. Many church traditions have elders in their leadership but don't call themselves Presbyterians. Many churches have presbyteries, or something very much like them, but don't call themselves Presbyterians. Most Reformed churches around the world don't call themselves Presbyterians. We're called Presbyterians because, at one point in our history, the most significant ecclesial dispute was how the church was to be governed.

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England and Scotland were a time of revolution against the monarchy and vigorous, new debates about how people should be governed. This discussion of governance spanned both state and church. In political matters, some were monarchists, some favored governance through elected representatives, while others wanted a pure democracy. In a parallel discussion in the church, some people believed in government by bishops; others, government by elders; and still others, government by the people of the congregations—hence, the birth of Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists. Reformed Christians are known as Presbyterians only in England and Scotland and among their descendants around the world.

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In this formative period of our tradition, governance was the most important question. The legacy of our origin means we often lead with matters of polity to characterize identity. As a result, sometimes it feels as if our motto, our brand, our tagline is something like: “Presbyterians: we’re the people that brought you . . . *presbyteries*.” Now this may be true, and even good, but it is hardly a vision that will fuel decades of ministry.

Charism of the Reformed Tradition

What will? What emerges from the core of our identity that compels us to practice Christian community, proclaim the gospel, and work for justice? Grace and gratitude. *Grace and gratitude* succinctly and winsomely describes the *charism*, the gift of the Reformed tradition. Each tradition has a gift that it offers to the church ecumenical. We Reformed learn the discipline of not conforming to the surrounding culture from the Mennonites, an appreciation for God’s presence in the sacraments from Roman Catholics, a commitment to engage the structures of society from the National Baptists, and the exuberance of the Spirit from Pentecostals. Grace and gratitude is our gift to the wider church.

This description came alive for me when reading Brian A. Gerrish’s book *Grace and Gratitude*. In this book, Gerrish explores John Calvin’s theology of the Lord’s Supper. At the table, the relation of God and humanity is exhibited. God calls us to the table and feeds us on Christ himself, and we are sent forth in gratitude for God’s gracious movement toward us. The relationship broken by sin is restored at God’s initiative—we offer our thanks with our whole lives. More than a characterization of Calvin’s theology of the Lord’s Supper, grace and gratitude is a simple yet deep description of Calvin’s entire theological vision.

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Grace and gratitude is our theological and spiritual vision. What is our picture of God? The gracious One who comes to us in creation, in the law, in the prophets, and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. The God who sustains us with the ongoing grace of the Holy Spirit. The God who calls us through the church. The God who is for us.

The most profound articulation of this theological and spiritual vision comes from the baptismal liturgy developed by the French Reformed Church:

Little one, for you Jesus Christ came into the world:

for you he lived and showed God’s love;
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary and cried at the last, “It is accomplished”;
for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;
for you he ascended to reign at God’s right hand.

All this he did for you, little one, though you do not know it yet.
And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled: “We love because God loved us first.”¹

That is grace.

And what is our only appropriate response? Gratitude. Gratitude for our lives, for our treasure, for our community. Gratitude that compels us to share the love of Christ in the community and to do justice and love mercy for all God’s children. Karl Barth wrote that grace and gratitude “belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder [follows] lightning.” If God is, in essence, grace, then we are, in essence, gratitude.²

You can hear grace and gratitude in the last clause in question and answer 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why then should we do good works?³

The catechism has a very helpful answer to this question that can be summarized in two words, “You don’t.” You do not have to do anything. You respond in faithfulness because the Spirit makes you able to, because you want to, because you are grateful.

We live in a time when the words most often associated with church are guilt and obligation. We believe we are guilty of sin, but that guilt is overwhelmed by the superabundance of God’s grace. And gratitude puts our obligations in the service of our freedom in Christ. This is not just an

identity that is true to our past; it is a winsome and compelling message in contemporary culture.

The theological and spiritual vision of grace and gratitude, central to our core identity, is an enduring legacy, worthy of our time and engagement. While institutional survival is not sufficient for our investment, seeing new and existing worshipping communities shaped by grace and gratitude is. We want to see communities shaped by grace and gratitude.

My old professor Stanley Hauerwas says that good theology does not necessarily lead us to good ethics but bad theology eventually leads us to bad ethics. I have a variation on that: a good pastor does not necessarily form a good congregation, but a bad pastor inevitably leads to a dysfunctional congregation. And so the best way for communities to be shaped by grace and gratitude is to have pastors who are shaped by grace and gratitude.

A Strong Core for Pastoral Ministry

How do you nurture a spirit of grace and gratitude as you pastor a church? The Office of Theology and Worship is absolutely convinced that what we need is a “core.” A pastoral core enables pastors to navigate the challenges they will face. We cannot predict the future or know the answer to every question pastors may have. What we do know is that having a strong core will form pastors into a congregational leader that will have the capacity for these new situations. One of the reasons we give significant amounts of our time, energy, and money to supporting new pastors in ministry is so that this core of pastoral vocation can be discerned, developed, enhanced, and lived.

How do you develop and maintain this core? It's not complicated: spiritual disciplines, community, mentoring, and theological reflection.

Spiritual Disciplines

We recommend the disciplines of the Company of Pastors (pcusa.org/companyofpastors): a daily pattern of reading Scripture, praying the psalms, thanksgiving, and intercession. Seminary students often say: “This is great, but I just don't have the time, with course readings, exams, and so on. When I get into the parish I will do this stuff.” No, there is never time for it. Never. No time in your life, no time in mine. But there is a real sense in which, after years of doing this, I've come to understand that my life depends on it. There are times when I

go for days or weeks without these disciplines—and I know it, I feel it. These things nourish my soul. These daily disciplines of Scripture and prayer are absolutely essential to the maintenance of a core pastoral vocation that enables people to think in a serious and sustained fashion about the faith, and to draw other people into that same thinking.

Community

You do not do these things alone. You learn to live out the pastoral vocation in community. The Christian life is not a solitary, individual pursuit. It is a life of formation in the community called church, where we learn to follow Jesus. We learn to follow Jesus together, and as pastors we help others to follow Jesus together. I cannot tell you the number of pastors who relate stories of how their peer groups sustained them in difficult times, or challenged them when they were going astray, or told them the truth that their current call was going to kill them, or told them the truth that they needed to be faithful in their current situation, or helped them identify the joys and triumphs of their work. We're in this together.

Mentoring

New pastors need good, experienced teachers and models in ministry who are committed to supporting, shaping, and loving them as they begin this calling. Having such mentors in ministry is an essential part of pastoral formation, and thus a critical component of the Office of Theology and Worship's Company of Pastors and Small Church Residency programs. These mentors model the pastoral vocation in its many variations, and provide a bridge between the pastoral formation that will sustain a lifetime of ministry and the practical concerns of a specific call. Over the course of time, these mentors become valued colleagues in ministry.

Theological Reflection

We in the Office of Theology and Worship are absolutely convinced that the core of pastoral ministry is deeply, deeply theological—and I don't mean merely academic. The core of pastoral vocation has to do with serious, sustained attention to the faith. That's what a congregation needs from its pastor. This is not something you do by yourself, but something you do in concert with pastoral colleagues, with elders and deacons, and with others in the congregation. You wrestle with

the basic questions of our faith and life—simple questions, like: Who is God, really? Who are we, honestly? What does God have to do with us, and what do we have to do with one another?

The first ordination question that Presbyterian pastors answer is: “Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” That is a question so theologically pregnant that it almost makes you tremble. Jesus Christ your Savior: Saved from what? Saved for what? How? When? Acknowledge him Lord of all: Lord of all the stuff that’s in the newspapers? I don’t have to go on. These are words and phrases the church utters all the time without thinking. What we’re calling for is for pastors to think about these things, and then to help elders and deacons who are going to answer the same questions to think about these things in their lives. This kind of theological reflection—thinking about our faith as it actually pertains to our lives—is essential.

Don’t Miss the Adventure

In his book *Just Courage*, Gary Haugen remembers a trip to Mount Rainier with his father and two older brothers. At the Paradise Meadow visitor’s center, Gary’s father proposed that they continue hiking up to Camp Muir, the base camp for those ascending the summit. But after reading the warning sign at the trailhead—despite his father’s assurances that they would be safe—ten-year-old Gary decided to stay behind at the visitor’s center. While they hiked, Gary read the exhibits carefully. When they returned, he was ready to tell them everything there was to know about Mount Rainier. But when they returned they had their own stories to tell: of lakes and bears and eagles and magnificent vistas. Gary realized that he had settled for information about the mountain while his family had experienced the adventure.⁴

Don’t settle for maintenance, for institutional survival. Allow God’s grace to envelop you, and respond boldly with a life of gratitude.

In the church we are often tempted to focus on the visitor’s center and miss the adventure. We spend most of our time in the visitor’s center. We spruce it up for visitors. We knock down a wall to expand it. We design new signage. And the whole time we miss the adventure that lies only on the mountain—the life of faith in the world.

If you experience God’s grace and respond in gratitude, you will be pulled into the adventure. That’s our hope and dream for those who are called to ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Don’t settle for maintenance, for institutional survival. Allow God’s grace to envelop you, and respond boldly with a life of gratitude.

Notes

1. Church of Scotland, *Book of Common Order*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1996).
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 4.1.2, §57.
3. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2014), 4.086.
4. Gary Haugen, *Just Courage* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 13–17.