



REFORMED 'ACCENT'

Most of what the CRC teaches and believes it holds in common with believers around the world. Yet as a denomination we tend to emphasize some teachings or Scriptural interpretations more than others. How can this be?

If you think of the worldwide church as a body, then you can imagine denominations as individual organs. Each organ contributes to the proper functioning of the body, and each performs a unique function. Or imagine a room full of English speakers from different corners of the world—Georgia, Australia, Britain, South Africa, Scotland, and Toronto. Each speaks the same language, but their accents make them sound very different! Sometimes we refer to our particular emphases as speaking with a Reformed accent. Three words that figure prominently within a Reformed accent are sovereignty, covenant, and kingdom.

Sovereignty

It's all about God! Those of us who speak with a Reformed accent hold a very high view of God's sovereignty: God's plan, God's will, God's power. Everything that happens in the world, from the acts of nations to the faith of individuals, is ultimately under God's sovereign control.

We find it very comforting that God's infinite love and grace is coupled with God's power and ability to work on our behalf. You see, we know that no human thought or speech or action or desire is completely free of the effects of the fall. Even our will is tainted. Therefore we cannot help ourselves; we are "dead in our trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). Our only hope, then, is to admit that we have a sin problem, that we are powerless to help ourselves, and that we need to ask for God's intervention. Since God has already stirred such a desire in us, we are sure that he will answer our cry.

Mysteriously, God doesn't accomplish his will apart from human faith and action. This means, for example, that we are careful in our language about salvation. We don't urge people to "accept Jesus into your life"—which could imply that human will has the power to keep God out, as if we are the directors of our own destiny. We'd rather focus on how God calls people into relationship with him, urging people to say yes to God's offer of salvation in Jesus and offer their lives to God in return. Although we're deeply involved in responding to God's love in Jesus Christ, salvation is ultimately God's work from beginning to end.

Covenant

Another word that shows up a lot in our Reformed accent is covenant. Perhaps that word isn't familiar to you. A covenant is like a contract or a treaty. It involves partners who make promises to each other and then seal the deal in some appropriate way—with signatures, for example. The Bible talks of God as a "covenant-making God," meaning that he makes promises and keeps them. (The word testament, as in



Old and New Testaments, really means covenant.)

This is a very good thing to know! Because the sad truth of the matter is that we have a hard time keeping our promises. Think of all those New Year's resolutions that dissipate in the light of January 2. More sadly, think of the number of marriages promises, made in complete sincerity, that are broken. God makes firm covenant promises to love and protect, to care for and guide his people—in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer. Though our promises prove feeble, God's are firm. In fact, God can carry our covenant all by himself.

Here's where our accent gets a little more pronounced. We profess that God's promises are not simply made to individuals but to a community. Not only that, they are generational. We take our cue from God's Old Testament covenant with the people of Israel. And we note that on the day of Pentecost, in the first Christian sermon, the apostle Peter urges adult Jews to “repent and believe” this new interpretation of the events of Jesus' life and death and their complicity in it. When they do so, he says, they will receive the promised Holy Spirit, which is “for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). Even in the New Testament, God's promises are communal and generational.

This means, for example, that with joy we baptize adults who want to profess their faith, and with equal joy we baptize infants (a practice that goes back to the early church). There's a catch, though. Baptism is reserved for children of believing parents (or a believing parent) who are part of the church family, because we know that the Holy Spirit is active in those households. Those children will grow up to experience God's promises at home and in the Christian community. Infant baptism is about God extending his promise to our children even though they have no understanding at the time. It is a sign to the whole congregation that God's grace is a gift we cannot earn: it's all about God acting first.

Kingdom

A final word that's important to a Reformed accent is kingdom. And here the accent gets very broad because kingdom takes in all of human culture throughout the world. Unlike nations on earth, God's kingdom does not have defined borders. It is not restricted to a certain location, like a cathedral; nor can it be reduced to “religious” activity. By God's kingdom we mean God's sovereign rule, God's sphere of influence. We believe that God's Spirit is busy extending God's rule all over creation.

Certainly God's reign is evident in spiritual experiences of renewal and change. But it is also evident in God's gracious upholding of creation day by day, season by season. God's reign is evident anywhere God's will is done—in actions, lives, technology, artistry, and institutions.

God calls each of us to participate in the spread of his kingdom. The whole world is a place where we can carry out the mission of restoring God's creation. In the memorable words of Dutch statesman and pastor Abraham Kuyper, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”

Our kingdom focus means that our denomination has been active in some unique kingdom-building activities. Avoiding any division between sacred and secular, we encourage endeavors in any sphere of human activity: art, media, publishing, law, education, labor relations, caregiving, agriculture, business, social justice, and politics. No area of human enterprise is exempt. CRC communities have established

Christian schools from preschool to graduate school—not to protect students from the world but to give them the tools to engage any aspect of culture from the perspective of God’s kingdom. After all, it’s God’s world.

Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of God. His victory over sin and death turned the tide. Though sin, brokenness, and evil are still evident in the world, God’s kingdom is already here and is still coming. Someday Christ will come again, bringing the kingdom in full. In the meantime we pray and act for God’s kingdom to come.

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