

On Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Reformed Catholicity

One holy, catholic and apostolic Church

Grace Covenant Church recognizes itself as part of the ancient Christian Church established by the apostles, rejoicing in the “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jud. 1:3). We are thankful for the fellowship we share with all the faithful in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church throughout the ages. We affirm with the apostle that there is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:5). Therefore with the holy fathers, we confess that one faith as it has been handed down in the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, the Definition of Chalcedon, and Athanasian Creed. On this basis we cheerfully recognize the Trinitarian baptisms of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, receive them (and all others who confess this ancient faith) to our celebration of the Eucharist, and warmly welcome them into membership in our congregation. Because there is one body and one Spirit, we insist that the unity of the body of Christ is fundamentally something to be preserved through humility, gentleness, and love in the Holy Spirit and is not dependent upon institutional forms, church polity, or bureaucratic decisions (Eph. 4:2-3).

Likewise, in submission to the apostle’s instructions, we seek ecclesiastical maturity which rejoices in all of the ways the saints are being built up and equipped for ministry, striving for the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, until we reach mature manhood, the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:14). Standing firmly in the Reformed and Protestant branch of the Church, we are committed to enriching and deepening our understanding, practices, and doctrines, fully expecting continued reformation and renewal in the entire body of Christ.

Gratitude for the rich and fruitful heritage of the Reformed faith

At the same time, this tradition of “semper reformanda” (“always reforming”) has periodically been a subject of confusion and misrepresentation. The Reformed tradition at its best, far from willfully dividing and abandoning the one true Church, seeks to preserve that Church which the apostolic, patristic, and medieval fathers established and has continued in the lives of all the faithful throughout Christendom. Yet, some within the Reformed tradition itself today misinterpret ongoing reformation and preservation of this rich catholic heritage as an abandonment of historic Reformed principles. Some think they see a trajectory in our reformational progress which leads back to Roman Catholicism or leans toward Eastern Orthodoxy. Individuals who claim that we are moving this direction after having studied and worshipped and lived in our community have dramatically misread our aims and purposes. Furthermore, such interpretations fail to appreciate the deep catholicity found in the Reformed tradition and display

ingratitude for the great sanctifying work our sovereign God has done in His Church by the faithful labors of protesting catholics over the centuries. While we affirm our fundamental unity with all the saints within the body of Christ, including those in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, as well as our great appreciation for the many gifts, insights, and contributions they bring to the broader Church, we equally affirm our great thankfulness for our own history and tradition. Our commitment to the Reformation and those central claims of the Protestant Reformers is unwavering and as robust as ever, and our thankfulness for this rich and fruitful heritage has only deepened as we have grown. In particular, we are grateful for and committed to those summaries of the faith found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, The Three Forms of Unity, and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. At the same time, we do not understand this gratitude to be at odds with a genuine catholicity and love for the saints throughout the body of Christ. Rather, we are most thankful for the insights and concerns of the Reformed tradition because of how hopeful we are that God will be pleased to use us to bless and build up the broader Christian Church.

Catholicity and the ultimate, infallible authority of Holy Scripture

In keeping with this hope, we reject views which place the ultimate, infallible authority of the Scriptures in competition with other sources of authority since Christ is Lord over all, and His Word cannot be broken (Jn. 10:35). The sixty-six books of the Bible in their entirety are this perfect, God-breathed Word and comprise the only ultimate, infallible source of tradition for the Christian Church (2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Thess. 2:25, 3:6, 14).

With the Reformers, we insist that liturgical idolatry is a most dangerous temptation and sin for many within Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. This includes the veneration of man-made images, statues, relics, Eucharistic elements, the invocation of the saints, as well as other practices and traditions which are not according to Scripture. Likewise, we warn all the faithful to flee those doctrines or practices which, whether in doctrine or in practice, undermine the fundamental and sovereign graciousness of God in salvation.

Finally, while we consider divisions in the body of Christ most grievous to the calling of the Church, and we confess that the Reformed tradition has contributed its own failures to this state of affairs, we do not believe that abstract considerations of church polity, apostolic succession, or institutional unity rise to the level of weightier matters of the law. Therefore, however helpful the study of those issues may be, they must not jeopardize genuine Christian fellowship, justify the denunciation of the least in the kingdom of God, or result in disparaging the validity of the ordinations or sacraments of other churches that worship our Triune God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Individuals who join communions that effectively excommunicate their Protestant brothers and sisters contradict their

search for catholicity, and ironically, the goal of unity comes at the expense of further divisions in the body of Christ. We desire to be of one mind with all the saints, not by coercion, but by the same patient love of our brothers and sisters shown by Christ in His patient love for His Bride, the Church.

Toward greater unity and purity of the body of Christ

As we hope and pray and continue to work toward the greater unity and purity of the entire body of Christ, we do so committed to the most central callings of the Church: humble submission to Scripture and the proclamation of the gospel, the centrality of faithful worship and celebration of the sacraments, and loving God and neighbor with all that we are, which includes caring for the poor as well as widows and orphans in their distress. And this, we confess, is the way to grow up together with all of Christendom “into Him, who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:15-16).