



The Theology Project

The Church has a Faith
without which she cannot live faithfully

Truth leads to duty, faith to practice. A church that wants to be a servant found faithful to its commission must be a steward of the Faith entrusted to its care. A fellowship that desires to be an effective witness to the gospel must know the gospel. An apostolic church must not only live a life like that of the apostles, it must teach what the apostles taught.

Some generations of believers have tried to live faithfully without a shared Faith; all have failed. Our generation may be particularly tempted to try. Forging theological consensus is hard work in any generation, but ours seems to have concluded that it is impossible work. Private and partisan interpretations are now considered inflexible and intractable. We have forgotten the humble recognition that ambiguities exist and must be respected, and now dwell in a land where ambiguities are preferred and certainties are suspect. We are coached to celebrate diversity of theological conviction, rather than seeing this as a sign of important work yet to be done.

Theological debates in the church have not always been filled with grace, or even understanding, and many have been unnecessarily divisive. The formative ecclesial debates of earlier history are viewed as arcane. Doctrinal work is unfavorably compared to relationship building as if the two were mutually exclusive. Teaching elders attempt to teach how to live lives faithful to the truth without doing the required work of laying foundations of the truth in the hearts and minds of the congregation. Ruling elders are equipped to be managers of church life rather than able to teach the Faith.

Although these realities are manifest somewhat differently in churches and among leaders who identify themselves as progressive or evangelical, neglect of

the substance of the Faith is wide and deep. As a result, all other matters suffer – the strength of disciples, the health of congregations, the effectiveness of councils. Disciplined attention to the Word gives gifts to the Church that it cannot receive elsewhere or by any other means.

Renewal of theological work at the core of our common life is not only an acknowledged need but, in the providence of God, may be a blessed provision. Throughout history, the reformation of the Church has followed theological work – work that grew from recommitment to the Faith. In turn, the reformation of the Church has fostered a recommitment to theological work.

Now is the time to re-engage the theological work, for this moment, and for the next generations.

Renewed commitment to sustained conversation is needed. At its best, sustained conversation is characterized by prayerful and rigorous study of the Scriptures with attention to clarifying the Reformed theological lens through which we read the Scriptures, by grateful listening to the voice of the church around the world and through the ages, and application of theological wisdom to every part of life before God and for the world.

Toward these ends, we now commit ourselves to the formation of theological friendships in communities that include all teaching and ruling elders – gatherings of elders who covenant to study and learn together, providing mutual encouragement and accountability for the sake of sustaining and advancing the theological and missional work of the church.

Necessary to this commitment are:

1. Identifying the best practices of current theological projects and relationships within the Church that will help guide the shape of these theological friendships.
2. Building the structures that connect elders with each other locally, regionally, and nationally in environments that establish and sustain theological friendships.

These theological friendships should strive to:

- transform life and ministry,
- be sustained over the years,
- include a breadth of participants
 - gender, age, ethnic, and global communities
 - other Reformed churches
 - other orthodox and evangelical theological traditions, and
- engage other theological friendships, thus forming broadening communities, who worship and witness together.

An invitation is now offered in an excellent resource, “A Pastoral Rule,” developed by the Re-forming Ministry Program of the PC(USA)’s Office of Theology and Worship. This resource invites us to commit to personal disciplines, conduct in ministry that is holy, and mutual encouragement and accountability. It is offered to the whole Church as a tool for the formation of theological friendships that sustain us and are sustained over time. We propose that The Fellowship Community accept that invitation to adapt and then adopt “The Pastoral Rule.”

These three theological projects are offered for broad immediate consideration:

- Recommitment to a particular confessional heritage as an immediate core constituent of our renewed common life, however that common life is re-formed.
- Identification and affirmation of the essential tenets of the Reformed Faith.
- Commitment to re-engaging the theological enterprise broadly and deeply.

Further advance on these three projects will be made as we put our theology on the table for public discussion, deliberation, and decision; share best practices;

form theological-missional relationships; build the structures; and covenant together.

Questions for immediate consideration:

1. Do we consider the proposal to reaffirm the Book of Confessions as we work to build and test theological consensus among us, to be the right judgment to make at this time?
2. Is this an adequate and helpful articulation of the essentials of the Faith as expressed in Reformed ways, and will we sincerely adopt it?
3. What theological friendships will we form, what practices will we commit to, and what structures will we build for mutual encouragement and accountability?
4. The theological project is required of the Church, and now is re-engaged by this Fellowship within the Church. The invitation is now offered. How will you respond?

Addendum:

Suggested questions for the covenanting gatherings of theological friends:

- What has the Spirit gathered the Church to be?
- What has the Spirit sent the Church to do?
- Always and everywhere; here and now. What is the authority of Scripture in the actual life of the Church?
- How will we teach and obey the Scripture?
- What does it mean to be saved?
- What is the gospel we are to preach?
- What is the shape of our corporate and individual lives that are formed by that gospel?
- Elders, ruling as well as teaching, are to be equipped to teach. Teach what, to whom, how? Ruling elders are to measure out the patterns of faithfulness for the congregation. What are those patterns, and how are they measured?
- In a time of both ecclesial division and realignment, how can schism among parts of the Church be diminished and how can reconnection with the whole Church be increased?

The Church has a Faith without which she cannot live faithfully. What is that Faith? What is faithful living?