

## PART ONE: Theological Perspective

*We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify: God calls the worlds into being, creates humanity in God's own image and sets before it the ways of life and death.*

The sixth day in the creation account concludes with God assessing the work of the previous week and declaring everything "very good." Too often we have overlooked this as God simply sticking a gold star on the universe. More than a mere compliment, the words communicate profoundly about the nature of Nature. The pronouncement indicates that what God sees is not merely a reasonable approximation of what God hoped to churn out; it is instead the embodiment of God's intentions. What's more, what God wanted is a creation that reflects God's character. God is the Source of Life-- indeed, Life Eternal. The creation bears the mark of its creator. In short, like its Creator, the creation brings life.

While Genesis highlights the procreative capacities of the creation (i.e. seeds and sex), that is not where the potential for creativity ends. This is where the beings God forms from earth and breath come in. Part of the goodness of creation is that within it is the raw material necessary for a vast range of human endeavors. In other words, trees and flowers are God's creation but so are the arts, engineering and commerce. The story laid out over the course of the Scriptures starts in the garden but it ends in a city (Rev. 21:2). The redemptive work of God validates our cultural pursuits by culminating in a booming metropolis.

To claim that humans bear the Divine image due to being in possession of some uniquely human trait ("a will," "a conscience," "a soul," etc.) misses the thrust of the passage. Again, the God we meet here is creative, life-producing. Humanity is created to reflect *that*, to act on God's behalf (i.e. bear God's image) by protecting and expanding the vitality and fertility of the planet.

Quite frankly, the church has by and large failed to take the implications of this seriously-- maybe because doing so served its immediate self-interests. The church has preferred to maintain sharp distinctions between "spiritual" concerns and secular ones. Church authorities enjoyed identifying themselves as fulfilling a

“higher calling.” We reduced the work of the church to “saving souls,” dismissing the realities of this world for the promise of the next.

My point is not to diminish evangelism or disparage the consolations of the after-life. It is simply to lament the fact that a singular emphasis on such things has come at a profound price. A vacuous theology of creation justifies an indifference to social, economic and environmental injustice.

Another divine quality revealed in this passage becomes more apparent when we lay the Genesis 1 account alongside the Enuma Elish. The similarities between the two are striking. The ordering of the rollout of creation is identical. Yet these parallels serve to highlight striking distinctions. Most notably, the Enuma Elish supplies a gruesome backstory. After committing matricide, Marduk fashions the universe from the carcass of his dead, dragon mother. In Genesis, God creates merely by speaking things into existence. It is not enough to simply say that the biblical account lacks the violence of the Babylonian. Genesis 1 in particular offers us a creation at peace that goes beyond a lack of hostility. The universe exhibits *shalom*-- all things existing in a relationship of mutual thriving-- God with humanity and the creation as a whole, humanity with the creation, the creation with itself. In Genesis 1, nothing is lacking. It lacks nothing because the Source of Goodness and Life exists at its center.

Genesis' second creation account, of course, contains the story explaining why we don't exist in a *shalom*-abundant universe. The short answer is that we were not content to keep God as the hub of the operation. Falling prey to temptation, we are convinced that the Source of Goodness and Life is withholding goodness and life from us. The mirrors beaming with reflected light suddenly decide they are themselves light bulbs. Out of their distrust and suspicion, they turn toward darkness.

God describes the consequence of their disobedience. Where *shalom* had created mutual thriving, hostility now permeates-- between humanity to God, humanity to itself, humanity to the creation. Goodness and life remain possibilities, but they will be achieved-- however fleetingly-- through struggle and toil. The act of disobedience casts long shadows, leaving us to stumble around in twilight.

*He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin. He judges humanity and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.*

The drama that unfolds in the Scriptures following human rebellion revolves around the struggle to restore *shalom* to humanity and the creation. It is our struggle, and it is God's. It is God's "struggle" only because God insists on accomplishing this mission through what exists rather than scrapping the universe and initiating a Plan B. The story is, therefore, a redemption story.

A prelapsarian universe exhibits *shalom* because it embodies the Divine Word (God says "Light," and there is light. It is good.) A redeemed universe is one in which the Divine Will/Word and the cosmos realign again. The Divine Word is the means by which realignment will occur. In short, God will continue to speak -- at times through signs and wonders but mostly through human mouthpieces-- i.e. prophets. Mediated speech differs somewhat from the speech in Genesis 1. In Genesis 1, Divine words appear to immediately generate the Divine intention. When God speaks through prophets, our time frame changes. As Isaiah describes it, the Divine word resembles rain on a field. It will fulfill the Divine intention-- at some point. This underscores yet again God's commitment to the creation and protecting its integrity. God refuses to simply override individual minds or collective will. Redemption is, therefore, painfully slow work.

It makes some sense for the statement to highlight the salvation of "all people," since we are the species of creature prone to "aimlessness and sin." Then, again, salvation is not merely about *homo sapiens*, but rather, an undertaking that is cosmic in scope.

*In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, he has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself.*

The incarnation demonstrates God's profound love for creation; God redeems what God loves by making it essential to God's own being. In the small body pushed through Mary's birth canal, we find the beginning of a new creation-- one that resembles the creation at its genesis. Jesus is a creature with God at the center. He is "Emmanuel" ("God with Us") right from the start. Yet being that takes work. After his baptism, for example, he spends forty days fasting in the wilderness in an effort to ensure that Divine centrality sinks deep into his bones.

Having done that he is ready to bring it everywhere else-- even the most godforsaken of places. He brings light to the darkness of betrayal, abandonment, injustice, violence, humiliation, mockery and, finally,

death. He refuses to allow any of that to dictate the outcome of the story or establish the limits of salvation. Jesus brings God to all that.

While the resurrected body of Jesus is “the firstfruit” of this reconciled creation, the ongoing work of reconciliation often follows the same pattern of death and resurrection— both literally and figuratively. *He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races. He calls us into his church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be his servants in the service of humanity, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.*

The Holy Spirit is both evidence of salvation (i.e. God occupying God's place at the center) and the means by which the work of salvation continues. To recognize the Holy Spirit as “evidence” is to recognize that the Holy Spirit trumps all other identity markers. Even as we all exist on a spectrum between maleness and femaleness, whether we identify with the sex we were assigned at birth or feel discomfort in our assumed gender (and the socially constructed rules that go along with it), have a sexuality that allows our relationships to be recognized or have sexual identities that place us in the margins, no matter our income, whether native, non-native, regardless of race, born on this land or land oceans away, we are, first and foremost, God's.

In addition to telling us who we are, the Holy Spirit directs what we do. The church often defines “spiritual gifts” far too narrowly. “Spiritual gifts” are not a certain set of gifts, but rather, any gift that protects or promotes *shalom* is a spiritual gift. Put another way, a spiritual gift is any gift that produces the fruit of the Spirit.

The statement above rightly emphasizes that we should anticipate the full range of human experiences in the effort to advance *shalom* and produce spiritual fruit. Indeed, if our efforts are without struggle and suffering, we might question whether we are doing it right. After all, the work of the Holy Spirit in us resembles the Spirit's work in Jesus. Paul, for example, finds joy in his suffering because he recognizes it as the Spirit retelling the gospel in his own life. It is his Good Friday, anticipating Easter resurrection. To live attuned to the Spirit, then, is to undergo a life-long process of dying and rising.

*God promises to all who trust God's forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, God's presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in God's kingdom which has no end. Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto our God. Amen.*

There are theological traditions that emphasize “forgiveness of sins” and others that emphasize “the struggle for justice and peace.” By fusing both into the same sentence, this statement highlights the need to hold both together. Engaging in the struggle requires “courage” not optimism or blind fanaticism. We seek a kingdom “which has no end” (i.e. a kingdom which flourishes eternally). In this life, we can only experience temporary approximations of that kingdom, we only have access to glimpses of it. To take “the struggle” seriously requires “trust [in] God’s forgiveness of sins.” That supplies us with the courage to confront all that opposes “justice and peace” (i.e. *shalom*) in ourselves and in the world. Apart from trusting in the Divine whisper proclaiming grace and forgiveness, we will either give up in despair or devote ourselves to the “honor, glory and power” of our own little thieftoms.

## PART TWO: UCC History and Polity

I once heard the Reformation described as a “tragic necessity,” and that Protestants place the emphasis on the “necessity” of it while Catholics emphasize the “tragedy.” To the Catholic Church, the Reformers were schismatics whose churches lacked an institutional heritage dating back to the Apostles (i.e. “apostolic succession”). The Reformers countered by claiming that it was their message that gave them legitimacy and created a direct link back to the Apostles. I suppose that this argument was so compelling that, eventually, we showed little concern for the tragedy of cutting ecclesiastical ties and forming whole new institutions from scratch. The 19th century in particular is one in which American churches split over the finest of doctrinal concerns. We Protestants were always finding things to protest.

The “tragedy” of all this indignation and divisiveness dawned on many in the aftermath of World War I. Technological and economic changes had made the world a smaller place. Isolationist thinking— whether ecclesiastical or political— proved to have dire consequences. While The League of Nations was an attempt to overcome political fragmentation, the ecumenical movement attempted to do the same for the church. Among the consequences of those efforts in the US was the formation of the United Church of Christ.

Building a united denomination from various traditions is not easy— not just for sociological or political reasons but for theological reasons as well.. While Jesus prays that the church “may be one,” it is Paul we

must rely on to work out the details. After all, during his earthly ministry, the church literally followed Jesus. Where Jesus went, it followed. It is Paul who establishes communities dotting the Empire committed to following Jesus in the figurative or spiritual sense. He addresses those communities both as “churches” and as “the church.” The church is a plurality and a singularity. Trying to navigate that tension is where polity comes into play.

Even as it grew out of a response to the call to oneness, the UCC refused to adopt a polity that sought to foster a spiritual monoculture. Indeed, it maintained the Congregationalists’ emphasis on the autonomy of the local churches. An individual congregation was not a fragment of the church or a mere chapter of the denomination. Each church is fully the church.

Out of respect for the integrity of the local congregation, unity was not to be imposed from headquarters. No bishop or any other ecclesiastical authority would dictate policies or demand uniformity. We would “be one” by means of the bonds of our covenant together. In other words, even as each congregation has autonomy, we recognize that a gathering of the broader church supplies its deliberations with resources beyond what any one church possesses. As covenant partners, we participate in the decisions made at the level of association, conference, and General Synod as people listening for God.

Taking our unity in Christ seriously requires taking seriously the resolutions made at the level of General Synod. Taking the autonomy of individual congregations seriously requires allowing individual congregations to discern for themselves how those resolutions apply on the local level.

There are obvious drawbacks to operating this way. There are no doubt churches who could use an intervention from some denominational authority. There are times when churches find themselves in situations where the last thing they need to do is figure it out themselves— despite what they themselves think. On the other hand, there are obvious drawbacks to Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal polity as well. Personally, I prefer ours to theirs.

These days efforts at ecumenism seem almost passe. Few are even aware of what doctrinal differences separate Methodists from Baptists from Presbyterians; let alone find them cause for division. It is taken for granted that people within a given congregation can hold a range of views on everything from the

sacraments to eschatology. While a person may feel loyalty to a particular church, denominational loyalty is increasingly rare— and for good reason. Churches within the same denomination differ widely in theology and praxis.

This has not happened because we all have learned to get along. We are as divided as a nation as ever. Some would argue more divided than ever. We are also more isolated from one another, a trend only exacerbated by the pandemic. At first glance, it would seem that issues related to UCC history and polity are irrelevant— relics of a bygone era. But that's at first glance.

As Randi Jones Walker argues in *Evolution of a UCC Style*, our denomination's history and polity provides us resources to draw on in an effort to address the current milieu. In our own day, the crisis facing the church is finding a unity which respects and even celebrates diversity. The resources that enabled Congregationalists and Reformed Confessionalists to find common ground will serve the church well in its efforts to overcome divides between Democrats and Republicans, cis and trans, brown folks and white. It is the tendency of those in the majority culture to assume that unity requires erasing difference or ignoring it. Marginalized communities have every right to view such efforts with suspicion— as an attempt to downplay autonomy of the individual and impose a superficial unity. That seems like an issue that UCC history and polity can speak to.

### PART THREE: Personal Pilgrimage

Though only sprinkled at my baptism, I could hardly have been more deeply immersed into my previous denomination, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). My dad was a CRC pastor. With few exceptions, my grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins all attended CRC congregations. The first time I attended a school not overseen in some way by the CRC was graduate school for Literature. My first course, however, was John Bunyan and His World. Going over the attendance roster on my first day, the bemused professor said, "*Cornelius* Roeda?" She figured I must have been named after Cornelius VanTil and asked, "You here for the Reformed theology?" (Usually, I just have to clarify that "Cornelius" is my legal first name. Yeah, "Cornelius.") She was the best.

I never gave much consideration to seeking ordination in another denomination. The CRC was a flawed denomination, I knew that. (I was in college before it started ordaining women.) But it was family, full of people I loved deeply and who loved me. However, upon graduating from Calvin College in '94, I joined the CCO, a campus ministry organization based in Pittsburgh. I took a position at Kent State and, in some ways, gained some distance from my upbringing. Until then, for example, I'd never realized how ridiculous the name "Calvinettes" was for the denomination's program for grade school girls. On the other hand, it was there that I came to embrace the best parts of my own tradition— for example, its robust creation theology that sanctifies all fields and disciplines as sacred callings.

It was also during this time that I learned to assume a more active role in the local church. After completing my commitment to the CCO and starting grad school, I became an elder and ended up preaching for a few months when the pastor took a short sabbatical.

After moving back to Grand Rapids, I started Calvin Seminary in 2000. After completing my second year, I was offered a position at Campus Chapel, the denomination's campus ministry on the University of Michigan's Central Campus. I ended up completing my M.Div at Ashland Seminary which had a wonderfully diverse branch campus in Detroit.

I was thrilled to return to campus ministry. Working with students provides the freedom to explore new opportunities and try new things. What's more, I was particularly eager to do so within the context of a worshiping community, to anchor the work in liturgy, preaching, and sacraments. Plus, Ann Arbor is one cool town.

The trick with campus ministry is having to re-invent ministry every year and after six such re-inventions, I was ready for a change. I took a position at South Bend CRC (now Church of the Savior CRC) in 2008. By and large, I had a wonderful experience there. I enjoyed serving as head-of-staff, in large part because I loved my colleagues— and the congregation. Among the things I am most proud of having accomplished there was leading the congregation through a name-change process. While that may sound superficial, the fact is that it provided a great opportunity to engage in big discussions around identity, mission, and tradition.



My experience at that church was overwhelmingly positive until my first marriage came unglued. Long (painful) story short: I resigned. Not long afterward, I divorced as well. I taught Junior English at the local high school, then at a group home for adults suffering from cognitive issues. I also started a business with my artist mother. The conclusion of my ministry experience was so traumatic I did not consider returning to parish ministry.

I then met my current wife Jenn. In addition to regularly filling my heart with joy, she works as a therapist at Mosaic Health and Healing Arts. Most of her clients identify as members of the LGTBQ+ community. Among other things, her work inspired me to consider returning to parish ministry— in a denomination where no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey you are welcome. We started attending St. Peter’s UCC. Pastor Scott Bowie accepted my invitation to get coffee and listened to me pour out my life’s story. He has been a great source of encouragement ever since. In addition to directing me to COM in order to initiate the MID process, he also provided my name to St. John UCC (Woodland) as possible pulpit supply.

Things went well enough at St. John that they invited me back. Even though I arrived late that next time (thinking the service started at 9:30), they continued to invite me back. In fact, they offered me the half-time position of “supply pastor” a few months after my first Sunday with them.. Since the summer of 2019, it has been an honor to serve there ever since.

When the pandemic struck, Pastor Bowie suggested that we, along with the pastors of other nearby UCCs, collaborate on creating services over Zoom— among them First UCC Bremen which was being served by Interim Pastor Virgie White. They offered me a part-time position as well. So far the arrangement is working out pretty well. If First Bremen is disappointed that I’m not as interesting as the videos I contributed to our online services might have suggested, they have not let on.

#### PART FOUR: EVIDENCE OF THE MARKS OF MINISTRY

##### *A. Exhibiting a Spiritual Foundation and Ongoing Spiritual Practices*

- CCO: Leaving an environment which was so familiar and supportive and arriving in Kent, OH where I knew few, I first learned the importance of spiritual habits and disciplines.
- Sermon preparation has become a vital spiritual practice. Whether I manage to say anything meaningful by Sunday or not, having to sit with a text over the course of a week proves to be an edifying undertaking personally.
- Making a habit of seeking the counsel, encouragement, and accountability of mentors

### *B. Nurturing UCC Identity*

- Becoming a member of the UCC by joining St. Peter's in South Bend (Fall '18)
- Developing a friendship with Pastor Scott Bowie has been critical (Fall of '18)
- Attending the Annual Gathering (Spring '19, Spring '20)
- Becoming supply pastor at St. John–Woodland, IN (Summer of '19-Present)
- Helping to plan St. John's 150th anniversary celebration (Fall '19)
- Attending Association meetings (Spring '21, Spring '22)
- Briefly serving as Vice President of the NW Association (Summer of '21)
- Collaborating with four other UCC pastors to create online worship services during the pandemic (Spring of '20 to Spring of '21)
- Working with organizers of the Annual Gathering to present video versions of the events various events (Spring of '20)
- Serving First UCC (Bremen, Summer '21-present)

### *C. Building Transformational Leadership Skills*

- Serving as New Staff Trainer for the CCO (Summer '97)
- Serving as church elder for Akron Christian Reformed Church (Fall '97-99)
- Directing three different Vital Worship Grant projects while at Campus Chapel– one on art and worship ('03-04), another on leading in worship ('04-05), and a third exploring the subject of lament ('06-07)
- Facilitating the congregation-wide vision process at Church of the Savior ('10 & '13)
- Serve as Senior Pastor of a staff numbering between four and five ('08-'14)
- Leading South Bend CRC to undergo a name change process and become Church of the Savior to (2012)
- Overseeing a year-long project exploring Art and Worship at First UCC (Spring of '22-present)
- Serving as pastor of St. John ('19-present) and First ('21-present)

### *D. Engaging in Sacred Stories and Traditions*

- Building a library of commentaries and theological works that reflects the best of contemporary scholarship.
- Deeply committed writing sermons that reflect a meaningful engagement with the biblical text
- Led Bible studies and small groups for college students and adults
- Served as a Sunday School teacher for 13 year olds ('99)
- Provided Children's Sermon each week in worship ('08-14)
- Wrote a research paper in graduate school on teaching biblical narratives to children for a course entitled Theory of Children's Literature while obtaining an MA in Literature ('98)

### *E. Caring for Creation*

- Integrate concerns for the creation and climate change into our pastoral prayers on a near weekly basis
- The gospel's cosmos-wide implications is a major theme in my preaching
- Currently in the process of converting our conventional yard into one populated by native plants and have begun conversations with First Bremen about doing the same in the grass lot next to the facility.
- Attempt to remain active. Specifically, most weeks I play pick-up play basketball weekly at Bethel College and meet with a friend for an hour walk.
- I have learned to cook, sometimes using ingredients from our garden, but generally eating less processed foods.
- Participating as a member of a "Communities of Practice" group (Spring of '21-present)

### *F. Participating in Theological Praxis*

- M.Div from Ashland Theological Seminary
- Invited to present at the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship's annual Worship Symposium ('07 and '11) as well as at Western Seminary's Preaching Conference ('12)

- Drawing on other wonderful resources like Hearts and Minds Bookstore's BookNotes blog and the OnScript podcast
- Published articles in *Reformed Worship, Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, and the online version of *Relevant Magazine*.

#### *G. Working Together for Justice and Mercy*

- Helped put together the Transgender Day of Remembrance Service ('20)
- Regularly preach sermons related to racial justice and LGBTQ+ rights
- Assigned readings from authors like James Baldwin and Zora Neal Hurston and analyzed documentaries about mass incarceration and gang violence when a teacher in the South Bend School Corporation
- The Art and Worship project seeks to provide people with practices that help to mediate anxiety and advance mental health.
- Worked as Counselor, Head Counselor, and Program Director for Camp Tall Turf, a camp begun following race riots of late sixties and serving youth of Grand Rapids, Detroit and Chicago (Summers '94, '95, '97)

#### *H. Strengthening Inter- and Intra- Personal Assets*

- Took Clinical Pastoral Education (Fall '21)
- Participating in a Communities of Practice group (Spring '22 to present)
- Meeting with Mentor Rev. Paul Fraser (Spring '21 to present)
- Have met regularly with a therapist and life coach
- Started a business with artist (and, in my case, mom) Carol Roeda devoted to creating materials and conducting workshops designed to build mental health (Fall '16 to Summer '18)
- Recently certified to provide child care to children in foster care
- Attended conferences related to Family Systems Therapy (Spring '08, Fall '08)
- Employed by Dungarvin as a Direct Support Professional serving adults with mental disabilities (Fall '16 to Summer '17)