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# Calvin Theological Seminary Forum

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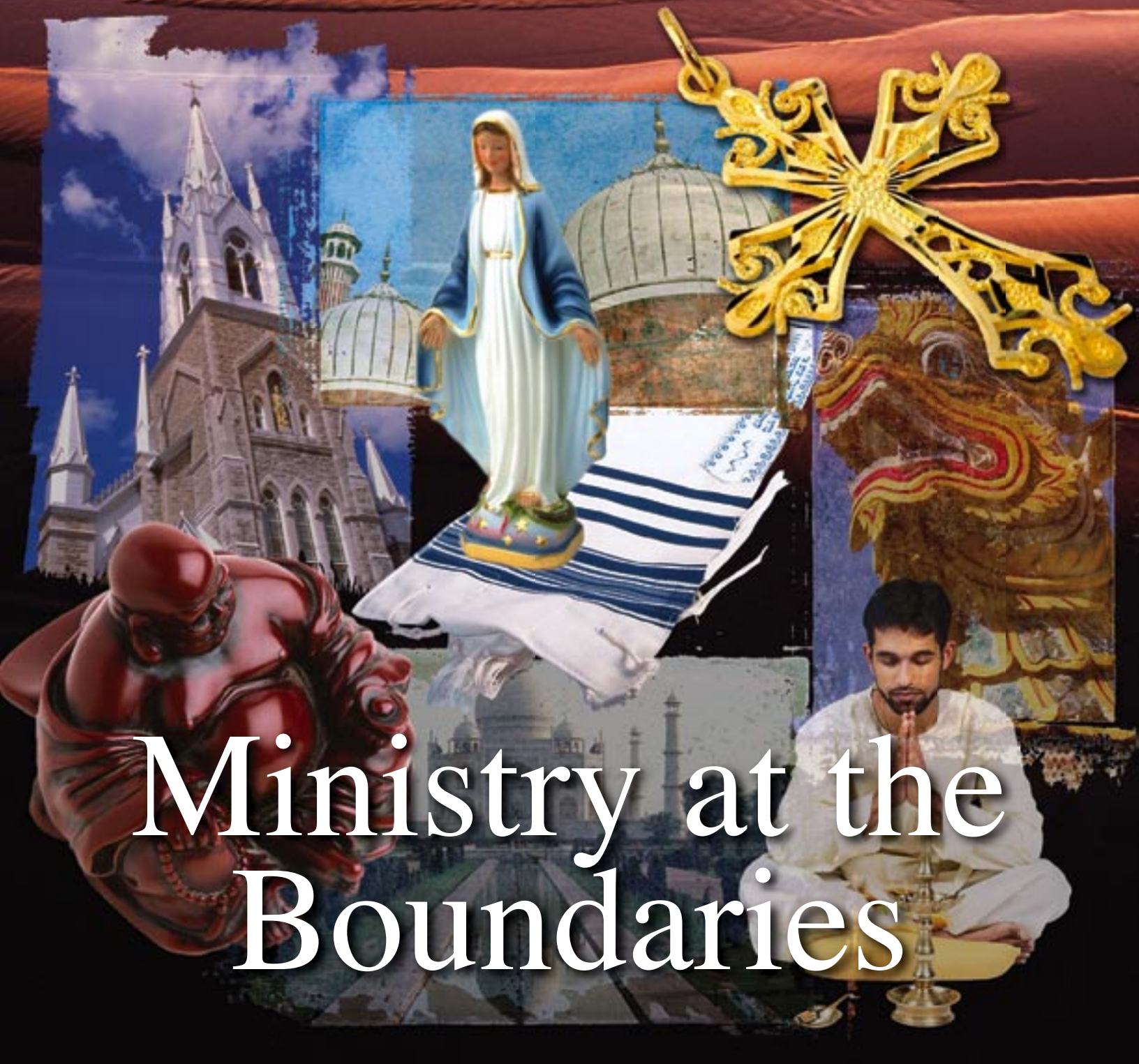
CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

# FORUM

WINTER 2004



# Ministry at the Boundaries

CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

FORUM

Providing Theological Leadership for the Church

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**REFLECTIONS ON MINISTRY AT THE BOUNDARIES**



**DEPARTMENTS**



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# *from the president*

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

When I became an ordained minister in 1971, my field was a home missions church in Webster, New York, just east of Rochester. In October, when the Webster ministers' club gathered for its monthly breakfast, the host introduced me around the table. I'm pleased to tell you that I was a polite youth. I'm sorry to tell you that I also viewed each minister in turn as an embodiment of error. When I met the Baptist minister, I thought, "He's messed up on one of the sacraments," and when I met the Lutheran, "He's messed up on the other one." So on, around the table: the Free Methodist was wrong on sanctification, the Congregationalist on church order, the Bible Church minister on creeds and confessions, and, of course, the Catholic priest had forgotten that Jesus reserved the title "holy Father" for God, not the Pope.

I guess you might say my ecumenical spirit was low. I hadn't yet had a student — now a colleague — like David Rylaarsdam to remind me of the "Peace Saying" that Richard Baxter, the great Puritan, took from Peter Meiderlin, and spread through the English-speaking world. The saying, you may recall, goes like this: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity."

Which, of course, still leaves open the question where the border lies between what's essential and what's non-essential, and who ought to draw it. Hence this issue of the *Forum*, in which good colleagues survey some ecumenical borders and discuss border etiquette for people who wish to be both faithful and charitable.

What has helped me over the years is a sheer fact from the Bible, namely, that *koinonia* hasn't so much to do with testifying of our religious experiences, let alone with the 60s practice of singing "Kum ba yah" around a campfire. Koinonia is fellowship *in the Lord*. It's not fellowship in being religious, or in being human, or in wishing to be a good sport when it comes to worshiping with Buddhists. Jesus called into fellowship people who would follow *him* and do it together. These were men and women who wouldn't naturally get along very well. Jesus called the tax-collector Matthew, whom Simon the Zealot must have once despised. Jesus called Judas, and washed his feet and fed him. Following suit, the mighty apostle Paul gathered churches where members glared at each other over ethnic identity and sacramental practice, and Paul usually didn't write much of anything to them before he had written, "Grace to you and peace."

Which is what I say to you, brothers and sisters.

Neal

Neal Plantinga

# REFLECTIONS

**REFLECTIONS ON MINISTRY AT THE BOUNDARIES**

# Can't We All Worship Together?

## The Ethos of Pluralism

*by Roger S. Greenway*
Professor of Missions, Emeritus

Around the corner from our house in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) stood a large Buddhist temple. On full moon days the smell of incense burning in front of idols was inescapable. Worshipers streamed past our house on their way to the temple. What did they do there? Some of them cried to the Buddha for light, help and relief from misery. Others simply meditated. In theory, Buddhists do not pray to a supreme deity. But atheism invariably leads to polytheism and the worship of various spirits. Our neighbors never left the temple without dropping a few coins in the "god boxes" in the courtyard. For me, the saddest sight was that of Buddhist mothers showing their children how to pray to the Buddha, and to show respect to various gods whose "favor" might be helpful.

In my Saturday morning catechism classes, I regularly discussed with the church's boys and girls the uniqueness of Christian prayer and worship. Christians were a small minority in the country, and most of their schoolmates were Buddhists or Hindus. To them, Q&A 117 of the Heidelberg Catechism was intensely relevant: *"How does God want us to pray so that he will listen to us? First, we must pray from the heart to no other than the one true God, who has revealed himself in his Word...."* On that foundation the Reformed Church of Sri Lanka had survived on the island for more than 300 years. It had not succumbed to the religious syncretism that was rampant in society at large. For the church to resist the allure of syncretism, the children needed to be well instructed in Christian doctrine and practice.

### *Pluralism in America*

In the past forty years, enormous changes have occurred in the religious landscape of North America. Religious icons from our Judeo-Christian heritage still linger. We see "In God we trust" on our coins, "One nation under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, and Bible verses on frescoes in government buildings and on the Liberty Bell. But all the while, Americans are casting aside the traditional ethos that was shaped by Judeo-Christian religious and ethical tradition. In its place has come the ethos of pluralism, an ever deepening mindset that denies all religious and moral absolutes, particularly those of Christianity. As Harold Netland points out in his book *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (IVP, 2001), the traditional links between Christianity and Western culture are coming loose. Christian teachings and standards are increasingly attacked while other religions are praised and promoted.

### *The Ethos of Pluralism*

Religious *diversity* is not the essential problem in America or anywhere else. Christianity was born, after all, into a religiously diverse world and soon learned how to survive and grow in a pluralistic environment. Over the centuries Christian missionaries have carried the gospel to people of every religion under the sun. Today, the global church is composed of people drawn from every culture and religious background, and the church is growing fastest in places where religious diversity is most common (See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford, 2002). The plain truth is that most Christians have never known anything else but religious pluralism and have been surrounded by non-Christian faiths. Obviously, religious diversity, per se, is not the issue.

To understand the issue we must distinguish between the pluralism of diversity, which is the common experience of many Christians around the world, and the ethos of pluralism, which is a very different matter. By "ethos" we mean a deeply held viewpoint that affects the character and direction of people's thinking on moral, religious and practical matters. It is the ethos of pluralism that threatens the foundations of Christianity in America. People who have this mindset laud "tolerance," but are vigorously intolerant of anyone who insists on

**Pluralism** ▶ *one God, one Savior, one Scripture, and one way to God the Father*.

The ethos of pluralism represents a major change with respect to how Americans generally think about Christianity and where it stands vis-a-vis other religions. The new ethos assumes a basic parity between religions and essential agreement as to what they teach about God, the human condition, prayer, worship and, ultimately, salvation. Pluralism becomes for them a distinctive way of looking at religious diversity. They do not view religious diversity as a result of the fall and the choice of sinners to worship something other than the one true God (Romans 1:18-23), but as something good, to be embraced enthusiastically.

Christians inclined toward pluralism have no problem joining on special occasions with followers of other religions in public prayer and worship. Their actions implicitly deny the exclusivity found in the church's confession: *We believe that we have no access to God except through the one and only Mediator and Intercessor, Jesus Christ the Righteous. He was made man, uniting together the divine and human natures, so that we human beings might have access to the divine Majesty. Otherwise we would have no access* (The Belgic Confession, Article 26).

*It is the ethos of pluralism that threatens the foundations of Christianity in America. People who have this mindset laud "tolerance," but are vigorously intolerant of anyone who insists on one God, one Savior, one Scripture, and one way to God the Father.*

Major denominations in Europe and America capitulated to the ethos of pluralism long ago and it is now making inroads among evangelicals. Wherever pluralism goes it undermines faith in the gospel, the authority of the Bible, and the need for missions and evangelism.

In fact, pluralism calls into question the *legitimacy* of missions and evangelism. I was made aware of this after delivering an address on Christian missions at an interdenominational gathering. In my presentation I described the basic differences between the Christian worldview and the worldviews of other faiths. I explained the different "salvations" each promises, and how the differences come to expression in rituals, prayer and worship. I tried to be accurate to the point where clerics of other religions could not honestly accuse me of being unfair.

Following the address, a man came toward me and I could see fire in his eyes. He vigorously disagreed with what I had said, not because of any inaccuracy in my description of other religions, but because I had dared to say that on vital points I considered them *wrong*. They aren't wrong, he said, just *different*. All religions lead sincere people to the same place, whatever that "place" may be. Religious absolutes only cause trouble. His parting jab was something to the effect that missionaries are narrow-minded bigots.

### *Roots and challenges of pluralism*

Where did the ideology of pluralism come from? How are Christians sucked into it? To find the answer requires that we reflect on a number of developments in Western society. Moral values based on Christian convictions have been eroding for some time. In mainline churches the authority of the Bible has been marginalized and convictions about things that Christians have embraced since the days of the apostles have been set aside. Secularism, meaning life without reference to God, has established itself in the West. This has occurred at the very time when, due to immigration and globalization, people have become more aware of cultural and religious diversities.

The ethos of pluralism spreads among church people when two conditions are prevalent: (1) widespread ignorance of, or indifference toward, important biblical doctrines; and (2) increased awareness of the wider world of religious ideas, whether through study, travel, the Internet, or the arrival in our schools and neighborhoods of religionists from distant places. Both of these conditions can be plainly seen in the West. Even in traditionally orthodox churches, doctrine has been downplayed to the point where most members are unsure of what their church teaches, and many don't care. Moreover, in 1965, the Congress of the United States passed a new immigration law that opened the door to a greater number of immigrants and to groups from every part of the world.

British historian Andrew Walls has described the immigration law of 1965 as "the most important piece of legislation of the 20th century in terms of its effects on the church in North America." It increased the non-Christian segment of the population, brought new mission fields to our doorstep and increased the number of ethnic minority churches. It introduced ordinary Americans to new people from around the world with different values, lifestyles and religions. It also fed the ethos of pluralism that was already growing in western society.

The challenges are many, and they demand clear thinking. On the social and political level, "older" and "newer" immigrants are all citizens of the same country and share equally the rights and privileges of our democracy. The first challenge is to accept people who are different than ourselves, respect them as fellow human beings, live in peace and work together for the common good. The second challenge is to "show and tell" the gospel by word and deed, with prayer that those who now serve idols will turn to the true God and the one Mediator, Jesus Christ. The third challenge is to recognize the insidious nature of religious syncretism and resist societal pressures to compromise with it.

### *Learning from other Christians*

I write this piece for the *Forum* from New Haven, Connecticut, where my wife and I are living in a community of thirty Christian leaders drawn from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Last evening, I discussed the subject of religious pluralism with some of them. They emphasized three things. First, religious diversity is nothing new to them; they have lived with it for centuries, and American Christians could benefit from lessons they learned the hard way. Second, Christians proclaim or deny the gospel both by words and

actions, and when church leaders line up with representatives of non-Christian religions for joint prayer and worship they send an altogether wrong message. Third, the teaching of Scripture, Old Testament and New, is plain and consistent: theological pluralism has deadly consequences for God's people.

### *This isn't a "fad"*

This subject should not be dismissed as a passing fad. Religious pluralism is shaping up as the number one challenge to biblical Christianity in the 21st century. The issues it raises strike at the heart of our faith and mission — Who is God? Who is Christ? How are we to pray to God? What separates true religion from idolatry? On what basis can sinners be reconciled to God? What is our source of authority on religious and moral matters? What is our duty toward followers of other religions? The answers to these fundamental questions separate Christianity from all other religions.

I think again of the children in my catechism class years ago in Sri Lanka. I hear from some of them from time to time. They all married Christians, and as far as I know remain firm in the faith. But if somehow I had conveyed to them the ethos of pluralism, where might they be today? Pluralism is like cancer. It starts small, and it may spread slowly. But in the end it will kill you if not removed. Some people regard a pluralist approach as a gentler, friendlier kind of Christianity, but it ends up being a new religion. I'm glad I taught the children the difference.

# Reformed on Baptism — Without Apology

*by Henry De Moor*
Vice President for Academic Affairs and Professor of Church Polity

On paper, the Christian Reformed Church's stance on baptism is crystal clear. Baptism is one of only two sacraments. It is a "divine pledge and sign" of a faithful covenant-keeping God that assures us all of Christ's completed sacrifice for us and the Spirit's washing away of our sin (Q&A 73, Heidelberg Catechism). There is no magic, no automatism. Instead, the water is a sign and seal of a spiritual reality that Christ's church embraces by faith. Thus, we baptize only in official worship services. We baptize infants of believing parents and do not accept dedication as a substitute for it. We baptize converts not previously baptized. We accept the baptism of anyone who comes from another Christian denomination if that baptism has been administered in the name of the triune God by someone authorized to do so. We oppose re-baptism of any kind, whether by reason of the so-called "second blessing of the Holy Spirit" or the experience of a prior baptism now considered less than meaningful to the recipient. And we do these things in the conviction that this is God's will for us in Scripture. That's what is on paper.

But then there's the practice, actual life situations, what happens out there in the real world. A hospital chaplain visits the maternity ward and is asked to baptize a newborn not expected to live. A mother asks the elders not to push her into baptizing her firstborn because her husband is opposed to it and it would just cause too much tension in their marriage — "he has an evangelical background, you know!" She'd be grateful if they would allow her to dedicate her child. A recent immigrant from El Salvador thinks he was probably baptized as a child ("done by the priest") but craves re-baptism on the ground that, in his firm belief, the Roman Catholic Church is a false church. John, always a bit dour in his life of faith, recently went to an inspirational gathering at the Assembly of God congregation and returned triumphantly with the announcement a) that he was re-baptized and b) now prays for a similar outpouring of the Spirit for his (just as dour) Calvinist brothers and sisters. And then there's the newly organized congregation having trouble nominating people for leadership positions. "Bill has so many good gifts for eldership; it's just that he doesn't like our insistence on infant baptism; and we know what the Church Order says, but do we err grievously in nominating him?"

Paper and practice, our creedal stance and pressures on it from the midst of life, that's our predicament. It is that, of course, because Jesus' church on earth is not unified in these matters. It has a long history of doctrinal controversies never quite resolved: Tertullian vs. Bishop Stephen of Rome on "heretical baptism" by the Novatians, Constantine vs. the Donatists, the "anabaptist" Hubmaier vs. Zwingli and the elders of Zurich, the Arminians vs. the Calvinists, the "neo-Pentecostals" vs. the mainline denominations, and that's just to mention only a few.

I met it head-on in my first parish setting. A family of four remained members of our church even though they lived forty miles away and worshipped with their local Baptist congregation. Ardent Calvinists that they were, they refused to be re-baptized. Thus, formally, they were not welcome in that Baptist congregation as full members. Informally, they were embraced with open arms for their enthusiastic participation in congregational life. It still baffles me when I think of it. But then again, would we allow ardent "Anabaptists" to become full members in our church? I remember, in that same parish setting, pointing a newly converted couple in the direction of the evangelical church down the street — exasperated that after fifteen lessons on the unity of Old and New Covenant

**Baptism** they still wouldn't buy baptizing children. I expressed the certainty they'd be happier there, but now I wonder, was that the right thing to do?

These days we have a tendency to believe that all this doctrinal controversy is just plain objectionable and that, frankly, we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. Maybe so. That would be the impulse of unity in Christ. On the other hand, the pilgrims who went before us did not dabble in these disputes just to be difficult. They fought for precious values that they considered inherent in Christian faith and practice. That would be the impulse of biblical truth. Evangelicals don't want anything to do with "automatic salvation" dispensed in cathedrals. That would overshadow the need to make choices for Christ, a repeated act called for in the Bible. Charismatics scream for Spirit-led spontaneity instead of the formal rituals of the Anglican Church — to do otherwise is to drown power from above in a sea of sobriety. Presbyterians shudder at re-baptism and ask with apparent incredulity: "Didn't God really mean it the first time?"

It is helpful to remind ourselves that ecumenicity does not require us to sacrifice what we believe to be the clear teaching of Scripture. It does require us to be respectful, and so we have learned to remove references to "denouncing Anabaptists and other anarchists" from our creed. It requires us to be honest about what others believe and not misrepresent them in our zeal, and so we re-examine our creed's confident statement that Roman Catholics deny the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross and engage in "condemnable idolatry." It is even possible to assert with some legitimacy that the Reformed and the evangelical world have far too long been talking past each other. For the sake of unity, talking past each other must disappear. But for all the insensitive rhetoric of the past, why should there be any shame in holding to that which we value and cannot in good conscience revoke?

We are sensitive to requests for baptism of a newborn not expected to live, but we hold to baptism as a sacrament of the congregation. The event is special, not just for the person baptized and for Grandpa who came all the way from Colorado to be present, but for every single worshipper in the pews. Baptism is not a family event. It is a family of God event. The sign and seal of water confirms the Gospel message (Word and Sacrament together) and reminds us all of the root of our salvation: not that we chose him, but that he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. It also signifies that the person baptized is now a full member of the body of Christ. As for the newborn not expected to live, a chaplain

*Baptism is not a family event. It is a family of God event.*

I spoke with feels so strongly about baptism being a congregational sacrament that he cannot in good conscience perform such a ceremony. He offers an alternative ceremony with appropriate lament, prayer, and Gospel hope. If the parents insist on a baptism, they are informed that he would be happy to arrange for another chaplain willing to come and do that on short notice.

We are sensitive to those who ask for dedication instead of infant baptism. We understand where they are coming from. We do, however, ask in all seriousness whether they would not be greatly comforted by water that speaks of God's faithfulness and promises rather than resting in only half — the lesser half — that speaks of our believing approach to God. Openness towards dedication ceremonies sounds like a reasonable accommodation to the more evangelically minded, but it does rob the church of an opportunity to experience the mysteries of God's sovereign grace.

We are sensitive to brothers and sisters who have experienced what they felt was only a "routine baptism" performed by a priest in the Roman Catholic church. We have some empathy (though we're certain we cannot have it in full measure) for those whose people and communities and countries have gone through horrible things done to them with so-called "missionary fervor" but clearly for the self-interest of the church alone. Even so, our Church Order is remarkably ecumenical when it states that we accept baptism done in other Christian denominations. It does so for good historical and theological reasons. In my own pastorate, I once designed a litany of praise for a person "routinely baptized" — a kind of confirmation of baptism — and had that person give an impromptu expression of wonder at the fact that God was true to his promises in a baptism that had no meaning for him and, indeed, was clearly done under false pretenses. I remember the congregation rejoicing: "Great is Your Faithfulness." Not once did I hear regret that re-baptism had not been permitted.

The truth is that baptism is an initiatory sacrament. As such it is deeply meaningful in and of itself, regardless of how we feel at the time. A neighbor's daughter-in-law once confided in me why she had not visited a church building in five years. The pastor of her independent evangelical congregation had gone on sabbatical and studied the topic of baptism. When he returned, he informed the members that they needed to be re-baptized — not into the name of the triune God — but into the "real name" of Jesus: "Yashua." They all succumbed. Four years later came yet another sabbatical. This time, the laborious research led the pastor into an absolute conviction that Jesus' "real name" was not "Yashua" but "Yosha" and that, once again, his flock needed to be re-baptized. Half of them wrote letters of resignation. They complained bitterly: the pastor had just managed to rob them of any assurance of their salvation. This is re-baptism drawn to its logical extreme. As for those on a new "spiritual high" wishing to celebrate that experience in the community — there are countless ways to do it meaningfully yet short of a sacrament.

The plea, simply put, is that with our carefully crafted theology of baptism we take our legitimate place among other Christian baptismal traditions without apology.

# CRC Dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church

## A New Ecumenical Venture

*by Lyle D. Bierma*
Professor of Systematic Theology

In 1989 Fuller Seminary President Richard Mouw published an article in *The Banner* on the condemnation of the Roman Catholic Mass in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 80 (hereafter, "HC 80.") There Mouw recounted a conversation he once had with a Catholic friend who knew something about the Christian Reformed Church and was shocked to learn that our denomination had never renounced or modified the conclusion in HC 80 that the Mass was "basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable [or accursed] idolatry."

When Mouw informed his friend that all efforts to bring about such a change had proven unsuccessful, the Catholic asked, "Well, have you ever talked to us about this? I mean, has your church ever asked some of our theologians to sit down with some of yours and find out what we actually think about this subject?" When Mouw admitted that we had not, his friend replied, "Well, if you honestly think that we are accursed idolaters, then you have every right to say so. But if you are going to be on record as saying that sort of thing about us, then I think you owe it to us to engage in some dialogue — just to be sure that you are not bearing false witness against us."

Ten years later Mouw's friend finally got his wish. An overture to remove HC 80 from the Heidelberg Catechism led to a mandate from Synod 1998 to clarify the official Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass, and during the next three years a committee of five persons — General Secretary David Engelhard and Professors George Vandervelde, Henry DeMoor, Ronald Feenstra, and Lyle Bierma — met twice with teams of Catholic theologians from the U.S. and Canada.

Throughout the dialogue, the Roman Catholic representatives insisted that HC 80 does not accurately portray the doctrine of the Mass. They pointed out, for example, that the claim that Christ must be offered up daily for the forgiveness of sins and that "thus the Mass is nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ" contradicts all official Roman Catholic teaching. The Eucharist is not a re-sacrifice of Christ but a re-presentation or making present to us again of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The Catholic theologians did affirm that HC 80 is essentially correct in the way it describes their doctrine of Christ's bodily presence in the form of consecrated bread and wine. But because this doctrine is based on the words of Christ himself ("This is my body") and because Catholics worship Christ alone and not material elements at the Eucharist, it is hardly appropriate, they concluded, to describe the Mass as a "condemnable idolatry."

The committee's report on their findings was adopted by Synod 2002 and was subsequently endorsed as an accurate presentation of official Roman Catholic teaching by the conferences of Catholic bishops in the U.S. and Canada and by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in the Vatican. Synod 2002 also asked that advice be given a future synod about any further action that might be needed regarding HC 80. The committee is currently working on that new mandate and should have a recommendation ready for Synod 2004.

> *Now for the first time in her history the CRC will be in simultaneous dialogue with all three of these churches from whom she separated.*

As a result of this dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, Synod 2003 accepted an invitation extended to the CRC in 2002 to join the next round of a U.S. Catholic-Reformed ecumenical dialogue that has been underway since the 1960s. This latest round, which began in September 2003 and is projected to last for several years, will center on the topic of the sacraments.

### *Significance*

These new ecumenical opportunities are significant for the CRC in several ways. First, the recent dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church represent an important moment in CRC history. The CRC is the product of three ecclesiastical divisions during the last five hundred years: separation from the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands during the Reformation, secession from the state-supported Netherlands Reformed Church (NHK) in 1834, and secession from the Reformed Church in America in 1857. Now for the first time in her history the CRC will be in simultaneous dialogue

**Dialogue** with all three of these churches from whom she separated. In addition to talks with the Catholics, the CRC and Reformed Church in America have intensified ecumenical discussions in response to mandates from both their synods in 2002. And the CRC will soon be discussing its ecumenical relationship with the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, formed in late 2003 from the union of the GKN (with whom the CRC has long had ties), the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the old NHK.

Even more significant, however, is that these dialogues with the Catholics represent part of a larger shift taking place in CRC ecumenical relations. For one thing, over the last several years a number of denominations with whom we had been in ecclesiastical fellowship have broken ties with us, in large part because of the CRC's qualified decision in 1995 to open the offices of minister and elder to women: the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, Korean-American Presbyterian Church, Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Presbyterian Church in America, Reformed Churches of New Zealand, and Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. In 2002 the CRC was also formally expelled from the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC), an ecumenical organization she had helped to found in 1975.

Moreover, in 2000 the CRC adopted a new version of its ecumenical charter, which not only retained the familiar classifications of (Reformed) churches in ecclesiastical and corresponding fellowship but also introduced a category called "Churches in Dialogue." With the establishment of this new category, the CRC was seeking to "maintain and promote an interest in the worldwide church through study and contact with other denominations as opportunity and prudence make possible."

Finally, the synod of 2002 authorized the CRC to apply for membership in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), an ecumenical body of over 200 Reformed, Presbyterian, and Congregational denominations from over 100 countries. The CRC was officially received into membership in WARC later that same year.

This recent breakdown of older ecumenical ties, adoption of a charter with new provisions for dialogue, and entry into WARC have provided some of the context for the HC 80 discussions and for synod's acceptance of the invitation to join the Catholic-Reformed dialogue. The CRC's willingness finally to reexamine HC 80 and to dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church can be explained in part by these other changes in its ecumenical posture.

### *Benefits*

These dialogues with the Catholic Church are not only significant but also beneficial for the CRC. For me personally, it has been a highly rewarding experience to spend several days at a time getting to know fellow Christians with whom we have long had serious disagreements, eating together, worshipping together, and conversing about weighty theological matters in an atmosphere of mutual love and respect. Our Catholic conversation partners have appreciated our efforts to understand their teaching, our loyalty to a doctrinal tradition, our careful use of words, and even parts of our confessional texts. One Catholic bishop was so impressed with the Heidelberg Catechism's treatment of the Lord's Prayer that he indicated that, HC 80 notwithstanding, he intended to use that section of the confession in his own church.

> *The recent HC 80 dialogue has been good for our spiritual health by teaching us a lesson in denominational humility.*

But these contacts have also benefited the CRC as a denomination. The recent HC 80 dialogue has been good for our spiritual health by teaching us a lesson in denominational humility. The CRC has had to swallow some ecclesiastical pride by finally calling for a conversation with the Roman Catholic Church, by learning to read HC 80 through the eyes of its Catholic dialogue partners, and by admitting that the results of the dialogue raise serious concerns about the present form of the text. The project has also enabled us to live more consistently by the ninth commandment, which, according to the HC's own interpretation (Q&A 112), means that we should "never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, . . . nor join in condemning anyone without a hearing or without a just cause."

The HC 80 dialogue has also forced us to face again some of the difficulties involved in subscribing to confessions that are hundreds of years old. In the case of HC 80, we have wrestled many hours with questions about the meaning of the text, about the historical context out of which it arose, and about the proper course of action to follow when a confessional text appears to be inaccurate. If nothing else, we have been learning what it means to be a denomination that takes seriously both truth and unity — both its confessional heritage and its ecumenical responsibilities.

Finally, the latest round of Catholic-Reformed dialogue on the sacraments might also have some practical benefits for the CRC. The previous round of discussion dealt with Reformed-Catholic intermarriage and resulted in a book designed for ministers and priests to use with parishioners about to enter such a marriage (*Interchurch Families: Resources for Ecumenical Hope*, Westminster John Knox, 2002). That is an issue that CRC pastors frequently confront. Where might this next round of discussion lead? To certificates of baptism that officially recognize a common baptism in both traditions? To some movement toward participation in each other's celebration of the Eucharist?

Whatever happens, the CRC will have considerably broadened its ecumenical consciousness and taken a significant step forward in her efforts to contribute to the visible unity of Christ's church.

# Grace and Truth

John 1:17b **"Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."**

*By Dean Deppe*
Professor of New Testament

Isolationism is over. Not only has the world shrunk through global transportation systems and the influence of the media, but this "post-Christian era" has driven Christians closer together. We cannot live without each other. Therefore, I always find Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:4 convicting, "For when one says, 'I follow Paul' and another 'I follow Apollos,' are you not merely human?" In this age the church must be more than "merely human." We must answer the prayer of Jesus in John 17:23 and endeavor with all our heart and soul and strength "to be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." When we parade our Protestantism or our Reformed heritage in a prideful manner that puts down other traditions, we have become a stumbling-block to Jesus' prayer being answered. Paul's sarcastic words in 1 Corinthians 4:8 are meant for us: "Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you!"

But what will an answer to Jesus' prayer look like? My image of the united church is based on the social makeup of ancient Israel — twelve tribes, each with its own character and influence, but only together making up the true Israel. Organizational unity may never happen, but we must always keep an alert eye to the wellbeing of the other tribes. There will always be differences of doctrine and practice among us as Paul explains, "indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine" (1 Corinthians 11:19). But amidst this "truth," we are called to be gracious to one another, "to maintain the unity of the body in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3), "so that with one heart and one mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:6).

I appreciate the logo of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Diversity in unity. Unity without uniformity. Unity only as a gift of God. These standard slogans certainly hit the nail on the head. Christ does not have 33,820 wives (the number of Christian denominations in 2000), but only one.

Yet in our sincere search to discover common ground among Christians, some things cannot be compromised. There are non-negotiables. I think of Acts 4:12 above all, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved." We live in a culture of compromise, in a society that increasingly demands that we not say anything negative about another group. Professors who write a critical evaluation of a student or employers who offer an honest appraisal of an employee's weaknesses in a job referral have been taken to court. Professor Robert Thornton of Lehigh University encourages people in authority to speak in generalities that appear as double-talk. To describe a candidate who is so unproductive that the position would be better left unfilled, say, "I can assure you that no person would be better for the job." To describe a person who is not worth further consideration, write, "I would urge you to waste no time in making this candidate an offer of employment." Instead of continuing this trend, I would encourage us to "speak the truth in love."

In our compressed world since 9/11, Islam and Christianity certainly can no longer ignore each other. But our culture is promoting a subtle message about how to live together: "Set aside your differences. Truth is bigger than the both of you. Worship together, pray together, agree together. You all serve the same God." The newspaper quip in the religion section, "Worship at the church of your choice" is fast becoming "Worship with the religion of your choice." I saw a bumper sticker the other day that read, "God is bigger than only one religion."

We are speedily running in that direction as a culture. Tolerance is being redefined before our eyes. Instead of meaning respect for another's beliefs, now tolerance means considering another's convictions and lifestyle decisions of equal value to mine. One moral or religious proposition is as good as any other if it is held sincerely and does not deny the validity of its opposite. But if this view reigns, there is no foundation for determining right or wrong outside a person's own subjective stance. A. W. Tozer insists that we are operating with a new beatitude: "Blessed are they that tolerate everything, for they shall not be made accountable for anything."

But grace and truth cannot be separated. That is foundational to any constructive dialogue. Instead of the term "tolerance," I prefer an expression Richard Hays uses to describe a Christian's attitude toward other religions: "respectful controversy." Mere tolerance can privatize convictions and eliminate courage. The popular concept of unity is a fantasyland where disagreements never surface and contrary opinions are never stated with force. Respectful controversy, on the other hand, refuses to surrender fundamental beliefs, but at the same time goes the extra mile to understand the convictions of others without downgrading their dignity.

# Ministry at the Boundaries

## An Interview with Chaplain Carl Kammeraad

*Christian Reformed military chaplains serve a broad constituency from varied religious and denominational backgrounds. Rev. Carl Kammeraad, Pastor of Congregational Life and Outreach at Seymour Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, also serves as a colonel in the United States Air Force Reserve.* Forum *Editor Lugene Schemper interviewed him recently about his experiences as a military chaplain.*

**Lugene Schemper** How did you get started as a military chaplain?

**Carl Kammeraad** When I was serving a New Jersey inner-city church, the Air Force, Navy, and Marines were recruiting a lot of our kids right out of high school and I was interested in following them and serving as their pastor. So I talked with some Air Force chaplains, spoke with my church council about it, and with their support and encouragement, applied to the chaplaincy. Part of the attraction was to follow our young people and say to them "Someone in this congregation understands what you're up against, and we want you to know that we're with you and God is with you."

**LS** How long ago was that?

**CK** Twenty-two years ago. Over the years I've worked for many active duty chaplains, and currently am the reserve counterpart to the Air Force Special Operations Command Chaplain. This past spring I served ninety days in Germany at Ramstein Air Force Base during the invasion of Iraq. Ramstein is the gateway to the Middle East and North Africa for the Air Force, so it's a busy place. As the highest ranking chaplain, I was director of a large staff of chaplains serving there.

**LS** In this issue of the *Forum*, we're highlighting some of the challenges we face in ministry with Christians from the broader Christian world. The military serves a broad religious constituency. What kinds of things have you experienced in your work?

**CK** I thoroughly enjoy working with Christians from other denominations, both chaplains and those we serve in ministry. Some of my richest spiritual experiences have been in working with other chaplains from Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church. You are faced with real world situations dealing with ecumenical and interfaith demands. A lot of the counseling that you do crosses faith boundaries, but there are limits to that ecumenical cooperation. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, sets strict parameters on who can join in celebrating the Eucharist. As a chaplain, I may be open to a truly ecumenical worship service, but I must respect the boundaries that others have, just as they respect my boundaries.

**LS** Are there conflicts between your denominational affiliation and commitments and your broader commitment to minister to everyone you meet?

**CK** Chaplains are dually endorsed when they serve by the Armed Forces Chaplains Board and by their own denomination. We are not required to do anything that would compromise who we are denominationally. And we consult with others, both Christian Reformed chaplains as well as other Protestant chaplains, as we make decisions about these things.

> *As a chaplain, I may be open to a truly ecumenical worship service, but I must respect the boundaries that others have, just as they respect my boundaries.*

For example, in the Reformed tradition we typically do not administer the sacrament of baptism outside the context of the organized church. This past spring at Ramstein I baptized the infant of a man stationed there. He said, "My wife and I have been going back and forth about Tyler's baptism. Now he's eighteen months old. We'd like to have him baptized. Will you do it at a friend's house in the back yard?" I talked it over with an active duty chaplain colleague from the Presbyterian Church of America. He said to me, "In the military you really don't have a congregation. You attend worship, but that worshipping congregation is constantly changing. I treat something like this as a field baptism." The man's spiritual support was a small group of six, which met weekly for Bible study and prayer. He invited the five other group members and their spouses and children over for that gathering in the back yard. And I baptized Tyler. What a thrill to explain the theology of baptism again — how Tyler will grow up with this sign and seal of God's love! Some volunteers from Seymour Church made a baptism banner for Tyler which I presented to his family.

When I debriefed three chaplains coming back from Iraq, I heard similar stories. There is a sense of reckoning as soon as a military person steps off an aircraft onto the ground in a battle area. She may realize "This could be it! I could meet my Maker. Three years ago I thought about becoming baptized and declaring my trust in Jesus as Savior, and I put it off. But I don't think I ought to put it off right now." In that situation, a chaplain

doesn't have the time or inclination to question people's motives. You ask what they believe, and help them understand the theological reasons for their baptism.

**LS** How has your work as Air Force chaplain helped you in your ministry in the local church?

**CK** Each time I serve, I come back seeing the church more globally — called by God from every tribe, language, people, and nation, as in Revelation 5. I bring those global concerns into our worship and service here as a local congregation. It's expanded my horizons as a pastor way beyond my local congregation, and helped me to put flesh and blood on Jesus' prayer in John 17 for the unity of all believers.

# East, West, North, and South Meet at CTS

*by Richard E. Sytsma*
Dean of Students and International Student Advisor

Recently a visitor remarked, "What a peaceful place Calvin Seminary is!" He was right. Nestled among the trees by the pond, CTS breathes tranquility. But the serenity of CTS is not the quietness of a cloister isolated from the rest of the world. In fact, if peace is defined as freedom from the fray of colliding world cultures, CTS does not fit the definition. CTS, whose students represent 18 countries, is a place where cultures of east, west, north and south meet, mingle and sometimes collide.

This year we have thirty new international students — bringing the total to seventy-two, not including our thirty-seven Canadian students. The influx from Korea has been dramatic — now up to forty-four — including eight named Kim, six named Park, and five named Lee. The three-week international student orientation in August was a delightful bonding experience for incoming international students.

International students enrich our classroom discussions and stimulate us with thought-provoking questions. The Korean practice of gathering daily for early morning prayer has proven contagious. This year North American students have followed their example and have been doing likewise in English. As Indonesians and Nigerians recount personal experiences with demonic powers and witchcraft, we read scriptural teaching concerning spiritual warfare with new eyes. The communal emphases of Asian and African cultures challenge our North American individualistic approach to life. This happens, for example, when Koreans and Americans eat together at noon. Koreans, who shove their lunches to the middle of the table so that everyone can share, have actually managed to pry a few of us from our individualistic practice of each eating our own lunch.

CTS actively encourages interaction across cultural lines. The involvement of international students in potluck dinners, luncheons featuring international discussion, Bible studies for seminarians' spouses, chapel services and town hall meetings helps us overcome our cultural insularity. With three Koreans on the Student Senate, including two officers, the student government is working hard to address the unique needs of international students. Through local churches and the Calvin College Alumni Association Heritage Chapter we link international students with host families. International students with good English speaking skills often preach in local churches and speak at mission emphasis events.

This year CTS has initiated two new programs to further facilitate cross-cultural interaction. A peer-mentor program pairs up international students with North American student mentors. The mentors befriend their international partners and help them transition into American society. Mentoring is a great learning experience for the North Americans as well. They acquire cross-cultural communication skills, learn about their partners' cultures, and gain a deeper understanding of God's work around the world.

CTS has also started a proofreader program. A list of North American volunteer proofreaders from the student body and the wider seminary community has been compiled and sent to all international students. International students contact these volunteers for help in editing their papers. As North Americans and international students work together on these papers, friendships develop and cross-cultural understanding grows.

Perhaps at CTS we are experiencing a small foretaste of the rich cultural diversity that we will enjoy in heaven. Describing his eternal kingdom, Jesus prophesied, "People will come from the east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29).

***International students make up about 25 percent of Seminary students.***

# Marital Differences

*By Ronald Nydam*
Professor of Pastoral Care

Christian marriages between partners from different religious traditions are becoming more frequent in North America. Within the Christian community denominational boundaries are increasingly permeable. People from Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Pentecostal traditions marry sons and daughters from our Reformed background. And more and more frequently North American youth are raised without any history or education in the variety of traditions of Christianity. How can we help young marriages to flourish and thrive in this religiously diverse situation?

Religious differences, like many other differences in marriage, require the development and use of two relational skills that are absolutely vital to married life. A husband and wife must be able to negotiate conflict and they must also be able to live with differences. As many of us know from first-hand experience in marriage, the wondrous idyllic fantasies with which romance always begins usually change into more realistic assessments when a couple gets to the hard work of married life. The romantic idea that "when I am with this person all my problems go away," is one of the puzzling notions with which erotic love begins. But it proves to be a short-lived fantasy. The personality difficulties and unresolved conflicts that we bring to the altar of marriage inevitably resurface after the honeymoon. We learn that managing conflict is essential to staying together. Marital relationships are work. They do not survive for long without the steady commitment and effort needed to communicate well and to deal openly with conflicts that arise.

It is not surprising that Christian parents who are concerned for the wellbeing of their children's marriages encourage them to marry within the church of their childhoods. This will minimize the level of conflict. If future husbands and wives both grow up on pot roast and mashed potatoes, there may be less to argue about at the dinner table. Such a prescription for marital success, however, fails to emphasize the need to learn how to get along when marital mates see things differently. Parents of today's young couples need to realize the importance of teaching young people how to resolve differences or learn to live with them in honesty and grace.

Those who are confronted with the reality of an inter-denominational marriage may face conflict over often-debated subjects such as infant baptism or infant dedication, Christian education or public education, and views of the sacraments (Are there two or seven?) Newly born babies await their parent's answers. So how might the church best proceed? What role might pastors best play to assist in the health of these new marriages? What spiritual wisdom might the local elder offer?

For starters, we should not assume that marriages of Christians from different church backgrounds are necessarily more problematic. While differences in religious backgrounds can bring additional stress and conflict to a marriage, they can also enrich the spiritual life of a marriage. Many young adults who marry Christians from other traditions are forced for the first time to identify and express to the one they are marrying exactly what they believe and why. How many pastors haven't heard this statement from a young adult member of their church who went all the way through church school and catechism, "Pastor, I know I should be more able to explain to (Jack) why we believe (in infant baptism). Can you explain that to me (again)?" This is one of those great educable moments, and young couples who must engage in such rich spiritual dialogue are often the stronger for it.

*While differences in religious backgrounds can bring additional stress and conflict to a marriage, they can also enrich the spiritual life of a marriage.*

Church leaders who want to minister effectively to inter-denominational marriages should teach engaged couples the skills of conflict management as well as the grace of accepting differences of opinion about faith matters. The modeling they do in negotiating differences with others and learning to live with disagreements is their first line of defense in protecting marriages from dissolution. In premarital education and conversation, pastors need to ask how a couple deals with disagreement. Encouraging openness in communication at both mind and heart levels is critical to giving newlyweds a good start. But pastors must go beyond discussing the basic beliefs of the Christian faith which are important for a Christian marriage. There should also be deep dialogue between potential partners about faith in God and how that is lived out personally in marriage. There will be new pressures to live without "getting one's way" in all matters of faith and life.

The differences which partners bring to marriage set the stage for lively discussion about the meaning of one's faith and the nature of our God. Couples who engage these differences and who clarify their Christian beliefs may enjoy vibrant relationships that stimulate their thinking and deepen their Christian faith. But couples who withdraw from differences and retreat from conflict may face greater marital stress as the years go by. Marriage is, among many things, the promise to get along when we don't get along. The Christian community honors the holiness of matrimony best when it demonstrates to its young people that it can see beyond marital differences with an eye towards the Lord who calls us to work them out.

## Conferences Bring Speakers from Near and Far

Continuing Education events in the fall of 2003 brought people together from across the continent and around the world, including three major conferences sponsored by CTS and held on the Calvin campus in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

On October 2-3 the Missions Institute of CTS sponsored a conference on "The Theology and Practice of Evangelism in Today's World" at Calvin College's Prince Conference Center. The theology of evangelism was addressed by plenary speakers Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. and Pieter Tuit from CTS and Paul Visser from the Netherlands. The practices of evangelism were addressed in workshops on personal witnessing (Charles Uken of New Era, Michigan), Latin American urban church growth (Ricardo Agresta da Silva of Brazil), North American church planting (Juluis Medenblik of New Lenox, Illinois), pastoral care (Professor Ronald Nydam), and worship (Professor John Witvliet).


Professor Pieter Tuit

On October 16 the Fall Preaching Conference featured Dr. Howard Edington, a well-known preacher and pastor of several Presbyterian churches in the southern United States. Dr. Edington reflected on the preacher's call with the theme "Take This Job and Love It!" and described what he has learned about the preacher's craft "1400 Sermons Later." The 150 pastors and seminarians who attended received insight and encouragement, as well as the modeling of a powerful evangelical preacher. These sessions, and many other presentations given at CTS are available for listening in the Lecture Archive at www.calvinseminary.edu, or tapes can be ordered by emailing semit@calvinseminary.edu.


Dr. Howard Edington

On October 30 – November 1 CTS joined Calvin College's Seminars in Christian Scholarship office and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship in cosponsoring a conference on "Christianity, Cultures, and Worship Worldwide." This event brought some marvelous presenters from around the world, including James Ault, Samuel Escobar, Charles Farhadian, Michael Hawn, Seung Joong Joo, Thomas Kane, Miguel Palomino, Robert Priest, Dana Robert, Lamin Sanneh, Bryan Spinks, Andrew Walls, and Philip Wickeri. A highlight was a pre-conference meeting of a group of seminarians with Michael Hawn of the Perkins School of Theology and Philip Wickeri of the San Francisco Theological Seminary to discuss Hawn's book *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship* (Alban Institute, 2003) and Wickeri's research on worship in the Mar Thoma Church of India.

**Seminarians meet with Philip Wickeri and Michael Hawn.**

## New Korean CRC Hosts Leadership Conference

Building on the foundations laid at last year's conference in Orange County, California, CTS again cosponsored a leadership conference with Christian Reformed Home Missions through the CRC Ministry Center and Rev. Tong Park. This conference was funded in part by a grant from the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program and represented a wonderful collaboration between the agencies of the Christian Reformed Church. All Nations Church, the largest Korean congregation in the Los Angeles area and a new member of the CRC, hosted the conference on October 24 and 25. Entitled "The Church: A CRC Leadership Conference," it explored issues of leadership in the church from biblical and theological foundations to practical ministry issues such as preaching and worship, church order, congregational leadership, and conflict management. Many of the 90 persons who attended were from Korean churches, but others came representing Hispanic, Chinese, Filipino and Anglo churches. Plenary sessions were translated into English, Korean, and Spanish.


Plenary session



Rev. Christian Oh and Rev. Howard Vanderwell


Professor Mariano Avila


The Worship Team


The hospitality of All Nations Church

The presenters represented a mixture of pastors, professors and denominational leaders, including host pastor Rev. Jin So Yoo, Rev. Christian Oh of Rochester Hills, Michigan, Professor Jung Suk Rhee of Fuller Theological Seminary and Professors Mariano Avila, Henry De Moor and Pieter Tuit of Calvin Theological Seminary, Robert DeMoor, of *The Banner* and Faith Alive Publications, Duane Visser of Pastor-Church Relations, and Kathy Smith and Howard Vanderwell of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and CTS.

In addition to great learning and profitable discussion sessions, conferees enjoyed wonderful food and hospitality at the All Nations Church, coordinated by Helen Lim, who also directed the conference worship teams, assisted by CTS student James Kim. The church is in the process of building new facilities in Lake View Terrace for the 2000 people who attend 5 services in Korean or Spanish on Sunday mornings. It was an exciting place to hold a leadership conference — in the midst of the obvious growth of Christ's church!

## Moving From Division to Unity: Prayers for North and South Korea

When the Chapel Planning Committee chose an overarching theme for CTS morning worship services this fall — the "Journey from Death to Life" that all Christians are on — they found many ways of describing that journey: from Brokenness to Wholeness, Foolishness to Wisdom, Lament to Joy, Violence to Peace, Injustice to Justice, Division to Unity, Fear to Faith, Bondage to Freedom, Mourning to Dancing, Pride to Humility, Impurity to Purity, Emptiness to Fullness.

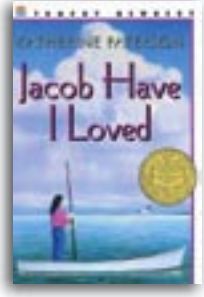
On October 29, 2003, the Korean students of CTS led a service of "Prayers for North and South Korea to Move from Division to Unity." This moving service of lament and hope included readings from Ezekiel 37, Korean songs sung by a Korean student choir, and background slides of the suffering in Korea. The liturgy culminated in a concert of prayer for unity and peace in the typically Korean fashion of a congregation praying aloud altogether. "As the Waters Cover the Sea," a song by Hyoung-Won Ko, was sung in Korean and in English:

"Our Lord who never rests until the day all the nations are saved,
Grant us your heart so that we can rise and follow you everywhere.
Our Lord who calls us out from the world to show His glory for all to see,
Make us your hands and feet so that we can heal the world and serve you faithfully.
As the waters cover the sea, may the recognition of Yahweh's glory fill the entire world;
As the waters cover the sea, we will see on that day His glory filling the whole world;
We will hear on that day the whole world exploding with a shout!"

Korean students lead a chapel service for Korean unity.

## Book of the Quarter Program Explores New Literary Genres

In the Spring 2003 issue of the *Forum*, President Plantinga wrote that "good preaching needs good reading to nourish it, and the best preachers read a great deal more than Scripture and commentaries. They read fiction, and biography, and essays. They also read great children's literature for its noble 'simplicity.'" For that reason the Book of the Quarter program took the unique approach of focusing on children's literature in the Fall of 2003. Plantinga chose two books by master storyteller Katherine Paterson, *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved*, which were read and discussed by students, staff, and faculty as well as several reading groups hosted by the seminary.

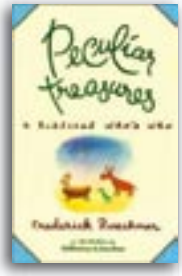




Gary Schmidt, Professor of English at Calvin College and national expert on children's literature, gave a fascinating overview on October 9. Those who attended came away with a new appreciation for this genre and how it can help each of us think creatively.

Gary Schmidt leads a discussion of children's literature.

The Winter 2004 Book of the Quarter explores another genre of literature and brings an international emphasis to our reading. Recommended by Professor Mariano Avila, the CTS community is reading and discussing *The Short Sweet Dream of Eduardo Gutierrez* by Jimmy Breslin. Written by one of America's most respected journalists, it is an intriguing and heart-breaking account of the incredible struggles of a 21-year-old illegal immigrant from Mexico.


In the Spring Quarter we will read Frederick Buechner's *Peculiar Treasures*.



"At Calvin Theological Seminary my colleagues and I train the leaders of the church to receive the gospel like a child and to minister it like an adult. We want our students to open their hands and their hearts to the grace of Jesus Christ, and then to channel it to people who need it so much that without it they will die."

*— Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., President of Calvin Theological Seminary*

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