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FORUM

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COVER ESSAY

WALKING AWAY FROM FAITH

“I would have given my life for the faith,” recalls Rob, a former member of a Reformed Baptist Church who identified himself then as a “born again” Christian. “Fifteen years ago, I couldn’t have imagined in my wildest dreams that I could be sitting here tonight telling you I am an atheist.” But that is what he was doing. Rob’s story is only one of many that I have listened to or read about since I have been researching for my book *Walking Away from Faith: Unraveling the Mystery of Belief and Unbelief*.

The phenomenon of professing Christians walking away from faith is not new. We see it in biblical times and throughout Christian histo-

ry to the present day. **Christianity, more than any other religion, is vulnerable to attacks on its veracity because it is a historic faith that relies on the credibility of its Scripture and theological foundations.** Christian beliefs are not merely myths or moral stories. The truth claims are based on historical events. The very nature of

“ Authentic Christian community has room for the one struggling with doubt and unbelief ”

Christianity, therefore, makes it a target for those who would seek to use its own standard of truth to repudiate its truthfulness.

Christians have responded in two very opposite ways. Many have been so troubled by their inability to prove the veracity of the biblical narratives that they have lowered the truth claims and presented them as stories that offer moral values—a collection of Sunday school tales from childhood. Marcus Borg of Jesus Seminar fame and the author of *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, testifies that he reclaimed his faith essentially by this means.

The opposite response has been that of facing the attackers head on



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and proving the truth of Christianity—and if not proving at least seeking to show that the claims of Christianity are the most reasonable of any belief system. **In recent decades popular apologetics has become a bit of an Evangelical industry, with books, articles, videos, seminars, and debates that seek to challenge con-**

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TUCKER

temporary unbelief on its own terms. To the one who is overwhelmed by philosophical arguments and scientific evidence against biblical accounts of the supernatural, philosophy and science are employed as a response.

Rob initially sought to answer his doubts with the standard proofs of apologetics and then gradually moved away from Fundamentalism to progressively more liberal versions of Christianity. But he soon began to question the value of a watered down religion stripped of its essential tenets, and the final—and logical—step for him was to abandon Christianity altogether.

Is there another way to respond to people like Rob? Is it possible that he and others are walking away from faith for all the wrong reasons? I will suggest five factors we might consider as we respond to people besieged with doubt and unbelief—a response that does not imply that such individuals are insincere or that they are rebels seeking a way to sin with a clear conscience, with no concern for honesty.

1 The truth or falsehood of Christianity is not proven by rational arguments.

Most Reformed apologists would argue that the greatest value of apologetics is that of confirming the faith to believers. **So strong is our emphasis on God's role in our conversion that we place less weight on rational arguments in the conversion process than do most contemporary Evangelicals.** We should not dismiss altogether apologetics of the rationalistic variety, but we should utilize this discipline with caution. Why is it so hard to believe—or so

easy to doubt? In *When Faith is not Enough* Kelly Clark writes: “Many preachers proclaim with so much verbosity that Christian beliefs are easily attained and maintained. To those flagging in belief they simply reassert these troublesome beliefs, only louder. . . . They do not understand how anyone could refuse what seems to them so obvious. They are eager to deny what neither Jesus’ followers nor Jesus himself denied: ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’ (John 6:60)” (16).

2 The element of mystery in faith should be celebrated, not avoided.

I have personally found J.H. Bavinck helpful on the matter of mystery. In *Faith and Its Difficulties*, he includes a chapter that is entitled “The Unknown God.” Unlike so many missionaries who speak

little to do with. It is to try to put the gospel into words not the way you would compose an essay but the way you would write a poem or a love letter” (61).

3 Doubt and unbelief are natural components of faith.

“Lord I Believe; help, thou, my unbelief.” These are the familiar words from Mark 9:24, spoken by a man who had brought his son to Jesus, asking for him to be healed from epileptic seizures. Jesus told the man that all things are possible—if he believed. The man could have simply responded with a declaration of belief, but he knew his own heart all too well. Jesus rewarded him, despite his confession of unbelief. He healed his son.

Flannery O’Conner addressed the matter of unbelief in a letter to a college student: “I think that this experi-

ence you are having of losing your faith, or as you think, of having lost it, is an experience that in the long run belongs to faith” (*The Habit of Being*, 476).

ence you are having of losing your faith, or as you think, of having lost it, is an experience that in the long run belongs to faith” (*The Habit of Being*, 476).

5 Faith is a collective endeavor that involves community, tradition, and service.

Authentic Christian community has room for the one struggling with doubt and unbelief. It is a community that is secure in its tradition that above all includes the Scriptures (especially the Bible stories), but also the creeds, the confessions, and the songs of faith—**traditions that will be imbedded in the hearts and minds of children and stay with them through their adolescent and adult years. Many of those who return to faith tell of the significance of a particular hymn.**

The community and the individual Christian must also engage in service to maintain a vital life of faith. I conclude with words of the great Victorian preacher, F. W. Robertson: “But there are hours . . . [when] you doubt all—whether Christianity be true: whether Christ was a man or God or a beautiful fable. . . . In such an hour what remains? I reply, Obedience. Leave those thoughts for the present. . . . Force yourself to abound in little services; try to do good to others; be true to the duty that you know. That must be right, whatever else is uncertain” (Cited in Clark, 94-5). ■

“Many of those who return to faith tell of the significance of a particular hymn.”

of God with the confidence we associate with an evangelist, he speaks of being “constrained by fear and dread when we venture to talk about God, whose thoughts we cannot think after Him, and whose motives we cannot fathom or understand.” **No matter what language we use, we “come far short in doing justice to His greatness and holiness”** (9).

In *Telling Secrets*, Frederick Buechner, sums up what preaching ought to be:

“Basically, it is to proclaim a Mystery before which, before whom, even our most exalted ideas turn to straw. It is also to proclaim this Mystery with a passion that ideas alone have

4 Those mature in faith must be open about their own struggles with doubt.

I recently read *Letters to a Skeptic* by Greg Boyd, a professor at Bethel Seminary. He is writing to his father, an agnostic, who responds to the letters and comes to faith at the end of the book. Along with his rational argumentation, Boyd reveals in a letter the vulnerable side of his own faith, which may have been a turning point

Henry Zwaanstra, Editor

CALVIN SEMINARY: *Yesterday and Today.*



**HENRY
ZWAANSTRA**

Professor of Historical
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I began teaching at Calvin Seminary in the fall of 1963. After thirty-eight years, I am now retiring. Lugene Schemper, theological librarian at the Hekman Library, is replacing me as editor of FORUM. I wish him well.

During my teaching career at the seminary, I have had the privilege of working with two generations of faculty colleagues. Most of the first were my teachers; most of the second were my students. I have also taught many children of my former students. In some respects Calvin Seminary is the same today as it was when I began teaching; in others it has understandably changed.

Continuity

Calvin Seminary's fundamental stance and purpose is unchanged. It has been and remains the theological school of the Christian



Calvin Seminary Building, 1939



Calvin Seminary Building, 2001

Reformed Church (CRC). The theology taught at the seminary is church theology—theology of, by, and for the church. This theology has its source in Holy Scripture and it is confessionally Reformed. The professors articulate and defend the church's faith and do so in agreement with the Reformed confessional standards. My colleagues of the first generation taught their kind of theology loyally and well; those of the second teach it competently and with dedication. **The primary purpose of the seminary yesterday and today is also the same. It is to prepare well-educated ministers of the Word for the CRC.**

Changes

In 1963 Calvin Seminary had two programs and offered two degrees: a Bachelor of Divinity degree required of all candidates for the ministry in the CRC and a Master of Theology degree, a post-graduate program in theology. Today, the seminary offers a Master of Divinity degree (M.Div.) which is required of all candidates for the ministry in the CRC; two Master of Arts degrees, one in educational ministry and another in missions; a Master

of Theological Studies degree (a basic course in theology for those not preparing for the ministry); and two graduate studies programs, the Master of Theology and the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.). All of these programs are very good.

“ Calvin Seminary's fundamental stance and purpose is unchanged.”

The last to be put in place, the Ph.D., has become one of the brightest constellations in our theological heavens.

Thirty-eight years ago the seminary had twelve regular faculty members. They worked hard but, with the exception of Anthony Hoekema, they wrote few books while they were teaching. Today, the seminary faculty has a teaching staff of twenty. **A showcase in the seminary displaying books either written or edited by the present teaching staff contains an impressive fifty-nine publications.**

The course of studies leading to the ministry is not the same as it was earlier. The B.D. program allowed for only one free elective. The present M.Div. program allows the stu-

dents to choose approximately 20 percent of the courses required for the degree. To meet the needs of the church in a changing world, instruction in social ethics and more instruction in public worship and pastoral care have been added to the curriculum. In 1963 only two summers of field education were required for candidates for the ministry. Today, candidates are required to do an additional year-long internship. Consequently, **the seminary is now preparing better trained ministers for the church.**

The student body has a very different look from what it once

had. The enrollment for the 1962-1963 academic year was 121. The students were all males and almost all were white and Christian Reformed. This year the seminary enrolled 261 students. One hundred of them are from other denominations. Fifty-five of these are international students. They come from many parts of the world. There are now sixty-one women studying at Calvin Seminary.

Calvin Seminary continues to be a formative influence on the CRC. Its impact on the church worldwide has greatly increased and continues to increase. I thank God for having had the opportunity to serve his church and kingdom these past thirty-eight years at Calvin Theological Seminary. ■



JOHN COOPER

Professor of Philosophical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary

The Problem of Faith and Reason

When I was a boy, “prove it!” was a challenge that trumped a debate. I thought Mickey Mantle was the best centerfielder. My friend insisted on Willie Mays. I thought it was wrong to pray to Mary. He believed it was necessary. We went back and forth with baseball statistics or Scripture texts until one of us felt cornered. But instead of admitting defeat, he’d shout “prove

“ The Christian faith is reasonable, but it cannot be proven ”

it!” That would force the gloating aggressor to back off, because **proof is a tall order**. It means having so much evidence and such airtight arguments that no one in his right mind, not even a Giant-loving Roman Catholic, could deny the truth: Mantle, yes; Mary, no.

This boyhood memory

PROVE IT! A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE ON FAITH AND REASON

illustrates important dynamics of faith and reason in human life. **We humans all have deep-seated world-and-life-view beliefs.** Whether theists or atheists, Christians or non-Christians, **we all live by faith.** We hold our beliefs for what we consider weighty reasons. But when someone else or something inside ourselves throws out the “prove it” challenge, we’re stumped. **We can’t build an airtight case beyond all reasonable doubt.**

Usually this is not a problem. We go on affirming our beliefs and attempting to convince others of them. But if a loved one is drifting from the faith because of nagging doubts or we encounter a skeptical neighbor, we wish for proofs. Sometimes we even find ourselves wondering whether God exists, whether the Bible is true, and who is deluded—those who think that God accepts all good people, or ourselves. **Sincere Christians have left the faith because questions and doubts eventually eat it away.**

How should we engage people who can’t believe the truth of God revealed in Scripture because they find it doubtful or irrational? Is Christian apologetics, the intellectual defense of the faith, possible? Is it useful? This question is practical, not just theoretical.

Christians disagree about the answer. **Some believe that reason is a crucial support for faith.** C. S. Lewis and Josh McDowell tes-

“ Apologetics has a role like the defense at a trial. ”

tify that God used evidence and reasoning to bring them to faith. Professors at old Princeton Seminary taught that reason can validate the infallibility of Scripture as well as the existence of God. **Other Christians separate faith and reason:** We are to live by faith alone, they say. Doubt only arises because we subject faith to reason, impiously challenging God’s Word with our minds. **How should Reformed Christians relate faith and reason?** Is apologetics legitimate? Is it useful?

The Reformed View of Faith and Reason

Following the Augustinian maxim, “faith seeking understanding,” **the Reformed tradition has emphasized the primacy of faith and the normativity of special revelation for our knowledge of God, salvation, and the true nature of the world. But it has not denied the legitimate use of reason to explain, support, and defend the faith.** We are sure that the Bible is truly God’s Word, writes Calvin, because of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit; “hence it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning” (*Institutes* I.7.5). But in the very next section he states that once we have accepted

Scripture by faith, “those arguments—not strong enough before to engraft and fix the certainty of Scripture in our minds—become very useful aids” (I.8.1). Reason can corroborate what is known by faith, but faith ought not to be based on reason. Herman Bavinck likewise writes: “Christian theologians have always made use of these proofs [for God’s existence] in order to silence opponents and clear a way for faith.” And further: “The proofs for the divine testimony of the Holy Scriptures at least possess the power to make it clear that to believe is not unreasonable or nonsensical.” But “apologetics is the fruit, never the root, of faith” (*The Certainty of Faith*, 58, 59, 22). Louis Berkhof also finds the arguments for God’s existence useful, although he considers them “testimonies” rather than proofs (*Systematic Theology*, 28). **In sum, the Reformed tradition has confessed that faith in revelation is the foundation of our knowledge of God and has denied that revealed truth can or must be proven. Yet it asserts that the Christian faith is reasonable and can successfully be defended against charges that it is false and unreasonable.**

Cont. pg. 5 ►

PROVE IT!....cont.

COOPER

This view fits well with a biblical view of human nature. **God created us as rational beings** with minds that could understand ourselves in relation to him and to the rest of creation, over which he gave us responsibility as his image-bearers. **The mind was designed to gain knowledge in a loving and obedient relationship with God and within the order of creation.** Human reason did not create that order, define its truth, or establish the validity of our relationship to God. **God also created us so that the intellect cooperates with the other aspects of our lives—senses, emotions, values, social relationships, language, culture, and above all, our stance toward or against God.**

We humans are designed to learn not only from the evidence of our senses and the logic of our minds. We can also gain knowledge from reliable intuitions, from what other trustworthy persons tell us, and from discovering what satisfies authentic human needs. God hard-wired more into our minds than faith and reason.

What's more, **God didn't make us all the same.** We don't all have identical learning styles and we are not all equally "left-brained" and "right-brained." **Some people are more analytic and systematic, others more spontaneous and intuitive in their thinking.** Some of us need a lot of convincing, others reach conclusions quickly, even about matters of faith. **The faith-reason relation in humans as created by God is complex and somewhat variable.**

The fall only complicates it further. **Sinful humans don't love God and don't want to acknowledge what can be known about him.** Instead, they "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:19-22). Furthermore, the rational processes of forming ideas and drawing conclusions have become flawed. We now make mistakes in our checkbooks and construct racial stereotypes. To make matters worse, the connections between our senses, desires, values, other people, language, and culture have also become

“ Whether theists or atheists, Christians or non-Christians, we all live by faith. ”

unreliable. We can't always trust our experience and other people in forming our beliefs. **Fallen human reason is inconsistent, fallible, and sometimes avoids truth.**

But God in his grace continues to reveal himself in creation and in Scripture. His providence upholds the remnants of the image of God in human nature, including our ability to reason. So fallen human beings can still learn, eventually balance their checkbooks, and see the fallacy in racial stereotypes. **Reason is fallible, but can still be relatively reliable.** The connections between our beliefs, feelings, values, desires, communities, and cultures still function more or less adequately. And unbelievers can still sometimes hear "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19), as did the Athenian philosophers with whom Paul spoke (Acts 17).

Reformed Apologetics in Action

So the Reformed tradition gives an important but secondary place to apologetics. God's revelation in creation and in Scripture are accepted in faith and rationally understood through the eyes of faith. Defending the faith with reason begins here. Although there are good arguments for God's existence based on scientific and philosophical analyses of creation, they are his-

guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. The evidence, witnesses, and arguments for the prosecution's charges can be challenged and discredited. And apologetics can present evidence supporting some of the defendant's claims. But it cannot prove them to be true.

The jury is deadlocked. Some believe the defendant all along. Some vote "not guilty" even though they don't really trust the defendant. Others vote to convict. A couple find the case too close to call. Several are simply confused. Why jurors react so differently is a mystery.

The Christian faith is reasonable, but it cannot be proven. So Christians who rely on the assumption that their faith can be proven are in danger of losing it when they discover that it can't. But we can show Christians whose doubts seem overwhelming that they are not rationally compelling enough to abandon the faith. We can demonstrate to unbelievers who claim to have sufficient reason for rejecting Christianity that they are mistaken, even if we cannot convince them it is true. And we can show unbelievers who are interested in Christianity but have hard questions about it that there are no decisive reasons against becoming a Christian.

At the same time we recognize that **most people become Christians or forsake the faith not because of evidence and logic but for affective, practical, and spiritual matters of the heart** that are largely beyond understanding, except to the Holy Spirit, who sovereignly works in us all. ■

torically conditioned and fallible. They are not proofs that eliminate all doubt. But they do favor belief in God and demonstrate that unbelievers do not have proper science and sound philosophy on their side. Similarly, there are good evidence and arguments for the reliability of the biblical text and its account of the history of Israel and the life of Jesus. The facile skepticism of the Jesus Seminar can be challenged on rational grounds. But we cannot prove that the Bible is God's inspired Word. Again, the charge that God doesn't exist because an all-powerful, all-knowing, wholly good being could not have allowed Auschwitz can be refuted. But we cannot explain why God allowed Auschwitz.

Apologetics has a role like the defense at a trial. It can demonstrate that the Christian faith is not

OFFICE AND ORDINATION: ANOTHER ROUND



HENRY DE MOOR

Professor of Church Polity at Calvin Theological Seminary

It started innocently enough. For as long as we've known it, our Church Order has spoken of "official acts of the ministry" that the unordained are not permitted to perform (Article 53). For just as long, neither the Order nor the synod has ever spelled out precisely what these "official acts" are. All we have to go on is tradition. So in 1995, Classis Alberta North simply

Bear in mind that the first round spanned some seventy years. Beginning as early as 1910, the denomination sparred about the place of "layworkers" in mission and evangelism, an issue that was not resolved in principle until Synod 1978 established a fourth office of evangelist. Along the way, in the years leading up to Synod 1973, we managed to produce a substantive study report that without any doubt still informs and even guides the thinking of many of our leaders. Synod 2001 is now faced with yet another substantive report, about five years in the making, **that places an entirely new spin on the seventies' theology of office.** It's a good report, and one can only hope that its quality will prevent us from sparring as long in the second round as we did in the first.

Synod 1995 immediately transformed the innocent beginning into a more complex puzzle by adding two other pressing concerns to the study committee's mandate. The first has to do with per-

might bivocational leaders licensed to exhort in its churches receive the right to administer the sacraments? After the study committee presented its first report, Synod 1999 added to the complexity yet again by not buying the committee's proposals and raising a host of specific questions as deep as "Who should be ordained and why?" and "What is the difference between ordination, commissioning, and appointment to staff?" In the meantime, the matter of "Alternate Routes Being Used to Enter Ordained Ministry in the CRC" is in the hands of another synodical study committee, not reporting this year, but it too has a bearing on the thorny issues now on the table. In short, faced with the study committee's second report, Synod 2001 has its work cut out for it.

Official Acts of the Ministry

Both reports are content to stick with the tradition on identifying the official acts of the ministry (sacraments,

The first report suggested that some "belong naturally" to the office of minister of the Word while others "reflect actions of the consistory." The second report now broadens that to all "ordained leaders." **Both clear the way for local elders to perform them,** though continued regulation is necessary, and thus argue that bivocational pastors in Classis Red Mesa — or anywhere else — can be given that permission (as ordained elders) on a continuing basis and not merely by way of exception. Given our anti-clerical mood these days, this issue is not a likely candidate for much controversy.

Specialized Ministries

More likely to be controversial is the matter of specialized staff ministries. The first report proposed the recognition of a new unordained position: associate in educational ministry. The committee probably convinced the church of the need for credentialing such individuals. On the other hand, Synod 1999 stumbled over the suggestion that they would have to sustain a classical examination. This, it was argued strenuously, would be the first time in our history that local staff would have to "clear the classis," beneficial neither for the local church nor for our regional assemblies.

The first report also proposed the establishing of a fifth office: minister of education. This proposal came complete with elaborate Church Order changes designed to

"The committee's report is to be commended for taking us back to the 'balance' of the Reformation"

asked if synod would be so kind as to identify them, particularly in view of an increase in "staff ministries." Little did we know that this relatively harmless request would launch us into **yet another round of serious wrestling with office and ordination.**

sons engaged in educational or youth ministry and other specialized ministries. Can a way be found for them to be ordained or at least receive some status? The second concern deals with the situation in Classis Red Mesa. In the absence of a sufficient number of ministers of the Word, how

greeting and benediction, installation, reception and dismissal of members), even though the second seems to add "the preaching of the Word." Both view them as "liturgical acts" performed by those who function as Christ-representatives or leaders in the midst of the congregation.

OFFICE...cont.

DE MOOR

accommodate its introduction. Aside from an ongoing resistance to such wholesale changes in general, Synod 1999 was reluctant to embrace this new direction. It openly questioned what it feared might be an unhealthy “proliferation of offices” in the future. It was hard enough to be loosened from a “threefold office structure” in 1978. **If we add a fifth, where will it end?**

In its second report, the committee now comes with an entirely new concept. Instead of creating new offices, it argues, **why not take the office of evangelist and apply it more broadly to a greater variety of staff-ministry positions?** This office need not be limited to evangelistic outreach and may well be understood to have “the character of pastoral extension.” In organized congregations, evangelists might well “extend” our church’s ministries into “specialized areas, including, but not limited to, youth ministry, education, pastoral care, worship, and evangelism,” all “under the authority of an ordained minister.” Such an approach avoids the specter of a host of new offices and requires little change in the order of the church.

The issue, of course, is whether the denomination is ready for such “broadening.” Is this indeed what we had in mind when, in 1994, we permitted evangelists to serve in organized congregations as well as church plants or other mission settings? Should all “pastoral assistants” be ordained as evangelists? A youth minister, perhaps, but also a director of music or a worship coordinator? The study committee argues that the office of evangelist

“extends the pastoral office.” For that reason, it has “full access” to the official acts of the ministry but with different educational requirements. Thus, it “provides a model for dealing with staff ministries generally.”

It is time, the committee states, to distinguish between a “narrow focus” on an initial call to faith and the broader “sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ” in which all ministerial or pastoral personnel partake. Staff members are to be viewed as “extensions” of ministry of the Word with a specific task or set of tasks that is functionally determined by the church that calls and appoints them. Thus, the committee concludes, the four offices currently acknowledged by the denomination “are sufficient for good order,” but only if we are willing to say that “the office of evangelist

“ Synod 2001 has its work cut out for it.”

list is applicable to a variety of ministries.” **And that, as we have seen, is the million-dollar question.**

Theology of Office

We may quibble over the detailed proposals, and, as we said, Synod 2001 has its work cut out for it. On the other hand, this study committee report, like that of 1973, may well have significance far greater than possible solutions to current problems. **Its overriding burden is at last to deliver us from the clutches of a “func-**

“ More likely to be controversial is the matter of specialized staff ministries. ”

tional approach” and lead us to a “relational approach” to office and ordination.

What has remained with us since 1973 is the “guidelines” then adopted. What many of us have forgotten is that even that year’s synod was uncomfortable with their import. It adopted a “framework” for the “guidelines” so as to underscore that anti-clericalism and anti-authoritarianism in and of themselves cannot answer our most profound questions surrounding the practice of ordination. What it sensed, and what we have sensed since that time, has never found its way into a synodically mandated and freshly written theology of office—not until now.

The issue here is whether the church simply “sets aside” certain individuals to accomplish certain strategic ministries within the “broader ministry” of the church in which we all partake, so that officebearers are nothing more than “agents of the congregation,” or whether the church humbly receives the gift of leaders (Ephesians 4) and experiences them as “agents of Christ” in its midst. **Ordination is more than an “appointment.”** It is, as the committee claims, “the church’s way ... of solemnizing a pastoral relationship.” True, it is not an avenue “of elevating the prestige of certain people,” but it is “a recognition and enactment of a sacrificial, priestly relationship between Christ and congregation mediated in a certain leader” and, thus, “should not be entered

into lightly.” Similarly, the “laying on of hands” is not merely an optional ceremony that confirms the appointment or “setting aside” of a specific person for specific tasks, but it is one that “symbolizes and enacts the relationships of ordination.” Leaders are “symbolically offered to Christ, included in the succession of leaders of the church stretching back to the apostles, and given the power of the Spirit.” And, as the committee argues, such a ceremony is appropriate for all church offices, not just that of ministers of the Word.

While some caution needs to be exercised with respect to the committee’s articulation of the mission of the church in general, it is on the right track. **It is not, as some are already claiming, an attempt to return us to the clericalism of the middle ages.** If we hold, as we should, that Christ is the only Mediator between God and humanity, it is not necessary to hold that officebearers therefore play no “mediatorial” role in the relationship between Christ and his people. On the contrary, those who hold office bring us into the presence of our Lord and function as agents of his leading in our earthly pilgrimage. The committee’s report is to be commended for taking us back to the “balance” of the Reformation. As such, it will guide us for years to come. ■

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CALVIN SEMINARY FORUM

REAL HEROS



CALVIN VAN REKEN

Professor of Moral
Theology at Calvin
Theological Seminary.

Cultural pundits complain that we do not have any heroes anymore. **A generation ago many people looked up to sports heroes and politicians, like Joe Dimaggio, Dwight Eisenhower, and Pierre Trudeau.** With today's increasing media scrutiny, we now see public figures up close and personal. Not many appear heroic when viewed at close range.

Bob Kerry, the former U.S. senator and presidential hopeful, recently admitted that the Navy Seal unit he commanded during the Viet Nam war had killed some women and children during a night skirmish. He received the Bronze Star for his conduct. He said he didn't

feel like a hero. He felt guilty. He said that his idea of a real hero is not a person who does one heroic thing, but a person who day after day engages in selfless acts.

I think he is right about who the real heroes are. My personal list would include Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, John Paul II, and Nelson Mandela. The vast majority of real heroes are not well known. They obviously include those parents who take in special-needs foster kids, missionaries who leave their relatives and a comfortable lifestyle behind to serve in foreign lands, husbands and wives who care for spouses that no longer have control of their bodies or have lost much of the use of their minds, pas-

another person or persons unselfishly day after day. These are the heroes that we don't hear much about or pay much attention to. We usually take them for granted. **Heroes like these in every community make life as good as it is.**

The psalmist says that some people are like trees, planted by the rivers of water, that bring forth fruit in its season. This simile is a good description of real heroes. It emphasizes both stability and productivity. You can count on real heroes. They are there when you need them. They don't go off chasing the latest fads. They don't break any speed limits in the pursuit of pleasure. As trees provide fruit for persons and animals,

“As trees provide fruit for persons and animals, so real heros dedicate themselves to enriching the lives of others.”

tors who faithfully and selflessly serve in small churches, people who generously donate their wealth to worthy causes, Christian school teachers who carefully nurture dozens of children in the faith when there is more money to be made in public schools, and hundreds of others who serve

so real heroes dedicate themselves to enriching the lives of others.

God's plan does not call for us to live for ourselves. Of course we need to attend to what we will eat, drink, and wear, and to plan for recreation and relaxation. We need to satisfy some self-

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interest. The problem is that these interests so often crowd out what should be our primary focus. This crowding out is not because we need to work so hard to meet our self-interest. We have food and clothing in abundance, and have more leisure time than earlier generations. No, we attend to ourselves with such diligence because we have believed in some measure the lie that caring for ourselves will make us happy. This is a very old deception. Our first parents fell for it. **God calls us to lives of selfless service. Real heroes have responded to that call better than most.** ■