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CALVIN SEMINARY FORUM

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A COMMUNITY RISING

Editor's Note: This speech was part of the opening presentation by President-Elect Plantinga at the All-Seminary Retreat, held September 7, 2001.

How wonderful it is to see you this morning, to sing and pray together, and to prepare our hearts for the rigors and joys of a new academic year at CTS. In the past months I have been praying that we would begin well—students, staff, and faculty together—as we pursue classical theological education for contemporary Christian ministry. Grace to you and peace. May God shine on us this year.

Beginning Well

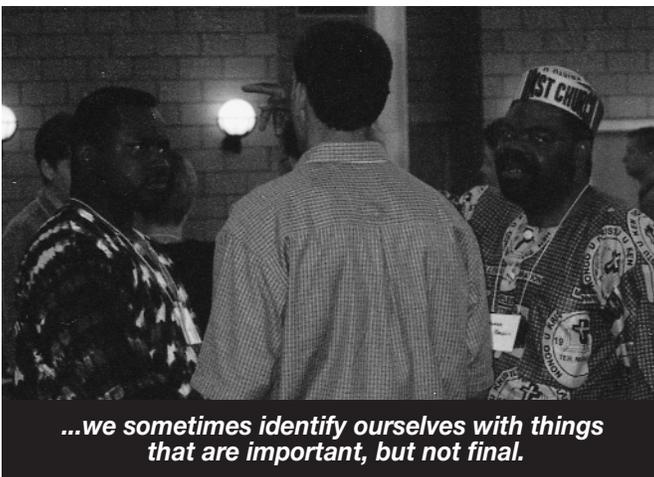
To begin well I think we have to go back to first things and establish our identity. We are people who have died and risen with Jesus Christ. That's who we are. That's what

makes us brothers and sisters.

I've been noticing that human beings often worry about their identity, and often outside the gospel. My friend Dr. Wonha Shin told me the other day that Chinese teens learn Korean so they can sing the songs of Korean pop idols, and identify with them. Female teens

and 'tweens in the U.S. buy clothes that identify them with Britney Spears. Male teens in Harris County, Texas buy orange jumpsuits to mimic prison uniforms. The orange suits say: "I'm bad. When you look at me, you're looking at a felon, so don't mess with me."

Even in a Christian seminary we sometimes identify



...we sometimes identify ourselves with things that are important, but not final.



CORNELIUS PLANTINGA, JR.

President-Elect and Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Seminary

ourselves with things that are important, but not final. An M.A. student might think she's a minor leaguer compared to an M.Div. student, and an M.Div. student, exalting himself exceedingly, might encourage that mistake. An international student may want to become a full member of this community of learning, but may also want to belong to a sub-community of

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COVER ESSAY cont.

PLANTINGA

*For you
Jesus Christ came
into the world;
for you he died and
conquered death;
all this he did
for you..*



people who speak his own language and who continue his own cultural practices. A female M.Div. student might know she is called by God to ministry, but have to live with persons, maybe in her own family, maybe in her classes, who send her signals that say, "You may think you are called to ministry, but I assure you that you are mistaken."

Our identities are troubled things, and especially when we take our eye off the gospel of Jesus Christ. To get our identities straight, we may have to begin as if we were infants.

For You, Little One

One Sunday morning not long from now (the Lord willing), I will baptize my first and only granddaughter. On that day I'll bring her some words that Reformed Christians have used for centuries. I'll hold my granddaughter and say to her: "Micaela Elizabeth:

For you Jesus Christ came into the world; for you he died and conquered death; all this he did for you, little one, though you know nothing of it as yet. Micaela Elizabeth, child of the covenant, in baptism you are

sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.

This is a Christian's ID card, and it makes us brothers and sisters. When we look at each other, what should run through our mind first is not our role. Not "SPMC student," "Administrative Assistant," "Ph.D. student," "Vice-president," "Information Technology Coordinator," "international student." No, when we see each other, our first thought should be: "Child of the covenant, for you Jesus Christ died and conquered death." In fact, as Romans 6 and Colossians 3 tell us, it's not just that Jesus Christ died and conquered death *for* the people in our community. No, what's crucial is that we all died and rose from death *with* Christ.

We did it when he died and rose, because he was our repre-

"We are people who have died and risen with Jesus Christ."

sentative. We did it again at the baptismal font. "You were buried with him in baptism," says Paul in Colossians 2, and "raised with him through faith in the power of God." Like the people of God who crossed the Red Sea with their enemies behind them, we go down into death and come up into life when we get baptized.

Dying and Rising into Holiness

Paul calls it dying and rising with Christ, and connects it to living a holy life. His idea is that in baptism we get publicly identified with the death and resurrection of Jesus. God says to us, "You are a person of these events and of all that they mean." You are a Good Friday and Easter person. In Colossians 3 Paul says, "Since you have been raised with Christ" keep the rhythm going. Let your old self drown. Let your new self arise like Jesus coming out of his tomb. Kill off envy; raise up gratitude. Kill off resentment; raise up forgiveness. You've already died and risen with Christ; do it again. Kill off arrogance; raise up humility. Paul says this to a whole community of Colossian people. It would not be a stretch to believe that he says it to us.

Dying and rising with Christ is a "rhythm" because doing it once isn't enough. The fact is that we have to die and rise repeatedly. The reason is that our old self is hard to kill. We may think that our old self is at the bottom of the Red Sea with Pharaoh and all his hosts. The problem is, as my pastor John Timmer used to say, that our old self is a pretty good swimmer. We try to drown it, and pretty soon it bobs back up.

Living a holy life is all about dying and rising with Christ. How so? Think of repenting to a student you have hurt by a careless remark. To confess your sin to this student will kill you. It's mortifying to say to somebody, "I hurt you by what I did, and I am very, very sorry." Imagine that the student then turns to you and says, "I forgive you." Saying these three words kills her too. As Robert Roberts has written, a victim who says these words must lay aside anger she has a right to, which is an act of self-sacrifice.

"I hurt you by what I did, and I am very, very sorry." Then, from the other side, "I forgive you." The interchange sounds simple, but it has Good

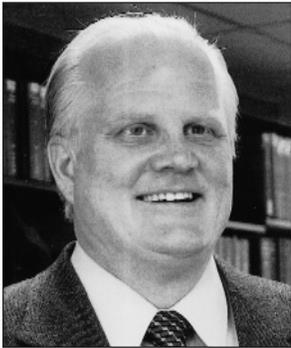
"Our old self is a pretty good swimmer."

Friday and Easter in it. It's got power and glory in it. Incarnation, passion, death, resurrection, Pentecost, baptism—all of it is packed into a single moment when two people in a community of faith, both clinging to Christ, go down into death with him and then rise up toward the morning light. They rise to reconciliation. They rise to unity. They rise to life. And when they do, all heaven rejoices because, once more, God's kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth, just as it is in heaven.

May God keep us in our going out and our coming in, in our waking and in our sleeping. Above all, may God keep us in our dying and rising with Jesus Christ. ■

Lugene Schemper, Editor

A New Editor



LUGENE SCHEMPER

Theological Librarian at Calvin Seminary

This is the final issue of the eighth year of the *Calvin Seminary Forum*. For the past four years Professor Henry Zwaanstra has edited the *Forum*. This summer he retired from the seminary after thirty eight years as Professor of Historical Theology, and those editorial responsibilities have been handed over to me.

As I look back through the issues of the past four years I appreciate the thoughtful contributions which Professor Zwaanstra brought to this publication. Whether commenting on Christian education, world missions, or non-Christian religions, he was often able to give the reader some perspective on the issue, either by giving an account of the history of the discussion of the topic in the history of the Christian Reformed denomination, or by showing us where that discussion fit into the larger context of the history of the church or within Reformed tradition of Christianity.

Behind his brief account of the 125 years of the history of

Calvin Seminary in this publication earlier this year lies a wealth of knowledge and wisdom about the history of the Christian Reformed denomination and a deep love and appreciation for its institutions. And above all, in his years of service as a seminary professor we recognize him as one who first and foremost desires to serve Jesus Christ and his Church. We are grateful for his leadership as editor of the *Forum* over the past four years, and wish him the Lord's blessing in his retirement.

Allow me to introduce myself. I began as Theological Librarian at Calvin Seminary about a year and a half ago, after serving for 18 years as a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church. I'm responsible for library services for the seminary at Hekman Library, the library of

grateful for the wonderful training for ministry which I received at Calvin Seminary. But today as I speak with students about the curriculum and their academic work and pastoral field education work, I've come to believe that seminary education has improved greatly. There is a much heavier emphasis on education for the practice of ministry and on theological reflection on that practice. From what I can see, students have a substantially heavier workload than they did twenty years ago (maybe too heavy). If you have seminary students from your congregation or classis, continue to encourage them, pray for them, write them and take an interest in their work and their spiritual and financial needs. Let them know that you consider their preparation for service in the church a matter of

// Encourage [seminary students], pray for them...let them know you consider their preparation...a high calling. //

Calvin College and Seminary. These past months have been a change for me, from the day-to-day varied routines of the life of a pastor, to the Monday through Friday rhythms of the academic world at the seminary. I have the privilege of serving on the Seminary faculty and of day-to-day contact with the lives and work of our seminary professors and students. During the time I've been here I've learned a number of things, and I want to share two of those items with you:

First, I'm convinced that training for ministry for today's seminarians at Calvin Seminary is better than it was twenty years ago when I was a student. Through the years I've been

great importance and a high calling.

Second, I have been able to see firsthand that the Calvin Seminary faculty has a strong interest in the local church and the practice of ministry. They are committed to (as President-Elect Plantinga puts it in the lead article of this issue) "classical theological education for contemporary Christian ministry." They thoughtfully reflect with students on how Scripture and the theological tradition sheds light on contemporary issues and the Christian life.

The other day I came across an entry in the latest edition of the massive *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Afghanistanism. - a preoccupation with events far

**//
Theological professors have sometimes been accused of 'theological Afghanistanism'...
//**

distant, as a diversion from controversial issues at home." Apparently this word was coined some forty years ago, and applied to journalists and others who studied obscure topics which seemed irrelevant to more pressing issues. As a result of the tragic events of the past months, we now recognize that a preoccupation with Afghanistan may have been quite important and beneficial.

I think theological professors have sometimes been accused of "theological Afghanistanism," that is, a preoccupation with obscure, unimportant topics with little bearing on the practical, pressing issues of the day. But I believe that the theological resources of the Reformed tradition, which may seem obscure and irrelevant to some, have a great deal of practical bearing on the issues faced by the church of the twenty-first century. I'm hoping that these pages will be a forum for the Calvin Seminary faculty to reach beyond the classroom and to assist pastors, other church leaders, and all church members in thinking biblically and theologically about the Christian life and our ministry as the Christian Reformed Church in the twenty-first century. ■



MARIANO AVILA

Assistant Professor of
New Testament at Calvin
Seminary

HISPANIC MINISTRY: *A Twenty-First Century Challenge*

Hispanics will make up 25 percent of the total population of the United States. One of every four persons in this

**“ [By 2050]
one out of every
four persons in
this country will
be a Latino. ”**

My wife and I came to Grand Rapids, Michigan, for the first time twenty-three years ago. During the two years we lived here, we recall that only twice did we overhear someone speaking Spanish in the store where we did our weekly shopping. When we returned to Calvin Seminary this past year we observed that the Hispanic population has increased so greatly in this community that we now hear the Spanish language being spoken very frequently throughout the city.

The Growth of the Hispanic Population

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Hispanic population in the U.S.A. increased by more than fifty percent since 1990, from 22.4 million in 1990 to 35.3 million in 2000, compared with an increase of 13.2 percent for the total U.S. population of 281 million. This makes Hispanics the largest minority group in the United States, with 12.5 percent of the total population.

According to projections of the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2010, 14.6 of the total population will be Hispanic; by 2030, 19.4 percent; and by 2050

country will be a Latino. [Note: This data does not take into consideration the millions of people from south of the border who come to work in the United States every year without documents. Note also that the situation in Canada is different. According to its census figures, in 1996 less than one percent of the total population was Spanish-speaking.]

We should pay special attention to this social phenomenon if we want to plan our ministry for the near future with vision. These are new realities that demand serious thinking, changes in our attitudes, and different models for the ministries of our churches. These realities are great challenges as well for theological reflection in our seminaries and for the education of church leaders.

During the past three decades, the geographic center of world Christianity has moved from the North to the South. Some of the fastest growing and most missionary-minded churches are in the Southern Hemisphere. In the year 2000, only one-third of the Christian population lived in North America, Europe and

other developed countries. The remaining two-thirds lived in the so-called Third World: Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Given the inhumane and oppressive situations in which the majority of people in Latin America and the Caribbean live, it is likely that immigration will continue to increase and present challenges to all levels of society in the United States. Political, economic, educational, and even religious strategies are already being implemented to respond to the opportunities, threats, and challenges (depending on the perspective of those who take this situation seriously) that Hispanics present to the country.

Our Response

The Christian Reformed Church in North America has a great deal to offer in response to these new realities. We can make significant changes that could be decisive for the future of our cities and society. We all (Anglo-Saxons,

claiming the gospel of the kingdom of God.

The Church is universal and is a body with many members. Within that body each ethnic group has gifts to share with the rest of the body. When we truly recognize that, we will be able to be more open to each other, and to receive and appreciate the historical, cultural, and religious gifts that every ethnic group brings to other members of the body of Christ. “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10). This is true of individuals and also of every nation, tribe, and people which has membership in the body of Christ, the Church universal (Rev. 7:9).

Evangelical churches in Latin America have been growing very rapidly during the last two decades and one of their main characteristics is their missionary zeal. In many of them, to be a Christian is to share your faith with others, as simple as that. The priesthood

“ The Christian Reformed Church in North America has a great deal to offer in response to these new realities. ”

Afro-Americans, Asians, and Latinos) must learn what it means to be members of the same body, and to live as brothers and sisters in the Lord. We must learn to relate to each other as equals, with hearts ready to learn from each other, and with hands ready to serve each other as we share in the common ministry of pro-

of all believers is a day-to-day reality for most believers. The majority of them have never heard of this central teaching of the Reformation, but they live it daily. We can learn from them and be renewed by their vibrant faith and devotion to the Lord.

Cont. pg. 5 ►

HISPANIC!...cont.

AVILA

Hispanics are very family- and community-oriented and the life in their communities and churches back home usually reflects that orientation. When they come to North America and go to church (most commonly to the Roman Catholic church), they

reach this goal should start in the Hispanic churches. They are the churches which must be aware of the challenge and opportunity that the growing Hispanic population presents. They must invest their resources to reach other Hispanics in their neighbor-

hoods. The needs that Hispanics face when they arrive to this country are manifold, and correspondingly, the ways in which we serve them in the name of Jesus should meet those needs.

advance God's kingdom and to seek the welfare of our communities and cities. The Great Commission of the Lord is not only the duty of World Missions and World Relief, but also of pastors, leaders, and members of our churches. We all now have the enormous privilege of doing foreign missions here at home, in words and deeds. More and more frequently this can now happen with a next-door neighbor who has emigrated from a foreign country. The Lord has brought the nations to us, and we are called to make disciples, not only of our own people but also of all nations. It is not a choice; it is a responsibility. It requires a great deal of preparation and training.

No doubt, one of the strategic areas for this ministry is to train the Hispanic leadership with a solid theological and Reformed education. Formal education is a necessity for the emerging leadership of our churches. Non-formal education programs for teachers, evangelists, elders, deacons, and deaconesses are urgently needed if our churches are going to be ready for the task. One successful example is the CR Home Missions Adelante training program for

“ One of the strategic areas for this ministry is to train the Hispanic leadership with a solid theological and Reformed education.”

evangelists. The Christian Reformed Church should offer traditional education as well as distance education programs to respond to these needs. These opportunities should be offered both in English and Spanish, since a good number of the Hispanic leaders do not have the proficiency to study in English. Educational curricula, programs, and class syllabi should also be adapted and contextualized to respond to the history, cultural background, and specific circumstances that shape Hispanic communities in the United States and Canada.

The harvest is plentiful; may God grant us to see this new reality with Jesus' eyes and pray earnestly about it: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'" (Mt 9:36-37). ■

“ ...the vision, commitment, and actions should start in the Hispanic churches. ”

usually find worship services rather cold and impersonal. They often find a lack of fellowship with others before or after the Mass. Recently I was talking with one of the Mexican members of the construction crew working on the new student center for the seminary. He told me how foreign and different the local Catholic church felt to him. As a result he is no longer attending church services. If churches can change and be sensitive to these realities, they may be able to reach Hispanics, as well as other immigrants. For example, Comunidad Cristiana is a Hispanic CRC in Hialeah, Florida. Every Sunday morning after the worship service this congregation offers a lunch for everyone, giving people ample opportunity to socialize and build the community life that is difficult to experience and cultivate in a large city.

The challenges and opportunities are of such magnitude that this mission requires the collaboration of churches, classes, and agencies (Home Missions, Calvin College and Seminary, Publications, World Relief, and others). If we invest a good part of our resources (talents, experience, institutions, money) to reach the mission field that has moved to our own cities and neighborhoods, we can make a significant contribution to

hoods. The needs that Hispanics face when they arrive to this country are manifold, and correspondingly, the ways in which we serve them in the name of Jesus should meet those needs. The challenges and opportunities are of such magnitude that this mission requires the collaboration of churches, classes, and agencies (Home Missions, Calvin College and Seminary, Publications, World Relief, and others). If we invest a good part of our resources (talents, experience, institutions, money) to reach the mission field that has moved to our own cities and neighborhoods, we can make a significant contribution to

A Key Role for Hispanic Congregations

One of the key goals that we in the CRCNA should set is to reach the Hispanic mission field that we have now in our communities. And the vision, commitment, and activity to



Hispanics are very family- and community-oriented and the life in their communities and churches back home usually reflects that orientation.

WITH MISSIONARY HEARTS AND EYES



PIETER TUIT

Assistant Professor of Missiology at Calvin Seminary

I lived in Grand Rapids as a student from 1970-1974. After that I had the opportunity to live, study and minister in Mississippi, Australia, Indonesia and in three different areas of the Philippines. I returned to Grand Rapids in 1999. Many things had changed in those 25 years.

in Grand Rapids. We drive through the various sections of the city and study its neighborhoods. We observe the kinds and mixtures of people who live in them, their economic situations, and the ways the people relate to one another. We take note of the types of churches found in these areas. When I am not preaching on Sundays we frequently visit different churches and see how the multi-cultural changes in Grand Rapids have affected their worship and ministry. We also enjoy visiting different ethnic restaurants in the area. Just a few months ago a Bosnian restaurant was opened. A favorite of ours is an Ethiopian restaurant.

The above may not be so strange for *Forum* readers living in large cities or places like South Florida or California. However, for others the multi-cultural life of even Grand Rapids is quite an eye opener. I remember one student from the prairies of Canada sharing with me a recollection of his first con-

North American students live is no longer the same place and world where they were born. Calvin Seminary must take note of this changing world, both in its life and community as well as in its teaching and learning.

I like to think of Calvin Seminary as a place that plays a key role in developing pastors, missionaries and other kinds of leaders who have missionary hearts as well as missionary eyes. This should apply to all students, not just to those committed to cross-cultural work here in North America or overseas.

Missionary Hearts

With the words “missionary hearts” I refer to hearts which are burdened because there are so many people who are lost in sin and live under the judgment of God. A missionary heart is concerned that many people do not know and experience the light of life. It is troubled that the wrath of God remains on those people.

A missionary heart sees not only the sinner’s broken relationship with God and its spiritual consequences. It also sees how this affects the sinner’s life in all its relationships. It sees the brokenness of life. It sees and hears the cries and heartaches, as well as the oppression and the injustices of the world. A missionary heart is painfully aware that although the kingdom has come in Christ and that the final victory is secure there is so much of life that does not reflect the shalom of God and his kingdom and that so many people do not reflect God’s will and purposes for them.

Though the missionary heart may be burdened, it does not despair because it also knows of God’s great love, revealed in Jesus Christ for a sinful, rebellious, lost and broken world. It knows and believes that God so loved this world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. It knows the story of Jesus and his love. It knows that in Christ the Kingdom has come and that because of him we may look forward to a new heaven and a new earth. I like to think of Calvin Seminary as a place that is known not only for its theological mind, but also for its missionary heart. That heart and mind brings forth a life that is offered to God promptly and sincerely.

Missionary Eyes

The above means that students must also be trained to have missionary eyes. What does this mean? When a missionary goes to another country or

“ the missionary heart may be burdened, it does not despair because it also knows of God’s great love.”

What specifically struck me was the change in the cultural and ethnic make-up of Grand Rapids. The changes I saw in Grand Rapids were even more true for the whole of North America.

Cultural Diversity in North America

My wife Gail and I have been doing (what is called in church planting terminology) research

tact with people of different color.

In the future we will only see more of this. The world is literally at our doorstep and not just “next door” in Canada (as the sign on the bridge crossing from Michigan into Sarnia, Ontario reminds us). For a long time Calvin Seminary’s student body has reflected the variety of God’s people, with students from many parts of the world. But now the world in which many

A missionary heart rejoices in belonging to Christ and his body, but at the same time realizes that there are many who are not the people of God and are without hope and without Christ in the world. They are the people who know God (Romans 1) and are recipients of his general revelation. Yet, even though they know God they suppress this knowledge and exchange it for other gods or, especially in our western culture, for no god at all.

MISSIONARY...cont.

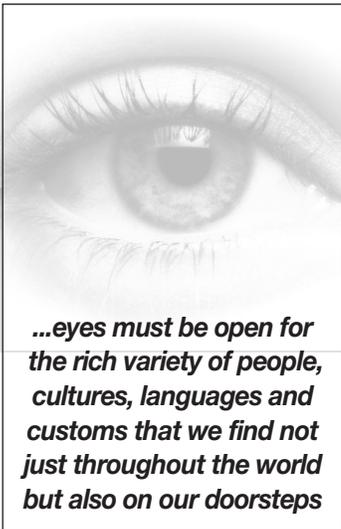
TUIT

another culture within North America she notices many differences. There is the difference in language. There are the differences in culture, in customs and in expectations. For example, when a family in the West is having dinner and a friend of one of the children comes over on the way to catechism she might be asked to wait until dinner is finished. This would not be proper in a country like the Philippines. When a family there is having dinner and someone comes to the house he is immediately invited for dinner. Most families will usually cook more food so as to accommodate unexpected guests and visitors.

In North America eyebrows would be raised if one saw pastors or elders holding hands

while walking to the dining room during a synod meeting. However, no one would think it strange when the same delegate holds his wife's hand in public. In parts of Indonesia the opposite is true. When I worked there it was considered inappropriate for me to walk down the street holding hands with my wife. However, holding hands with an Indonesian colleague during a synod break was the most normal thing in the world. At first these different customs can be confusing. They can make a missionary feel lost and experience culture shock. At the same time it can also be a very enriching experience to get to know other people, cultures, languages and customs than your own.

Our changing world means that eyes must be open for the rich variety of people, cultures, languages and customs that we find not just throughout the world but also on our doorsteps. Calvin Theological Seminary has a wonderful opportunity. The presence of many students at the seminary from a great variety of cultural backgrounds gives us an opportunity to develop students with missionary hearts and eyes, knowledgeable of, sensitive to, and understanding of people of other cultures and backgrounds. This can happen, provided we take the time to get to know each other deeply and appreciatively as brothers and sisters in Christ in the process of teaching and learning together.



...eyes must be open for the rich variety of people, cultures, languages and customs that we find not just throughout the world but also on our doorsteps

A Joint Effort

However, Calvin Seminary can only play one part. Others must play a part in this also. I think of parents as they raise children while developing those missionary hearts and eyes. Your children may never go into cross-cultural mission work, but through your influence they can become sensitive to people different from themselves, knowing how to relate to others and be a positive Christian witness.

“ Churches must play a part in helping members reach out beyond their cultural and ethnic comfort zones. ”

I also think of our Christian schools and colleges and the important role they can play. We do have a certain disadvantage here which should not be allowed to become a liability in kingdom living. Because of their clientele, our Christian schools and colleges often do not reflect the diversity found in our communities and our public schools. Many of our children, therefore, have very little contact with children from other cultural backgrounds. Our educational institutions must become much more intentional about provid-

ing cross-cultural opportunities, lest our children become cultural strangers.

Finally, our congregations and their life, worship, and ministry have a vital part to play here. The message preached must reflect God's great love for all sinners regardless of cultural, ethnic or racial background. Churches must play a part in helping members reach out beyond their cultural and ethnic comfort zones. If at all possible our congregations must reflect more and more the richness and variety of redeemed humanity.

Churches have a part in helping members live in peace with people from other religions while at the same time modeling how to reach out with the saving gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are many challenges ahead. At the same time the possibilities are equally and even more exciting. It is my prayer that Calvin Seminary, our congregations, educational institutions and families will all do their part in raising the family of God to be a community of faith with missionary hearts and eyes. ■

REFUGE...cont.

SYTSMA

words of Psalm 46 are not just words of comfort for terrified survivors of a natural disaster or a national calamity. These words are a call to turn to God in repentance and faith. The Psalmist is a missionary proclaiming the good news of peace and salvation which God alone

gives. At the service held at Kobe Reformed Seminary on January 17, 1995, many people heard the gospel for the first time. Some continued attending church services even after they left the seminary. God with his loving missionary heart was reaching out to them in the middle of their distress. In the aftermath of the tragedy that occurred on September 11, 2001, God is

once again calling to all of us, “Be still and know that I am God.”

God desires this for people of all nations. He says, “I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” What God desires is what the world needs. The people of Kobe, Lagos, and Mexico City—the people of the whole world—suffer with the people of New York

and Washington D.C. The people of all nations need to hear from us that God is God and that he will be exalted among the nations. This tragedy of global proportions underscores the global scope of the church's task. God loves the nations with a loving missionary heart. Our task as God's people is to mirror that love to the world. ■

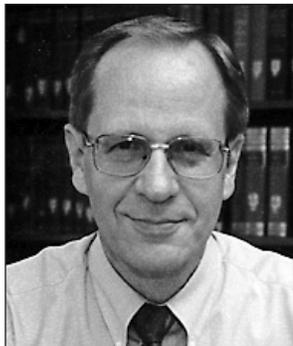


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CALVIN SEMINARY FORUM

GOD IS OUR REFUGE



RICHARD E. SYTSMA

Dean of Students at Calvin Theological Seminary.

Trade Center twin towers explode, crumple, and crush uncounted thousands of New York workers. As the death toll mounts, I wonder how many of the 30,000 body bags the City of New York has prepared will actually be used. Once again I feel numb and helpless—and angry. How can anyone commit such evil? I wonder, “Why?” I wonder what are God’s words to us in this tragedy.

I remember what happened at Kobe Reformed Seminary on the day of the earthquake. The sturdy seminary buildings suffered only minor damage, while most of the dwellings in the neighborhood were destroyed. Rev. Makita, the seminary president, canceled classes and turned the seminary into a refugee center for nearly a hundred neighbors who were now homeless. That evening professors, seminarians and earthquake victims joined in worship. They read and sang the words of Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.

What words could have been more fitting for the people of earthquake-stricken Kobe, a city sandwiched between the quaking mountains on the north and

the surging sea on the south? Those worshippers knew those words were God’s words for them, and they took solace in God, their refuge and strength. They heard God saying, “Be still and know that I am God.”

On September 12, 2001, the day after the terrorist attack, Calvin Seminary held its first chapel service of the 2001-2002 school year. We began the worship by reading and singing Psalm 46. Hearing of the mountains falling and quaking, we recalled the images of the man-made mountains of steel and glass quaking and falling. We heard the psalmist go on to picture nations in uproar, the earth melting, and desolation on earth—apt and vivid images of the turmoil that had enveloped our world. But at the conclusion of the Psalm we heard the words we needed desperately to hear: *He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire. Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

In our confusion, disbelief, and fear we heard God himself speak, “Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.” Those who spread terror, destruction and war will not have the last word. The final

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word is from God himself: God is God; God is sovereign; and God is with us. Like our Japanese brothers and sisters at Kobe Reformed Seminary six years before, we at CTS were still and knew that God is God. We too knew these were God’s words for us. We took solace in God, our refuge and strength.

In the days immediately following the terrorist attacks, the words of Psalm 46 have been read, sung, and heard in thousands of religious services around the world. At these services the words of the gospel of peace have sunk into the disoriented minds and fearful hearts of millions of people. For the

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