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CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

FORUM

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WINTER 2006

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Providing Theological Leadership
for the Church

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and David Young on a CRWRC disaster relief trip to
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from the president

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Every day, it seems, we see or read of people drowned, burned, or earth-quaked out of their homes. People’s suffering is televised to us all the time. There they are: sobbing children, grieving parents, bloodied soldiers and civilians. In our own homes and churches, too, we witness an array of evils. Crashes, tumors, strokes, family strife—such things tell us, if we didn’t already know, that we are frail creatures, “born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.”

An earlier generation would have said of suffering, “It’s God’s will.” God is trying us. God is chastising us. “All things work together for good to those who love God.”

But we’ve become wary, these days, of Job’s friends. We don’t want others to explain our suffering to us. We don’t care to be handed clichés for our sorrow. Nowadays we are slow even to mention God to fellow sufferers lest we intrude on their anger toward God, their discomfiture with God, their sense of the absence of God.

Maybe we are all like children who expect parents to take us under their wing and guard us there. So we are confused by the presence of evil in our parents’ world. It makes us stammer.

In *Blessings* Mary Craig reflects on the letters she and her husband received in the midst of family tragedy. People wrote to express deep feelings or sometimes to apologize for their ineptness in doing so. The ineptness itself comforted the Craigs: “the letters, representing so much anguishing groping for words, said more than the spoken word ever could.... It was the sheer floundering incoherence of so many of them that made them important and precious.”

We can do that for each other in the face of suffering: we can struggle to express our love and prayers and surely our consternation. But at the end of the day can we do no better than silence about God’s role in unexpected suffering? Must we always adopt the posture of learned ignorance and refuse to invoke the name of God or of Jesus Christ lest we offend sufferers by the sheer predictability of our piety?

I don’t think so. God’s work speaks to us in our sorrows, and we should not rob each other of its power.

I stood outside the cell of a man on death row some weeks ago and he was shining with the light kindled in him by God’s word.

Condemned to die, “but if God is for us, who can be against us?” Crammed into a tiny cell, but “the Lord has set me free.”

In this issue of *Forum*, colleagues ponder one of our hardest topics—God and suffering, and one of our most comforting doctrines—the providence of God. Please ponder with them.

Grace and peace,

REFLECTIONS

REFLECTIONS ON PROVIDENCE

Strange Comfort

My best friend, Marie, is pregnant for the fifth time. She has two children. She lost two children to miscarriage. When she became pregnant this time, she was relieved to find that soon after conception she felt awful. She was nauseated, couldn't tolerate the smell of coffee, and her most urgent desire was to lie down on the couch and take a nap. But these feelings brought her relief, because when she lost pregnancies through miscarriage she had been feeling great. Now, craving Chinese food at 10:00 in the morning and then finding that she can't eat it when it is in front of her gives her the strange comfort of knowing that her little baby is doing just fine. Whereas the rest of us would find such symptoms as warnings that something in us was very wrong, she knows that they are telling her that something is very right.

It is no coincidence that Jesus uses the metaphor of birthpangs for the events he describes in Mark 13: "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs."

Like my pregnant friend, Jesus knows that these horrors—while normally signifying that things are very wrong—will actually be reminders to his followers that in truth, everything is very right.

It probably didn't sound that way to Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Mark tells us at the beginning of the chapter that after Jesus made his declaration about the temple being thrown down, Peter, James, John, and Andrew came to him privately and asked what in the world he was talking about. Mark 13 is Jesus' response to their question.

These words were not spoken to the whole group. Jesus didn't preach them in the temple courts or send them echoing across the Sea of Galilee. Jesus said these things privately to these men who were, arguably, the four who were closest to him. These four heard Jesus' prophecy about the

by *Mary Hulst*
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temple and they knew he wasn't joking. Already that week—that Holy Week—they had seen him clear out the temple courts and curse a fig tree to its withering. They knew that his words about the temple were true. That is why they came to him and asked, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

Imagine them hearing these words about being brought to trial, about a desolating sacrilege, about fleeing to the mountains; imagine these four Galilean fishermen sitting on the Mount of Olives, gazing out on the magnificent temple, and hearing their rabbi tell them that someday soon the temple would be no more and their very lives would be in danger—and knowing that every word Jesus said was true.

And herein lies the comfort. Comfort in prophecies of persecution and distress? Comfort in predictions of their suffering?

No, comfort in that *this* is not all there is. If these words of Jesus are true, the words about wars and rumors of wars, the words about councils and beatings, the words about fright and flight—if these words are true, then so are the words that promise his return:

"...In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not

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Strange Comfort

give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."

And this is why Jesus can tell his friends not to worry and not to be afraid. The lack of fear and lack of worry commanded by Jesus of his followers are not based on promises that they will be exempt from sorrow, that suffering will miss their houses; not based on assurances that wars will take place far from their homelands and earthquakes will not happen in their hemispheres; not based on pledges of rescue or retaliation.

The words of comfort Jesus gives in the thirteenth chapter of Mark are founded on the truth that he will return.

So when followers of Jesus hear of wars and rumors of wars, we hear of them not as cause for undue concern, but as a reminder that the words

of Jesus are true—that suffering will be present on this earth, but that suffering will someday come to an end.

The strange comfort embedded in Mark 13 is that when nation rises against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; when there are earthquakes in various places; when there are famines—this is further proof that what Jesus says comes true. These horrors, while reminding us that things are not the way they are supposed to be in this world stained by sin, also serve to remind the followers of Jesus Christ that in truth, everything is very right because everything is just as Jesus said it would be.

Now we need to be cautious with such claims. This does not mean that when war is declared we merely shrug our shoulders

and go back to our crossword puzzles. This does not mean that when an earthquake wipes out thousands and we see the horrific pictures on CNN we receive the news matter-of-factly and flip over to Animal Planet. Just because Jesus says that such things are going to happen in the course of the world does not mean that we as his followers do not seek to relieve suffering and promote peace. There is plenty in the rest of the gospels that teaches us that.

others step back, and sign up when others check out.

In this chapter of Mark, Jesus actually assumes that this is how his followers will be: "As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. ... When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit."

Jesus doesn't say, "Oh, hey, you know, just in case you get into trouble sometimes for standing up for your faith, just in case somebody somewhere doesn't like what you're doing, here's a little advice that may be handy."

Jesus says, "When they bring you to trial and hand you over ..."

There is in Jesus' words the expectation that troubles are ahead for those who are close to him. So, Peter, Andrew, James, John, while the temple in Jerusalem may fall and Romans will slaughter the Jews, while many flee to caves and cling to false Messiahs, you—those I have called and love—do not worry and do not be afraid.

Jesus' words were spoken for these followers, these friends of his who would live to see the temple fall, who would see Jews flee from their holy city, who would be dragged before councils and kings. What Jesus prophesied happened: the stones of the temple were thrown down when the Romans swept into the city. Of his disciples, 11 were martyred and 1 died in exile.

But when they were on trial, they testified. When they were in prison, they sang. When earthquakes opened the doors of their cells, they stayed and converted the jailer. And just a few days after Jesus spoke these words, when women came to them and told them that Jesus had risen from the dead, they believed. They believed, and then they testified, and then they sang, and



*When these things happen, we,
as followers of Jesus Christ,
are to not be afraid.*

What this does mean is that when these things happen, we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are to not be afraid. Be alert, be aware, but do not be alarmed, do not be afraid.

This is why when wars and rumors of wars circle the globe, and earthquakes flatten parts of the world, it is the disciples of Jesus who are the first to push back. We are the ones who protest for peace, we are the ones who volunteer to rebuild. We are not the ones who stand idly by and shake our heads. We are not the ones who pretend that the pain of those half a world away does not matter.

Because our Lord has told us to be aware, to be alert, but also not to worry and not to be afraid, we can boldly step in when

then they were killed. When they lived, they lived boldly and when they died it was without fear.

Was this because they were so different from us? Infused with more of God's Spirit? Loved more by God's Son?

No. It was because they listened to their rabbi. Their rabbi who said to them, be aware, be alert, but do not be afraid. Their rabbi who said stay awake, but do not worry. Their rabbi who said to them that they would see the Son of Man come in clouds with great power and glory. Their rabbi who promised to gather the elect from the very ends of the earth.

They listened. And they changed the world.

When I just started writing this sermon, my pregnant friend called me. I told her that with her permission I was going to write about her. "I'm going to write about

being pregnant," I told her. And she said in a heartbeat, "How much it stinks?"

I then reminded her that at the end of this, she will hold a baby in her arms. And this mother of two who knows what it is to lose a pregnancy said to me, "Hopefully."

Hopefully. My friend lives, as many of us have, in the anxiety that surrounds being pregnant in a world where anything can go wrong. I've buried stillborn babies. I've buried young children. We live in a world where anything can go wrong. Which is why we need more than ever to hear these words of comfort from our Lord, who says that his return to this earth is even more certain than the birth of an Autumn baby.

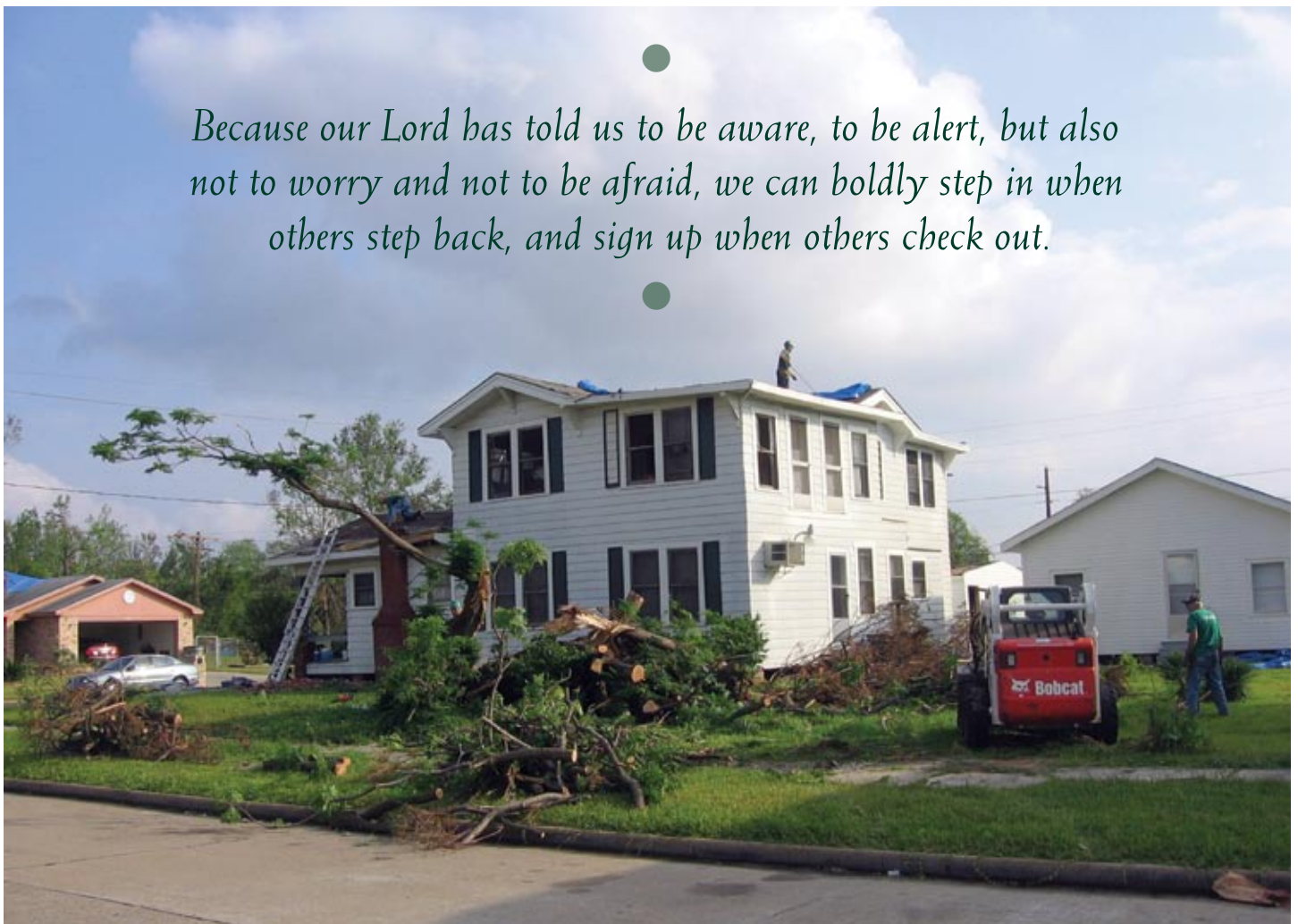
"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will

be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heaven will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens."

This is the Word of our Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.

This piece is adapted from a sermon preached at the CTS Bible and Ministry Conference in June 2005. To listen to the sermon in its entirety, go to the Lecture Archive under Continuing Education at www.calvinseminary.edu.

Because our Lord has told us to be aware, to be alert, but also not to worry and not to be afraid, we can boldly step in when others step back, and sign up when others check out.



The Problem of Evil

The Shipwreck of Faith?

The Shipwreck of Faith

I know someone who trusted God absolutely. Every night he prayed fervently and fell asleep confident of God's loving care. One night someone broke into his home, assaulted him, and left him permanently injured. Recently he explained why he is no longer a Christian. "I was taught that God takes care of those who trust him. I trusted him, but he did not take care of me. Either the God of my childhood does not exist, or he doesn't care about me."

This painful anecdote illustrates why the problem of evil and suffering has been called "the shipwreck of faith." It seems reasonable that if the all-powerful, all-good God of the Bible is in control, then suffering and evil should not exist—at least not the appalling amounts, horrific kinds, and unfair distributions of evil that afflict countless individuals and large parts of the world. And what about Christians? The question of Job still burns: If God really does love us, why does he let it hurt so bad? His wife's response still resonates: "Curse God and die." Probably more people have lost their faith because of evil than for any other reason.

Is Faith Blind?

But it doesn't have to be that way. Faithful Christians neither deny God nor his sovereignty. We affirm with Job that our Redeemer lives (19:25). We trust that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom. 8:28). We believe what Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 26 teaches—that God will turn all adversity to our good. Throughout the centuries, countless suffering Christians have testified to God's loving, powerful presence.

But is our faith blind? Isn't it absurd to believe in a good God? Isn't the evidence of his absence, impotence, or under-achievement overwhelming? Isn't our trust in God irrational, foolish, and even pathetic?

The Temptation of Theodicy

"No!" Christians respond. "It is not absurd to believe God." Just the opposite. "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" (Ps. 14:1). Great Christian thinkers from Augustine to C. S. Lewis have labored to understand God's reasons for allowing evil so that they could answer skeptics and comfort believers. Some, such as the philosopher Leibniz, thought that they could provide rationally convincing justifications and explanations of God's reasons for allowing evil. Such explanations are called *theodicies*.

Theodicy is tempting for two reasons. One is to have a compelling answer for doubters, both believers and non-believers. The second is to make sense of evil. Why is God allowing this? What good is supposed to come from it? Purposeless suffering is twice as difficult to endure. Theodicy would provide the explanation we crave.

Theodicy is a key issue in the book of Job. His three friends attempt to comfort him by offering theological explanations for his suffering—mainly that he needs or deserves it. Job rejects those explana-

by John W. Cooper
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tions and reasserts his faith. But eventually he wants an explanation from God (23:1-7). God reveals himself to Job in nature but does not answer his question. Job repents, admitting his inability to comprehend God's ways (42:1-6). God restores Job's fortunes, but he never tells him what we know from Job 1-2, that God allowed Satan to test the integrity of Job's faith to show that Satan is a liar and false accuser of God's friend. Job lives and dies trusting God without a theodicy.

We too should resist the temptation of theodicy. We humans are less capable of comprehending how God runs the world than mice are of understanding computers. In addition, having a full explanation of suffering can actually undermine our faith, giving a false sense of security and control. But the main reason for avoiding theodicy is that none is available. Human reason cannot construct one, and God has not provided one in Scripture.

The "Rationality" of Evil in Biblical Perspective

Our faith in God is not blind or irrational, however. Although Scripture does not present a theodicy, it does give a coherent perspective. The biblical narrative—from creation, through the fall, focusing on redemption in Christ, to the new creation—gives us a clear overview of the origin, pervasive consequences, and ultimate end of evil and suffering. In wisdom God created the world good but gave angels and humans the ability to do evil. With his permission and foreknowledge, they did. The results seriously affected the spiritual, human, and natural aspects of creation. Only God can fix the broken creation, and he has begun to do so through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ rules the fallen world through his Word and Spirit. But evil will

We ought to be careful
about what we say
precisely because,
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trust God's providence
without knowing
his reasons.

continue and perhaps get worse until he returns to judge the world and establish the Kingdom.

In Scripture, God usually does not miraculously preserve Christians from the consequences of the fall that afflict humans in general. God's regular miracle is the regeneration of our hard human hearts, giving us a new nature which he sustains in the struggle against our sinful nature and life in a fallen world. The people of God in history will continue to suffer evil and must keep wrestling with it, taking up our cross for the sake of Christ until he comes again. The signs of the times—earthquakes, floods, diseases, famines, persecutions, and wars—impact us just as much as the followers of the Beast, sometimes more so. But God preserves and cares for his people. He hears and answers our prayers. He will give us the Kingdom. Meanwhile he makes all things work together for our good, so that nothing separates us from his love in Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28-39).

Scripture makes sense of evil and gives us certain reason to hope in God. But it does not provide a theodicy. We cannot verify what the Bible teaches; we must accept it by faith.

"God Meant It for Good"

Scripture does not reveal all God's reasons for allowing the fall and its terrible consequences, but it does suggest some of God's reasons for allowing evil in some cases. Sometimes he uses bad things for just punishment (but not for people whose punishment has been suffered by Jesus). Sometimes he uses suffering for "soul-building"—to bring us to faith, to strengthen our faith, or to motivate growth in the fruits of the Spirit (Rom. 5:3-4; James 1:2-4). In John 9:1 the man was born blind so that Jesus could show God's glory. Sometimes God uses suffering to cause the church to grow—"the blood of the martyrs." Terrible events such as earthquakes and wars are always "signs of the times," warning humans that they cannot save themselves and must give account to God. Thus Scripture provides glimpses of God's wisdom in allowing evil and suffering, even afflicting Christians. But it does not state all his reasons, nor

The Gospel is that whether or not bad things lead to good things, God is always with us, loving and sustaining us even through the greatest pain and darkest despair.

does it explain each and every bad thing that happens.

Christians should not try to be wiser than Scripture. When bad things happen, we want to know God's reasons for them. Sometimes we can see obvious benefits, such as repentance and faith resulting from an illness—or realize that worse outcomes were averted, such as avoiding an accident because of a traffic jam. But sometimes the urge to identify God's reasons locates us with the friends of Job. We make pious pronouncements about God's reasons for a severe illness, a terrible tragedy, or an untimely death to reassure ourselves or comfort friends. "God must have taken your son to save him from a difficult future." "The hurricane was God's punishment for New Orleans' sin." Even if such judgments are consistent with general teachings of Scripture, we cannot read God's mind to discern how these events fit into his eternal counsel. We ought to be careful about what we say precisely because, like Job, we must trust God's providence without knowing his reasons.

Do All Things Work for Good?

Resisting the temptation of theodicy is especially important when bad things do not seem to have good outcomes. Many Christians understand "all things work for good" to mean that each and every bad

event is put there by God to lead directly to some greater good. According to this theology, there are no "purposeless" evils, no bad events that don't result in greater good. There is a shiny silver lining in everything from spilled milk to world wars. Even the torture, rape, and murder of a little girl is ordained by God to bring about something nice.

But is that true? It would take a pretty wonderful outcome to put positive spin on such a horrible crime. Some faithful Christians search decades without ever finding the meaning and purpose of tragic events and horrible suffering in their lives. Are they blind?

No. Greater good may not be there. "All things" does not necessarily mean "each and every thing." More likely it means "the totality of things." The second reading implies that God may allow some instances of evil and suffering that do not lead to greater good. But his whole plan, ordained from before the foundation of the world, does work together for the good of those who are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). That plan includes bad things that God does directly turn to our good. It includes perplexing things whose purpose takes awhile to figure out. It includes awful things that are much worse than any good that comes from them. But all of these things work together for the ultimate good according to God's plan. The Gospel is that whether or not bad things lead to good things, God is always with us, loving and sustaining us even through the greatest pain and darkest despair. "Nothing ... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

The Ship of Faith

Scripture gives us all we need to know about evil, but not a complete explanation. It warns that we will not escape suffering and evil in our earthly lives but must deal with them as followers of our suffering Savior. But thanks to God's Word and Spirit, our faith will not shipwreck. We will not sink even if we cannot comprehend evil or endure the pain. God himself strengthens our faith, hope, and love, just as he did for Job.

The Troubles of the Day

Prayer and Providence in a Broken World

“Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”
(Matthew 6:34)

No one saw that last line coming. In Matthew 6 Jesus lyrically teaches his disciples how to pray. He then goes on to tell his followers again and again, “Do not worry.” We are not to fret over food, drink, or clothing. Our heavenly Father knows we need all those things and he will provide them as surely as he feeds the birds and clothes the fields. It is all bracingly hopeful, redolent with a belief in God’s providence. When you pull together all of Jesus’ words, you arrive at a portrait of calm.

That’s why Matthew 6’s bottom line is properly startling. In essence what Jesus ends up saying is, “Therefore, don’t worry about tomorrow. Just let tomorrow worry about itself. And anyway, my friends, today life is bad enough as it is.” This is not expected! After all those sunny promises about God’s provision, how can we end with a blunt admission that we are sunk neck-deep in troubles? If anything, you would have expected to hear, “Don’t worry about tomorrow because it will be as chock-full of blessing as today is.” But no, that’s not what Jesus says. He says not to worry about tomorrow because there is plenty of troubling stuff to ponder now.

What a marvelous realist Jesus was! Somehow he was able to pivot from saying, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart,” to saying, “Life is often difficult,” without missing a beat and without, apparently, seeing any contradiction. Mostly, however, we *do* have a difficult time holding such things in tension. Life is *either* good or it’s bad; we struggle to wrap our minds around the idea that life can be good even *when* it is undeniably bad. Jesus encourages ardent trust in our heavenly Father even though he does not deny that the circumstances in

which we need to nourish such trust can be tough.

It is an unexpected conclusion and yet hopeful too. Why? Because Jesus tells us that we can seek first the kingdom, pray, and trust our heavenly Father for every good thing even—or maybe *especially*—on those days when we feel harried and pressed and distracted and troubled by all that vexes us in this sad world of hurricanes, cancer, earthquakes, and war.

For me, this is profoundly good news. If I thought that the only time I could serve God was when absolutely everything in my life was perfect, I’d wonder about when I could *ever* serve God. If I thought that I could pursue the kingdom only on days when I could devote my attention 110 percent to all things spiritual, I’d wonder if I could *ever* seek first the kingdom. If I thought that the only way to be certain

by Scott Hoezee
Director of the Center for
Excellence in Preaching



that I am still in the care of my heavenly Father was when every conceivable need in my life was satisfied to the full, I’d wonder how much God *ever* cares for me.

Jesus admits that even for the most faithful believer, each day has enough bad stuff as it is, and each of us knows deep in our bones that a truer word was never spoken. The life of discipleship and prayer does not take

place *outside* of the hurly-burly everyday nature of our lives but smack *within* all that occupies us, all that keeps us hopping, and all that makes us sad sometimes. Here is our Lord’s gospel at its practical best.

After all, we live profoundly terrestrial, earthy lives and there is no escaping that fact when we pray. We pray *from* the context of our Monday mornings and our Thursday afternoons, and we pray *for* the things we need and encounter on those days too. This connection of the earthly to the heavenly distinguishes Christianity from some Eastern traditions. Christian prayer is nearly the opposite of a kind of “transcendental meditation” by which you try to transcend your own thoughts and desires in order to enter some other realm on a plane far above all things typical and mundane. True, we want to meditate and focus on God when we pray . . . but once we are so focused, the “what” of our prayers goes right back to what happened in the office earlier in the day and how we need to make sure we can pay our bills this month. But this is fitting—true prayer is not meant to disconnect you from the world but to help you connect to it at a deeper level.

In Matthew 6 Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray. But before that chapter is finished, Jesus also assures the disciples that even the most prayerful person will still lead a life full of difficult realities. We pray to God because we believe in God’s providence—we believe that God can (and rou-

Jesus admits that even for the most faithful believer, each day has enough bad stuff as it is, that even the most prayerful person will still lead a life full of difficult realities.

●

*We pray to a God whose
providential care we believe even when
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●

tinely does) provide what we need. But the realism of Matthew 6 tells us that for now providence will not spare us from all hurts. There is a lot of comfort in this thought—it is a good thing to know that suffering does not mean we have fallen out of God’s care.

But on the other hand, the coexistence of suffering and prayer leaves the Christian faith vulnerable to those who claim that all of life is random, so that you can never definitively know whether a prayer for healing was truly “answered” or whether a given person just got lucky (and so would have been healed whether anyone had prayed or not). If prayerfulness is not a ticket to a pain-free life—if Christians who pray to be spared from a hurricane can get nailed by that storm the same as people who never pray—then who is

to say whether prayer makes a difference? “Prayer changes things,” according to an old adage. But many people retort, “Prove it!”

And, of course, we can’t. So we pray, “Your will be done,” and then chalk up our disappointments in prayer to the inscrutable will of God. “It’s not that prayer doesn’t work,” we say, “but only that we sometimes ask for something contrary to God’s wisdom and will.” Such a statement is true on its face but can lead to its own difficulties. When a four-year-old is ripped from her mother’s arms in the raging waters of a tsunami, who would want to claim this is the will of God? “Your will be done?” Now the questions grow even more acute.

There may well be no end to the ask-

ing of such hard questions about prayer. Had we never been invited to pray—if we resigned ourselves to the inscrutable will of God and to the inexplicable blessings and tragedies that come willy-nilly—then many of the Christian faith’s tougher questions would dry up. But *we have* been invited to pray to a God we dare name as our Father. What’s more, we believe that this heavenly Father provides for us and for all creatures such that at any given moment we have more for which to be thankful than we know or could name.

And yet the troubles of the day persist. “Each day has enough trouble of its own,” Jesus said, and we can be glad he said it. We will never run out of problems,

but because Jesus himself admitted this was so, we know that prayer remains thoroughly intertwined with tragedy and hurt. Scripture never promises it will be otherwise. Thus, we pray on. Like the poets who composed the psalms of lament—complaining about God’s absence and yet doing so while addressing that absent God—we pray to a God whose providential care we believe even when we cannot figure out why that care seems to go off-duty now and then.

As Frederick Buechner once observed, when you pull together all of the New Testament passages about prayer, it seems that the bottom line is always “Keep at it.” Truth is, most people testify that they have no choice. Even those who have been the most bitterly disappointed by prayer in the past find

they cannot prevent future prayers from welling up within them. So we keep at it. As Buechner says, “We keep on beating the path to God’s door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path when you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer the God you call upon will finally come, and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for.”

“Each day has enough trouble of its own,” our Lord said. And we reply, “Amen!” But for that same reason we keep on praying, ending even our worst days with a murmured but certain “Amen.”



When Pain Forms Us

When a doctor steps into the room and tells you, “I’m sorry ... it’s malignant,” you have heard words that are about the hardest for anyone to hear. They are words that pack an emotional wallop, and can shatter your sense of wholeness in an instant!

I’ve heard those words three times. The first time was in 1972. I had just begun a new pastorate; I was a 34-year-old father of three young sons, and I assumed I had a lifetime of ministry before me. It felt like my whole future fell apart. The doctor told me it was lymphoma and therefore radiation therapy would be necessary. The second time I heard those words was 1984. More serious surgeries and more radiation therapy became necessary. In 1990, I heard them for the third time. More surgery ... more radiation. It was lymphoma each time, though different types. Each time I felt devastated and each time it felt like my future had been wrenched away.

Thirty-three years have passed since I first heard those awful words, and fifteen years since the last time. Today, I’m cancer-free. So God has given me plenty of opportunity to reflect. Such experiences plunge us far beyond the trivialities of everyday life. And those reflections take on new dimensions when you are a caregiver/pastor yourself.

Nearly everyone who hears the “malignancy” word goes through a variety of emotional responses—from shock and denial, to deep emotion and anger, to fright and depression—before finally arriving at the point of acceptance. It’s one thing to help parishioners move through those stages; it’s something else entirely to be there yourself. I’ve had plenty of time to arrive at that point and in the process I’ve gained some holistic, healthy perspectives on life and living as a wonderful gift of God. I’ve struggled with how to integrate my faith with my life-shattering experiences.

In the process I’ve become rather impatient with glib and superficial answers to

the hard times in life and the complex struggles of faith. Glib answers don’t satisfy. Only deep trust does. My sense of deep trust is shaped and formed by seven insights that have been forged through such experiences.

1. Disease is an invading enemy.

All our lives we are busy warding off such invaders. We get fevers, tonsillitis, and chicken pox as children. We “catch” the flu, get toothaches, and break bones in adolescence. As adults, aches and pains of all sorts become our companions. Sometimes we experience the dreaded enemies of potentially terminal diseases or events—cancer, heart attacks and strokes. We see friends die. Every day we live we are involved in warding off this enemy in one way or another. These are not merely natural occurrences in the process of living, they represent daily combat. When we face an enemy, we fight, attack, and call in every force to aid us in the fight. So I went to doctors, laid under machines too complex for me to understand, underwent surgeries that were frightening, and took drugs that were powerful, all as part of the “combat” of life. This disease was an enemy trying to invade!

When you are told you have a malignant tumor, your theology is thrust into the realm of cold facts and frightening experiences.

by Howard
Vanderwell
Adjunct Professor
of Worship



2. This is a fallen world, and at times it’s not a safe place.

I had preached sermons on Genesis 3 and I had taught all those truths about the fall into sin, the corruption of this world, and I had embraced it all with my mind. Now I had to embrace it experientially and integrate it into my faith-life. When you are told you have a malignant tumor, your theology is thrust into the realm of cold facts and frightening

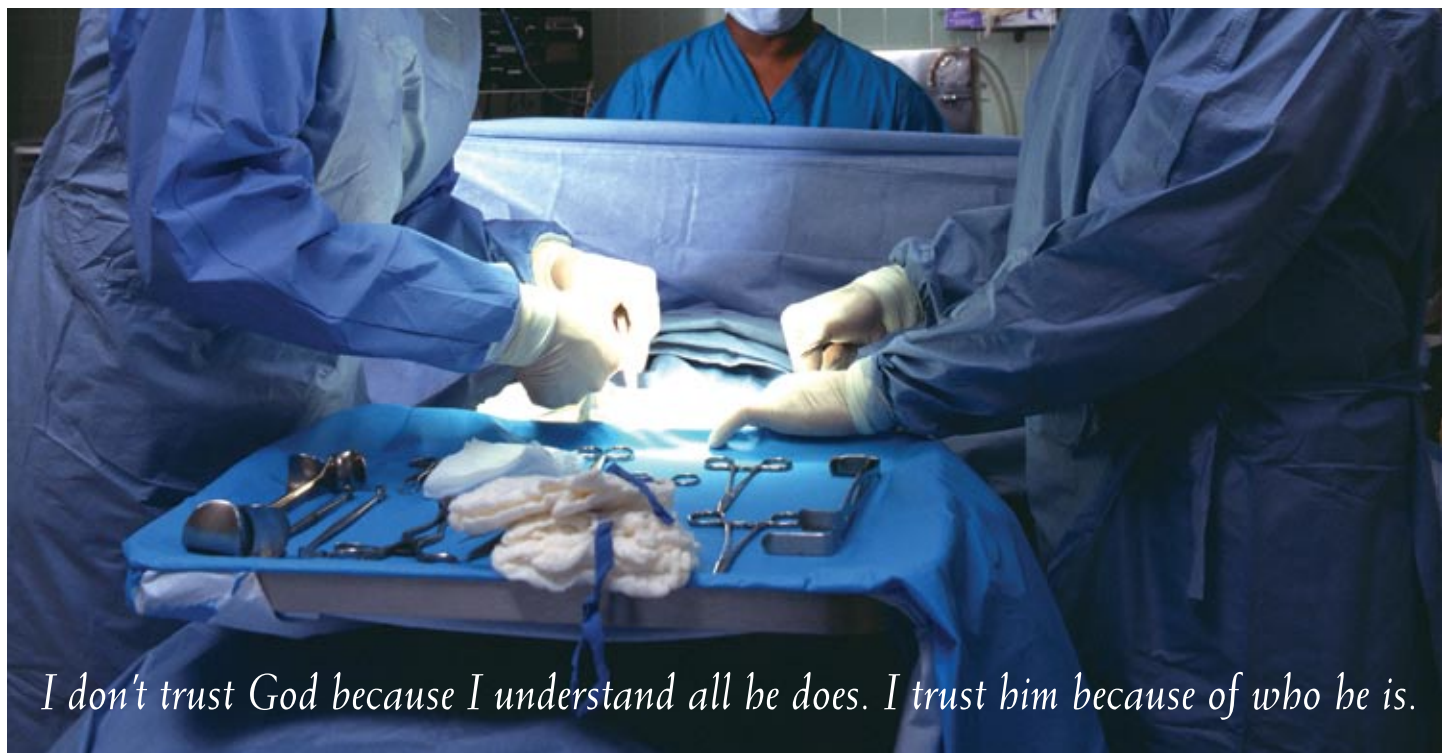
experiences. It’s a world where things happen that are different than God envisioned in the beginning. It makes this world seem like a very dangerous place.

3. We are fragile persons.

I was thirty-four when my first diagnosis came and most of us at that age feel anything but fragile. We assume we are strong, invincible, and have a lifetime ahead to conquer the world (or at least pastor a church!). But my whole sense of identity changed. I had to admit that this body, which could jog, could also get tumors. The pastor who felt strong enough to lead others, could suddenly need them deeply. The one who could pray for others could also cry out to God in pain and fear. The one who could preach from a pulpit could also lie between the sheets of a hospital bed. At thirty-four I sat in a hospital room in Chicago, stared out the window, and mouthed the words “I could die from this”—words I had never before uttered in my life! I felt very fragile ...

4. God is our friend and will never become our adversary.

Did I ask some of the hard questions that such experiences wring out of the suffering soul? Yes, I did. Did I question my previously held concept of God? Certainly. Did my theology seem to have as many holes in it as Swiss cheese? I wondered ... until God made it clear to me from the promises of his Word and the testimony



I don't trust God because I understand all he does. I trust him because of who he is.

of his Spirit that he cannot become my adversary. He had adopted me through Jesus Christ and would forever hold me in his hand. Week after week when I had pronounced his benediction on the gathered congregation he had also extended it to me, and I knew that I carried the benediction with me to the hospital, into surgery and into radiation therapy. I knew that he stood with me, arm around my shoulder, tears in his eyes like mine, reassuring me that he would be my friend forever and walk with me through whatever pain this world can give. Bought by his Son, he surely wouldn't abandon me.

5. We don't have to understand God to trust Him.

This was perhaps the hardest lesson to learn and the deepest insight to arrive at. We all want to understand what God does and why He does it. It seems so much easier to trust him if we can know the "why" and the "wherefore" of things. And that's especially true for those of us who are pastors and theologians. It's assumed that we have the answers in life. Whatever questions people raise, we're supposed to be able to answer and explain. And now I couldn't! Could I still trust? Even if I never understood? And then I read one of those precious gems that Lew Smedes wrote (*How*

Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?). He says the best believing, deep believing, is believing against the grain! When everything else seems to shout "No," we affirm "Yes!" It put my trust on a new level. I don't trust God because I understand all he does. I trust him because of who he is and the unshakeable promises he has given me in his Word and confirmed through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's easier now for me to live with mysteries. It's easier to say "I don't know" and keep on trusting.

6. We have belief and unbelief side-by-side in our heart.

By the Spirit's power, I can believe. But in my own personal weaknesses, I can also doubt. Always. Both. I came to feel very much at home with the father of the demon-possessed boy in Mark 9 who said, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (v. 24) It was an admission on his part that he had both, side-by-side in his heart. I do, too. Admitting that explained a lot of things I was feeling. I knew then why I needed to retain my spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, and feeding my spirit with God's Word. It explained why I needed the encouragement of family, friends and church. We were all involved in this process of aiming to diminish the "unbelief"

and build up the "belief." The success of my journey depended on this process of starving one and feeding the other.

7. We can become very comfortable with deep emotion.

The pain of life often opens up our previously locked-in emotions. Those of us who find it easier to laugh than cry, easier to sing praise than cry laments, or don't dare raise our hard arguments with God, find that suffering often makes us more real. And then we begin to notice how the whole range of human emotion is expressed in Scripture, especially the Psalms. We find it's OK to cry and to feel sad. We don't have to pretend we are always "up." Being "down" is not a sign of weak faith! We achieve greater internal honesty. But at the same time it makes our laughs better, our praise deeper, and our thrill at the deep privileges of life richer than ever. When we allow ourselves to wrestle with the pain, we also allow ourselves to soar with the blessings!

Suffering is formative. It forms our view of life and our self. It also makes us aware of and alive to the beauty and benefit of meaningful relationships. And, best of all, it has an important role in forming our faith.

Confessions of a Disciple-in-Training A Student's Perspective on the New Formation for Ministry Course

By Kristy Manion

We first met one another one morning in early September, a group of 70 first-year M.A. and M.Div. students gathered at the Calvin Seminary Chapel for the first day of orientation. Some of us came directly from undergraduate studies, affirmed by our church communities in our ministry potential. Some of us came as people leaving a first or second career in favor of pursuing the new work to which God had called us. And still others enrolled as those currently serving on church staffs, desiring to grow in our knowledge and love for God in order that we might more effectively serve our congregations.

We gathered as a slightly awkward, newly-formed community of individuals from various cultural backgrounds and church affiliations, and several of us had more than a little anxiety about starting an educational journey whose end was, as yet, rather indeterminate. At the outset of this journey, I can only guess that others were asking the same question that weighed on my own mind: *What am I doing here?* Not, *Why am I here?* (though I was asking that, too), but more precisely, *How does the time I spend here in seminary relate to the person I am and the ministry role I assume, now and in the future?*

It's a critical question, because its answer has everything to do with the kind of ministry leaders we will become. *What am I doing here?* While it's a question each student must wrestle to answer for him or herself, we're not left to wrestle alone. So perhaps the more appropriate question is, *What are we doing here?* Whispers of an answer began to echo in our seminary community as we worshipped and prayed, studied and spoke together in large and small group settings this fall within the Formation for Ministry (FFM) program. We were divided into groups of 70 and seven: a large group of 70 studying together in a class, and a small group of seven or eight



discussing the intersection of study, faith, and a life of ministry. And as we began to meet together, a funny thing happened. We began to travel together.

In the class, Professor David Rylaarsdam encouraged us to consider how each aspect of seminary study—from biblical studies to theological reflection to ministry practices—should not only *inform* but also *form* us. We explored spiritual formation as the process of “being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others,” and, several members of the class would add, “for the glory of God.” A range of written works fueled our discussions, from early classics by Augustine and Athanasius to contemporary articles by Dallas Willard and Eugene Peterson. Each class brought surprisingly lively discussion for such a large group, as we thought together about

formation through the practice of classic Christian disciplines and the various academic disciplines in the seminary. Several guest speakers from within and outside the seminary assisted us toward this end, including CTS President Neal Plantinga and several CTS professors. On more than one occasion, our class reading or discussion providentially aligned with a particular situation or need in youth ministry at our church. I watched in wonder as these two paths—the one of seminary study and the other of ministry practice—converged, each bringing broader understanding to the other.

Class assignments, too, had their own role to play in formation. Each week brought an opportunity to write reflectively on the class reading or on our own practice of a spiritual discipline with which we were previously unfamiliar. Many of us, myself included, had primarily thought of the Christian disciplines as those of regular Scripture reading, prayer, and corporate worship, and were challenged by learning about lesser-known disciplines that have served the church in growing toward Christlikeness for centuries: disciplines like *lectio divina*, secrecy, solitude, silence, celebration, service, and others. Our final writing assignment for the quarter involved taking prayerful inventory of the current state of affairs in our lives and designing a realistic but motivated personal Rule of Life, or trail map for spiritual growth, considering when and how we might implement some disciplines in key places in an effort to be conformed more and more into the image of Christ.

The first portion of our class has now been completed (we'll gather again for one more quarter in two and a half years), but our small groups will meet regularly for the next three years. I can speak now only for my own small group, but within the first three



months of traveling together, I have already found a rich and supportive community of people. Our diversity (of age, gender, ethnicity, and church background) brings life to our discussions as we challenge each other to think and live in new ways before God's face. As we grow increasingly willing to express ourselves honestly within the group, we find a place in which we learn about how the church community can function. Undoubtedly we will disagree with

one another at times. And ideally, we will come to a better understanding of church communities as we walk through these situations together.

The *What am I doing here?* question is one I hope we'll contemplate throughout



our lives. As people considering how to best shepherd God's flock, we must be people who have learned to think deeply and carefully and about matters of doctrine and biblical interpretation, but the work of our minds must be enlivened by the Spirit

of God, who brings loving attention to our work. We must study and love and work and play as people who carry out Jesus' version of the *shema* daily, people who are learning to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself" (Lk. 10:27).

Kristy Manion is an M.Div. student at CTS.

She also serves at Calvin College as Coordinator of the Jubilee Fellows Program, an initiative for students considering ministry, and as the Special Assistant to the Vice President for Student Life.



Preaching Still Belongs to the Church

Preaching Still Belongs to the Church" was the topic of our 2005 Fall Preaching Conference, held on October 13, 2005, and attended by close to one hundred pastors and other church leaders. The day included an opening worship service, two lectures by our guest, David Davis from Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, entitled "Discerning the Voice of the Listener" and

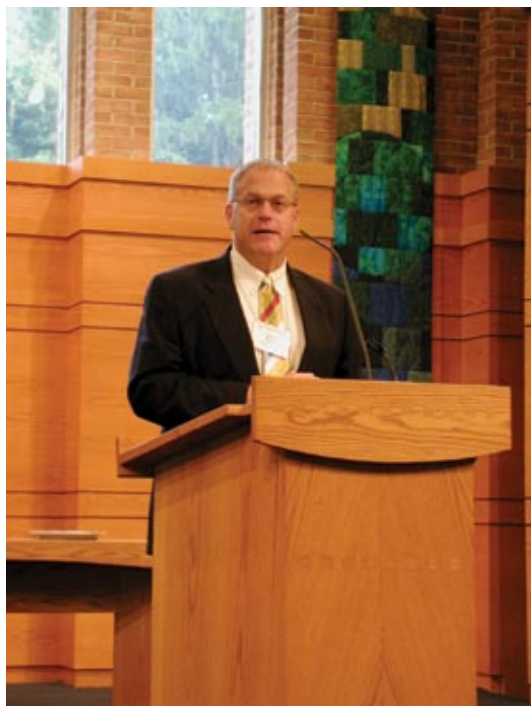
"Toward a Shared Preaching Life", and an interview and question period with Dr. Davis conducted by CTS President Neal Plantinga.

Those who attended this year's seminar expressed great appreciation for being able to hear from a speaker who is himself still engaged in the weekly task of writing new sermons for a congregation. In addition to his Ph.D. in homiletics, Dr. Davis has twenty years of experience as a preaching pastor. One pastor reflected, "This has been a tough couple of weeks for me, and to hear the



ministry of preaching lifted up was encouraging. I kept saying to myself as Davis was speaking, 'I can do that,' and 'I believe God has called me to do that.' "

You can now see and hear that day's presentations by clicking into CTS's online lecture archive at www.calvinseminary.edu under Continuing Education. You will also find links to the website of our Center for Excellence in Preaching, which sponsored this conference and provides many resources for preachers at <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu>. We hope you can take advantage of this online learning opportunity!



The Chronicles of Narnia at CTS

One of the great stories of good overcoming evil comes from storyteller and theologian, C. S. Lewis. The December 2005 release of the new film *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* brought much discussion about whether the story—and the movie—should be used for evangelism. This issue was addressed at CTS on December 15, 2005 in a lecture entitled “Are the *Chronicles of Narnia* an Evangelistic Text?” by Dr. John Bowen, Professor of Evangelism at Wycliffe College in Toronto, Ontario.

Bowen believes that evangelism involves words which help people take steps towards faith in Jesus—through preaching, Bible study, testimony, and conversation. It is best understood as a process that takes time and repetition—and many questions. Provoking such questions is perhaps one way the *Chronicles* can be used evangelistically. As for making a movie of *The Narnia Chronicles*, Lewis himself called the idea



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“blasphemy” in a letter dated December 18, 1959. And when asked in a 1963 interview by *Decision* magazine, “Would you say that the aim of Christian writing, including your own writing, is to bring about an encounter of the reader with Jesus Christ?” he answered “That is not my language, yet it is the purpose I have in mind.”

The Narnia Chronicles can supply great material for preaching, Bowen observed, though he was quick to note that the story is not an allegory, but a “supposal”, according to Lewis, as in, “suppose God made another world and went in to save it—what would that look like?” Following Lewis’s example,

Bowen hopes the new movie will help move people toward Christ through their imaginations and wonderings about the story. He recommended that preachers not try to explain it all but say something like “Aslan has another name in our world. I wonder what that is.”

The preaching of the Apostle Paul in Athens in Acts 17 is Bowen’s model. Paul used the literature and philosophy of the day to prepare the way for people to hear about Jesus. Bowen suggested that “maybe we should be praying that people who watch the movie will just start to ask questions!”

Bowen concluded that “like the good teacher he is, Lewis does not spell things out for his students,

but points them in the right direction, and lets them discover the truth for themselves. Most evangelists are reluctant to do this! Lewis however is content to sow seeds, nurturing curiosity that he trusts will lead people to consider or reconsider the stories of Jesus.... Is this evangelistic? In the sense of calling for an immediate decision to follow Jesus, no, but if evangelism involves all kinds of words whose intention is to help people take steps towards faith in Jesus, then the stories of Narnia certainly count.”

The lecture by Dr. Bowen can be viewed at www.calvinseminary.edu in the Lecture Archive.



Author Thomas Lynch Speaks at CTS

The fall 2005 Book of the Quarter at CTS was *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* by Thomas Lynch. In this unique collection of essays, Lynch, an undertaker and poet from Milford, Michigan, eloquently portrays a trade which few would consider taking up as a career. He digs into the experiences, pains, and joys of life and death, and explores the issues surrounding funerals and undertaking, all with an endearing tenderness and a raw honesty.

We had the opportunity to hear this in person when he visited CTS on December 1, 2005. Students, faculty and staff spent time with Lynch in the student center, where he responded to questions and conversed with humor, honesty and compassion. Over lunch, Book of the Quarter community reading group members listened to President Plantinga interview Lynch. After much spirited conversation Lynch commented that he was delighted to have this opportunity to meet with a group of pastors

and pastors-in-training. Likewise, attendees (many of whom are pastors) remarked that Lynch's approach to death and undertaking is not only refreshing but an unmistakably important resource for pastors.

M.Div. student Karen Norris agrees: "What is most convicting about Thomas Lynch is the importance of being there and being fully present, fully alive, in the experience of death. So much of our culture tries to make death go away. But Thomas Lynch helps us to see the importance of looking death in the face, holding on to both the grief of loss and the hope of resurrection." The many moments of hearty laughter, nodding of heads, mutterings of "yes, that's right", as well as the line of people waiting to meet Lynch in person confirm that Lynch is a vital voice for people who minister in a culture which prefers to keep death at a distance.



Author Thomas Lynch (l.) was introduced by seminary president Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.



BOOK OF THE QUARTER

Seminary president Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. chooses a book for each quarter to read and discuss in the seminary community and in reading groups beyond our walls to stimulate reflection and conversation. Here are the books chosen for the 2005–2006 academic year:

Fall 2005

Thomas Lynch

The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade



Winter 2006

Lauren F. Winner
Girl Meets God: A Memoir



Spring 2006

Marilynne Robinson
Gilead: A Novel

David H. Engelhard—A Believer in Providence

This *Forum* issue goes to press in the very week in which Dr. David Engelhard died, prematurely by our standards, at the age of 64. David's lifelong ministry career as a Calvin Theological Seminary professor and as General Secretary of the Christian Reformed Church in North America was cut short, again—by our standards. But not by David's.



For the past ten months David's family has maintained a website to keep friends and loved ones up-to-date on his medical condition. Its opening page contained the words of Article 13 of the Belgic Confession, "The Doctrine of God's Providence." During these months of illness, David has proclaimed, by his life and witness, his deep faith in the providence of God. His memorial service that included a packed congrega-

tion of family and colleagues began with a recording of David reading Article 13 of the Belgic Confession. There was unshakable confidence in his voice as he told us that "nothing happens in this world without (God's) orderly arrangement" and "this doctrine gives us unspeakable comfort."

The subject of God's providential rule over all things is deep and worthy of the biblical and theological attention this *Forum* issue has given it. And it is in many ways "beyond our ability to comprehend." But as this issue goes to press now, how wonderful to have this doctrine not just written about, but vitally professed, and lived, by one of God's children in the deepest valley of life. We hope this *Forum* will help all who read it to live each day with grace, courage, and thankfulness.

Where is life's path leading you?

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