How Was the Sermon?

1. BIBLICAL
   - The sermon content was derived from Scripture:
     1  2  3  4  5
   - The sermon helped you understand the text better:
     1  2  3  4  5
   - The sermon revealed how God is at work in the text:
     1  2  3  4  5
   - The sermon displayed the grace of God in Scripture:
     1  2  3  4  5

1=Excellent   2=Very Good   3=Good   4=Average   5=Poor
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Every Sunday they do it again: thousands of ministers stand before listeners and preach a sermon to them. If the sermon works—if it “takes”—a primary cause will be the secret ministry of the Holy Spirit, moving mysteriously through a congregation and inspiring Scripture all over again as it’s preached. Part of the mystery is that the Spirit blows where it wills and with peculiar results. As every preacher knows, a nicely crafted sermon sometimes falls flat. People listen to it with mild interest, and then they go home. On other Sundays a preacher will walk to the pulpit with a sermon that has been only roughly framed up in his (or her) mind. The preacher has been busy all week with weddings, funerals, and youth retreats, and on Sunday morning he isn’t ready to preach. Miraculously, his rough sermon rises on the wings of the Holy Spirit and gathers people to God.

Strange things happen when a minister preaches. After the service, people thank the preacher for things she didn’t say, or for things she did say but hadn’t understood as well as the listener had. Our words can be “wiser than we are,” said Ben Belitt, and never more so than when the Spirit of God is in the building. On such occasions, as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Something happens between the preacher’s lips and the congregation’s ears that is beyond prediction or explanation.”

In any case, as we teach our students here at the Seminary, the preacher’s job is to preach about God. Open up the Scriptures and preach from them about God. Respect God’s mystery and our finitude, but preach about God. Admit our sin, our corruption, and the corruption of our knowledge of God, but do preach what we know of God: God’s mercy, God’s judgment, God’s wisdom, God’s Messiah, God’s Spirit, God’s enthusiasm for losers and nobodies. The Bible’s big story is not human sin—dark and desperate as it is—but God’s redeeming grace centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the preacher must find excellent ways to tell this story and preach this gospel.

Congregations can help, and in this issue four good colleagues tell how to do it.

Grace and peace.

from the president
Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.
How Was the Sermon?

“Nice sermon, pastor,” the friendly woman said as she breezed through the narthex door. “That sermon just didn’t do anything for me,” the disappointed man said as he tugged on his coat and headed to the parking lot. The one comment tells the preacher generally that she may have done a good job; the other tells the preacher generally that something may have gone wrong. But in both cases it’s that adverb “generally” that is the problem.

“What exactly did I say that made that sermon so ‘nice’ according to Lloyd and Sheila last week?” the preacher wonders. Then again, “What exactly did I say that made Alice so ticked?” What’s more, how can the preacher be sure that either comment was on target? Whether someone is complimenting or critiquing the pastor’s sermon, pastors are better off if they know that the person making the comment has some idea about what a sermon should be in the first place—and therefore has some good reasons for suggesting that a given sermon did or did not hit the mark.

When Calvin Theological Seminary established “The Center for Excellence in Preaching” three years ago, the faculty knew it would serve the church if they came up with some standards by which to assess sermons. The faculty did so, and the four standards they came up with were eventually folded into the Seminary’s new sermon evaluation form (enclosed in this issue of Forum). In an effort to help everyone in the church be able to provide their pastors with the kind of informed feedback that is genuinely helpful, the balance of this article will look briefly at each of these four standards of excellent preaching.

Excellent preaching is biblical.

Scripture is the vessel through which and by which the Holy Spirit brings the gospel to light. So the first step in evaluating a sermon is to ask, “Does this sermon reflect a serious engagement with the biblical text? The next time I read this passage, will I be able to remember at least one insight that I gleaned from this sermon?”

For their part, pastors need to approach the text with eagerness and an expectation that they will be startled by what the text reveals. Too often preachers assume too much and so conclude that biblical texts don’t have a lot of potential to startle. My colleague Randy Bytwerk, a Calvin College communications professor, says that before Thomas Edison would hire someone to work in his invention shop, he would take the candidate out to lunch for some subtle observation. When the soup arrived, if the potential employee added salt before he tasted the soup, Edison would not hire him. People who assume too much do not make good inventors because they get rid of their best ideas before they bother to try them out.

Preachers should never assume they know how a certain text “tastes” before reading it. Preachers should expect to be startled by the text and then bring that expectation into the pulpit. What’s more, preachers should expect to be convicted by the text through their careful study of it. Congregations, in turn, should hear in the sermon not how the preacher “feels” about the text nor what the preacher wants to make the text say. Instead, truly biblical sermons are those that proclaim the truth of the text. Only when the
How Was the Sermon? sermon says what the text says can we expect the Holy Spirit to work through that sermon in ways that are fresh, bracing, and startling.

Excellent preaching is authentic.

Some while ago when serving as a guest preacher, I was approached by a woman who said with great enthusiasm, “What I liked most about your sermon is that I can tell you really believe this yourself!” I was glad to hear that but was at the same time troubled. Her comment told me that she had heard altogether too many sermons that did not reveal such transparency between the message and the heart of the one who proclaimed it.

According to Mark’s gospel, when Jesus first began to preach and teach in places like Capernaum, the people were properly wowed by his miracles—but what arrested their attention even more was, as they put it, “He teaches as one with authority, not like the scribes and Pharisees.” What differentiated Jesus from others was that there was no discernible gap between his message and his own person.

I once heard a charming anecdote about Pope John XXIII. Apparently one day in the 1950s the Pope was having an audience with a number of people, including several mothers of young children. At one point the Pope said to one of these women, “Could you please tell me the names of your children? I realize there are others here who could give me that information, but something very special happens when a mother speaks the names of her own children.” I think we know what the Pope meant. When our relationship to and engagement with something or someone is as close as a mother-child bond, then we cannot help but speak of such things with warmth, fervor, love, and commitment.

The more people sense the preacher’s own engagement with and devotion to the gospel and the Christ of God who is that gospel’s centerpiece, the more sermons will take hold. It’s the old “fire in the belly” phenomenon: there can be no substitute for the preacher’s own enthusiasm about the things he or she proclaims. When a congregation has the sense that the preacher is bored with his own sermon, how in the world will that message touch anyone? But when a preacher has spent the week engaged with the biblical text in ways that make her eager to get into the pulpit and share the week’s findings and discoveries with everyone else, that sermon will take hold almost immediately.

Excellent preaching is contextual.

The Word of God is the unchanging foundation and center of any sermon. Further, God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, and so there are things preachers must say today that are identical to what Paul said in Antioch 2,000 years ago. Some things do not change.

But preachers cannot speak even core gospel truths today in the same way John Calvin did in Geneva 400 years ago or Augustine did 1,600 years ago. Preachers need to know their context, their culture,
the shape of the lives into which they want to pour the gospel’s content. Where and how is the gospel being challenged and questioned and undermined today? How are those peculiar challenges different from what was true fifty years ago?

No, preachers never accommodate the message of the gospel. But to make even that unchanging message intelligible to people today requires a savvy apprehension of the context in which Christ will be encountered today. So preachers need to read good newspapers and magazines, explore the contours of modern life through the works of thoughtful novelists and poets, be judicious viewers of television and films, and be willing to listen to the voices of even those who may count as the church’s fiercest and nastiest critics. Congregations have the right to hear a voice from the pulpit that connects with the contemporary situation.

Excellent preaching is life-changing.

The preacher needs to preach with the expectation that something will happen as a result of the sermon. Preaching needs to be eventful. This sense of anticipation has to start with the preacher himself. Sermons never seek merely to impart information but carry with them the expectation that if the sermon is biblical, if the preacher clearly believes what she is saying, if the message is spoken in a contextual way that will be understandable to people in the twenty-first century, then the Holy Spirit is going to do something.

If people listen to this message with prayerful hearts and with a measure of holy seriousness, their lives can change. People come to the faith for the first time because of what they hear in sermons. Others recommit themselves to the faith after a period of doubting and wandering. Still others who are perfectly solid in their faith will find their pulses quickened and their spirits uplifted by being reminded again of precious gospel truths.

These four standards of excellent preaching provide church members with some pegs on which to hang their thoughts about the preaching they hear. Being aware of these categories can help us move from saying, “Nice sermon, pastor,” to something more along the lines of, “What I like about your sermons, pastor, is that they are so rooted in the Bible and yet so aware of how Scripture speaks to us today.” Or we can move from, “That sermon didn’t do much for me,” to something more like, “Pastor, I have a hard time being able to tell if you are very enthusiastic about the message yourself.”

In the Reformed tradition, preaching has always occupied a central place in the life of the church. That seems unlikely to change, and so also conversations about preaching will continue across coffee tables, around dinner tables, in the narthex, and in the council room. It is our hope that providing some guidelines for such conversations will help make those conversations as fruitful as they can be to the benefit of preachers and congregations alike and to the singular glory of the great God whose wonders we proclaim!

Resources for Congregations on the Center for Excellence in Preaching Website:
http://cep.calvinseminary.edu

Even though the Center for Excellence in Preaching (CEP) website is geared mostly for pastors, there are a number of resources on the site that may be of interest to elders, deacons, and others in the church. We encourage you to visit and explore the CEP website even if you are not a preacher.

When you come to the site, notice especially these pages that are listed on the main menu on the left-hand side of the screen:

• “Conference and Seminar Listings”: CEP keeps a running list of upcoming events throughout North America, including some that have a wide appeal to all churchgoers, such as “The Festival of Faith & Writing” and the annual “Symposium on Worship,” both held at Calvin College.

• “Podcast and Audio Sermons”: CEP now links to hundreds of outstanding sermons that you can listen to right on your computer or download into an iPod or other mp3 player. Many people use these sermons for midweek devotions or as discussion starters in small groups.

• “Online Lecture Archive”: Calvin Theological Seminary maintains a large, diverse, and vibrant archive of lectures that can be listened to (or viewed) online.

• “Discover Fresh Reading”: In addition to preaching-specific books like commentaries and sermon collections, the CEP website features a wide range of recommended children’s books, novels, memoirs, and biographies that appeal to anyone who loves to read.

• “Resources for Congregations”: On this part of the CEP website you can access several of the documents referred to in this issue of Forum, including the new Sermon Evaluation Form and tools to help pastors and congregations alike plan out the church’s preaching calendar.

• “Find Learning Opportunities”: Among the items on this portion of the website are tips and ideas for planning spiritual retreats and other exercises designed to renew heart, body, and soul.
I n the first year of my ministry, I was not prepared for it. Nobody ever told me that my sermons might come up for discussion in consistory meetings! But here we were in this meeting, and I discovered that the elders wanted to evaluate my preaching. They wanted to talk about the vocabulary I used, how well I explained the text, how interesting it was, and how well I preached the catechism! It was my first year in my first parish and I was feeling very fragile and quite defensive. I went home wounded.

But the elders at Lebanon CRC in rural Iowa understood that they shared the responsibility for providing good preaching for the congregation. While they knew it was my responsibility to do the preaching, they knew they had a hand in it too. Apparently they understood that elders “oversee the doctrine and life of . . . the congregation” (Church Order, art. 25b), that elders “shall regulate the worship services” (art. 52a), and that if I had to be faithful, they must be too.

What happened in that consistory room from time to time was jarring, but very formative, and it set me on a journey that gave me a much greater appreciation for the fact that good preaching takes good elders. As the journey continued, I came to realize that generally you can’t preach well without the aid of good elders. If only all the elders of the church realized that!

It required some adjustments and learning on my part. I had to overcome the natural defensiveness it stirred up. After all, who in the world were they to think they could evaluate my preaching? I have a calling to preach. I had been to seminary (and some of them hadn’t even finished high school). But defensiveness serves no good purpose; it only shuts down conversations and aborts benefits.

So I had to move from defensiveness to accepting their comments and evaluations, albeit a mite reluctantly for some time! I then moved from accepting it to welcoming it because I found it was so valuable. And then I moved to a new stage of even soliciting it, sometimes from elders who seemed to think this was not their task and were quite resistant to the idea. In the years since, I’ve wanted many elders to go back and have a conversation with those first elders at Lebanon. As the membership of consistories varied from one year to the next, I found a lot of inconsistency in the commitment of elders to share this task.

At the same time, I had to change my perspective on motives. I found it was important to distinguish between criticizing and evaluating. When those elders at Lebanon first opened up the subject, I assumed it was to criticize my preaching. But over a period of time I learned it was something else: evaluation not for making me feel inferior but for aiding in my growth and in my striving for a better sermon. I could make that adjustment as I better understood their motives. They believed it was their calling before God to collegially share the leadership of the church with me and to lovingly aid me in becoming a better preacher so they could be fed well. I learned that they loved the congregation, and they loved me, and wanted the best for both.

The church needs good elders like that! Elders who take seriously their task to “oversee the doctrine and life of the members of the congregation” (Church Order, art. 25b) and to “regulate the worship services” (art. 52a) will have four tasks that are far too often overlooked. The preacher whose elders take these tasks seriously and in a healthy Christian spirit will be well served and will have a more effective preaching ministry.

1. Assessment of the congregation.

We preachers often live in a somewhat different environment than parishioners do. So it’s often very difficult for us to fully understand what they are experiencing, what their struggles are, and what needs to be addressed in preaching. We preachers move into the life of a congregation at a certain point in time, whereas many elders have been immersed in the life of their community for many years and thus know it better than we do. Each congregation has its own distinct personality and character, and good preachers will be aware of that. What are the key needs
here? What are the trouble spots? What will help this congregation listen well? What will destroy their ability to listen well? What will build trust? Because they have lived within the church community and because of the visits they do in their ministry, elders often have key insights into all these questions.

However, over the years I discovered that many elders find it difficult to articulate the unique marks and needs of the community, so later in my ministry I devised a “Situational Analysis Form” that elders could use. It gave them an opportunity to point to issues or needs they felt preaching should address, listing forty different themes, issues, and doctrines organized in five different categories. In addition, they had opportunity to add other comments they felt were necessary for planning preaching. They were instructed to complete this form on the basis of what they believed the congregation needed most, not merely their own personal preferences. I gave this to my elders about once each year and carefully studied the tabulated results. (A sample of this form can be found in Malefyt and Vanderwell, Designing Worship Together, p. 171, and on the Center for Excellence in Preaching website under “Resources for Congregations.”)

2. Instruction in Discernment.

Most of us preachers find it difficult to receive comments and criticisms objectively. We are often fragile. After all, a sermon is part of our soul, and when anyone comments on it in a way that seems even a little negative, we feel wounded. Consequently our responses are not always so healthy. Elders can be very valuable in helping us learn how to receive comments discerningly. First of all, elders keep us realistic: the criticism is out there. But they also help us in the evaluation process. What do we know about the source of this criticism? In what spirit is it offered? What can we learn from it? What is behind it? Is this an isolated voice? How can we avoid becoming reactionary? How can we remain positive? Are there other critics who “fly under the radar” that we ought to consider? Criticism and feedback need to be evaluated and interpreted, but rare is the preacher who can do it all alone.

3. Participation in Planning.

For some preachers, planning ahead is difficult. We don’t know where to begin and what to select. The assessment of the congregation and its needs as explained above can be very helpful. But the preacher who involves elders in the process of planning the preaching program is wise. Preachers must plan ahead so that others, particularly musicians and artists, can make their selections, do their planning, and have time for adequate rehearsals. Therefore, elders must be involved early on in the process. Any elder who is willing to participate in it will be a great partner to the preacher. What theme should our Advent series have? What emphasis would be good for Lent this year? How do we take the assessments of the congregation that the Situational Analysis Form has provided and turn that into a preaching program? What series of sermons would benefit the congregation? If those decisions are made by the preacher alone, the process suffers from inadequate input.

At the beginning of each season I would present to my elders a list of sermon series that I was willing to prepare for the year or season. The list usually included about twice as many as the preaching calendar could include. They each made their selections on the list, and the tabulated results became the subject for discussion at an elders meeting. At times their choices were different from mine, but I learned that listening to them was very beneficial. And I ended up preaching some series of sermons I would not otherwise have selected—and found they were received very well!

4. Evaluation of Preaching.

Everybody evaluates preaching, but most of it is done in the church parking lot after the service and never reaches the preacher. Perhaps that’s good, for much of it may not be very well thought out. But when evaluation is done thoughtfully and collegially in the right setting, the preacher can find it very helpful. Elders’ meetings ought to regularly involve discussions of preaching, and it is vitally important to have established a positive atmosphere so that all know this is no time for attacks but a time for all to participate together in an effort to grow. Elders will be in touch with other thoughtful members of the congregation from whom helpful and wise evaluations can be received. The elders should regularly study and review the Seminary’s statement on Excellence in Preaching (available at http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/facultyStatement.php).

Each meeting, therefore, should have a line on the agenda that gives each member the opportunity to make comments. However, it is usually more helpful if an evaluation session is structured and if agreed-upon evaluation forms are used. The Seminary provides evaluation forms that are used for the growth of students. Elders will likely find this form valuable for use in their own congregation. (The form is available in PDF format at http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/engageCongregation/sermonEvaluation/sermonEvaluationForm.pdf, and a copy is enclosed in this issue of Forum.)

It’s a large task, but if the preaching in our churches is to be upgraded and kept strong, we’ll have to increase our efforts to effectively train preachers in this all-important craft, and also to better train elders to see this as part of their task and encourage them to partner with their preachers.

After all, good preaching takes good elders too!
Here’s something I’ve learned about myself after a dozen years in the pulpit: I care less about what people think of my sermons.

Let me explain: when I was a newbie preacher, fresh out of seminary, earnest, hopeful, and oh-so-vulnerable, I felt like my very worth as a human being rested on whether or not people liked my sermons. I would stand at the back of the sanctuary after worship with my hand out and my heart exposed. If, while shaking hands, I heard people say, ”Nice job this morning,” or，“Thanks for that sermon; it really touched me,” I would breathe easy and leave church feeling that I was worthy of divine love.

If, on the other hand, the comments were more along the line of “Nice weather,” “Good morning,” or “Nice to see you,” I would know that my sermon hadn’t connected and I would doubt my abilities, my calling, and my faith. And—gasp—if someone gave me a more direct criticism, such as, “Too many illustrations about football,” or, “Are you ever going to preach on something other than the Old Testament?” or, “I didn’t get that at all, I have lost my faith and am now going to become a Buddhist,” I would leave church, drive home, put on my pajamas, and curl up in the fetal position on the floor of my bedroom.

Thankfully, no one has actually become a Buddhist after hearing me preach. Yet.

Now, however, I can receive a thoughtful critique of my sermon in the moments after worship with an objectivity that was lacking in my early days. After preaching more than a thousand times, I hold more loosely to my sermons. I know that if this one didn’t hit it out of the park, God still loves me and I am still called. And if the sermon is a home run, I am keenly aware that it is less about my abilities and much more about God’s work.

So maybe I should amend my opening statement. Maybe it’s not that I care less about what people think of my sermons, but that I no longer directly connect my self-worth with the reception of my preaching.

But this is a hard move to make, and it’s one most of us preachers have to grow into. I still don’t have it down, and as friends of mine know all too well, I can beat myself up for a less-than-stellar sermon weeks after it’s been preached.

So if we preachers are so vulnerable regarding criticisms of our preaching, what’s a congregation to do? How can congregants speak wisely and well to their preachers about how the preaching ministry can be improved? Here is a list of suggestions:

**For congregants:**
1. Remember that preachers are like peaches: they bruise easily.

   A survey done on CRC preachers a few years ago noted that most preachers rank their own preaching as Garrison Keillor does the children of Lake Wobegon: above average. This may reveal an innate clergy delusion, but I think it’s also an important reminder to congregants about the strength of the connection between preachers and preaching. We preachers see a sermon as an extension of ourselves. It’s our most public work of ministry. We still get nervous on Sunday mornings. Some of us don’t sleep well on Saturday nights. We’re not asking for pity, mind you, but we are asking for sensitivity. Know that when you critique the sermon, it feels like you are critiquing us. So be wise and gentle, as gracious as you are truthful.

   2. Do not critique the sermon immediately after it’s preached.

      I know, I know: you’ve just heard him cite Isaiah when the passage is in Malachi. Or she described Gnosticism as a third-century heresy when really it was around much earlier. Or he used another illustration from golf. You’re annoyed and you want your preacher to know. Now.

      Instead, may I gently suggest that you take a breath, write a note in your bulletin, and let him know later? Even the end of the coffee hour would be better than in the handshake line. A few minutes between the benediction and your comment isn’t enough time for your preacher to absorb it well. Wait several minutes. Wait a day. If you really want to be heard, and you really want your preacher to change, present your thoughts to her at a time when she can most hear them. In her office later in the week over a cup of coffee is better than in the flurry of details sailing through her brain on Sunday morning right after worship.

   3. Do tell the preacher directly.

      Don’t tell your coffee group. Don’t vent in the minivan. Don’t mutter it at the next worship committee meeting. If your preacher has an area that needs to be improved, tell him. Tell her.


      Instead of saying, “Could you please stop talking about golf?” you could say, “In three of the last four sermons you have used an illustration from golf. We’re glad

   "I didn’t get that at all, I have lost my faith and am now going to become a Buddhist,"
that you enjoy this diversion, but many of us don’t. Can you expand your pool of illustrations?”

Instead of saying, “Your sermons are too moralistic,” note that in the last few months the sermons have ended with calls for the hearers to be like someone, or be more of something, or do something, rather than pointing to the work of God in the world and inviting them to be part of it.

A specific comment supported by good evidence can make all the difference.

5. Don’t speak only when the preaching is weak.

When the sermon is better, say so! When the illustrations connect, tell him. When the exegesis was artfully done, tell her. If every time your preacher sees you she knows you’re going to have a word of criticism, she’s not going to be eager to see you. If you balance your critiques with encouragement, you can create a good conversation about the preaching in your church.

For preachers:

1. Let your spouse off the hook.

Marriages are complicated enough without giving your spouse the role of evaluator every week. And be honest, what you really want your spouse to say is this: “That was the most moving sermon I’ve ever heard. It was smart and funny and insightful and brought me into the presence of God himself. It made me so honored—humbled, really—to be married to you.” That’s not going to happen. Let your elders do the evaluating and let your spouse simply be your spouse. You may need to wean both of you off of this if you’ve done it for years, but I think you’ll both find Sundays to be much more enjoyable.

2. “If there’s smoke . . . there’s fire.”

Yes, there are congregants who are eager to pick us apart. Yes, sometimes they are critiquing us to work out their own issues. But if you are receiving regular feedback that your preaching needs work, listen to it. The style and substance you had at a previous church may not work as well here. The way you preached thirty years ago may not work anymore. Listen to what your congregation is saying and take it seriously. Preaching is hard enough without extra barriers of defensiveness and arrogance put up by the preacher.

3. Teach your congregation how to listen.

You may want to teach an adult ed class on the process of writing a sermon. You may want to have a discussion at every elders meeting about the goals of your sermons. You may want to read a preaching book with a small group and teach them what makes a sermon different from a lecture, for example. You may want to bring in an outside speaker to teach your elders, congregants, or interested others how to listen well to sermons. Don’t assume that people know what you are trying to do in a sermon or that they will catch every nuance. Teach them what you are trying to do and see if your goals match theirs.

4. Engage your congregation in the process.

I have a colleague who enjoys “Brown Bag and Bible” every week. He intentionally chooses a handful of people to come and sit with him and think about the preaching text for that week. They offer suggestions, stories, and questions, and he weaves those contributions into the sermon. When they come on Sunday, they are invested in the sermon and eager to hear it. This pastor rotates the members of the group every few months to be sure that all the voices of the church are represented. The process has led to a much greater interest in the sermon writing process and in the preaching event.

5. There’s a Sunday in every week.

If you hit a bloop single, ah well. It happens. And if you hit a home run, ah well. You still have to get up there and do it again next week. The hardest thing about preaching is also its gift: you get to do it every week. Don’t put all of your eggs in this Sunday’s basket. Don’t put all of your ego in last Sunday’s sermon. Life is too short and the gospel is too compelling to let our egos get in the way.

If you balance your critiques with encouragement, you can create a good conversation about the preaching in your church.
The Move to Grace

Many people come to church each week teetering on the edge of hopelessness. Some are on the verge of losing their jobs. Others have fallen behind in mortgage payments and fear losing their homes. Still others know that the medical condition they have been trying so hard to ignore probably signals something bad. Marriages are falling apart. Addictions have tightened their grip. The fog of depression thickens. The gathered congregation waits for a word of hope, a word from God, but too often sermons fail to deliver what the congregation so desperately needs.

Some while ago the father of a friend was dying of lung cancer and yet still managed to make it to church week after week. But at the time, the preacher was firmly locked into an extended series on the book of Job. This might seem fortuitous. True, as one who suffered, he identified with Job easily enough. And he appreciated the futility of ill-conceived pastoral care on the lips of Job’s three friends. But week after week, as the preacher worked his way through Job, this dying man listened in vain for a word of hope. Perhaps hope was coming toward the end of the series, but the problem was that he was dying a little each week and needed a word of hope all along the way.

Pastoral need requires that sermons preach both the word of God and the hope of the gospel. Doing anything less is pastoral malpractice. Preaching hope every now and again is not enough. Fortunately, preaching hope and preaching a biblical text never need to work at cross-purposes.

The Bible is full of hope. A person cannot help but notice that the larger story line of the Bible moves from disaster to hope. Evil intrusion and human rebellion set God’s good creation on a path leading to suffering, pain, and death. But God is not content to leave his ruined masterpiece to its own destruction. He promises hope and eventually makes the decisive down payment on that promise in the death and resurrection of Jesus—a down payment that points to the final healing of all creation. Important episodes in the Bible also move from disaster to hope within the larger narrative: from enslavement to exodus, from wilderness to conquest, from captivity to restoration, from barrenness to babies, from Good Friday to Easter, from old creation to new creation.

Our approach to preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary equips students to look for hope in the text and so to preach grace in the sermon—because the message of the gospel is finally always a message of hope. We have chosen to use Paul Scott Wilson’s “four pages” approach to preaching (The Four Pages of the Sermon, Abingdon, 1999), an approach that places hope at the center of the sermon. The kind of sermons that Wilson recommends use four basic moves as they progress from trouble to grace. Wilson uses the image of “four pages” to characterize the four moves that work to carry the sermon from trouble to hope.

In the first move, “page one,” the preacher identifies and presents what might be characterized as trouble in the selected biblical preaching text. Trouble inevitably focuses upon some sin or human brokenness resulting from sin. The sermon begins in the biblical text, attending to the questions, issues, or events that have something to do with our fallen condition. For instance, a sermon on Matthew 19:16-30 probably would feature a pious, wealthy young man with a bit of an attitude. The preacher would present him waltzing up to Jesus looking for a pat on the back. The congregation would watch as his conversation with Jesus exposes his wealth as his highest priority and greatest love. Page one closes with the rich young man sulking away, unwilling to change.

“Page two” then explores how the sort of fallen condition that infected the rich young man might appear in the world of the listeners today. Here the preacher offers examples of the same or a similar...
trouble and explores its implications for the listeners. The preacher might notice how many today exhibit a loyalty to and love of wealth similar to that of the rich young man. These two trouble pages, a page of Bible and a page of application, constitute roughly half of the sermon.

From here the sermon moves on to good news—hope. Hope always springs from God’s initiative in addressing the trouble identified in the first half of the sermon. “Page three” moves back to the biblical text looking for grace or good news. Sometimes finding this good news requires that the preacher move beyond the immediate preaching text into the larger text of the Bible. The good news of the gospel is that God is never content to leave his people in trouble or bereft of hope. Preaching hope means looking past the rich young man as he sulks away from Jesus. Page three probably will feature Jesus’ offer of hope: even though it is impossible for rich people to enter the kingdom, with God all things are possible. God promises the kingdom to disciples of Jesus who would never be able to enter that kingdom through their own efforts.

“Page four” features the saving action of God in our world, an action that parallels the hope identified and explicated in the text. In this final part of the sermon, the preacher gives voice to the words of God, who speaks hope to his gathered people. God opens up possibilities of repentance and love for people impossibly mired in their wealth and materialism. The preacher will highlight the seemingly impossible action of God by citing stories or testimonies of those who have experienced it.

So “page four” in a sermon on Matthew 19 might tell about multi-millionaire Tom Monaghan, the founder of Dominos Pizza. Tom drifted away from God while becoming a fabulously wealthy man. He owned the Detroit Tigers baseball team, his own yacht and helicopter, a huge vintage car collection, piles of antique furniture to die for, and his huge pizza franchise. Then one stormy night as he read C. S. Lewis at his cottage, God called Tom back to the love from which he had drifted. The Holy Spirit prompted Tom to begin to use his wealth to serve God. He sold practically everything—the pizza business, the cars, the helicopter, the ball team—and started building churches and orphanages while funding various other kingdom causes as well. He even said in an interview that he hopes to die broke and to assist as many people as possible in finding God and getting to heaven. Page four preaches a God who is active not only in the Bible but in our world, bringing hope to the hopeless and salvation to the dying.

Elders (and others) who encourage and guide the preacher need to understand the priority of preaching hope. They also need a way of talking about it together with the pastor (as suggested in other articles in this issue of Forum). This “four page” approach offers a way of evaluating sermons. For instance, if the preacher consistently speaks only of trouble and of our need to change, he might be said to preach only pages one and two—and then the hope of the last two pages is missing. Or if the preacher does a bang-up job presenting the text, both its troubling features and the hope God gives, but fails to apply it to today, the sermon will present pages one, two, and three—but will stop short of that all-important fourth page where God’s present-day action shines through. The language of the four pages can help elders and others to talk about the essentials of the sermon—what was missing or anemic in the sermon, or, conversely, what was done well.

As they supervise the preaching of the word, elders will want to be encouraging at nearly every turn. This will mean noting specific features of the sermon that were helpful, interesting, or convicting. When features that are not as helpful appear or when important aspects of the sermon seem absent, the elders will want to be ready with suggestions for ways in which the sermon might be improved: “If you had been able to show us how God gives hope to people in danger of becoming lost in their wealth, your sermon would have been even stronger.” As elders learn the language for speaking about what characterizes a good sermon, they will prove much more helpful to their pastors. And as they learn to help the preacher, this helps also the whole church.
CTS Learns about the Belhar Confession

by Kathy Smith, Director of Continuing Education

A town hall meeting to discuss the Belhar Confession was co-sponsored by the CTS Student Senate and the Social Justice Committee on Thursday, December 6, 2007, with South African and African-American pastors as guest speakers.

The Belhar Confession (named for a small town near Cape Town where groups of different-colored people all lived together) was drafted in South Africa in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and approved in 1986. It became a Form of Unity for the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa along with the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort.

Willie Julius was in South Africa when the confession came about. He now serves as Director of Congregational Life at Madison Square Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. He explained, “I was born in South Africa about the time that apartheid was legalized. Of the four major groups in South Africa—whites (9%), Indians (2.5%), colored (8.9%), and the rest blacks—I am “colored.” I grew up in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church—the church that adopted the Belhar around the time I started in ministry in my first congregation in Keetmanshoop, Namibia.”

Julius went on to say four things about the Belhar:

1. This confession was born out of crisis—out of the chaos going on in a country filled with racial tension and conflict. My seminary years were difficult—studying for exams and running from tear gas.

2. It was a kairos moment—a moment of truth for the church. We couldn’t be quiet any longer about the injustice and oppression. The church believed that obedience to God is more important than obedience to a regime which claims to be Christian but separates racial groups and allows people to be killed. The unity of the country and the church itself was at stake.

3. We needed to start with ourselves—repent of our sins first. For so long the church was part of this regime and didn’t stand up against the oppression. This confession says that, based on Scripture, everyone is equal before God. If we wanted to restore the unity in the country, we needed to confess our sin of being part of the system. We wanted to start in our own Reformed circles of three denominations—the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, the black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, and the colored Dutch Reformed Mission Church—and then broaden out.

4. It was a new day in the life of the church. There was new hope in the church and in the country. We sang together for hours when our Dutch Reformed Mission Church accepted the Belhar Confession. One song we sang was “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” Julius explained that “after that year, pressure started to build up from within the church and without. Six years later, Nelson Mandela became the first black president of South Africa. Our focus turned to reuniting the different Reformed churches in South Africa. In 1994 the black and colored Reformed churches joined in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. They planned to start the process of uniting with other churches in Africa, but the Belhar Confession became not a point of unity but a point of controversy. The white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa is still not reunited with the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa after twelve years of talks and discussions.”

Jaco Hamman, professor of pastoral care at Western Theological Seminary, grew up in the white Afrikaner community in South Africa. He told the CTS audience that “the Belhar Confession is the reason I am in the United States. It convinced me that I could not serve a government that oppresses people. When I was drafted I left the country and came to the U.S. So I am eternally grateful to the Belhar, because it has given me life.”

Hamman was in the ninth grade when the Belhar was drafted. As part of the privileged white class, he was never encouraged to read it. He told us about three things he grappled with regarding the Belhar, commenting that the CRC will have to struggle with them too.

1. The Belhar taught me that good theology can keep the tension between a theology from above and below. Theology from below means I have to listen to the voices of women, people who are homeless, people who are abused, who are victims of a greedy corporate culture and jobless, and so on. A theology from above teaches eternal and timeless truths, and typically uses a lot of abstractions. But we cannot do theology only from above. When you’re raised in the Reformed tradition, theology from above is always with you. The Belhar provides a theology also from below.

2. The Belhar made me a politician. “Politics” means “the shape of the city.” The Belhar wants to shape the city according to certain principles—where everyone works toward unity in Christ, where reconciliation takes place, where the marginalized and oppressed are heard as justice is served. If you are concerned about violence in the world, about the schisms in the church, about power being abused, about economic inequality that creates another apartheid, about the marginalized and dehumanized, then the Belhar is your confession, because it pushes you at exactly those levels.

3. The Belhar gave me my humanity. I was a privileged white boy raised in such a way that I truly did not know how to relate to people of color and people who were different from me. I
had a deep-rooted fear of them and a sense of unconscious superiority. The Belhar exposed these deep-rooted things in me that make me inhuman. I slowly learned what it means to be a human being—how it changes how you think about and see God. My God now is much more compassionate, and more often asking me, "What are you doing to root oppression out of the world?" Today I wear this t-shirt that says "Ubuntu." It stands for a powerful African philosophy: "I am who I am because of who you are." If you see that all your friends look like you and think like you, then maybe you are less a person because you do not have the fullness of created life, of personhood, around you.

How does this translate to church groups that want to engage the Belhar at a deeper level? Hamman says, "There's a difference between struggling with the Belhar, adopting it, and living into it. It's difficult—especially in the area of economics—to live into the Belhar. It could have consequences for equality in church buildings and pastors' salaries. But churches would also discover the richness of engaging the other. Churches who want to wrestle with the Belhar will discover an accountability partner. You can't embrace it and not look at the injustices around you. When the DRMC adopted it, the first thing they did was confess their sins. The kind of looking at yourself that the Belhar requires is very threatening and rarely done. But I believe the Belhar Confession is the most life-giving confession that the Reformed tradition has today. If we wrestle with the Belhar, we will discover a theology from below, a world where we become politicians and create cities where peace and justice reign, and ultimately we will discover a new humanity."

Reggie Smith is pastor of Roosevelt Park Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. He remembers coming to CTS as a student in 1988 and watching his first CRC synod in 1989 in awe and horror as they discussed severing ties with the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. He said, "I was one of two African-Americans at Calvin Seminary. I listened to elders saying we cannot break ties with our white brothers and sisters in South Africa. I had to ask myself, am I really called to the CRC? Why should I stay? The answer was that God called me. The Belhar Confession says that God built the church from every tongue and tribe and race and helps to regain the conversation of what God calls us to be.

"In my D.Min. program at Western Theological Seminary, I was told that Jaco Hamman—an Afrikaner—would have to help me deal with some things in my personality. I had to ask: what can he teach me, an Afrikaner? In the United States we're in a context where we don't have to do the hard things. But being called as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ means to count the cost, and do courageous things—engage in courageous discipleship. Maybe the wider church can teach us some things that the isolated church doesn't know.

'I've been a pastor in Grand Rapids for thirteen years, where people in the local interdenominational ministerial alliance are surprised that a black person is a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church. Isn't that the church that is connected with apartheid?' they wonder. "There's a lot more to the CRC and a lot more that God has for us—I think the future is brighter if we engage in discussion of the Belhar. It's about unity. The Forms of Unity are documents that highlight our commonalities—tell us how we're alike, not different. Where are we finding the connections that show how much we have in common? In the CRC we are moving away from being a denomination that says, 'Isolation is our strength,' to one that says, 'Diversity is our strength.'

"As we talk about the Belhar, I hope we would see it as our calling, would dare to be courageous, and would dare to see that our future is larger in what we have in common as opposed to what is different."

An audio recording of the town hall meeting is posted online in the Lecture Archive at www.calvinseminary.edu. Watch the Spring 2008 issue of Forum for further discussions of the Belhar as we ask the question, "Why Be a Confessional Church?"
Seminarians Mentor International Peers

by Shannon Bernard-Adams, Administrative Assistant for the Making Connections Initiative

Hospitality, compassion, wisdom, and shepherding. These gifts come together in Calvin Theological Seminary’s peer mentoring program for international students. According to CTS student Josh Holwerda, “It is so powerful to see God at work in a person’s life and to know that we serve a God who reaches across oceans and other divides to bridge his children together.”

At CTS students from North America gather with students from all over the world and find a profound opportunity for learning from one another in a vibrant community of Christian believers. To help those who are transitioning to a new country, North American students are encouraged to volunteer as peer mentors—friends and guides who serve Christ by welcoming these students and answering their questions.

Students are excited about the opportunity to come alongside others and share in their journey. This year 38 students are participating in the peer mentoring program: 19 North American students paired with 19 international students. As these relationships develop, both individuals grow in their spiritual formation as they learn about each other’s countries, churches, cultures, and families. For international students who often experience a time of adjustment and confusion when they first arrive in the United States, knowing that they are not alone and that someone is praying for them is tremendously helpful.

Rev. Richard Sytsma, Dean of Students and International Student Adviser, and Ina De Moor, Assistant for the Office of Student Life, established the peer mentoring program for international students at CTS. They also offer parallel programs for international students to orient themselves to a new academic environment. For example, peer proofreading volunteers, organized by CTS student Barry Stuart, are available to read student papers and meet with international students regarding their writing assignments. Understanding and communicating in another language can be quite complicated and often adds to an already stressful transition. Another program enables Calvin College students to earn class credits by becoming “conversation partners” with international seminary students and their spouses. These are just some of the ways that the college and seminary community encourages the gifts of hospitality, compassion, wisdom, and shepherding.

Josh Holwerda shared the following story from his mentoring relationship with Sung-Il Lee: “It is always wonderful to sit down and break bread with someone from a different culture. The first time Sung and I met was at our home for dinner with my wife. We had a great time filled with laughter, but what was most powerful was sharing our faith stories with one another.” Sharing faith and building relationships are ways Calvin seminarians prepare for a life of ministry and hospitality to the variety of people they will meet and serve.

Todd Farley Speaks at Fall Preaching Conference

How does the look on your face affect how people hear what you are saying? Does your posture sometimes convey the opposite of what you are trying to say? Dr. Todd Farley answered those questions and more at the Fall Preaching Conference in October 2007 on the topic “The Lively Sermon: Refining Skills for Embodying the Word.” A preacher and mime trained under Marcel Marceau, Farley showed other preachers how to embody the words they preach through their entire persons—facial expressions, body posture, gestures, and movement. He also demonstrated some profound and moving ways to communicate the truths of God’s Word. Those who attended appreciated the combination of theological insight and “body 101.” Video of the conference sessions can be found in the lecture archive at www.calvinseminary.edu.
Biblical Art Enhances Worship in CTS Chapel

“T”he fulfillment of my life’s work is to have it here at the seminary,” said Calvin College Professor of Art Emeritus, Edgar Boevé, when he spoke about his artwork hanging in the seminary chapel hallway.

Boevé addressed the seminary community and invited guests on Friday, October 24, 2007, and explained his lifelong passion for bringing artwork into the church. “My life is fulfilled with the exuberance and the wonder of the Christian community that surrounds me. And as the Holy Spirit has worked through me all these years, this artwork is the result.”


Worshippers and art lovers can enjoy the beautifully crafted hangings representing Adam and Eve and many other Bible characters. Those who enter the chapel are reminded of and blessed by the lives of all those who have come before us to tell of God’s wondrous works. The intent of the artworks is to interpret the essential character of each person by texture, color, and design through diverse fabrics gathered from around the world.

Boevé pointed out that “we are all part of that red thread or vein—the Christian community that continues from Christ. Gold is the color of divinity and purity, and we are all entwined in the golden cord which is wrapped around us. The cloud that led Israel and Elijah’s small cloud are beautiful symbols. We are all under that cloud—not its weight, but its inspiration. As we manifest the scarlet thread, the golden cord, and the cloud, we realize that we are together as a communion of saints as we worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in Trinity.”

Also accompanying the fiber hangings is a series of paintings of the “Seven Days of Creation.” Visitors are welcome to enjoy the artwork by stopping by the seminary. For those at a distance, the art can be viewed at www.calvinseminary.edu/worship/artwork/ along with descriptions of the hangings and paintings. The artwork is a gift to the seminary from William and Willa Beckman and from Professor Boevé and his late wife Ervina.

New Senior Development Officer Joins CTS Staff

obert Knoor began serving CTS as its senior development officer in January 2008. He will continue the good work done for many years by Richard Eppinga, who continues to serve CTS part-time following his recent retirement.

Bob grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and graduated from Calvin College in 1989. He went to work as a salesperson for a staffing company in Grand Rapids and ultimately became its West Michigan regional vice president. After twelve years in the staffing industry, Bob felt called to change careers and enter the world of development. In 2001, he began working for the Hope Network Foundation, and served as its Executive Director until joining the CTS staff this year. Bob is a lifelong member of LaGrave Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids.

Reflecting on his new position, Bob said, “The Seminary is vital to the ongoing growth of the CRC. My role is to help ensure that funding is available to support the seminary’s goal of training students to become vibrant church leaders.”
At Calvin Theological Seminary we’re helping form people for ministry. **Hands-on ministry experience** is gained through supervised cross-cultural and congregation-based internships as well as ministry in local churches. The goal is to form students for a ministry of forming others into Christ’s likeness.

“My internships have allowed me to put what I have learned to the test—challenging things, and in the process, allowing me to gain experiential truth. Ministry is something that is done among people, whether at seminary or on internship.”

— Jeff Vandermeer, M.Div. student