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Lyle D. Bierma

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CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

# FORUM

SPRING 2008

A group of people, likely a church choir, are shown in profile, singing from books. They are dressed in formal attire. The background is a brick wall with a large window. The text is overlaid on the image, following the curve of the choir's line.

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our  
Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the virgin Mary.  
He suffered, died, and was buried,  
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

# FORUM

Providing Theological Leadership  
for the Church

Volume 15, Number 2  
Spring 2008

## REFLECTIONS ON BEING A CONFESSIONAL CHURCH

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CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
3475 MAINWAY, LCD STN 1  
BURLINGTON, ON L7M 1A9  
email: [forum@calvinseminary.edu](mailto:forum@calvinseminary.edu)

# from the president

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We Calvinists have always wanted reform *according to the Word of God*. That's the first thing "Reformed" means. We want a straightedge to guide reforms, especially because sin has twisted our thinking. We want an *outside* word, an inspired and infallible word, which defines "good" and "evil" not by human opinions, but by the wisdom of God. We want a picture of the kingdom of God so we can see how life is supposed to go and then judge how life needs to be reformed in order to go that way. We want the same Holy Spirit who had originally inspired Scripture to inspire *us* when we take Scripture in hand to read or preach it. That's why there's a "prayer for illumination" not right before the sermon, but right before the reading of Scripture. We know that unless the Holy Spirit breathes through Scripture all over again as it's read, we might not hear it the right way and we might not believe it.

But in thinking about applying Scripture to life, the Reformers faced a problem, namely, that it's hard to guide a program of reform by reference to the whole Bible, which is very large, or by reference to a single verse from it, which is very small. To solve this problem, Luther, Calvin, and other reformers reached for a solution at least as old as the earliest forms of the Apostles' Creed. They wrote medium-length catechisms and confessions of faith that summarized Scriptural teaching in a form handy enough to be learned, or even memorized, by believers. Expectably, these documents describe God, Christ, and the Spirit; they describe the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Jesus' atonement for sin. They also describe the drama of the kingdom of God, including creation, fall, and redemption.

Sometimes they do so with extraordinary power and clarity. "True faith," says the Heidelberg Catechism, "is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true; it is also a deep-rooted assurance, created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel, that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven and have been made forever right with God" (Answer 21).

Churches sometimes get tempted to draw back from their confessions. This temptation ought to be stoutly resisted. Creeds are like ribs. We need them to hold us together.

Grace and peace.

*Neal*



# REFLECTIONS

REFLECTIONS ON BEING A CONFESSIONAL CHURCH

## Why Be a Confessional Church?

**T**he Christian Reformed Church (CRC) is sometimes called a “confessional church.” But what exactly does that mean? Our first thought might be that it has to do with confession of sin. But that is not what the term “confessional church” usually refers to. It is not about confessing our sin but about confessing our faith. This involves an allegiance to certain historic documents called confessions. All office-bearers in the CRC formally subscribe to three confessions (see Henry De Moor’s article on p. 9), and professing members of the CRC claim to believe not only that the Bible is the Word of God but also that “the confessions of this church faithfully reflect this revelation” (CRC Form for the Public Profession of Faith). To better understand, therefore, what it means to be a confessional church and why it is so important, we will look first at what confessions are and then at the roles they play, or should play, in the life of the church.

### What Are Confessions?

Confessions are (1) statements of faith, (2) adopted by a church, (3) based on Scripture, and (4) addressed to a historical situation.

First, confessions are statements of faith or belief. They set forth in writing important truths that Christians claim to believe. Some, like the CRC’s Belgic Confession (1561) and Heidelberg Catechism (1563), cover a wide range of basic Christian teachings. Others, like our Canons of Dort (1619), treat a narrower set of doctrines but in much greater depth.

Second, confessions are adopted or in some way officially recognized by a church. A brief and ancient confessional document like the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.) is recognized by churches in all the major branches of Christianity: Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox. Others serve just a family of Protestant churches, like the Lutherans’ Augsburg Confession. And still others are confessed by only one denomination, such as the Confession of 1967 of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The CRC is one of a number of Reformed denominations that subscribe to the three confessions mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Third, Christian confessions are based on the Bible. They summarize and interpret the teachings of Holy Scripture. That does not mean, of course, that they have the same authority as Scripture. For us Protestant Christians, the Bible alone is the

by Lyle D. Bierma,  
Professor of  
Systematic Theology



supreme authority for what we believe and how we live. As the Belgic Confession says, “We must not consider human writings ... equal to the divine writings” (Art. 7). Among these “human writings” are confessions.

Finally, confessions arise out of particular historical contexts, often serious doctrinal or moral crises in the history of the church. The Canons of Dort, for example, were written in the early seventeenth century in response to the rise of Arminian teaching in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. And the Belhar Confession was composed in 1982 in the midst of the *apartheid* (racial segregation) crisis in South Africa. When the church speaks confessionally, it has its ears tuned to Scripture and its eyes trained on a critical situation of the day.

### Why Are Confessions Important?

Confessions play at least four important roles in the life of the church. First, they serve as *forms of unity*. The word *confess* literally means “to say together.” Confessions, therefore, are what members of a church body profess to believe. In this way, confessions are part of the glue that cements us together as a denomination and with other denominations that also hold to them.

That does not mean that these documents are perfect or beyond testing or challenge or change, or that we should never write or adopt other ones. They do not necessarily speak the

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## Why Be a Confessional Church?

last word on a subject. But for a confessional church, they are certainly, after the Bible itself, the first word—the point of departure and framework for our communal reflection on the meaning of Scripture.

As such, confessions help us give expression in some small way to that visible unity of the church for which Jesus prayed. When we speak together confessionally, we testify to a bond of unity that reaches across congregational and even denominational lines. To confess that my only comfort in life and death is that I belong to Jesus Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1) is to join a confessional chorus of brothers and sisters not only in the rest of the CRC but in the United Reformed Churches in North America, in the *Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche* in Germany, in the Church of Christ in the Sudan among the Tiv (Nigeria), and in many other churches around the world that subscribe to this same confession. And we are also joining our voices across the centuries with those who have confessed their faith with these words.

Second, confessions are what we might call a church's *identification papers*. They help explain who we are and where we come from. They give us a sense of historical and doctrinal identity. The CRC's three confessions all came out of the Reformation period and thus identify us as a Protestant church. They explain a number of doctrines that we share with all Christians (e.g., the trinitarian nature of God) and with other Protestants (e.g., justification by grace through faith alone). But the major branches of Protestantism that arose during the Reformation—Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, and Anglican—also differed from each other in certain aspects of their theology, worship, and church organization. Not surprisingly, therefore, our confessions also speak with certain *Reformed* theological accents: the sovereignty of God in creation and salvation, the radical corruption of humanity, sanctification in a life of gratitude, the covenantal basis for infant baptism, and the spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, to name a few. Our identity as a denomination is shaped in part by the characteristically Reformed way our

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confessions interpret certain teachings of Scripture.

Third, confessions are important *teaching tools* for the church. They can be effective means by which to instruct new believers, long-time believers, and children of believers in the fundamentals of the Christian faith from a Reformed perspective. The Heidelberg Catechism, for example, was written for that very reason. Like most Christian catechisms before and since, it is essentially a set of questions and answers that explain the basic elements of the Christian faith: the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments. But it also applies these truths very practically to people's lives. That is why the CRC's Church Order calls for the regular use of this catechism in the preaching (Art. 54b) and teaching (Art. 63b) ministries of the denomination.

Fourth, confessions function as *standards of orthodoxy* in the church. They identify the boundary lines between truth and error. Like foghorns or beacon lights near a dangerous shore, confessions warn the church of doctrinal or moral shoals nearby. The Canons of Dort, for example, were composed to defend the Reformation emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation against a challenge to that doctrine by Jacob Arminius and his followers. Calling them "canons" was fitting because a *canon* is literally a measuring stick. The "Canons" of Dort, therefore, provide standards by which to measure or test the truth of teachings related to the issues in dispute.

## Why Be a Confessional Church Today?

Why, then, be a confessional denomination? Because to do so helps to give

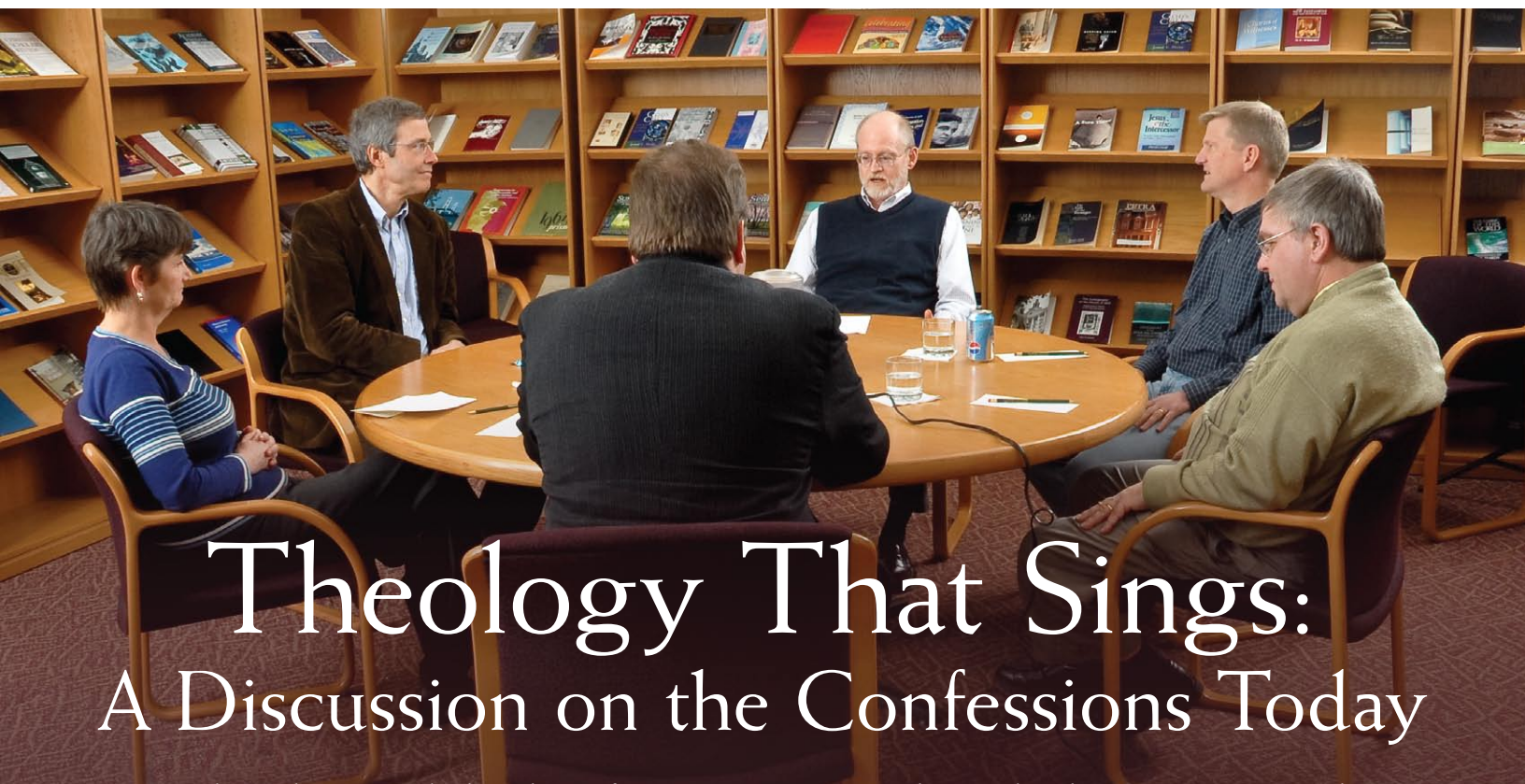
expression to the unity of the church, to identify who we are and how we understand Scripture, to teach our members the fundamentals of the Christian and Reformed faith, and to avoid the dangers of false doctrine and practice.

Can our current confessions still help us do that? There are some in the CRC who have called for abandoning some or all of our three confessions because they don't speak today's language or address today's issues. In their view, we should either raise our Contemporary Testimony ("Our World Belongs to God") to the level of a confession or compose an entirely new confession.

These people are right that we must continue to wrestle with the question of how best to be a confessional church in twenty-first-century North America. But before jettisoning our old confessions, all of us should listen to some other voices in the CRC as well. We should listen to the young guest editorialist in *The Banner* a few years ago who chided the generation before him for not teaching him the confessions, thus contributing to what he calls his spiritual "malnutrition." We should listen to the hundreds of college and seminary students whom I have had in courses on our creeds and confessions over the past twenty-eight years and who, almost to a person, testify to a deep appreciation for our confessions and their relevance today. We should listen to those individuals who have recently joined the CRC and now publicly lament the fact that we seem to be losing the very thing that attracted them in the first place—a clear sense of denominational identity rooted in the historic Reformed confessions. The problem, it seems to me, is not with the confessions themselves but with those of us charged with teaching and preaching them.

The CRC has been held together for the past 150 years by various kinds of glue: ethnicity, provincialism, common patterns of worship, a commitment to Christian education, and others. But these glues are dissolving. Now more than ever, it is essential that we recognize and reinforce a more fundamental bond of our unity—our ministry together as a *confessional* church.





# Theology That Sings: A Discussion on the Confessions Today

*In order to deepen our look at the confessions, Forum convened a panel to discuss issues surrounding the place of the confessions in the church today. The discussion was moderated by Scott Hoezee (c.), Director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary. The panel included (l. to r.) CTS Board of Trustees member Joan De Vries, Pastor of ClearView Church in Oakville, Ontario; James Bratt, Calvin College Professor of History and Instructor in Church History at CTS; John Cooper, CTS Professor of Philosophical Theology; CTS Trustee Kevin Adams, Pastor of Granite Springs Church in Lincoln, California; and Pieter Tuit, CTS Professor of Missiology.*

**Hoezee:** There was a time in Christian Reformed history when it was absolutely expected that you would see confessions such as the Heidelberg Catechism in worship, that you would hear them preached, that they would show up regularly in the life of the church. Each of you has worked in different parts of the church and its mission. Based on your experiences, how do you think the confessions are received by people today? If you talked about them in a sermon or used them in worship, what would be the reaction?

**Cooper:** Well, Jim and I are both members of a church that still has knowledge of the confessions, where the Heidelberg is regularly referred to, and, as recently as fifteen years ago, we even had a series of sermons on the Canons of Dort. I think that there

is still nostalgia for the confessions, and among older folks there's some specific knowledge of them as well.

**Bratt:** Some of the materials from the Heidelberg will be used in responsive readings at particular points in service, perhaps in a service of confession or at communion. At our church it is more likely to come up in a liturgical setting than in the preaching, like I was used to hearing it as a kid.

**Tuit:** I have lived and ministered in six different countries and in every country I have come across the confessions, especially the Heidelberg Catechism. As a pastor from 1977 to 1984 in Australia, I think I preached almost four times through the catechism, and that was expected and was

not an issue for discussion. When I went to Indonesia, I saw the catechism used in the Indonesian language. In my first church plant in the Philippines, we did not yet have the catechism in their language, and so I translated Lord's Day 1 and a few others. I have discovered that the catechism travels easily.

**De Vries:** In my setting I find really diverse reactions, and it's very generational. In the Canadian CRC setting, the seniors are Dutch immigrants and so they have an attachment to those documents. People my age, second generation, have a bad taste about them. Baby boomer leaders may be much more interested in what Willow Creek says than in what the catechism or any of the other confessions say.



## Theology That Sings

**Bratt:** What's the root of the bad taste?

**De Vries:** I think it's partly the immigration experience. In the second generation, things our parents and grandparents treasured were imposed on us without a lot of explanation or understanding. They didn't seem to make a lot of sense in the context that we were growing up in. But we had to do it. Why? There was no answer.

**Bratt:** Was it rote memorization?

**De Vries:** Some of it, definitely. But as my church is really growing and becoming an outreaching church with lots of adult baptisms, people love these documents. I introduce people to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession and in every class there's somebody who says, "Where can I get this? Can I take this home?" Just a few weeks ago again I sent people home with Psalter Hymnals because that's the version I have the confessions in, and they want to read them. So I do find they make sense to people today.

**Adams:** I grew up walking to church for weekday catechism lessons that began after our Christian school classes ended. Our context in California is a little different. Here folks are highly suspicious of



**Joan De Vries:** I introduce people to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession and in every class there's somebody who says, "Where can I get this? Can I take this home?"

anything that feels like institutional religion. A number of college students in our church have parents who recommended they stop attending because we are part of organized religion. We live in a place where anything to do with organized religion is suspect, and if there is anything that smells like organized religion, it's a catechism! So if we push a catechism or confessions, it suggests the bad institutionalism they fear. As a result, we have kept our confessions a bit more below the surface. I would not want to announce that I am going to preach from the catechism for the next fifty-two weeks. That wouldn't be the way to start. Still, the confessions shape everything that we do and teach. They saturate everything. When I am preaching through the Apostles' Creed or the Lord's Prayer, I point to the catechism because it is so warm and personal in those sections. We've also used it in small group settings. One group studied the old confessional language of these five-hundred-year-old documents, including the guilt-grace-gratitude framework, by using contemporary movies. We found that was a helpful way to begin.

**Tuit:** In the Philippines we had to be careful about using the word "catechism" because that was a connection with the Roman Catholic Church. That's why even today I often use the word "story" to show that my work is part of a larger story.

**Hoezee:** There was a time in the 1970s and '80s, when Willow Creek was on the rise and the seeker movement was strong, when leaders sort of evacuated the church of theology because that was a turn-off. Now I am hearing that has changed. Something happened such that younger people didn't have the allergic reaction to tradition and theology that their parents did. How have you experienced that, and can you say when that change started to take place?

**Adams:** During the last few years there is a sense of coming back to tradition, to things that are ancient. This emergent generation values things that are tried and true.

**Cooper:** I think there's renewed curiosity and interest in Reformed doctrine. My grandparents, including my grandfather



**Kevin Adams:** During the last few years there is a sense of coming back to tradition, to things that are ancient. This emergent generation values things that are tried and true.

who never studied past sixth grade, knew the confessions almost by heart. Knowing this doctrine was a living part of their faith. But there was also a kind of legalism about it. If you didn't believe this doctrine, then you were not as good a Christian. And then came a generation, perhaps including some of us here, who had to sit through catechism, learn it, and even memorize it. But it didn't seem alive, so a lot of people rebelled. Many people of our generation don't want much doctrine and want to be more open and inclusive. We went too far. Now perhaps people are coming back a little.

**Tuit:** I see it even in the seven years I have been at the seminary. Students want to be more grounded. Twenty years ago a lot of church planting was done in a context where people were not going to church anymore because they had bad memories about the church, perceived or real. Church plants had to adjust to that situation. But today we reach people with no experience with the church, so it's all new. You still have to deal with sin and non-belief, but you don't have to deal with negative church baggage, so I think there is a new opening for the confessions.

**De Vries:** When I teach my Inquirers Class, it helps me to think of Calvin's context

in Geneva where he had people who had been Roman Catholics whom he was trying to make over into blossoming believers. It's not that much different than what I am doing with people who are becoming believers in my context. The same kinds of questions need to be answered about sin and salvation.

**Adams:** Every generation asks how to communicate in its unique setting with the folks who are new to the faith. Church planters in the 1980s and '90s were pulling back from some of the traditions. The tradition was still there, but it was buried in the bones of the church. I remember visiting the local church plants in our town before we began Sunday services. After visiting we would say, "This is a Baptist Church doing Willow Creek, and that is a Methodist Church doing Willow Creek, and there was a Presbyterian Church doing Rick Warren!" You can't run from your roots.

**Cooper:** May I ask you pastors if people in your congregations have concerns about whether or not old documents can still be true? Can we still believe stuff that came out of the sixteenth century? Even if it was true then, is it still true now? Do you find these questions among the people you deal with?



**James Bratt:** The confessions can make a lot of sense as a way of providing roots in a situation of flux and flow. Roots give anchorage and steadiness.

**De Vries:** My first response is, "What about the Bible, then?" The other thing I am doing right now is teaching a Bible 101 class to people who just finished the Alpha program. Do you know how hard it is to teach that to people who know absolutely nothing? I am just overwhelmed by how much I have to explain. So to get them to read the Bible would be my first desire. Then we can say we also have these other documents that can help them understand the Bible. Both may be old, but both are relevant.

**Bratt:** A couple aspects of our current context of ministry, including what Kevin describes in California, speak to the relevance of old documents. Calvin himself in Geneva faced a city that was half exiles and immigrants—an uprooted people. For us, too, the confessions can make a lot of sense as a way of providing roots in a situation of flux and flow. Roots give anchorage and steadiness. Roots feed you so you are not blown around by every wind of doctrine—you are rooted and grounded and you can flourish. The downside, of course, is that, just as every virtue taken to excess becomes a vice, roots can literally make you stuck in the mud. And that is what my Boomer generation lamented and was one of things that made these confessions negatively charged for us.

But it has not always been that way. It's no accident that there was a flowering of confessions in the United States in the 1840s and '50s right after the second Great Awakening and the ascent of Methodism. People finally started coming to the question that Martin Marty once posed: "OK, you got born again. That took fifteen minutes. Now what?" In the 1840s and '50s we see the Lutherans, the German Reformed, the Presbyterians in America all approach the question of "Now what?" So the rootage and the feeding, particularly in an era of flux, are really important functions.

The other place where the confessions come up in my life is as part of the faculty at Calvin College, for whom signing the Form of Subscription is a requirement. A good number of faculty at Calvin are not from a Dutch Reformed background, but you'll hear some of them say they really like this stuff for exactly the same reason newcomers to Joan's church often do: the



**Pieter Tuit:** Today we reach people with no experience with the church .... so I think there is a new opening for the confessions.

confessions provide a well-articulated systematic summary of the Christian faith that also serves as a guide to reading the Bible. That way, the confessions can become an animating and energizing soul-filling nutrient.

**Tuit:** We have to realize that the reaction of my generation came from how the confessions were lived and taught. So, how do we teach it? How do we live it? Do we show a passion for preaching the gospel? Is that being felt and seen? I think damage can be done again if it is only seen as a head thing. What is your only comfort in life and in death? How does Christ's resurrection comfort you? As a church planter, how do you bring that across? It's a living faith.

**Adams:** I appreciate the image of roots that offer strength and flexibility. When we introduce folks to the idea that our roots go all the way back to the early church where they taught the Apostles' Creed and the Ten Commandments, that's helpful. Then they can see an invitation to find their own place in a community that has tapped into hundreds of years of conversations about the deep questions of the faith. One way to invite folks into our community is to say this is our tribe. We love all of the other tribes, they are part of us. But here are valued questions and dialogue of our tribe. As long as we are



## Theology That Sings

not throwing stones at other Christians, that can be very, very, helpful.

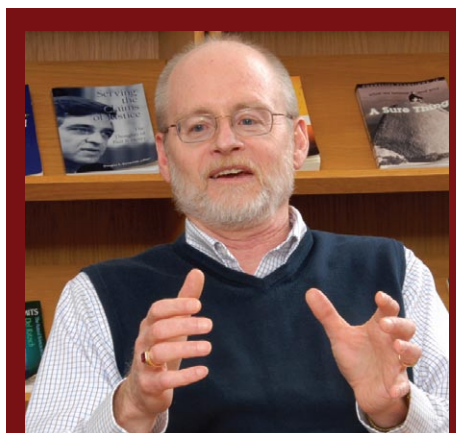
**Bratt:** The confessions let us recover so many theological resources that we would otherwise forget about. Maybe some ideas in them will go out of phase. Give it fifty years, a hundred years, they will be back. Some themes in them will sing more in one given context than another. Some ideas might seem really odd or even offensive in one context as opposed to another. But then fifty years brings another context again. The last shall be first, and maybe the first shall go to the middle of the pack. But it's important to have these documents as storehouses where all the themes live on.

**Cooper:** That is exactly what keeps the confessions alive, that kind of lively dialogue and debate. There are important biblical terms and doctrines that are reasserted down through the ages. I do believe in truth that endures through the ages, even if it gets appropriated and appreciated differently. But that also raises a question about new statements of faith. I am very glad for the Contemporary Testimony. Now we are talking about the Belhar Confession, which emerged from a very specific context among the South African people. So it's interesting to ask, do we need to add new documents? Do they have the same status as the Heidelberg Catechism? I think it's healthy that we think about these things.

**De Vries:** We need to remember also the missional aspect of the church. Perhaps it is like you said, John, in terms of the context. We need to keep that in front of us, too.

**Hoezee:** What we have been hearing here is that we are at an opportune moment in terms of people's openness to the confessions in a way that wouldn't have been true twenty years ago. So going forward, what is the best way to capitalize on this moment now where seekers are finding the Belgic Confession and asking for copies to take home? What should we avoid so we don't kill it all over again?

**Tuit:** First of all, church leaders my age need to deal with their own issues about



**John Cooper:** I do believe in truth that endures through the ages, even if it gets appropriated and appreciated differently.

the past. We need to get beyond negative experiences, perceived or real, and capture something of the positive nature of it all. Our own positive attitude should be firmly grounded in a real commitment to the truth.

**Cooper:** To me the most important thing is that our confessional statements are clear-headed, intellectual expressions of a lively faith. That's why the catechism works for me because some teachers I had believed it, explained it in an engaging way, and lived it. It worked for them when times were good, when times were bad. The statements about God's providence weren't just something to be memorized. For these people, providence was the foundation of their lives.

**Tuit:** Going forward, I often think about the presence and challenge of Islam and what that means in understanding our faith today.

**Hoezee:** I often told the kids in my catechism class that their grandparents knew doctrine really well, and nobody ever challenged them on it except maybe intramural stuff within the Reformed camp. By way of contrast, high schoolers today know less about their faith but need that knowledge more. Today upon going to a college or university, a Christian young person could very well have a Muslim roommate or a Hindu suitemate. With the Internet and

chat rooms and Facebook and the like, younger people today bump into a wide variety of religious ideas and get asked important questions about their own faith. It would help to have some substance to their articulations of the faith.

**Adams:** Having these shared expressions gives us a sense of groundedness, whether we are part of a new church or an existing church. We struggle with identities so much. As we go forward, dialoguing with our spiritual mothers and fathers can give us a way to remember who we are. It's like Mufassa tells Simba in *The Lion King*, "Remember who you are." This is our people, this is our tribe. The confessions give us a way to hold this ongoing conversation deep in our bones. I really like the idea of teaching the confessions as expressions of a lively faith. I think, for instance, that Reformed theology can really sing in pagan California. The message really speaks to the freedom people crave, because it's so rooted in grace, in God's sovereignty, and in what Christ has done for us. We embrace God's grace and then get to live it and enjoy it. In a place like California where Christianity looks like a twisted form of legalism that everybody runs from, to have this kind of breadth and openness is really an inviting thing.

**Bratt:** And this was the intention and the achievement of the Heidelberg. How it became a legalistic, scholastic document in the bad sense of those terms is one of the miracles of bad transmission because the Heidelberg is pastoral and pragmatic from the start.

**De Vries:** It answers the "So what?" question people ask. The catechism often asks the question, "How does this benefit you?" So that's how I try to preach it too. This makes a difference in your walk. It doesn't just make a difference in your head; it makes a difference in how you live your life. So to go forward, I think we need to take advantage of all this. I would want to challenge pastors and elders and people who might be reading this article to go back and look at these documents and discover them again so we can take them along on our journey and not just say we dropped that knapsack a long time ago. They are important for us!

# With Integrity of Heart and Spirit

A story in *The Wall Street Journal* of June 14, 1996, featured a longtime charismatic preacher, the Rev. Chuck Bell, pastor of Vineyard Christian Fellowship of San Jose. One Sunday, quite out of the blue, he announced that God was calling him to a “radically different brand of Christianity” (Eastern Orthodoxy) and that God wanted the entire congregation to join it too. Before long, he began calling himself “Father Seraphim Bell” and transformed half his flock into the St. Stephen Orthodox Church. The other half? They “felt betrayed” and left. As the staff reporter astutely observed, “The very quality that makes many Protestant denominations attractive to parishioners—a lack of central authority—can make these churches unstable. The minister can become a papal figure, his whims unchecked by any higher authority and his hold over the congregation more powerful than that of the denomination.”

When a congregation calls and installs a new pastor, the people expect some change—different approaches to liturgy, leadership, or pastoral care. But they surely have a right to expect that such change does not go to the core of their identity. That would be like an American President who violates the solemn oath of office and seriously undermines the nation’s Constitution. Fundamentally change the outlines of a budget? Sure. Make some sweeping changes in the way intelligence is gathered? Certainly. But you can’t declare that an election is null and void. You cannot contradict the essence of democracy: government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

The Christian Reformed Church’s “constitution” consists of the three

ecumenical creeds (Apostles’, Nicene, Athanasian) and the three Reformed Confessions (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort). The Form of Subscription that Article 5 of the Church Order obliges all officebearers to sign is the “oath of office.” When they sign it, they declare that the six documents are in harmony with the Word of God. They solemnly pledge to teach these doctrines and not to contradict them. They promise to express any difficulties with them and to submit to the judgment of the assemblies (council, classis, and/or synod) before making such difficulties or contradictory doctrines a matter of public teaching. None of this is terribly strange or unusual. Some things just do go to the core of our identity.

by Henry De Moor,  
Professor of  
Church Polity



*The Christian Reformed Church’s “constitution” consists of the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles’, Nicene, Athanasian) and the three Reformed Confessions (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort). The Form of Subscription that Article 5 of the Church Order obliges all officebearers to sign is the “oath of office.”*

Most officebearers are honored to sign the Form of Subscription. They do it heartily as far as the ecumenical creeds are concerned. Some do it less heartily when it comes to the confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is an understandable sentiment. We all wish that the visible church had remained as one. But history has produced denomina-

tions that will probably remain until the Lord returns and unity is truly restored. In the meantime, the officially adopted confessions define our “brand,” express what our tradition holds truly sacred. Is that tradition “everything”? No, but we believe that it is where the Spirit would have us be. So we sign a Form of Subscription. We subscribe to what’s at the heart of our faith.

And in accordance with that we proclaim and witness to the truth of the Word of God in our time.

Are the confessions equal to the Word? Do they have the same authority as the Word? Of course not. They are human documents. They are a response to the Word of God, seeking to summarize and articulate some major doctrines taught in the Scriptures. Although they do that in their own context, they express timeless biblical doctrines and therefore have authority, even for us. It would be fitting for a church of the Reformation, like ours, to make this very clear in the Form of Subscription. Instead of saying that “all the articles ... fully agree with the Word of God,” we should begin by saying: “We believe the Scriptures are the Word of God and the only infallible rule for our faith and life.” Then we can add that the “points of doctrine set



▶ With Integrity of Heart and Spirit

forth in the [confessions] fully agree with the Word of God.” This is exactly what the “sola scriptura” of our spiritual ancestors in Europe meant: first, that the Word—not tradition—is the final source of truth; then, that our tradition is and must always be shaped by what the Word reveals.

It is important to note that we do not subscribe to all the words contained in the confessions but to the doctrines that they teach. When we sign the Form of Subscription, we are not saying that these doctrines are expressed in timeless words and enduring images. As one of our guidelines (found in the Supplement to Article 5 of the Church Order) says, we do not say that these confessions express those biblical doctrines in “the best possible manner” for all times and places. Nor do we say that they cover all that the Bible has to say for our time and forevermore. We are bound only “to those doctrines which are confessed, and ... not ... to the references, allusions, and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines.” Times and contexts change. There are new crises in our time and different battles for us to fight. That’s why we need new statements of faith in the midst of new challenges: the CRC’s contemporary testimony “Our World Belongs to God,” the RCA’s “Our Song of Hope,” the German “Barmen Declaration,” and the South African “Belhar Confession.” While they do not have the same level of authority as our creeds and confessions, they articulate our cherished doctrines for today. Indeed, the church must constantly be confessing if it is truly alive. That’s why many of us still preach “catechism sermons.” And it’s also why every single one of those sermons had better be in words that folks in 2008 can understand.

It is even more important to note, as another guideline says, that we are not bound “to the theological deductions

which some may draw from the doctrines set forth in the confessions.” When I was fourteen years old, one of my catechism teachers explained to me what the idea of “reprobation” in the Canons of Dort was all about. We believe, he said, that even before we were born God chose some to go to heaven and others to go to hell and that nothing could ever change that. As a careful listener I concluded that human beings were like wind-up dolls or robots and that God pushed buttons (green and red) to determine our ultimate fate. I also drew from my instruction that I didn’t have to go to church. If I “lit up green,” I’d get to heaven anyway. If “red,” I’d never get there no matter what I did. It took a few years before others assured me that the Canons intended something a bit more complex and very different and, furthermore, that I’d best go to church. And so it is. We have difficulty with the way some express our doctrine, and rightly so. Yet, as it turns out, Protestant denominations do have a “central authority.” It is not a

Pope. It is the mutually accepted doctrines in our trusted creeds and confessions, our sincere attachment to them, and our submission to the judgments of a council, a classis, or a synod when that becomes necessary. That is what keeps us from suddenly forsaking our “constitution”—from turning “Eastern Orthodox” from one day to the next.

Our congregations should be able to expect that their officebearers will lead them in tune with our core identity. To this end, it would be very helpful if these guidelines of ours in the Supplement to Article 5 of the Church Order would actually find their way into the Form of Subscription itself. Perhaps we could sign it with greater integrity and less reservation. Along the way we might simplify the language. And then we might read it aloud once every year, in our council rooms, when new elders and deacons are asked to sign, and talk about what it means—and doesn’t mean.

When I was a seminary student, I truly believed that our spiritual ancestors were rigid traditionalists who thrived on legalistic rules that kept everyone on the straight and narrow way. To a person, and by definition, they were stodgy black-robed clerics, devoid of all compassion and empathy for new generations that were truly “with it.” (I exaggerate, of course, to make a point.) Then, in graduate school, I began to study how people in the seventeenth century in fact treated the signing of our Form of Subscription. The Dutch theologian Groen van Prinsterer said it best for me: We hold to our confessions “*op onbekrompen en ondubbelzinnige wijze*.” In translation, that means, first, that we do so not as cramped legalists who insist on every word and phrase, jot and tittle; and, second, that we do so single-mindedly, without reservation, and with integrity of heart and spirit.

*We do not subscribe to all the words contained in the confessions but to the doctrines that they teach. When we sign the Form of Subscription, we are not saying that these doctrines are expressed in timeless words and enduring images.*

# Is It Time for a New Confession?

**H**ow does a church go about deciding whether to add a new confession? Should it write a new one if the times require it? Can one church's confession be adopted or endorsed by another? These are questions the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) is facing as it considers the Belhar Confession, which was written in South Africa in the 1980s during the height of the controversy over apartheid in that country.

On Thursday, February 7, 2008, fourteen members of the seminary faculty discussed these issues with members of the CRCNA's Interchurch Relations Committee. The faculty functioned as the first of several regional discussion groups the committee is hosting to gain input on the Belhar Confession.

These questions were presented to the faculty:

- Should the CRCNA consider adopting the Belhar as a new confession to be added to the three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort)?
- What ecumenical responsibility do we have to assist the denominations in South Africa or others who have encouraged its adoption?
- If we don't adopt it as a confession, are there other alternatives, such as some form of endorsement or the status of the Contemporary Testimony (a statement approved by the CRC but not given confessional status)?

Faculty members voiced a variety of viewpoints on these questions, from considering adoption of the Belhar as our own confession, to endorsing it as a Reformed confession of another church, to giving it the status of a contemporary testimony or

a synodical report, to augmenting it and applying it to the North American context.

Some faculty had serious reservations about adopting it as a confession, but were open to talking about other options. They recognized that in the 1990s the CRCNA synod said there was nothing objectionable in terms of the content of the statement itself and did not object to the Reformed Ecumenical Council endorsing it. But they remembered that it was not recommended for adoption by the CRCNA at that time because of geographic limitations and because it was not part of the historic experience of our own denomination.

Some agreed that the Belhar is not unbiblical or contrary to our confessions, but believe it's too specifically about apartheid and artificial race-based separation, and therefore comes out of a context we don't share. Since we don't have that specific problem in North America, it doesn't speak directly to our race-based issues. They said that if the Belhar is true, it's fine to endorse it for ecumenical purposes, but it doesn't follow that the CRCNA should adopt the confession as its own.

Others pointed out that saying there is "nothing objectionable about it" is about the weakest thing we can say. The Belhar Confession rings with wonderful

by Kathy Smith,  
Director of Continuing  
Education



gospel affirmation in many places. People find it valuable because it *does* say things we don't have in our confessional documents. Sure, it is addressed to the South African situation in particular in a few places, but the vast majority of the statement is not limited to that situation. And perhaps if we are being asked to agree to it in solidarity with other Christians, that's a good thing to do.

Still others reflected that although the North American context is different from South Africa, North Americans are also broken and sinful in the way they have dealt with matters of race. The Belhar makes some very helpful statements about who we are as people in relation to race, and calls us to unity in Christ. Some faculty worried that since the Belhar doesn't address the racial problems of North America, maybe adopting it would in effect let us off the hook from dealing with our own racial issues. Others saw its potential for teaching, since we have a history of keeping people in their place in North America, whether that affects African Americans, women, or Native Americans on reservations.

Some wondered if the Belhar is more directly applicable to our situation than we give it credit for. We are part of a history that includes the greatest forced migration ever in terms of African slave trade. We constructed one of the most elaborate apartheid systems of any country involving 12 million people. That is part of our history, and we live with the consequences every day in North America. As part of the people of God we carry a huge burden from our own American history.

Others lamented that our awareness of the history of slavery and

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## Is It Time for a New Confession?

our participation in it hasn't been as strong in our ecclesiastical community as it should have been. The Belhar discussion may provide the occasion for heightening that awareness. They noted that Guido de Bres wrote the Belgic Confession because he thought a fresh statement was needed, even though there already were some confessions in place at the time. Perhaps today is another time to confess anew what we believe while also confessing our historical life of racial sins.

Another faculty member challenged the idea that it isn't part of our history. As a historically Dutch Reformed denomination, we in the CRCNA have to recognize that the Dutch were involved in apartheid in South Africa and this *also* is part of our history—and not a proud part of it. Furthermore, we have a history of genocide and forced separation in this country too in our treatment of Native Americans. Years ago when former CTS president Dr. John Kromminga visited South Africa, a church representative there chided him, "Don't compare us with white and black issues in North America, but with how you treated indigenous North Americans." So maybe the Belhar is already more a part of who we are than we'd like to admit!

Some suggested we should explore the

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idea of adopting the Belhar as a full confession, wondering if we can make it part of our history by starting to deal with it now. Then, 400 years from now, it will have been part of our history and will have shaped us. To the argument that it's not part of our history, it was noted that the Heidelberg Catechism was imported into the Netherlands by a refugee congregation that happened to be located in Heidelberg, Germany, and was inserted into the Dutch context from another context completely. So this isn't all that different a situation.

Can the Belhar shape us as the three Reformed confessions have? Are we humbled by it in good, biblical ways—convinced that it will help us see our own sins and be more true to the gospel? If it has that kind of transformative impact on

us, and if we look for ways to give it legs, that will be good for us, some said. Maybe there are more ways to appropriate it for ourselves than adopting it as a confession or a contemporary testimony.

The faculty wondered about augmenting the Belhar Confession with a preamble about our solidarity with the Christians in South Africa and a statement about how it relates to our own history. Then, we could succinctly list how its general principles are brought to bear in North America, but still keep the statement intact. Maybe it could be called the "Belhar-Grand Rapids Confession." We could put it in the Psalter Hymnal and people would know we're taking it seriously, and it could have all kinds of uses. Then the debate about confessional status would become moot, because it would be used, like the Contemporary Testimony. It would be a North American contextualized Belhar Confession as a contemporary testimony.

It's obvious from the faculty discussion that this is a decision that will require much discussion and pastoral sensitivity. We look forward to the results of other local and regional discussions and the Interchurch Relations Committee's recommendation to Synod 2009.

For the text of the Belhar Confession and a study guide, go to [www.rca.org](http://www.rca.org).



CTS faculty discuss the Belhar Confession in President Plantinga's family room with William Koopmans and Peter Borgdorff of the Interchurch Relations Committee.



*Panelists John Bolt, John Cooper and David Hoekema discuss the problem of war.*

## Panelists Discuss War Within the Church

“**W**ar within the church.” For many, that phrase raises memories of church squabbles over everything from worship style to carpet style. For others, it brings thoughts of what the church has to say about war. It was the latter emphasis that was highlighted on March 5, 2008, when Brookside Christian Reformed Church and CTS hosted a forum entitled “War Within the Church: Fighting Fair About the War in Iraq.”

The purpose of the event was to acknowledge that, like our nation, we are a church divided over the war in Iraq. Brookside Pastor Paul De Vries asked three panelists questions such as, “Why do we have such different opinions about the war?” and “How do we maintain our Christian unity and live together in the church when we don’t agree with each other?”

The panelists were John Bolt and John Cooper, CTS Professors of Systematic and Philosophical Theology, respectively, and David Hoekema, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College. These three men clearly showed their appreciation and long-term friendship with one another as colleagues and as Reformed thinkers, but they took quite different views regarding the war in Iraq as well as the role of the church in responding to war in general.

In pre-event publicity materials, Bolt wrote, “On September 11, 2001, The United States of America was attacked by an international jihadist group dedicated

to the destruction of Western civilization. We have enemies that are determined to destroy us. The invasion of Iraq was a just-war response and serious attempt to take the war to the enemy in one of the headwaters of international terrorism.” Hoekema took a very different position, stating that “from the beginning of the preparatory propaganda campaign down to the present quagmire, the Iraq conflict has offered an instructive example of the misuse of ideology to the neglect not only of moral obligations but also of genuine national interest. All of its stated aims remain elusive, after nearly five years of war, but it has caused deep and lasting damage to the United States, to Iraq, and to the international order.” Cooper’s view registered between the others: “My basic perspective on the war in Iraq is traditional Christian just war doctrine, not American politics or foreign policy. By that standard I was opposed to the war even before we started it. But since we did, I think that we are obligated to stay there until the Iraqis can reestablish a viable government or it becomes clear that they cannot. As my mother would say, ‘You shouldn’t have messed with it in the first place. But now that you broke it, you should fix it.’”

At the March 8 forum these three scholars debated whether the war in Iraq was a just war, whether there were necessary or sufficient conditions for beginning the war, and even whether war can ever serve

the purpose of peace. They also discussed what should be done now that we are five years into the war—regardless of whether the war was a moral action, would it be immoral to leave Iraq today? Furthermore, they considered questions such as the following: “Is ‘just war’ an oxymoron?” “Even if in rare cases it is permissible to take a life to prevent a grave injustice, has that been practiced rarely enough?” “How do we deal with texts like Romans 13 about the power of the sword to do justice?” “Is it possible for large military programs to actually bring reconciliation and peace?” “Is the defense of ‘just war’ simply immoral nostalgia?”

These tough questions call for much discernment and discussion on the part of Christians. John Cooper noted that the role of church as institution is to preach the gospel, but the role of Christian citizens—the church as organism—is to speak out, vote, and get involved in these matters.

The event’s goal of modeling how to have a good honest discussion—even argument—and still be brothers and sisters in Christ, was accomplished. Another goal was also met—that of helping the church to deal with political topics appropriately, by talking about them openly. Although time allowed for only a few of the questions submitted in writing by attendees to be answered after a coffee break, hopefully the conversation will continue.

*Video of the forum is available in the Lecture Archive at [www.calvinseminary.edu](http://www.calvinseminary.edu).*



## Prize-winning Author Addresses Immigration Issues

Should a mother stay with her children or move away to feed them from abroad? This question—faced by many families in Latin America—was discussed in the seminary community over the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Enrique's Journey*, the Winter 2008 Book of the Quarter. Author Sonia Nazario spoke at a seminary town hall meeting on January 7 about her experience in writing this book, based on a series of articles she had written for the *Los Angeles Times*, for which she retraced the unforgettable odyssey of a Honduran boy who braved unimaginable hardship to find his mother in the United States.



Sonia Nazario

The story is that of a trip through a hostile world of bandits and corrupt police and clinging to the sides and tops of freight trains. *Enrique's Journey* is also a timeless story of a family torn apart and a boy who risks his life to find his mother. Nazario said this book puts a human face on the ongoing debate about immigration reform in the United States, and the problem of high unemployment in some Latin American countries that leads men and women to seek jobs in the United States. In Michigan alone there are

150,000 undocumented immigrants without whom the fruit farm industry couldn't survive. In Los Angeles, four out of five live-in nannies still have a child in their home country. When Nazario discovered that her housecleaner had four children in Guatemala that she'd been separated from for twelve years, she was determined to investigate the story.

She reported that thousands of children as young as age seven attempt this trip every year, traversing four countries strapped to the top of freight trains. Most never make it past Mexico. Some are killed by train wheels, others robbed and beaten by bandits, and others targeted and deported by corrupt cops. Nazario gave stunning eyewitness accounts both of the threats to children like Enrique and also of the assistance they received along the journey from villagers who would hear the train whistle and run out to throw pineapples, crackers, and bananas to the migrants on the trains. Nazario was amazed both at the difficulties these children faced, and at the faith and risks of church people in Latin America who helped them. She declared, "I'm an agnostic Jew. It's hard to move me, but this did. They almost made me a believer!" She

also found a huge amount of camaraderie on the trains. "People who don't know where their next meal is coming from will share a piece of bread. They pray together on the train. They share information and look out for each other."

Nazario explained how difficult it is for the mothers who leave their children. They save up money to send back home, but rarely enough to bring their kids to the U.S. And they wonder, will it be safe for the kids here? Are they better off back home with grandma? The mothers think it will be one or two years, and then it becomes five or six years because she's getting them enough money to get by. It is very, very rare for the mothers to actually go back to their home country—either they can't afford it, or they fear how their children will see them, and how they will make ends meet. Usually the only ones who go back are those who've been deported.

Nazario reported, "I've written about migrants, but never understood the desperation. My hope was to humanize these immigrants, not to demonize them. Who wouldn't at least consider doing this if your kids were crying with hunger every night? These mothers do back-breaking work for minimum wage with no benefits or vacation, but they do earn money for their kids. Sadly, however, in the process they often lose what is most important to them—the love of their children."

Nazario's talk at CTS can be listened to through the online Lecture Archive at [www.calvinseminary.edu](http://www.calvinseminary.edu).

## 2008 Alumni Award Recipients

At its meeting on February 15, 2008, the Trustees of CTS named two recipients of the Seminary's Distinguished Alumni Award for 2008. The award is given annually to individuals who have brought unusual credit to their alma mater by their distinction in Christian ministry. For 2008 the recipients are Reverend John H. Stek and Reverend Anthony Van Zanten.

**Reverend John H. Stek** received an A.B. from Calvin College, a B.D. from Calvin Theological Seminary, and a Th.M. from Westminster Theological Seminary.

An ordained minister of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, John served his denomination as a pastor in Raymond, Minnesota, as an elder, as a member of the Calvin College and Seminary Board of Trustees, as an astute member of many synodical study committees, and, for thirty years, as a professor in the Old Testament Department of Calvin Theological Seminary, retiring in 1991.

John was a marvelous teacher—alert, balanced, highly intelligent, and hospitable



John Stek

to students. He taught Hebrew Bible, and the Hebrew part of his teaching was always for the sake of opening the Bible and letting students see deeply into it. Everything in his teaching was worked up from scratch with the result that it was always honest and fresh.

In addition, for many years John has served on the Committee for Bible Translation which produced the New International Version and the Today's New International Version of the Bible. He is Associate Editor of the NIV Study

Bible, and a significant contributor of the version's study materials for seven Old Testament books—and for two of them, the principal contributor.

John Stek is a leader of the church, and a worthy recipient of the 2008 Distinguished Alumni Award.

**Reverend Anthony Van Zanten**, a native of rural Iowa, made the American city his home and mission field, first in Harlem, then in Paterson, New Jersey, and for twenty-eight years as pastor and director of the Roseland Christian Ministries Center in Chicago. Tony has offered hospitality to homeless people, healing



to addicted people, training for unemployed people, food for hungry people, and hope in the blessed gospel of Jesus for all people.

He has been a tireless agent of racial reconciliation.

Tony is a reformer in the tradition of John Calvin, who not only comforted and prayed for the victims of plague in sixteenth-century Geneva, but also introduced new hygienic measures to arrest the spread of diseases. Accordingly, Tony has not only preached the gospel and administered the sacraments, he has also set up beds for those who would otherwise

shiver on Chicago's wintry streets. He has not only prayed for devastated people, he has also stayed with them, trained them, found support for them, fought for them. Tony's life, his health, his safety, his peace of mind—the things we all protect—have become his gift to church, neighborhood, and community. His ministry in all these ways has said: "The body of Christ for you. The blood of Christ for you."

Tony is an alumnus of Calvin Theological Seminary and a Distinguished Alumnus of Calvin College.

Tony Van Zanten is a leader of the church, and a worthy recipient of the 2008 Distinguished Alumni Award of Calvin Theological Seminary.

## First "Lord Plantinga's Cup" Awarded to the "Elders"

In January the CTS community celebrated what may become a new tradition at Calvin Theological Seminary—the awarding of the "Lord Plantinga's Cup" to the winning team of a seminary-sponsored hockey tournament.

According to M.Div. student Mark Hofman, students were inspired to organize the event from learning about the history of hockey at Calvin College and Seminary. Hofman wrote an article in the CTS student publication *Kerux*, which said, "Adorning the wall of a basement hallway in Calvin College's fieldhouse are several photos of hockey-playing Calvin students, dating back to the seventies. Some of these photos contain seminarians. The history of hockey at Calvin College and Seminary reflects the Canadian heritage of many of its students. Without their 'migration' Calvin may never have developed a team. One of the all-time best goalies for Calvin's club hockey team was seminarian Don Weinberg. Classics professor George Harris coached for several years. Although the College and Seminary have since become separate entities, their mutual interest in ice hockey is one way their relationship is sustained."

Over the years the seminary pond has been the site of many would-be preacher-theologians taking a break

from their studies by playing hockey, but this year the inaugural "Lord Plantinga's Cup" game was played indoors on Saturday, January 19, at the Jolly Roger Ice Arena. The teams were named the "Elders" and the "Deacons" after the original names for the dominant Calvin Seminary intramural hockey squads of the seventies, and were comprised of seminarians, faculty, and local clergy. The Plantinga Cup was awarded in the tradition of Lord Stanley's Cup, given for the 120 years of championships played for the "crown" of North American hockey. Lord Frederick Stanley, governor-general of Canada in 1888, awarded the cup to the winner of a game played between the Montreal Victorias and the Montreal Hockey Club, and the Cup has been given ever since as a sign of the most prestigious hockey championship game.

Thus, in honor of President Plantinga, the inaugural cup was awarded to the winners of The Game. Hofman noted that

"the use of the British honorific title 'Lord' should not be confused with the English rendering of the tetragrammaton LORD, as the Bible of King James made popular. The organizers of this event are not suggesting that President Plantinga be considered for a 'title upgrade' of divine status (although we do think he's pretty cool!)." The Elders won the Cup this year, but the fact that the game was pulled off was a big win for all involved. Representing the Elders, Professor Carl Bosma received the Cup from "Lord" Plantinga himself.

When asked how hockey fits into the seminary's new emphasis on theological education as formation for ministry, Hofman responded: "Oh, this event definitely fits into the formational-ministerial rubric for theological education. By using this most-favored Canadian pastime as a medium for intra-denominational networking and mentoring, we were able to capture an eschatological 'snapshot' of theological shalom-building: watching Carl Bosma take a six-ounce disc of vulcanized rubber to the shin two months after having open heart surgery!" Bosma is doing just fine, as are all participants in the evening that included an hour-long open skate time for seminary families as well as a time of broomball for those less familiar with skating on ice.







**Wherever God is calling you, we can help you get there.**



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