Calvin Seminary Forum

Jeffrey A.D. Weima  
*Calvin Theological Seminary*

David Holwerda  
*Calvin Theological Seminary*

Robert C. De Vries  
*Calvin Theological Seminary*

Arie C. Leder  
*Calvin Theological Seminary*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/seminary_forum](https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/seminary_forum)

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Christianity Commons, History of Christianity Commons, Liturgy and Worship Commons, Missions and World Christianity Commons, Practical Theology Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

**Recommended Citation**

[https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/seminary_forum/20](https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/seminary_forum/20)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Seminary Publications at Calvin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Calvin Seminary Forum (1994-2001) by an authorized administrator of Calvin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dbm9@calvin.edu.
TWO CHALLENGES TO OUR REFORMED HERITAGE

What does it mean to be Reformed? That’s the question that the past couple issues of this Calvin Seminary Forum have been addressing. I’ve done some reflection lately about various discussions that have recently taken place throughout the Christian Reformed Church on a number of “hot” topics. And this reflection has driven home for me an important truth that the CRC needs to remember: Reformed Christians have always distanced themselves theologically from the dangers on both the left and the right. In other words, believers of the Reformed faith have always been wary of the influences of both Liberal Protestantism and Evangelical Fundamentalism.

The Challenge from Liberal Protestantism

The challenge the CRC faces from the left can be illustrated in how the controversial issue of homosexuality has sometimes been handled at the classical level in both Canada and the United States. Let me make it clear that I am not accusing any classis of making an official decision that can be described as liberal. In fact, there is much in these classical rulings that can be applauded. For example, Classis Grand Rapids East recently adopted five guidelines that challenge the church to better minister to homosexual persons. We as a denomination need to work much harder at providing a welcome and supportive environment for those struggling with homosexuality—an environment where not only homosexual persons but all Christians are called upon to live a life of obedience to God’s commandments concerning our sexual behavior.

Nevertheless, when I listen carefully to discussions about homosexuality...
Our theological home is neither with Liberal Protestantism nor Evangelical Fundamentalism

example, the five guidelines adopted by Classis Grand Rapids East are accompanied by a report which raises "the issue of the acceptability of committed, monogamous relationships as a legitimate option for homosexual persons... because of scientific evidence that seems to point to hereditary factors related to homosexuality" (p 3). Now it is certainly legitimate to raise the issue of a possible genetic cause for homosexuality. Reformed Christians believe that God reveals himself not only through his word (special revelation) but also through his world (general revelation). We must take seriously, therefore, what science may tell us about a possible genetic cause for homosexuality.

The report from Classis Grand Rapids East, however, gives the impression that knowledge derived from science has priority over that discerned from Scripture. This practice, of course, has been typically followed in Liberal Protestantism. Such thinking might well be characterized by the motto: "When scripture and science clash, tis' scripture must go to smash."

Similar logic also seemed to be behind some of the comments made at the classis meeting itself. One of the elder delegates publicly proclaimed: "Given our ignorance on the cause of homosexuality, it would be rash to call homosexuality a sin." In a private conversation after the meeting, this same delegate agreed that the New Testament does, in fact, call homosexual practice a sin. When I pointed out the obvious contradiction between this person's two statements, the response was: "I don't approach this issue from a theological perspective, but on the basis of my many experiences with gays and lesbians." Once again, we meet thinking typical of Liberal Protestantism: If there is a tension between what the Bible says and what science or, in this case, experience says, it is the voice of scripture that ends up taking second place.

Such thinking, however, is contrary to the convictions of scripture alone ("sola scriptura"). We must protect our Reformed heritage from this increasingly popular way of thinking in which the claims of scripture are subverted to the claims of science and/or experience.

The Challenge from Evangelical Fundamentalism

The CRC, however, also faces a challenge from the right. Once again, let me make it clear that I am not accusing any ecclesiastical body or group in the church of passing an official decision that can be described as fundamentalist and unReformed. In fact, there is much from the "conservatives" in our denomination that we should support. For example, the South Holland Conference that took place on November 6-7 adopted a number of statements that identify key teachings of the Reformed faith.

Nevertheless, when I listen carefully to discussions of conservatives taking place through the Reformed faith, as Reformed Christians we do not ignore the hard questions of science. But neither do we let these questions undermine the authority of scripture. So even if a genetic cause for homosexuality can be proved, we still affirm the scripture's demand for holiness in sexual conduct, for the homosexual person as well as the heterosexual. Similarly, as Reformed Christians we do not ignore the potential impact that our experiences and feelings have on how we read the Bible. But we seek to minimize these often misleading influences and base our beliefs on the teachings of scripture alone ("sola scriptura"). We must protect our Reformed heritage from this increasingly popular way of thinking in which the claims of scripture are subverted to the claims of science and/or experience.

The CRC, however, also faces a challenge from the right. Once again, let me make it clear that I am not accusing any ecclesiastical body or group in the church of passing an official decision that can be described as fundamentalist and unReformed. In fact, there is much from the "conservatives" in our denomination that we should support. For example, the South Holland Conference that took place on November 6-7 adopted a number of statements that identify key teachings of the Reformed faith.

Nevertheless, when I listen carefully to discussions of conservatives taking place through the Reformed faith, as Reformed Christians we do not ignore the hard questions of science. But neither do we let these questions undermine the authority of scripture. So even if a genetic cause for homosexuality can be proved, we still affirm the scripture's demand for holiness in sexual conduct, for the homosexual person as well as the heterosexual. Similarly, as Reformed Christians we do not ignore the potential impact that our experiences and feelings have on how we read the Bible. But we seek to minimize these often misleading influences and base our beliefs on the teachings of scripture alone ("sola scriptura"). We must protect our Reformed heritage from this increasingly popular way of thinking in which the claims of scripture are subverted to the claims of science and/or experience.

The CRC, however, also faces a challenge from the right. Once again, let me make it clear that I am not accusing any ecclesiastical body or group in the church of passing an official decision that can be described as fundamentalist and unReformed. In fact, there is much from the "conservatives" in our denomination that we should support. For example, the South Holland Conference that took place on November 6-7 adopted a number of statements that identify key teachings of the Reformed faith.

Nevertheless, when I listen carefully to discussions of conservatives taking place through the Reformed faith, as Reformed Christians we do not ignore the hard questions of science. But neither do we let these questions undermine the authority of scripture. So even if a genetic cause for homosexuality can be proved, we still affirm the scripture's demand for holiness in sexual conduct, for the homosexual person as well as the heterosexual. Similarly, as Reformed Christians we do not ignore the potential impact that our experiences and feelings have on how we read the Bible. But we seek to minimize these often misleading influences and base our beliefs on the teachings of scripture alone ("sola scriptura"). We must protect our Reformed heritage from this increasingly popular way of thinking in which the claims of scripture are subverted to the claims of science and/or experience.

The CRC, however, also faces a challenge from the right. Once again, let me make it clear that I am not accusing any ecclesiastical body or group in the church of passing an official decision that can be described as fundamentalist and unReformed. In fact, there is much from the "conservatives" in our denomination that we should support. For example, the South Holland Conference that took place on November 6-7 adopted a number of statements that identify key teachings of the Reformed faith.

Nevertheless, when I listen carefully to discussions of conservatives taking place through the Reformed faith, as Reformed Christians we do not ignore the hard questions of science. But neither do we let these questions undermine the authority of scripture. So even if a genetic cause for homosexuality can be proved, we still affirm the scripture's demand for holiness in sexual conduct, for the homosexual person as well as the heterosexual. Similarly, as Reformed Christians we do not ignore the potential impact that our experiences and feelings have on how we read the Bible. But we seek to minimize these often misleading influences and base our beliefs on the teachings of scripture alone ("sola scriptura"). We must protect our Reformed heritage from this increasingly popular way of thinking in which the claims of scripture are subverted to the claims of science and/or experience.
Hermeneutics Revisited

"Is hermeneutics the great bugaboo in the Church?"

I recall when a former editor of the Banner posed a question at the conference: "Is hermeneutics the great bugaboo in the Church?" Hermeneutics, he asked, is one of those terms that seem foreign but in the end are not as important as they are made out to be. But the term is not the important matter. What the term refers to is the interpretation of Scripture cannot exist without a Reformed hermeneutic.

Because hermeneutics is so essential, we must be careful when we talk about it. I believe that the open letter to Synod, submitted by the leaders of the South Holland Conference, is not sufficiently careful. Since the authors are all CRC ministers, I expected something better from them.

Let me be clearly understood. Their letter is a passionate statement against women-in-office. I understand their passion and have no quarrel with their stating it. They have a right to their convictions and their passion. But they imply that their view is simply the plain teaching of Scripture and are uncumbered by hermeneutics (I presume), whereas those who favor women-in-office have been misled by hermeneutics; in fact, misled by hermeneutical experts who are the new priestly class. Thus the great bugaboo in the church is hermeneutics. Is that fair? Is that accurate?

The Plain Meaning

What is meant by the "plain meaning" of the text? Is this what the Reformers meant by the perspicuity or clarity of Scripture? Not if one means that every text is equally plain. The Reformers meant that the way of salvation is written so clearly that whoever can read can discover it.

Who have been advocates of the plain or literal sense of the text? Baptists have stressed the literal meaning against the Reformed interpretation. Repent, believe, and be baptized is what the text literally says, say the Baptists. The Reformed reply that while that is the case with older children and adults, the New Testament retains the principle that children are incorporated into the covenant together with their parents (Col. 3:14). This is an instance of Reformed hermeneutics.

Traditional Dispensationalists have stressed the literal meaning of texts in the area of eschatology: the rapture of the Gentile church, the literal rebuilding of the temple, and the restoration of sacrifices. The Reformed, they say, ignore the plain meaning of prophetic texts and simply spiritualize them. Obviously, these are two quite different hermeneutical systems.

Reformed leaders should acknowledge how critical hermeneutics is to our entire approach to the Scriptures.

Rules of Interpretation

Until Galileo, the Church and everyone else believed that the earth was motionless in space and that the sun was in motion around the earth. The Church thought Joshua 10:13 proved it. Galileo disagreed and argued that the Church should apply to that text the commonly accepted hermeneutical rule that sometimes Scripture describes according to appearances. Today we still use the language of appearance: The sun rises and sets. But Galileo's suggestion provoked great controversy because that rule had never before been applied to that text. Although it took the Church 200 years to catch up with Galileo, today we all read that text as Galileo did. The miracle of Joshua 10:13 was that daylight was extended. But with reference to the earth the sun always stands still and the earth rotates and is in motion around the sun. Thus Joshua described the miracle according to appearance.

What about women remaining silent in the churches (1 Cor. 14:34)? Calvin said that Paul was regulating an issue of his time and that the regulation did not apply to churches everywhere at all times. Was Calvin one of those hermeneutical experts, a member of the new priestly class, telling people that the words do not mean what they say? I would not wish to say so. Do we today follow the plain meaning of greeting with the holy kiss, of footwashing, or of women wearing a head-covering in worship? Has our hermeneutics misled us or has it correctly interpreted the intended meaning of these texts for our time?

What then is the precise issue before us? There is a commonly accepted hermeneutical rule that some texts shaped by the circumstances of that time do not necessarily apply in the same form to the church existing in other times. The issue is whether that rule, which we all apply to some texts, applies also to 1 Tim. 2:12. If one says it does or if one says it does not, one has made a hermeneutical judgment for which one must give reasons. Of course, passionate disagreements are possible, especially when a commonly accepted rule is newly applied to a particular text. Not everyone will agree with that application.

So let's be careful when we speak, especially in volatile situations. Let's not be self-serving in our description of those we oppose. Let's not demonize persons or positions with which we disagree. Instead, let's be self-consciously aware of the hermeneutical reasons why we believe our view to be the accurate interpretation. Above all, let us "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).
WHERE IS THE CATECHISM?

Is the catechism "comfort" "truth" "boring" or "irrelevant"?

Do a word association the next time you are with your friends. Ask what they might associate with the word "catechism." Some may say "comfort," "solid," "teaching," or "truth." Others might say "boring," "dull," "memorize," or "irrelevant." Actually, the word "catechism" is not used very often in Christian Reformed churches any more. Catechism classes have given way to "Church School." Sermons based on a catechism are becoming a rarity. For many people, catechism reminds them of an earlier era — a period of time through which we have passed. We are moving on to other things.

We have seen many excellent changes in church education. I applaud the concern for making the lessons lively, engaging, and highly active. Students no longer sit passively in the class room. They now actively engage the story of Scripture. Teachers are encouraged to speak to the heart as well as to the head. In the pulpit, pastors are increasingly concerned to preach to the congregation's needs. As members face pressures at home and on the job, preaching tends toward corporate pastoral care and motivation for Christian living. Expository and textual preaching often gives way to topical sermons. In the process of introducing these changes, we have often allowed something else slip. How well do our children (and adults) understand the language of the faith? The phrase "language of the faith" may sound a little strange to you. I use it to refer to the technical, often precise, manner in which we speak to one another theologically about our faith. In the face of fuzzy thinking and imprecise language, the church needs to re-emphasize the value of precision in the use of theological language. Only by being precise in our own use of language can the church better translate its faith into the language of society and culture.

What is a Catechism?

The Christian church, almost from its New Testament inception, has made use of catechisms for instruction in the faith. The root from which our English word "catechism" comes is used at least twelve times in the New Testament, often by Paul, to describe instruction in the faith (Rms. 2:18; 1 Cor. 12:28, Eph. 4:11, and others). Very early in the history of the church, a process of catechetical instruction was developed to instruct new adult converts in the basic teachings of the Christian faith. One of the early catechisms was written by Augustine at the end of the fourth century.

For many contemporary believers, however, catechism is associated with a process of indoctrination, usually employing rote memorization of questions and answers. Advances in educational methods in North America have left that pedagogy behind, and the church has reduced the direct use of catechisms for instruction in the faith.

What is a catechism? A catechism is nothing other than a summary of the teachings of the church organized in such a manner as to be a useful tool in the instruction of the faith. Most people associated with the Christian Reformed Church are familiar with the Heidelberg Catechism which served for decades as the center piece of catechetical instruction.

How can we use the catechism today as an instructional tool? The first thing to remember is that we must make a distinction between catechism as a summary of doctrine and catechism as a pedagogical method. We need the summary of doctrine; we could certainly benefit for newer and more user-friendly teaching methods.

Let me focus your attention on two basic guidelines for using a catechism in preaching and teaching. We will look first at how the catechism functions as a summary of Christian doctrine. Then we will deal with catechetical teaching methods for various age groups.

Summary of Doctrine

Almost all catechisms include a number of common elements. Throughout their history catechisms were generally structured around a treatment of the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, and the sacraments. The Heidelberg Catechism also builds on these basic elements. In using a catechism, you do not want to lose sight of this basic structure for summarizing Christian doctrine. Instead of focussing on one or two particular theological points which might separate your tradition (say that of John Calvin) from some other tradition (say that of Luther), the elements of the catechism more often bind us together with other believers.

The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes Christian doctrine in three main parts — often referred to as Sin, Salvation, and Service. While that division is extremely helpful, it misses two additional elements of reformed doctrine. We are also deeply interested in both creation and consummation. A complete summary of Christian doctrine, then, would revolve around five main points of reference: how the God created the world, the...
CATECHISM... cont.
ROBERT C. DE VRIES

"The time has come to dust off the catechism and put it to use again."

The many points of reference for theological instruction at every age level of the Christian church could be well incorporated into the five primary theological points. Use of the catechism and confessions of the church could also be incorporated, along with references to the recently adopted Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony.

How to use it

Consider now how the catechism can be used for instruction and preaching at different age levels. The 1995 synod of the Christian Reformed Church reaffirmed a desire for children to be admitted to the Lord's Supper after attending a simple profession of faith. Synod also encouraged the churches to provide training for these younger children which would "focus on the nature and meaning of the sacrament and on a basic explanation of the Apostles' Creed, Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. It will be carried out at the cognitive level appropriate to the child." (Acts of Synod 1995, p. 720). Pastors and Ministers of Education are now encouraged to develop their own instructional processes to nurture children in these areas. Ideally, we should develop a set of family based materials for parents to use with their children at home in preparation for this younger profession of faith.

The catechism can also be used effectively during a child's middle school years. At this age, the child is better able to understand abstract concepts, enabling them to understand and use the language of faith. Psychologically they still have a positive orientation toward their parents and the church. Teaching a basic theological vocabulary to children at this age is critical. Educators recognize that children learn foreign language best at an early age.

This is likely true as well for learning the language of faith.

Instruction using the catechism for high school students and emerging adults should emphasize application and service. CRC Publications is presently preparing a course for high school students which combines a study of a portion of the catechism with service projects. Students at this age must be able to see how their faith works and impacts society.

Young adults and young married couples often look to the church once again for solid teaching. Programs such as Coffee Break, Men's Life, and even Promise Keepers, demonstrate the hunger of young adults for knowledge and understanding. This desire is combined, of course, with celebration, praise and a solid form of Christian bonding. A user friendly form of the catechism — a self-study guide, for example — would be very effective for this age group.

I would encourage churches to engage the older adults in intergenerational conversations of their faith. These folks were raised on the catechism. Many of them know it thoroughly. Churches have no better resource to pass on the heritage of faith to the younger generations than the wisdom of the elderly. Catechism classes could invite the "Saint of the Week" into their class to hear the testimony of how this particular lesson has been lived out in this person's life.

The time has come to dust off the catechism and put it to use again. We must also use the best educational methods available in teaching the content of the faith. But in a culture which is increasingly hostile to Christianity, we must provide a solid theological training for our children and youth so they can become discerning Christians in an adversarial world. The catechism, as a summary of Christian doctrine and as a primer in the language of faith, is a critical piece in achieving this goal.

STUDY MATERIAL

2 study books based on the Heidelberg Catechism currently on the market are:

The Call to be Faithful

As the CRC faces the increasingly complex issues of our modern society, we must not forget our Reformed identity and heritage. Our theological home is neither with Liberal Protestantism nor Evangelical Fundamentalism. We must ever be on guard against unReformed thinking coming into the CRC from the left and the right. We must fervently ask God for the guidance of his Spirit so that we will remain steadfast to our Reformed faith with its wonderfully rich and faithful understanding of his word.
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION at the Crossroads

What schools teach and how they teach are closely tied to community identity and values. At least, ideally a school teaches and promotes the values of the community to which it belongs. Thus, the identity that a school promotes depends on its vision and the willingness and ability of its teachers to shape their charges accordingly.

When a school no longer reflects the values of the community it serves, or its constituents are so negligent that educators can revise the curriculum without regard to the community, trouble cannot be far away. Recent debates about sex education and bi-lingual classes in the public schools clearly prove this. Parents move their children to other schools, even if it costs them extra; requested millage increases fail time after time; school board meetings are deluged with irate parents. Sometimes parents don’t care; they let the schools do as they please. But through it all the educators

Reformed tradition. Thus, Christian day schools associated with the CRCNA are rooted in the conviction that the minds of believers and their children need as much care as their souls and bodies. We confess that sin affects our minds not just our souls; that conversion and true faith lead us to acknowledge God, that the world we live in is created and ordered by him, and that human beings are image bearers of God.

We are convinced that this true faith makes a difference for the way in which we think about the world as a parent, a baker, an artist, a psychologist, a teacher, a physician or whatever calling we receive from the Lord. The knowledge and skills needed to perform our calling requires training, above all a training of the mind that shapes the ideas which direct the hands that move the world.

Some of this training takes place in the church and family. Ordinarily these do not have the competence that schools do to recognized and accepted it as part of our discipleship.

OLD AND NEW QUESTIONS.

But, is it not better for our children to be a salt ing salt? Are Christian schools a way of sheltering our children from the world? To these old questions new ones have been added. Are we still funding the original vision which established these schools? Or is the school’s purpose only one of a middle class private education? Or is it the pursuit of a multi-cultural equality? Should we continue to insist on Christian schools in missionary contexts? Should converts to the faith who join the CRCNA be exempted from the commitment to Christian day school? Is it worth all this money?

These troublesome questions challenge our commitment to Christian schools. We are faced with a dramatic challenge similar to that which the public schools are experiencing. What have these questions arisen?

DISTANCE FROM THE VISION FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION.

In some areas the Christian School has served the community for generations. Its presence is taken for granted; support and attendance is simply assumed. The Christian School has been there so long that its counter-cultural origins are forgotten or assigned to mere ethno-cen-trism. Little work is done to remind the community of the religious commitments that bind us to Christian education. Thus the biblical vision and faith that led the first generation of school builders to sacrifice as they did may have less impact on their spiritual descendants. Nevertheless, the form of the commitment remains and so the schools continue.

When the institutions that serve a community are no longer actively rooted in its commitments and values their existence begins to be questioned. Is this true of our Christian schools? Do we have the form of Christian day schools but not the power to articulate and provide an education that is shaped by our faith commitment? Have we forgotten what Christian education is? Do the Christian schools continue to teach the identity and the vision that gave them life? Do we care enough if they do not?

Cont. page 7
God is sovereign also in education

Let us affirm that our children are not our own; that they belong body, soul and mind to the Lord who holds us responsible for teaching them in the fear and knowledge of the Lord. Let us also reaffirm our commitment to the gift of Christian education in day schools. And if answers to the above questions tell us we are in trouble, let us integrate the integrity to respond appropriately.

THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW.

It is sometimes argued that establishing Christian day schools when we did was the right thing to do, then. For immigrants in Canada and the U.S. these schools enabled the community's identity and its values to survive in a strange new world. In the U.S. debates surfaced early in the twentieth century to the effect that the CRC should open up to society so that it would have wider impact. The argument continues.

It is true that Christian schools associated with the CRCNA were established primarily by immigrant communities. It is also true that there was a time of adjustment to the new world, had this affected the coherence of the community and "not a thumb breadth" of life belongs to us. Our ancestors in the faith sacrificed for Christian day schools as an intimate expression of our Reformed Calvinist identity and commitments. In a society that argued for human independence from God we confessed that God is sovereign also in education.

Now, more than ever, we need to be reminded of that truth. At that time society as a whole was informed by Christian values. School teachers in public schools were more often than not Christians of conviction. Now, even though our society is religiously more diverse, Christianity is one religion whose public expression is systematically opposed. Especially in public schools. Some people are sending their children to Christian schools because of the deep-seated opposition to Christian moral values in public instruction. Some of these parents are not practicing Christians. But they recognize the truth about teaching children. Let us not abandon the truth nor those whose lives depend upon it.

After God's people were in the promised land for a generation or so the differences between the Lord and the local gods, between God's people and the Canaanite population, were no longer appreciated. God's prior word to them about not intermingling with the nations (Deut. 7:3-4) was understood as a good thing "for that time;" but it's too harsh "now." Was the vision just right "for that time alone"?

Is it time again to emphasize the counter-cultural vision?

Of course not! A Christian vision of reality does not change; the time and consequences of Christ's victory is disputed only by the world. Let us not neglect our responsibility to train the hearts and minds of our children in an environment congenial to the Christian faith.

MAINTAINING THE VISION.

The membership of the CRCNA is changing. We don't hear Dutch much. Now we hear Spanish, Korean or Navajo spoken among its families, in its worship services, and in the Christian schools. That Dutch is not spoken much any more is not greatly lamented, nor is it crucial. What has always been important in the CRCNA is the Kingdom of God and the covenant of His grace. It is that theology, received from ancestors committed to a reformed theological view of God and the world, not a narrow ethnicity, which has fueled the CRCNA's vision for service in all of life, including Christian education.

Will we together, the people from many lands who speak different languages in the CRCNA, continue to covenant together as those committed to a reformed theological understanding of God and the world? Then our commitment to Christian education in day schools will grow stronger.

In this time of great cultural upheaval let us listen to the questions about Christian education and answer them with integrity on the basis of our reformed theological understanding of the world. Let us also dare to ask other questions: If at one time we were too narrow in our witness, are we now too open, too broad-minded? Are we in danger of becoming generically Christian or evangelical, embarrassed by our theological particularity and the stumblingblocks that come with it? Is it time again to emphasize the counter-cultural vision that engendered Christian education in day schools?

Education in public schools stands at a cross-roads. So do Christian day schools.
CALVIN SEMINARY FORUM

“Knowing God”

Those who have prepared for the ministry over the last thirty or forty years learned much about the Bible, church history, and church doctrine, and sometimes also received good training in pastoral skills. But in the area of their personal relationship to God, most were left to their own devices and insights, and received very little guidance.


Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli...now Samuel did not yet know the Lord...And Samuel said, speak, for your servant is listening.

- I Samuel 3:1-10 NRSV

Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as certain as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.

- Hosea 6:3 NRSV

When people ask me what a “COFE” does, my short answer is that I send students to practice in the church what they have learned in the classroom, and when they return I help them to discern what God is calling them to do. Seminary classes are intensive. Church work is usually exciting. Discerning God’s voice, God’s call — vocation — is sometimes difficult.

I spend a lot of time praying with students at Calvin Seminary. We pray for all sorts of things: the Hebrew quiz later this morning, a problem in the youth group, they’re leading, the strength to read all the books and write all the papers, and money. We pray for money because its hard to support four kids and go to school full time! But most of our prayers together boil down to asking God to come along side to show the way. “Guide us! Show us! Let us know you’re there and care! ‘Speak, for your servant is listening!”

As a Calvin Seminary student twenty years ago I noticed an irony which I still notice today: you can learn a lot about God and still not know God. You can memorize Bible texts and catechism answers and not know God. You can read the Bible in Hebrew and Greek and not know God. You can learn theologies both systematic and practical and yet have a shallow knowledge of God. You can even, like Samuel, be involved in ministry and not know God very well at all.

That doesn’t mean that religious education, as some have claimed, is bad for your spiritual health. It does mean that we should not leave students in Sunday school, Christian day school or seminary “to their own devices and insights.” It does mean that those of us involved in Christian education or leadership at all levels ought to check frequently with our students, our parishioners, our interns and staff members to make sure that in their study or ministry they are getting to know God better.

“Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord...” The Hebrew yada means “to become acquainted with, to experience, to be intimate with.” It’s even used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. God wants us to know about him. God wants our minds to learn life-long his Word and his creation. But God wants our minds connected with our hearts so that we know him in the core of our being. God wants us to experience his presence and activity as we study and as we minister, as we teach and as we lead.

That’s one of the benefits of praying with students. When you talk together to a mutual friend, you get an idea of how well the other person really knows your friend. And the prayer itself is a way to bring the presence of Christ immediately into the life situation of a Hebrew quiz, a youth group, personal time management or family finances. If you know God there, it’s easier to hear his voice in bigger issues like vocation.

Let’s listen for God’s voice: “Let us press on to know the Lord...” Let’s encourage our students to do the same. “We will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.”