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CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

FORUM

FALL 2009



Money

FORUM

Providing Theological Leadership
for the Church

Volume 16, Number 3
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from the president

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We all know people who have been hurt in the financial crisis of the last twelve months—people, for example, who have lost good jobs and face a discouraging job market. It's a serious thing to lose a job you needed and liked. It scuffs you in ways you can't even fully describe. At minimum you feel like you're no longer a player.

John Calvin had a theory of commerce according to which all of us live in a web of dependency. To get a loaf of bread on your table a good number of folk—farmers, grain processors, salespeople, bakers, delivery folks, retailers—have to play their part in the web. This blessed web of dependency is God's gift, Calvin believed, intended not just to get us fed, but also to remind us every day that we are dependent beings, much in need of each other and much in need of God.

What if you lose your place in the web?

We all know people, or know of them, whose job loss has led to mortgage foreclosure. Imagine the pressures. You've got to live somewhere, and if kind relatives take you in, maybe you've got a roof over your head, but your kind relatives like strange music, and you are allergic to their cat, and they are allergic to your son's attitude at the dinner table, and, besides, how do you all live with anxiety, loss of privacy, and questions of who pays for what, and....

At CTS we, like you, have had to cope with the crisis. We have cut pay and jobs. We have experienced a good deal of tension over these things, and also a renewed sense of our place in the web of dependency. We talk about money a lot, and we talk about God a lot and especially about our dependence on him. I am confident that in a new year, with a new calendar, a new curriculum, and a significant surge in enrollment, God will preserve and prosper us.

But we'll still talk about money. In fact, we're bringing some of our thinking and talking to you. In this issue of the *Forum*, five good colleagues cluster at the intersection of money and the gospel, and tell us what they see from there.

Grace and peace,

Reflections

ON MONEY

Stewards of God's Kingdom

If we were playing a word-association game, most of us would link “stewardship” with “money” rather than “relationships” or “work.” This connection is certainly valid. *Oikonomos* (related to *economy*) is the Greek term for the crafty *manager* in Jesus’ parable (Luke 16). Poor financial stewardship, public and private, is the main reason for the current economic crisis.

But we realize that stewardship is much broader than economics. The environment has become a pressing concern. We’ve all heard sermons about using our time and talents for the Lord. “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded” (Luke 12:48) echoes in our consciences. As it turns out, the biblical understanding of stewardship is huge. It involves everything we have and everything we are, all in relation to God. The Old Testament tithe—giving back the firstfruits of what we have received—is meant to illustrate how we love and obey the Lord with all our being—heart, soul, mind, and strength. Stewardship is faithful management of everything that God has given us.

Created to Be Stewards

Stewardship involves all of our lives because that is how God designed human nature. It is not merely the preference or peculiarity of particular cultural groups. Genesis 1 presents the creation as God’s kingdom, God as the great King, and humans as his image bearers—vassals, vice-rulers in his kingdom. We are given authority over the animals and the earth. Humans are supposed to be royal

stewards for God as Joseph was for Pharaoh and Daniel was for Nebuchadnezzar. God is the Ruler and Caretaker of his creation. To image God is to follow his lead. We’ve been stewards ever since God called Adam to tend the Garden.

God created the world to be a kingdom of *shalom*. It is like a community with an economy that is just and productive. When creatures do what God designed them to do, then he is glorified, they benefit one another, and everything flourishes. Human stewardship is intended to promote the *shalom* of the kingdom: the blessings of life, health, growth, harmony, justice, abundance, fulfillment, joy, and praise to God.

In order to be good stewards, we need practical knowledge of God’s design for creation—what the Bible calls *wisdom*. We must understand the roles and purposes of God’s creatures and especially ourselves so that we can nurture and promote them. God’s will revealed in Scripture is an unailing source. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding” (Ps. 111:10). But not everything we need to know is found in the Bible. Proverbs 8

by John W. Cooper,
Professor of
Philosophical
Theology



proclaims that God’s wisdom is so embedded in creation that no human—king, merchant, or peasant—can operate without it. Isaiah 28:23-29 indicates how practical such wisdom is: farmers’ skill for managing crops and soil is wisdom from God. The Lord teaches us good stewardship through his providence (*Belgic Confession*, Art. 2).

Dimensions of Stewardship

Although Genesis focuses on animals and the earth, our responsibility is not limited to nature. Good stewardship is managing all of God’s gifts as he intends them to be used. Our very existence, in all its dimensions, is a gift of God—our money, time, talents, health, energy, minds, emotions, relationships, activities, and, above all, our relation to him.

We are stewards of our physical health and safety, which requires eating and resting properly, exercising, and refraining from what is harmful. Our personalities and emotions belong to God, so we should nurture emotional well-being, filter what is disturbing, work on our rough edges, and cultivate the fruit of the Spirit.

Our minds, abilities, and all the things we do with them are gifts from the Lord—academic, practical, technical, emotional, social, professional, artistic, and spiritual gifts. All of them involve stewardship. Do we leave our abilities unused, squander them on worthless or harmful pursuits, or cultivate them as intended by God? Our use of technology, business practices, life-long learning, and

*Poor financial stewardship,
public and private, is the
main reason for the current
economic crisis.*

► Stewards of God's Kingdom

personal lifestyles are matters of stewardship. So is choosing a job or profession. How do my abilities, interests, and opportunities match genuine needs and worthy purposes in the world? Stewardship also applies to free time, discretionary income, and recreational activities—all gifts from the Lord. Good stewards know how to work and relax, without turning relaxation into work.

Marriage, family, friendship, work and recreational relationships, citizenship, church membership—all God's gifts of community likewise require care. We are stewards of our social lives and relationships. We can neglect them, abuse them, wear them out, or nurture them for God's glory and our mutual benefit.

Most basic of all is our walk with the Lord. The everlasting life that we have in Christ is a gift of God. So also are growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, the fruit of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, and the sure hope of resurrection life in God's kingdom. If stewardship is faithful management of God's gifts, then everything we do to nurture and cultivate our life with God—study of Scripture, prayer, worship, discipleship, and fellowship—is included. Spiritual laziness is poor stewardship of new life in Christ.

Good stewards manage the complexity of life as a whole, not just the various dimensions. None of us can be devoted full-time to our personal well-being, relationships, work, finances, civic responsibilities, and spiritual health. So we must develop habits and lifestyles that are conducive to overall balance and well-being. We must be able to recognize when specific issues need attention and have the discipline to address them. Proper priorities, time management, and efficient work in every aspect of life are characteristics of good stewardship. What a daunting challenge! How is it possible?

Fallen Stewards

It isn't. Stewardship that successfully sustains the *shalom* of the kingdom is not possible in a fallen world. We humans are flawed, limited, foolish, and sinfully inclined against good stewardship. We lack the will, time, energy, resources, love, and

[Christ's] death on the cross defeated all the forces that frustrate stewardship, and his resurrection is the dawn of the renewed creation order in which stewardship always yields shalom.

wisdom to manage our own lives successfully, not to mention the economy and the environment. Even if we could handle our own affairs infallibly, we cannot control the other factors that complicate life. Economic downturns, illnesses, natural disasters, accidents, the thoughtless and malicious actions of others, and the sheer unpredictability of outcomes all conspire against us. If we do manage decent stewardship, can we count on the benefits? Financially responsible people are bankrupted nonetheless, and many who are health-conscious prematurely contract fatal illnesses. Even the greenest environmental policies cannot silence creation's groaning in bondage to decay (Rom. 8:18-20). Stewardship no longer works as God designed it. We cannot escape our responsibility, but we cannot be successful either.

The Redemption of Stewardship

The good news is that Jesus Christ has redeemed stewardship. As a real human—the second Adam, the genuine image of the invisible God—he became God's royal steward and got the job done right. Jesus managed his life and relationship to the rest of creation in perfect obedience to God in order to restore *shalom*. He cast out demons, stilled the storm, healed diseases, fed the hungry, restored relationships, forgave sins, and raised the dead. His death on the cross defeated all the forces that frustrate stewardship, and his resurrection is the dawn of the renewed creation order in which stewardship always yields *shalom*. Jesus Christ managed to turn around the whole creation, not just a major corporation. He is the paradigm Good Steward, ruling all things until he turns the kingdom over to his Father. Surely he is worthy of God's affirmation: "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

In Christ, we too are good stewards.

Saved from sin and restored as God's image bearers, we again serve as stewards in his kingdom. With God's providence and blessing, our attempts to manage our lives, relationships, and dependence on nature are fruitful. God's Spirit enables us to grow in wisdom as we care for ourselves, our families, our friends, and our communities. We gain insight and effectiveness in managing the complexities, imbalances, challenges, and temptations in our lives. Our walk with the Lord can become more enlightening, energizing, mature, joyful, and glorifying to him. God's providence still upholds his design for creation—that faithful stewardship promotes *shalom*—and we can experience its benefits as we live the new life in Christ. Our efforts to be good stewards—even of the economy and the environment—often do bear fruit.

God's providence also gives us deep confidence as we suffer the effects of living in a rebellious, dysfunctional world that so often frustrates good stewardship. In a way, God's providence is his stewardship of all things, wisely managing them to bring his everlasting kingdom. God is the great King and Steward, and nothing in all creation—including economic turmoil and climate change—can separate us from his love in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8).

Everlasting Stewardship

Stewardship will remain our vocation even when the everlasting kingdom comes. We long for God's affirmation and promotion: "Well done, good and faithful servant! ... I will put you in charge of many things" (Matt. 25:23). Faithful stewards receive even more responsibility when the Lord returns (Luke 19:11-27). Revelation 22:5 reaffirms what Genesis 1 proclaims: God's people will reign in his everlasting kingdom. We are not merely stewards. We are also God's beloved children and friends, his prophets, priests, kings, and so much more.

So let's encourage one another to get started now. The things we do that are founded on Christ will survive the Day of Judgment and follow us into the kingdom (1 Cor. 3:11-15): "The fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward." May the Lord welcome us all as good and faithful stewards.

The Grace of Giving



Pastors often feel squeamish about preaching on financial stewardship—giving money back to God. However, most congregations want their pastors to challenge them more, not less, in the area of financial stewardship.

The sermon below was preached by Rev. Duane Kelderman in his first year of ministry at Neland Ave. CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he served as co-pastor for 13 years before coming to CTS in 2001. We hope it will encourage pastors to “believe in giving” and preach on the subject not just when there’s an acute financial challenge, as in this case, but as an ongoing feature of Christian discipleship.

I was planning to continue the sermon series today that I’ve been doing for the past few weeks. However, something happened this past Monday that changed my plans. This past Monday night we had a council meeting at which our finance committee once again informed us, as they have informed the congregation now, that financial giving this year has been below our budgeted needs. Only now, the finance committee informed us that our fund balances are below the point at which something more drastic than talking about it must be done. The finance committee proposed Monday night cutting the budget that we have already adopted. Needless to say, they got our attention.

We are still in the middle of deciding what to do. I want to make it clear that no one asked me to preach a sermon related to this problem today. I should also clarify that the finance committee did not propose any cuts in my salary, at least not yet. This sermon is not part of a plan hatched on Monday night.

However, I want to preach a sermon on “The Grace of Giving,” most of all because I believe in giving. I believe Scripture teaches that financial giving (and I know that’s only one part of Christian stewardship, but that’s the only part I’m talking about today) is one of the key expressions of our Christian commitment. To talk

about money and giving is not to talk about some side-issue in the Christian life, some add-on option for the really committed. It is to talk about a central dynamic of Jesus Christ living in us.

To take that one step further, our giving tells a lot about our relationship to Jesus Christ. As a measure of our commitment to Christ, our pocketbook tells a lot more than our hymnbook. One reliable way Christ takes our spiritual temperature is by browsing through our checkbook.

Finally, by way of introduction, let me say right off the bat that I think, when we take Neland Church’s spiritual temperature using the thermometer of giving, Neland Church is healthy and committed. A tremendous amount of money is received and distributed in this church. I’m not going to chastise you this morning. I’m really just going to preach the gospel

One reliable way Christ takes our spiritual temperature is by browsing through our checkbook.

*by Duane Kelderman,
Professor of Preaching and Vice President for Administration*



today, the gospel as it impacts and shapes our giving.

To do that, I’d like you to follow along as I read 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 and 9:6-15. ... (See sidebar on p. 6.)

Paul is excited as he writes to these Corinthian Christians. He has just come away from a beautiful experience with the Christians of Macedonia, who were poorer than poor, but had given a staggering amount of money to help the Christians in Jerusalem who were starving because of a famine.

The Macedonian Christians themselves were in extreme poverty. They were down and out—economically and politically. But, Paul says, “They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability” (8:3). He adds, “They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people” (v. 4). They heard about the famine in Jerusalem and said, “Please, Paul, let us do what we can to help.”

Paul uses these Macedonian Christians as examples as he encourages the Corinthian Christians to excel not only in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in love, but also in the “grace of giving” (v. 7). I like that phrase—“the grace of giving.” ▶

► The Grace of Giving

Paul says the capacity to give is itself a grace, a gift of God's Spirit to us.

Paul appeals to four principles or truths as he teaches these Corinthian Christians.

First, you must always *give gratefully*. Paul first looks at the motive, the attitude,

the heart of the Christian giver. True Christian giving springs from a heart that realizes what it has been given. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you

through his poverty might become rich" (8:9). The Macedonian Christians show us that Christian giving is not really a matter of financial ability; it is a matter of spiritual awareness of how much God has given us in Jesus Christ. Paul ends chapter 9 with "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift."

Earlier in chapter 9, Paul says we must give "not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Yet Paul isn't saying that we need no discipline in our giving. He's not saying that each Saturday night you should ask yourself, "How much do I feel like giving tomorrow?" and if you don't feel particularly cheerful, give nothing. Like any other area of our spiritual life, financial giving is a spiritual discipline. It is a grace, a gift, a spiritual practice that Christ builds into our lives for the long haul.

Paul's point here is that this discipline is not a law in itself. It springs from a desire to give because we are so thankful for what God has given to us. People who know Jesus Christ are givers.

Second, Paul says, you must *give proportionally* (that is, as God has blessed you). In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul says, "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income." In our text (8:12) Paul says, "The gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have." This was a clear continuation of the practice of God's people (from the time of Moses) of giving of their produce and their crops and animals and wealth in the proportion that they had been given it by God. In Bible times that was a tenth.

Many years ago Neland Church decided to organize its giving around this biblical principle. Neland members covenant together to contribute 6.5 percent of their adjusted gross income to the general operating fund of our church, and 2 percent to the Christian education fund—and that's before benevolence and missions and other appeals from the church and from other causes beyond our local congregation. On more than one occasion, I have explained to people

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 (TNIV)

The Collection for the Lord's People

¹ And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵ And they went beyond our expectations; having given themselves first of all to the Lord, they gave themselves by the will of God also to us. ⁶ So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

¹⁰ And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. ¹¹ Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. ¹² For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

¹³ Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, ¹⁵ as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little."

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Generosity Encouraged

⁶ Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written:

"They have scattered abroad their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever."

¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, people will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

how the finances of Neland Church work, and I can see them letting those numbers tumble through their heads as they do some quick figuring. The next words I usually hear are, “Wow, that’s a lot of money!” Yes, it is. And you know why it’s a lot of money? Because God has given us so much in the first place! The amount we give back to God is only a portion of what we have been given. And you know who controls that, and whom we have to thank for that? The same person to whom we are giving back.

That leads to a third principle of giving: We can *give confidently*. Giving is God’s way of both testing and strengthening our trust in him to meet our needs. Chapter 9:6 lays out a spiritual-economic law of the universe: “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.” That doesn’t mean (as some say) that we should give knowing we’ll get more back if we give more—that’s investing, not giving. There simply is an economic/spiritual law in the divine economy (that no CPA can explain or deny) that says the more you are a giving person (financially and in other ways) the more you will experience the abundance of life (maybe financially, maybe in other ways).

And to get us started giving, God promises that he will provide for our needs. “And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (9:8). And then in verses 10-11: “Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.” That’s a promise—of God!

It’s interesting that people don’t start tithing (by tithing now I mean principled, proportional giving as a way of life) when they decide they can finally afford it. Most people make tithing a way of life, the first check written each month, when they are hurting, when they don’t see how they’re

Paul says the capacity to give is itself a grace, a gift of God’s Spirit to us.

going to make it. It’s an act of faith, of trust, of sacrifice.

I still remember a visit I had with Dave, a member of my previous church who went through financial calamity. Dave was doing well in his own profession, but his father-in-law back in Mississippi was having big problems in what had been a very successful cotton-farming operation. The banker kept loaning Dave’s father-in-law more and more and more money. But then the banker said that another family member would have to sign the next promissory note. Dave and Pam signed it, never thinking the farm would go under and the banker would knock at the door demanding an amount of money they had never even dreamed of having.

I still remember the booth in the restaurant where we were sitting when Dave told me how hard it was to call his dad and tell him, “Dad, I’m losing everything.” With tears in his eyes, he told me what his dad’s first words were: “Son,” he said, “I know that you have never robbed the Lord. Do not rob him now.” He was referring to Malachi 3, where God says Israel has robbed him by not bringing in the tithe. For Dave’s father and for Dave, to give to God was to say, “Lord, I trust you to meet my needs.” Giving was both a test of his faith, and a strengthener of his faith. “Do not rob him now!”

Dave’s story is an interesting one because the skeptic raises her eyebrows and says, “Oh, give bountifully and receive bountifully? Was that true for Dave and Pam?” No calculator or accountant can measure how true that was for Dave and Pam. They would be the first to stand here

True Christian giving springs from a heart that realizes what it has been given.

and say, “Give confidently; God will meet your needs.” And when you are in the crunch that most of us feel like we’re constantly in when it comes to money, they would say, “Don’t rob God now!”

I could not call you to make your number-one financial priority every month *giving back to God in exact proportion to what he’s given to you* if I didn’t believe with all my heart that God’s word on this score is true, absolutely true, and if I didn’t see this truth played out in my own life, in the lives of my immediate family members, and in the lives of many of you and many others I have known. When we sow sparingly, we reap sparingly; but when we sow bountifully, we reap bountifully.

Finally, we can *give purposefully*. We don’t just give for the sake of giving. We give because we have a mission to do, a work, a cause. We give because Neland Church has a ministry, a glorious ministry.

For nearly 75 years, God’s Word has been proclaimed in this place. God’s people have worshiped. Generation upon generation, children and the children’s children have been nurtured in faith, and have grown up and gone on to serve. And now more than ever we are reaching out beyond ourselves in this community, to be a light and beacon of hope. I believe in the ministry of Neland Church—for us and for our children, for our community, for our city, for our denomination. I believe it is a vitally important ministry, and one which God and the Spirit are in. I believe it is Christ’s ministry. That is why I believe God will meet our church’s needs.

You know, there’s a side of me that would love to not have to think about money and be concerned about meeting budgets as a church. But that is the foolish and fearful side of me. I know that if a church is to be vital and alive and connected and reaching out, it will be a church that is living by faith, that is living on the edge, that is willing to lose itself for Christ’s sake.

Don’t wish for that situation where your faith would shrivel and your spirit would harden. Trust. Trust Christ enough to give him the firstfruits of your harvest. And God will bless you and all of us together.

What's Right with the Prosperity Gospel?

An Economy of Abundance

In contrast to the logic of scarcity with which we are all too familiar, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann put his finger on the pulse of God's economy by describing it as a "liturgy of abundance." God's economy, he pointed out, assumes the abundance of creation and so refuses the miserly hoarding and competition yielded by the myth of scarcity. It's Pharaoh's logic, he suggested, that generates an economy of fear: "There's not enough. Let's get everything."¹ In contrast, Jesus came to demonstrate an extravagant, wonder-working economy that makes wine out of water. In this economy of abundance, not only is there enough fish and bread to go around, there are baskets and baskets left over (John 6:11-13). God's extravagant creating and re-creating almost borders on being wasteful.

Not surprisingly, then, some have seized upon John 10:10 as central to the gospel, where Jesus announces: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

From Abundance to Prosperity

Unfortunately, this promise of abundant life is often taken up by those we identify with the "prosperity gospel": a gospel of "health & wealth" associated with folks like Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church in Houston, or Creflo Dollar's World Changers Church outside Atlanta. You might be familiar with its slogans, plucked from Scripture:

"You have not because you ask not" (James 4:2).

"Ask and you will receive" (John 16:24).

Jesus came "that you may have life, and have it abundantly."

This seems to resonate with creation's economy of abundance. Wouldn't an economy of abundance be one that generates prosperity?

And yet I'm guessing most of us would squirm (or scream) if we had to watch the Trinity Broadcasting Network for any extended amount of time. Many of us would cringe to see Creflo Dollar positioning the Cadillac Escalade beside his pulpit as "evidence" of the anointing. And I suspect most of us would be uncomfortable with the picture of Joel Osteen asking for donations on a remote broadcast from his yacht. Indeed, it's easy to detest name-it-and-claim-it as simply sanctified greed. We are rightly suspicious that this is just the wolf of consumerism in sheep's clothing.

But how many of us are still quite comfortable with more "low grade" (or "soft sell") versions of a prosperity gospel? For instance, how many of us buy into a logic which assumes that if Christians are wealthy, they have been "blessed" by God (as if material prosperity was a kind of magic, rather than the product of often unjust systems)? While many of us might be quick to loudly denounce the "heresy" of the prosperity gospel, we're quite comfortable with affirming the good of

by James
K.A. Smith,
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Philosophy,
Calvin College



affluence. But isn't that just a prosperity gospel without the glam?

What's Right with Prosperity?

So maybe it's fair for us to ask: What's *right* with the prosperity gospel? One of the reasons it's important to ask this question is because of the explosion of world Christianity, which is basically *charismatic* Christianity; and the prosperity gospel often attends Pentecostal and charismatic spirituality.

But here's my question: Does the prosperity gospel mean something different in rural Nigeria than suburban Dallas? Is the promise of material and economic abundance received differently by those who live on less than \$2 a day? The prosperity gospel (for all its failures) might be an unwitting testimony to the holistic aspects of Pentecostal spirituality that value the goodness of creation and embodiment—a holism that resonates with the Reformed tradition. In a curious way, the prosperity gospel is a testament to the very "worldliness" of Pentecostal theology. While Pentecostal spirituality might often be associated with "pie-in-the-sky" pietism and a sort of escapism into spiritual matters, the prosperity gospel of Pentecostal spirituality refuses to spiritualize the promise that the gospel is "good news for the poor," and gives evidence of a core affirmation that God cares about our bellies and bodies. This means something very different in the comfort of an air-conditioned megachurch in suburban Atlanta (where "prosperity" signals an idolatrous, consumerist accumulation of luxury) than in famished refugee camps in Rwanda. The former deserves our criticism; the latter, I think, requires careful listening.

Does the prosperity gospel mean something different in rural Nigeria than suburban Dallas?

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "The liturgy of abundance, the myth of scarcity," *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999, p. 342.

Two Cheers for Prosperity

God's economy of abundance has no room for some romantic celebration of poverty and lack. Even if we're rightly concerned about the prosperity gospel, that shouldn't translate into any simplistic demonization of abundance or even prosperity. Indeed, this reminds me of the lyrics of an old Everclear song, "I Will Buy You a New Life":

I hate those people who love to tell you,
"Money is the root of all that kills."
They have never been poor,
They have never had the joy of a welfare
Christmas.

I suggest that implicit in the prosperity gospel—and buried under all its perversions and distortions—is a lingering testament that God is concerned with the material conditions of the poor. And God's economy does not just envision some "bare minimum" survival, but a flourishing, thriving abundance. The New Jerusalem is not some spartan, frugal space but rather a city teeming with downright luxury—a luxury enjoyed by all. In a similar way, the marriage supper of the Lamb doesn't have to observe the frugality of a downsized corporate lunch policy! Creation's abundance is mirrored and expanded in the new creation. Prosperity has a biblical ring to it.

However, we are still waiting for the New Jerusalem. And I think we can rightly be concerned that the "prosperity gospel" is often inattentive to this. Instead, the prosperity gospel seems to be a kind of "realized eschatology"—an overemphasis on the *already* that forgets the *not yet*. It fails to recognize that such prosperity is still *to come*. And in the meantime, it misses the structural injustices that yield abundance for only a few. In other words, the prosperity gospel fails to discern how wealth is often generated by systems of exploitation and oppression.

So how can we respond? On the one hand, the biblical narrative paints a picture of abundance and overflowing generosity as part of the warp and woof of God's creation. On the other hand, in our fallen,

Implicit in the prosperity gospel—and buried under all its perversions and distortions—is a lingering testament that God is concerned with the material conditions of the poor.

broken world, the prophets consistently denounce those economic systems which concentrate wealth and abundance in the hands of the few, and often at the expense of the many. So are we called to be present-day ascetics who are just waiting for an abundance to come? Doesn't that seem like we'd be spurning the gifts of God's creational abundance?

Fasting and Feasting

The answer, I suggest, revolves around how we inhabit *time*. An intentional asceticism or abstinence which voluntarily chooses to forego abundance attests to the persistent injustice of current economic systems, expressing solidarity with the poor and refusing the idolatry of materialism. But such an approach can run the risk of spurning God's abundance and can unwittingly fall prey to a logic of scarcity. On the other hand, an absolute enjoyment of abundance in the present almost inevitably lives off the exploitation of others and is prone to idolatry, as Paul

The God who became poor so that we might become rich invites us into a way of life marked by the rhythms of fasting and feasting—as a way of making us hungry for the abundant life.

notes when he writes, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:5). So it seems we're faced with two problematic options.

But it's not either/or if we think about this dynamically with respect to *time*—which is exactly the idea behind ancient and medieval practices of "fasting and feasting." The rhythm of fasting and feasting calls the people of God to bear witness to both of these realities at different times and in different seasons: we rightly celebrate and enjoy God's abundance, but we also rightly lament and resist injustice and poverty. During days or seasons of fasting—which, in a way, should be the "default" habit of the church's sojourn—we say "no" to abundance as a witness to the fact that so many lack not only abundance but what's needed just to survive. But during days and seasons of feasting, we enjoy a foretaste of the abundance of the coming kingdom.

The liturgical calendar encourages these sorts of rhythms. The ascetic disciplines of Advent and Lent encourage seasons of denial, frugality, and simplicity. During these seasons we do well to express our solidarity with the poor and hungry and to remember economic injustice, by resisting the luxuries of our American standard of living. But during the festal seasons of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost we are encouraged to drink deeply of God's abundance—to enjoy the overflowing fruits of a bountiful creation.

We can do the same in our own week-to-week rhythms. We might consider regularly fasting one day a week and regularly observing a Sabbath rest from global economic systems and local markets. But we might also restore the Sunday feast, and open our lavish tables to friends and strangers, providing a tantalizing hint of the coming Supper of the Lamb.

The God who became poor so that we might become rich invites us into a way of life marked by the rhythms of fasting and feasting—as a way of making us hungry for the abundant life.

Money and Ministries of Mercy

When we think about money, we tend to think about *our* money or *my* money. Yes, we know that it's actually God's money and that we're stewards of that money. But it's still easy to keep thinking about money as mine, or as God's and mine. What's missing in such thinking is *the church*. What does the church have to do with my money?

The work of deacons is a key part of God's plan to make money work—not just for those who have it, but especially for those who don't. The office of deacon is an important part of God's economic plan for a broken world. Understanding the work of deacons, and clearing up some misunderstandings, can help all of us more fully understand how money functions in God's grand economy.

Mercy First

When we think about money in the church we often do think of deacons, since their most visible role in many congregations is that of collecting the money in the worship service. But that is actually just a small part of the calling of deacons—and their calling related to money is really about helping church members use their money to help the needy.

The office of deacon, first of all, is to “represent and administer the mercy of Christ to all people,” (Christian Reformed Church Order, Article 25). So the primary ministry of deacons is a *ministry of mercy*. Secondly, deacons are to “stimulate the members of Christ's church to faithful, obedient stewardship of their resources on behalf of the needy.” Here's where the money comes in; but notice that the emphasis is on using resources for the purpose of benevolence—to help those in need. Moreover, “resources” are much more than money—we also offer our time

and skills. Finally, deacons are to do this “with words of biblical encouragement and testimony which assure the unity of word and deed.”

So, the main role of deacons is the ministry of mercy, and then the stewardship of resources as a way to extend that mercy. All this is to be done with Scripture and testimony, because diaconal ministry is a form of witness to the gospel—giving the cup of cold water in Jesus' name so that people not only reach their God-given potential for life in this world, but also know Christ as Savior and Lord.

Food and Prayer

One example of this pattern of ministry comes from the deacons at First CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Joel Ruiter, who has served three terms as deacon, explains how benevolence offerings are used to stock the church's food pantry: along with gathering financial support, the deacons gather food donations, and encourage church members to serve in the pantry alongside the deacons. They talk with the people referred to them by a community organization and help them choose the products they need. “It's more than a handout,” says Ruiter. “We get to know people, and often end the visit by praying with them.” So even in these short visits, deacons are able to give words of biblical encouragement and testimony.

The office of deacon is an important part of God's economic plan for a broken world.

by Kathy Smith, Director of Continuing Education



In the summer the food pantry ministry expands by sponsoring monthly food trucks that provide much-needed groceries to the church's urban neighbors. Again, the deacons organize this ministry of mercy, but call the congregation to work side by side with them so that church members meet their neighbors and begin to understand their needs. In addition, First Church nurses volunteer their time to do blood

pressure screenings and answer general health questions for those who stop by for the free food, providing another opening for conversation. Opportunities develop to invite neighbors to worship, kids' programs, and the church's Bates Place neighborhood ministry center, eventually leading some to embrace the church and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Building Relationships

Some diaconal ministries of mercy lead to longer-term relationships with people in need. Starfish Ministries in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota, helps congregations to encourage struggling families (called “participants”) as they work toward self-identified goals in the areas of budgeting, employment, housing, education, parenting, and spirituality. Multiple volunteers (called “allies”) are trained and paired with participants in the community who desire healthy support and encouragement.

Starfish Ministries' director, Bonnie Smith, emphasizes the importance of these relationships. “The key is to work with individuals and families to identify what they want to become, and then come alongside to help them take steps toward those goals, rather than bailing them out.” Volunteers are trained to ask, “Can we encourage and support you in

making choices to get out of this situation?" Asking such questions also helps to identify those who don't want to change, and don't want the relationship.

Tricia, one of the participants in Starfish Ministries, talks about the team of people from Faith CRC in New Brighton who helped her through "one of the lowest points in [her] life." Tricia attributes her improved family situation to these people, and has given her life to Christ and become a member of Faith CRC because of her relationships with volunteers organized by the deacons of the church. She is now eager to "give back" by being a mentor to someone else in need.

Getting Started

Some deacons may wonder how to get started with ministries of mercy. Starfish Ministries began when the deacons of two Christian Reformed churches in the Twin Cities area wanted to do ministry together and reach beyond the church. But many churches and deacons find the idea of adding ministries a bit overwhelming. Donn Hansum, Director of Volunteers in Action in Denver, Colorado, says that deacons may find the internal financial operation and management of the church to be both time-consuming and sometimes more comfortable than reaching out with a ministry of mercy. But he believes that the most effective and creative diaconal ministries develop when deacons notice someone in their congregation who has a passion for a mercy or service ministry and then come alongside that person to help get a ministry going.

In addition to programs like Kids' Hope and Stephen Ministry, which function in many churches, Hansum points to a unique ministry like "Bridges of Hope" in Greeley, Colorado—a monthly meeting at which struggling neighbors can join in a free meal and visit booths set up by a variety of service agencies where volunteers share their professional skills and provide legal, budgeting, medical, counseling, mentoring, and other types of assistance. Bridges of Hope connects people with the help they need, and also allows churches to coordinate their services and thus help people get out of the cycle of poverty and pattern of going from church to church asking for money.

Deacons may find the internal financial operation and management of the church to be both time-consuming and sometimes more comfortable than reaching out with a ministry of mercy.

Staying Connected to the Church

Bonnie Smith says that it's important for mercy and service ministries to stay connected with the church. "Many nonprofits begin connected to churches and then become disconnected. We want to stay connected to churches because they are the arms, legs, and mouth of Jesus. The conduit of churches is the deacons because they are called to lead the congregation in the ministry of mercy. We come alongside to help them do ministry, because the task of the deacon is not just to do ministry, but to lead the congregation in ministry." Smith empathizes with deacons who are often fairly new to their role and can be overwhelmed with their task. Since having charge of the budget can be overwhelming and can even hinder the work of mercy, she notes that some congregations hire a treasurer to free up deacons to do more ministries of mercy.

Advice for Deacons

What advice is there for deacons who want to fulfill their calling as completely as they can? Hansum says they should focus on a vision to carry out mercy ministry rather than the financial and administrative work that is often expected; work "with" their community rather than doing

things "for" or "to" their community; and walk alongside people who are struggling, rather than try to "fix" the problem for them. He advises, "Think 'relationship' rather than 'relief.'" Smith agrees that "the key is the relationship—getting to know people and their situations, and encouraging them in the steps they need to take."

Ruiter suggests that deacons work with community agencies who have social workers, and ask for training for deacons to deal with various situations. He also recommends that deacons develop a "ministry culture" in their congregations over time. He recalls that his church was one of the first to sponsor a Habitat for Humanity home in its county in the early 1980s. Twenty-five years later, the church designated gifts in honor of its 150th anniversary for another Habitat house, and in the years in between had sponsored several houses through the Inner City Christian Federation (a local ministry similar to Habitat). The need for affordable housing is great in the church's neighborhood, and helping to provide that housing has become a core value of the congregation through the ministry of the deacons.

Bottom Line

In the past two years' flurry of news headlines about the world's financial meltdown, little attention was given to the work of deacons in the church. But their work is exactly what our world needs. In many ways the meltdown was caused by a lack of biblical imagination about what money is, and how it should be used (and not used). In their intervention and prevention work, deacons offer exactly the ministry and message our world needs to hear today. Let's encourage our deacons by supporting their efforts, and serving alongside them.

How do deacons carry out their ministry of mercy?

This answer comes from the form for ordination in the Christian Reformed Church:

Deacons serve by showing mercy to the church and to all people. They received this task in the early church when the apostles designated special persons for the work of mercy (Acts 6; 2 Cor. 8-9). In Christ's name the deacons relieve victims of injustice. By this they show that Christians live by the Spirit of the kingdom, fervently desiring to give life the shape of things to come. Deacons are therefore called to assess needs, promote stewardship and hospitality, collect and disburse resources for benevolence, and develop programs of assistance. They are also called to speak words of Christian encouragement. Thus in word as well as deed they demonstrate the care of the Lord himself.

Contentment in Uncertainty

A Sermon on Philippians 4:11-13

Some of the exhortations in Scripture seem to carry a good dose of audacity with them. Imagine that James (1:2) calls us to “consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds”! And Paul, while focusing on his thorn in the flesh, says he will “boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses” (2 Cor. 12:9).

We might feel the same way about Paul’s claim in Philippians 4:12: “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” On the one hand, that sounds like pretty good advice for us today. After all, most of us have less than we had a couple of years ago. And we’ve caught a glimpse of the fact that we’ve all been living above our means, and moved by a bit of greed. Learning more contentment might be very healthy for us. Right?

And yet doesn’t it seem that putting “contentment” and “uncertainty” next to each other creates an oxymoron, sort of like hot ice, cheap gas, and affordable bankruptcy? How can contentment be achieved in a day of unemployment, huge bailouts, reduced income, budget cutbacks, and economic fear? Has Paul lost touch with reality?

I always loved this text of Philippians 4—until one day when I was struggling with a crisis in my own life. I was dealing with a disease that scared me. How could I possibly be content in such circumstances? Was I expected to be OK with being sick?

And then I recalled that the Paul who wrote this verse was sitting in prison when he wrote it, probably in Rome. And I struggled with the idea even more. He had lost his freedom, his ministry, and probably his future. This is a prison epistle! Strange, therefore, that he talks about

contentment. What is he saying? Did he learn to be satisfied in prison? And must I learn to be satisfied with my disease? Must we be satisfied with the loss of our jobs, income, and security?

My dilemma led me to do some word studies. In our current vocabulary, “contentment” generally means being satisfied. It means saying, “OK, I am satisfied with that; I like that.” It’s reasonable to feel that way if our circumstances are pleasant. But what about those times when life is hard, when things happen that we don’t like? Then our normal definition of “contentment” as “being satisfied” just doesn’t work.

So I looked further. Paul is the only writer of Scripture who uses this word, and only in three places. In addition to Philippians 4, the word is found in 1 Timothy 6:6-7, where Paul talks about godliness with contentment and tells us not to love money. That reference could lean in the direction of how we normally use it today: “Be satisfied with what you’ve got and don’t want more.” But Paul’s third use of “contentment” is the one that gives us the big help. It’s 2 Corinthians 9:8, the passage about sowing generously and about being a cheerful giver, even when you don’t have a lot. Paul writes, “God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good

by Howard
Vanderwell,
Professor of
Worship



work.” Though the word doesn’t show up in our translation, it’s there. The message is this: Be faithful toward God, even if you don’t have a lot, and he’ll see to it you have all you need. That’s contentment—knowing and believing that God will provide all you need, no matter what.

There is the key to understanding this word!

Contentment is the confidence and conviction that we have all we need for a given set of circumstances. It is not saying, “Well, this is a tough situation, but that’s OK; I’m satisfied with it and I guess I can learn to like it.” It’s more like saying, “I’m going through some very tough territory; I don’t like this, but I have what I need to deal with it.” Today we’d probably use the word “cope” to capture that idea.

So Paul was not required to like prison; I am not required to like my disease; and we are not required to like economically tough times. But we are expected to say, “God will give me what I need to deal with it.”

The key to all this is found in Philippians 4:13: “I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” Just think about the huge ideas that are packed in that statement:

The “him” is Jesus Christ—the eternal son of God; the one who came to live, die, rise again, and give us eternal life; the one Paul proclaimed as the person of the gospel; the Savior of the world.

Christ actually takes up residence in me. Paul frequently speaks of the mystical union of the believer and Christ. We are “in Christ,” and Christ is “in us.”

Christ gives me his strength. His strength becomes my strength. He infuses

*How can contentment
be achieved in a day of
unemployment, huge bailouts,
reduced income, budget
cutbacks, and economic fear?*

his power into me, and he becomes an unlimited resource within me.

So I can do all this. When the tough times come, I have resources to draw on that I would not normally have.

And if we look at the rest of Philippians 4 we'll discover that there are a number of means through which God communicates this coping ability to us.

The first is a warning that it will take time. It's the process of gradually learning something. "I have learned the secret," Paul says. That means it was something that was elusive, at first out of reach, and gradually acquired. Like all good learning it comes slowly. It is part of our spiritual growth.

The second is a life of prayer. In verses 6-7 Paul reminds us that the more we pray—the more we lay all these needs honestly before the Lord—the more we'll experience the peace, confidence, and contentment of knowing we will be able to measure up.

Third, contentment happens best in a community of caring relationships. While Paul was in prison, the members of the church in Philippi were very good to him and never forgot him. They sent gifts and greetings, more than anybody else

*That's contentment—
knowing and believing that
God will provide all you need,
no matter what.*

apparently. They sent him aid again and again, much of it carried by Epaphroditus. Paul calls those gifts "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (v. 18). God extended his strength and coping power to Paul by means of and through the care of the Philippians. The visible (gifts that came from Philippi) accomplished the invisible (more of God's strength in him). It makes me wonder if we realize how important a caring congregation is when people are suffering. How many are near us who need Christ's strength for some tough times in their lives? Though they receive that strength ultimately from Christ, Christ intends to mediate it to them through caring gestures from fellow Christians in a caring congregation.

And then it all reaches its climax with a doxology in verse 20 in typical Pauline fashion. Paul likes to do that—teach us

some great Christian truth and then soar off in a doxology. There's something very counter-cultural in this. In our culture today, if someone copes well, if someone handles some difficulty with creativity and strength, we congratulate them. Not Paul. He raises a doxology. When Paul copes with a rotten imprisonment with strength and contentment, it's not "Good job, Paul!"; it's "To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever!"

So the question of how to be content is reframed by Paul. It's not "Can you be content with your tough circumstances?" or even "Can you cope with them?" There are two much bigger questions: "Are you sure that Christ lives in you so his resources are yours?" and "Are our congregations communities that care well for each other?" Have we turned our lives over to Jesus Christ, trusting him for our salvation *and* trusting him for the needs of each day? Have we created faith communities that care enough to be the instruments God uses to infuse his strength into us? When we can begin to honestly answer those questions, then perhaps we will begin to understand the biblical meaning of being content.

News

CTS Faculty Consults with Educational Leaders

Every summer the CTS faculty holds a consultation with pastors and church leaders representing various ministries, and this summer the guests included seminary graduates who also serve as high school teachers, college professors, and campus pastors.

The purpose of the consultation was for the seminary faculty to gain insight into what students are like today and what other teachers have learned about good teaching. In addition to receiving good advice about relating to students, dealing with technology, and teaching students who have grown up in the digital age, the faculty gained appreciation for the important role high school teachers, college professors, and campus ministers play in helping students discern the call

to ministry. They also learned about some healthy practices that teachers use to sustain themselves, and brainstormed about ways the seminary might provide continuing education for teachers.

Throughout the consultation, the teachers and pastors offered some great suggestions for the seminary to connect better with high school, college, and university students—some for direct relational contact, and others for web and video approaches. The connections begun at the consultation were not just new

acquaintances and relationships, but also new and renewed commitments to keeping churches, schools, and the seminary working together as we help individuals follow God's calling to ministry.



Teachers share a laugh at seminary consultation.



Pieter and Gail Tuit with their grandchildren



Ocean view from the Tuit's home

Pieter Tuit Teaches Us about Money

Rev. Pieter Tuit may be the best CTS model of many of the spiritual principles regarding money set forth in this issue of *Forum*. Over his lifetime, Pieter has lived in many corners of the world—from Europe to North America to Indonesia to the Philippines to Australia. As a result, his children are spread out all over the world. For the past seven years Pieter taught missions at CTS faithfully and joyfully. Pieter and his wife Gail knew they were sacrificing a lot to be separated from their kids and grandkids, but did so willingly because they believed God was calling them to do it. The kids also honored their parents' call to ministry and were supportive of them living on the other side of the globe.

But last summer everything changed. While the Tuits were in Australia with their children in the summer of 2008, their children delivered an unexpected message: "Dad and Mom, we need you here. We honor your commitment to CTS, but we believe you should reevaluate that commitment in light of your family's needs. You must follow where God is leading. But please, prayerfully consider whether it may be time to come back to Australia. We need you here now." Over the course of the following weeks, Pieter and Gail engaged in a discernment process and became convinced that God was calling them back to Australia.

But here's the amazing thing: Pieter and Gail made the decision to go back to Australia with no job in hand. They

trusted God for his provision. They left the U.S. having to sell a house in a faltering economy—in Michigan of all places! Confident of God's leading, when he had to practically give his house away, Pieter calmly concluded, "I guess God decided I didn't need that money."

And how did God honor that faith of Pieter and Gail? For starters, God gave them a call to Penguin, Australia, to the very church Pieter served in the first years of his ministry. In July they were graciously welcomed into the congregation by some of the same people who had welcomed them in 1977. And then, as if to give Pieter and Gail a "wink-wink" on the real estate bust in the

U.S., God gave them a parsonage on a high bluff overlooking the ocean. Pieter wrote, "The view from our home is just beautiful, overlooking an old cemetery where the original settlers of Penguin are buried. During breakfast we feast our eyes on gorgeous sunrises, and at dinner breathtaking sunsets! Even when the weather is stormy the view of the ocean is beautiful."

We already miss Pieter at CTS and are grateful not only for what he's taught us about missions, but also for what he is still teaching us about money, living by faith, trusting and obeying God, and receiving far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine.

CRC Members Hear Our Call for Assistance

This past spring the faltering economy began to take its toll on the CTS budget. In light of this, it became apparent that the annual fund, which pays salaries and helps keep the lights on, would have to play a larger role than usual in helping CTS meet its budget.

Responding to President Plantinga's call for financial assistance, several members of the CRC pooled a matching gift of approximately \$200,000 for Plantinga to use as a catalyst to challenge the rest of the denomination to give. And, give they did! The number of individual gifts to our annual fund jumped from 1,804 in fiscal year 2008 to 2,500 in fiscal year

2009 (ended June 30)—an increase of 39 percent! Gifts to the annual fund spiked from \$675,000 in fiscal year 2008 to \$850,000 in 2009.

Now we need the prayers and support of the denomination for this fiscal year. President Plantinga states, "We are not out of the woods yet. Even with staff and budget cuts, a continuing drop in ministry shares will require us to raise \$1,000,000 for the annual fund in fiscal year 2010, which is an increase of approximately 15 percent over last year. As the outpouring of support has been tremendous, I am confident that we can do it."

Students Enter Gateway to Seminary

A gateway is “an opening or a structure framing an opening,” or “something that serves as an entrance or a means of access,” according to the American Heritage Dictionary. The term is used to refer to computers that give access to communication, and architectural wonders like the St. Louis Gateway Arch that is the “Gateway to the American West.”

“Gateway” was a new term and a new experience at Calvin Theological Seminary this fall for all of our new students—two weeks of learning and being formed for ministry and education at the beginning of their seminary experience.

Encompassing orientation activities for all degree programs (M.A., M.Div., M.T.S., Th.M. and Ph.D.), Gateway also included introductory courses in biblical interpretation and communication for students beginning their first Masters degrees. They learned from Professor Jeff Weima about how to interpret the Bible well, along with an introduction from Professor Carl Bosma to the Libronix Bible software used at CTS. They were led by President Plantinga in analysis of sermons preached by pastors and professors such as Scott Hoezee, Mary



Pastor Ruth Boven (2nd from left) has lunch with her new mentoring group.

Hulst, Peter Jonker, and John Rottman.

Orientation and community-building activities for students were woven throughout the two-week experience, including lunches with their mentoring groups and student ambassadors, presentations on information technology and health insurance, sessions on mentors and internships, and conversations for learning about life together at CTS as people who are North American and international, male and female, single and married, and who differ in many ways but are called to be one in Christ. Students were also introduced to resources at the Calvin library and in other

centers and institutes, took a tour of the CRC denominational headquarters and met its leaders, visited service organizations in the area, and enjoyed an off-campus retreat with their mentoring groups.

The Gateway theme for the two weeks was that all of students’ learning, studying, relating to one another, and discerning various ministry contexts will form and shape them, and will prepare them not only for a rich experience in seminary, but also for their calling to build communities of disciples—whether that call comes from a congregation, a school, a mission field, or another ministry setting.

CTS Offers New Certificate Programs

Do you know a church staff member, volunteer, Sunday school teacher, adult education leader, worship leader, or other layperson who desires more study in basic Reformed thought and a specialized ministry area? Are you interested in such learning yourself?

In addition to rolling out a new curriculum at CTS this fall (see <http://mdiv.calvinseminary.edu> for details), the seminary is offering certificate programs for the first time in its history. These programs are especially geared toward church members and church staff who are looking for specialized training, but who are not planning to complete a degree program. They can learn for ministry training or personal enrichment right along with seminarians in these graduate-level programs, and thereby enhance their understanding and training while connecting with other church leaders.

Certificate programs are available in nine areas: church planting, educational ministries, English Bible, ministry, missions and evangelism, pastoral care, theology, worship, and youth ministry. Applicants must be high school graduates, and can find more information at www.calvinseminary.edu/degrees/certificates.

The certificate programs average 15 credit hours, which usually involves six or seven courses. CTS is excited about this opportunity for learning. Students can also apply these courses to a degree program, if they meet the admission requirements.

Evert Van Der Heide is starting the certificate in English Bible this fall, and reports: “I have been feeling a call to get more deeply involved with the education program of our church (Providence CRC in Cutlerville, Michigan). Since I have led studies at my church in the past, I felt that I should be more involved in developing

studies for those of us who have grown more mature in our faith and longed for continued growth. About the time all this was going on in my mind, I saw the announcement about the certificate program. It seemed to be the perfect way to structure my own preparation for structuring and leading future Bible studies.”

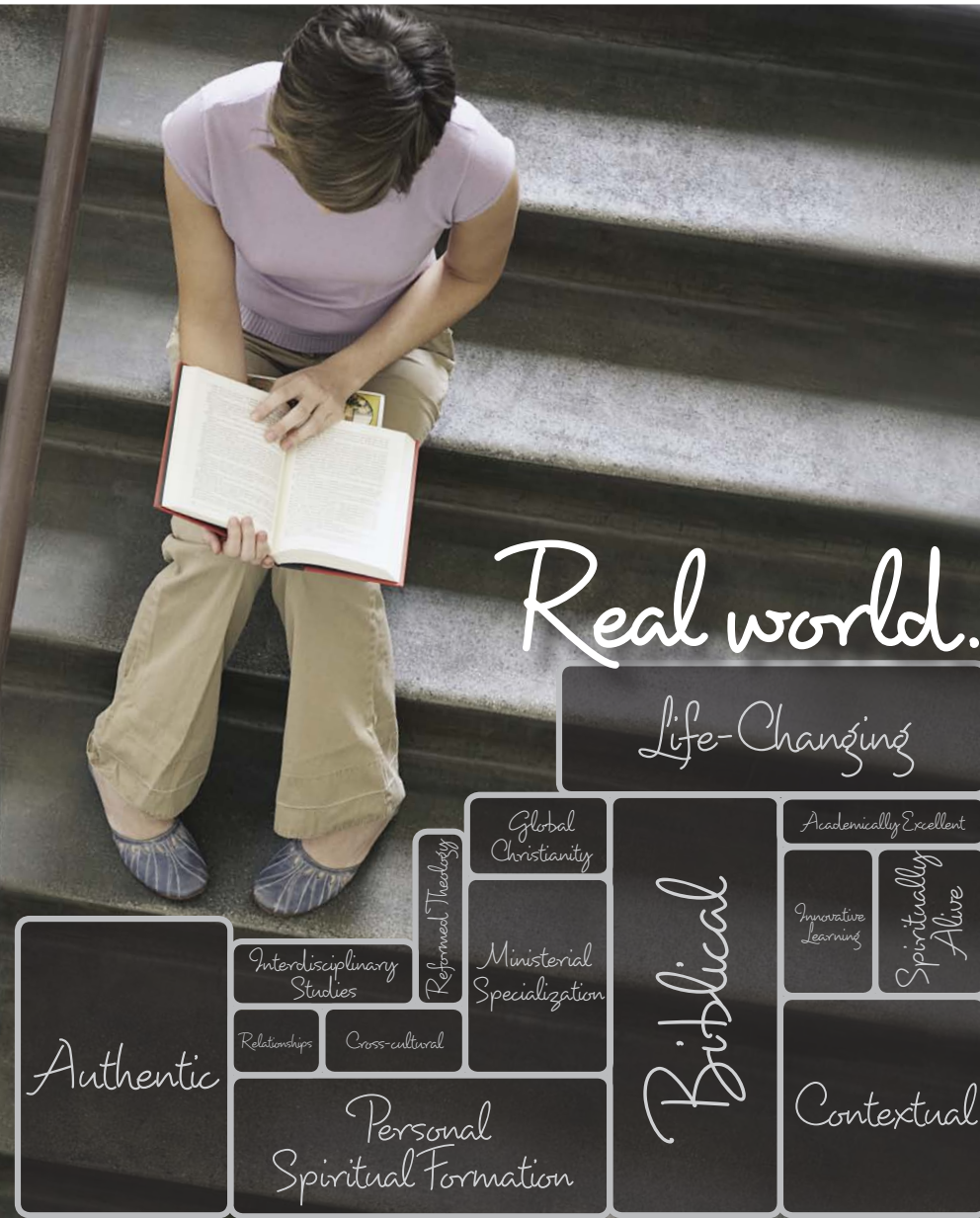
Van Der Heide hopes to gain an understanding of broader biblical themes in Scripture. “I hope that exposure to the work of theologians who develop these broader understandings will permit me to share the excitement I feel with others in my church.” He also is excited about the courses in the certificate program that address issues relevant to current cultural discussions (like apologetics) and courses in church and doctrinal history. He says, “My expectation is that I will be a much better witness of my faith as a Reformed Christian at the conclusion of my study.”

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