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Calvin Theological Seminary Forum

Kevin Adams
Duane Kelderman
Scott Hoezee

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A Decade of Ministry

Calvin Theological Seminary

Forum

Spring 2011
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the center of Matthew’s report of people’s response to the resurrection of Jesus are two women—Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph. They had been at the crucifixion, they had been at the burial, and on Easter morning there they are again at the empty tomb. Two faithful women come to the tomb as morning shines through the trees. And two faithful women find that it is death that has died in the night and that they have become God’s witnesses to history’s biggest event.

And they are afraid of it. I want to say, naturally they are afraid of it. They are afraid of the supernatural because it is so eerie. They are afraid of the angel who witnesses to them because he is so blindingly full of light. And they are afraid of the angel’s message because it sounds too good to be true. Good news has got to be true or it’s worse than no news at all.

Who knows? If angels are possible, maybe crooked angels are possible, or cruel angels.

Afraid of Easter! The news is so good that even faithful human beings can hardly believe it.

That’s half the truth. Half the Easter truth is fear, and we don’t admit it often enough.

But the other half is great joy. The women leave the tomb “with fear and great joy.” Fear and joy combined. Joyful fear. Fearful joy. These two emotions tug against each other. You might say they tug on opposite ends of the resurrection.

Fear says NO. Joy says YES. Fear says, WATCH IT. Joy says, TRUST IT. Fear says, GUARD YOURSELF. Joy says, GIVE YOURSELF.

Fear is fear, but joy is great joy, and in the struggle between them, joy must finally triumph. You might say that joy must triumph just to keep up with the risen Christ who has “gone ahead of us into Galilee.”

This will be my last Forum letter to you. I’ve been president of CTS for ten years. Long enough, I think. Certainly long enough to have experienced fear and great joy. Now it’s time to move along. I do so with an acute sense of gratitude for your love of our good school and for your many mercies to me. I do so, above all, with gratitude to Jesus Christ, who has gone ahead of us all.

Grace and peace,

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.
The following speech was offered by Board President Rev. Kevin Adams on behalf of Calvin Seminary’s Trustees at a luncheon honoring President Plantinga on February 10, 2011.

During my final year as a Calvin Seminary student I worked as youth director at Rogers Heights Church, in Wyoming, Michigan. One Sunday I was delighted to learn that one of my favorite professors would be speaking. After the uneven smorgasbord of guest preachers, I knew this would be a treat. I had come to greatly admire him and his well-crafted words, his knack for describing ordinary things in extraordinary ways, and his ability to make the muddiest theological ideas clear. His sermon that morning was remarkable. And afterward I gladly waited in the long line of well-wishers. His face lit up as he greeted each. But when his eyes turned toward me their light dimmed. His brow furrowed. And color drained from his cheeks. I had hoped, I realized at that moment, to see his professorial smile of blessing. I mumbled thanks in my unremarkable seminarian way. Only then did he break into his broad, familiar smile.

“I dreamt about you last night,” he said. “I dreamt that you were in the congregation listening as I preached. After the service, as people shook hands with me, you told me, ‘That was very disappointing.’ To see you in the congregation this morning caused me great alarm.”

Years later I met with Neal in his makeshift office at Calvin Seminary. My appointment was for thirty minutes, but our meeting lasted two hours. Neal, the newly chosen president, did most of the talking. He had another dream. And he wanted me, and anyone else who would listen, to hear it. He dreamt that Calvin Seminary would be a place overflowing with hospitality. He believed students and professors could flourish together in a contagious culture of learning. He imagined the infectious message of grace could delight learners and the churches they would one day serve.

Today we gather to say, “Neal, thank you for dreaming.” Thank you for your vision of the kind of place Calvin Seminary could become. Your service as president of Calvin Seminary has been a great gift to students (current and future), alumni, and those who know Calvin Seminary only by reputation or by the books you have written. Thank you, Neal. Thank you, Kathleen. Thank you for investing in all of us. Thank you for each sacrifice—some we know, many we do not.

Our list of specific thanks is long. But, in the well-established tradition of Calvin Seminary, we’ll highlight three.

First, we’d like to thank you for your intellectual leadership. Often we assume leadership to be a single, monolithic quality. But in his fascinating book Certain Trumpets: The Nature of Leadership, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Gary Wills lists sixteen different types of leadership. For example, he describes Franklin Roosevelt as an electoral leader. Napoleon is his prototypical military leader. Dorothy Day was a saintly leader. Neal, we are powerfully glad for your work as a stellar intellectual leader.

A few years ago, when Chuck Colson visited the seminary to name the Presidential Chair, he said, “I hesitate to speak to you this evening, because I’m
A Tribute to Neal Plantinga

Maybe the most remarkable hallmark of your rhetorical leadership is the way you model grace and truth in ordinary speech.

afraid I will quote Neal without knowing it. Neal has so shaped my thinking, that I cannot separate what I think from what Neal thinks or writes or says. I have adopted his thinking for so long, I now assume it is my own.” Chuck Colson, of course, is not alone. Neal, your words have profoundly shaped many of us at Calvin Seminary: faculty, students, alumni. And, without many being aware, your words have touched thousands of people in churches who hear reworked versions of your words, filtered into their own pastor’s sermons and conversations.

A long-time friend of mine, a church planter and now army chaplain, wrote me, “As a Wesleyan I have two Calvin connections: Richard Mouw and Neal Plantinga. Each represents the very best of the Reformed tradition, both in an authentic discipleship and in a spiritually grounded intellect. They help us love God with ‘all our mind.’ I have had a difficult time finding that in my own tradition, but Neal stands out to me as one of the greatest examples of living ‘For all things are yours’ (1 Cor. 3:21).” My friend represents thousands.

Yesterday Haddon Robinson told me, “When people outside the Christian Reformed Church think of your denomination, your seminary, and your pastors, they think of Neal Plantinga. He represents all of you. We admire him. And so we admire all of you.”

Neal, you could have spent the last ten years writing intelligent, thought-provoking books. But instead, at significant personal cost, you spent hundreds of hours raising money for scholarships and for our general fund, representing our seminary far and near, and providing us with intellectual leadership. Thank you.

Second, we thank you for your rhetorical leadership. Few people can turn a phrase like you can. I delighted to read even your most mundane seminary communications:

From the President’s Report to the Board of Trustees, May 2006: “I write to you on a day so sunny and crisp that it’s making us all feel freshly laundered.”

From a letter to donors, May 2008: “I write on the first day of May. … On the Seminary’s grounds, yellow daffodils sway a little in the spring breeze, tilting their heads toward the yellow sun. Wisteria creep up their trellis, pushing out delicate purple blossoms as they climb. Robins chase each other across green, green grass. Redbuds and forsythia and pear trees enjoy their red, yellow, white before they go green for the rest of the season. All things are being made new.”

When Neal led an “Imaginative Reading for Creative Preaching” seminar in Marin County a few years ago, an amazing chef from our church supplemented our reading discussion with one outstanding dish after another. Once, when Neal returned his plate to her half-full, she raised an eyebrow in question. Neal responded, “Don’t take my unfinished plate as lack of enthusiasm.”

When my oldest son and my daughter participated in the seminary’s Facing Your Fear seminar program for high school students, they were impressed by many people at the seminary—one was Neal Plantinga. They said, “He has such wonderful language, and diction, and tone that we could listen to him read his grocery list with pleasure: bananas, pudding, Chardonnay …”

In a world of hype and hyperbole, Neal restores clout to the simplest word. When he tells a student, “That was fine,” they salsa around the parking lot in a celebratory dance. If the rest of us say, “That sermon was fine,” students crumble their lips and bleat, “What did I do wrong?”

May be the most remarkable hallmark of your rhetorical leadership is the way you model grace and truth in ordinary speech. In hundreds of conversations—in large groups and one-on-one, in pubs and in restaurants, in hallways and behind closed doors—I have never once heard you demean a colleague or a student or an alumni or a trustee. Not one slur. Not one word of slander. Not one cut or complaint. Not one aside. You inspire us to live the Heidelberg Catechism’s vision for the ninth commandment to “do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor’s good name.”

Third, we celebrate your pedagogical leadership.

A former student told me, “Professor Plantinga was tough. I remember him saying in class that an ‘A’ paper ought to be a work so magnificent that it is suitable for framing.” He described a time he turned in a paper he thought was especially good. Neal returned the assignment to him with precious few remarks. On the bottom it simply said, “A+. A single remark was scribbled below: “Not quite.”

It’s no wonder we have heard our president-elect say on several occasions, “I got an ‘A’ in Neal’s Doctrine of God class,” as if that alone qualified a person to be the next president of Calvin Seminary. Maybe it does.

You have helped our community see again that every student is more than a brain, more than a container needing more information. Under your watch we have made big strides toward seeing each student as a whole person. We have established learning centers, hosted teaching seminars for faculty, established a beautiful new curriculum, and begun Formation for Ministry groups. A fellow trustee told me, “Teaching improvements will be Neal’s lasting legacy to the seminary.”

Our thanks could go on all afternoon. But we’ll have other times to offer our gratitude, so let me close with this. My colleague Doug Bouws was part of a student panel that interviewed Neal prior to his appointment as president. After many questions were asked one student tilted her head to the side and asked, “Do you love this school?”

Neal received the question, Doug remembers, with great appreciation, obvious from his smile and bearing. Without hesitation Neal replied, “Yes.” Doug says, “You had to be present to get the full experience. But Neal’s affection for Calvin Seminary was obvious.” And it still is.

Neal and Kathleen, thank you. You have served us well, and we are better for it. We honor you. And we wish you every grace in the next stage of your kingdom assignments. The Lord bless you and keep you and make his face shine upon you.
Reflections on the Past Ten Years

An Interview of Neal Plantinga by Howard Vanderwell, Professor of Worship

Neal, I welcome this opportunity to talk together because you carry around within you so many valuable insights and reflections. In reflecting on the past ten years, how do you view the student body at Calvin Seminary?

Our students are a joy to all of us. I would say that over the years we have gotten better at seeing and treating students first as brothers and sisters in Christ and second as students in this institution. It’s made students, faculty, and staff more joyous in our endeavor. I remember one student in particular who came to us from a secular setting, with a big scholarship, and took full advantage of his education here. I was present for his M.Div. oral comprehensive exam, and it was such a joy to hear him speak maturely and assuredly of all the things that he had learned. I thought at that time, “What more significant, wonderful work could we be involved in than helping to prepare students as they follow their calling?” I have loved that.

You have been involved in the cause of theological education for nearly all of your ministry. How have you seen theological education change over the past couple of decades?

If you talk to people at ATS, our accrediting agency and the overseer of theological education in North America, they would point to a number of factors. One is that our students come to us from second careers much more often. Some of what mature students bring to the seminary is really wonderful for the church. There are some things they already know that nobody needs to help them learn. Some of them have been on church councils and bring all that wisdom to the seminary, to other students, to the faculty, to the staff. I think another one is that we have tried more and more over the years to educate to the whole person. Calvin Seminary has always been academically really strong. But maybe there has been a time in the history of the seminary in which we did not sufficiently attend to who the learner is spiritually, emotionally, psychologically.

You have had a lot of contact with the donors of Calvin Seminary. How do they view the seminary? What dreams and goals do they have for the seminary?

It’s actually been one of the great joys and surprises of my ten years in this work. Development work is very interesting, in part because donors are typically people whom God has blessed with the kind of intelligence, energy, and vision that’s required to build a business or to be successful in a profession. So these are people who have thought long and hard about how the Christian life works. They have a sophisticated Christian philosophy of business, and it comes down to something very biblical: “We thrive only by making ourselves available to cause others to thrive.” Donors naturally translate what they’ve learned in business into their view of how theological education ought to go. So they will ask, What efforts are you making to see to it that your students are thriving? What are you doing about student debt? How are you thinking about student housing? Are you paying attention to what salary students get when they leave Calvin Seminary and enter ministry? They think of faculty/student relations, staff/student relations, and students’ loyalty to this institution after they leave it. And donors care a lot about the seminary’s relationship to the rest of the church—how we are doing as a citizen of the denomination, how we have contact with the other agencies.

I know you’ve traveled a lot worldwide. CTS functions on a world scene now. How does the cause of theological education here look from abroad?

One of the things I have learned is that in many parts of the world, the church is growing so fast—Africa especially, but also parts of Latin America. In those places ministers are needed in numbers much faster than anybody can educate them. So everybody is scrambling to find ways of equipping ministers. The Timothy Institute, for example, is deeply involved in this—trying to equip other people to equip other people to get at least a
basic education so they can minister and provide leadership. There are also signs that people understand that you can’t be a minister after just having gone to a couple of weekend conferences. (After all, who would want a dentist who had only gone to a couple of weekend conferences?) So I’d say the hunger for theological education is at least as strong as it’s ever been, even if in some parts of the world people are not always available for what we would regard as a full theological education.

I’m grateful that you have remained immersed in and loyal to the Christian Reformed Church. What are your reflections on the Christian Reformed Church at this particular point in its history?

Well, first let me say that it has never really been a question in my mind that I would remain Christian Reformed. My first identity has always been that of an ordained minister of the Christian Reformed Church. Belonging to a church or a denomination is like belonging to your family. You wouldn’t at some point say, “Well, I’ve had a good run with my family, but now I think I will look for a different one.”

Obviously the Christian Reformed Church has changed over the last forty years. Certainly the interest in diversity—multiculturalism in the blessed sense of that word—has become strong. I think we are a more outward-looking denomination, evangelistically, with many more church planters than there were forty years ago. But I think there has been a loss of doctrinal interest and doctrinal self-identification in the Christian Reformed Church. Forty years ago people really were interested in substantial conversations—about the covenant, about sin, about grace. So many churches no longer even include a confession of sin or an assurance of pardon in their worship services. To what degree is that a capitulation to a no-fault culture? There are some parts of the Heidelberg Catechism that are absolutely brilliant. You think for example of the section on prayer, or the ten commandments, or what it has to say about grace. We have lost something by letting these things go by the wayside.

What more significant, wonderful work could we be involved in than helping to prepare students as they follow their calling?

Are there a few memorable experiences from these past ten years that come to mind?

I could pick from so many. I will start with one that happened in California with a group of donors, and with two of our former students. I was asked a question about what the culture of Calvin Seminary is like these days. I passed that question over to our two recent alums, and what they had to say about their experiences at Calvin Seminary was deeply gratifying—about professors who opened their eyes to the deep things of Scripture and took a personal interest in them as persons, about the deep bonds of friendship that they formed with other students that persist now beyond seminary.

Another is when the seminary faced the need for a new calendar and a new curriculum. We faced things that in some instances have been very difficult times in some institutions. But we had so many people listening to each other, so many people full of grace and truth, that when the votes came for these new measures they were overwhelming. We had some intelligent concerns before, during, and after by intelligent faculty members. With all of that fully acknowledged we have had a smooth process. I will take that with me to my grave as an example of how, in an institution of the church trying to become better, under the warm breath of the Holy Spirit we had overwhelming unity. That was a blessed thing to see and to experience.

Now you transition to a new chapter. What goals and challenges do you have personally and professionally for this next chapter that God, we trust, is going to be giving you?

My goal is to almost never complain about anything. I’ve seen over the years what the tendencies are as you age. I think it’s important for people who are in the autumn years of ministry to keep a positive, buoyant atmosphere of being thankful for any ability to still minister. Spiritual hygiene for me includes attending to compassion and kindness, noticing how often St. Paul was up to his neck in trouble and was still full of joy. Where does that come from? I mean, that’s a supernatural miracle that somebody who was in prison and shipwrecked and had the daylight stripped out of him would overflow with joy. It almost makes you think that he had seen the risen Lord!

Professionally, I have some books to write. First, I’m going to write Warfield Lectures for Princeton Seminary, to be given in March of 2012. The topic is one I’m keenly interested in—how a program of general reading can assist preachers. Then a book on Christian virtues, probably called The Way It’s Supposed to Be or something equally hokey. I’d also like to write a book on the Christian’s view of aging. The ancient Greeks (and some of the psalmists, for that matter) were much struck by the transience of human life, and of the sorrow so often attendant upon the one-way flow of time into our past, carrying with it treasures that we’ll not see again this side of heaven. What’s a Christian to make of the phenomenon of aging?

Neal, as you turn over the leadership of Calvin Seminary to Jul Medenblik, what are a few of the things you’d say to him if he were sitting here with us today?

I would wish him God’s best blessings, and I’d tell him that I hope he succeeds in leading us well. I’d encourage him to respect all the wonderful people here in this Seminary community. I hope that he always is able to sense God’s movement among us, in the same way that he certainly has experienced that in his pastorate. I hope he feels the same sense of profound privilege in this position that I did. I would say what all Christians have to say to each other: do your work in faith that God will make something good of it, and in the knowledge that all we contribute to the kingdom of God is never lost.
What traits and gifts come to mind when you think of what makes for a great teacher of theology? Please share how you saw those gifts in Neal Plantinga.

Leanne Van Dyk: What is needed to teach systematic theology is the ability to convey the sheer size of the Christian faith, and to do it with passion and in ways that make multiple connections. In all of those areas, Neal was exemplary. He portrayed the size of the faith in his lectures, and he did it with absolute conviction. As a rookie theology student, I needed to learn that when you talk about the doctrine of Creation, you’re also going to end up talking about eschatology. He had that ability to see all the connections. I remember coming out of class with my mind buzzing each time, filled with new thoughts that I had never thought before.

Mary Vanden Berg: A teacher needs to have a deep love for God that translates into what he or she says as a teacher. That deep love for God came through in what Neal said as well as in his deep conviction and humility. You did know the size of theology under his teaching, but also where you stood in relation to that theology.

Paul De Vries: Not only was he able to take a great big subject and get all the nuances of it, he also was clear—something I appreciated so much. Even as a first-year seminary student, I knew what he was trying to do and where he was going and why. He was so crisp and clean and clear as to “Here’s what we’re talking about and why.”

Scott Hoezee: The image that comes to mind is Google Earth—where you can zoom in and zoom out. Neal could zoom in and get you right down to the Cappodocian Fathers and how they found this middle way through various doctrinal thickets on the Trinity. Neal could toggle in and toggle out from big picture stuff to what individual theologians said.

Van Dyk: And he could say what difference it makes. So for the doctrine of the Trinity, he could show you the big picture of it but then also talk about how this teaching impacts marriage, church, and...
family, friendships, and all of those ripples of implications. Paul was saying how crisp and clear and clean he was with his lecturing, and I completely agree. He was also really organized. I remember he’d come in with his three-ringed binder and he’d set it on the lectern, open it up, and there was this brilliant lecture!

De Vries: I remember a time he came into the classroom and opened that binder but, clearly, something was wrong. He said, “I have forgotten my prayer.” He went back to his office to get his prayer. Now surely, Neal can wing a prayer. But he had a certain thing in mind to pray that day. So he went back to get what he had prepared.

Hoezee: And if you saw those binders up close, you realized that a lot of it was hand-written and that he was adding to those pages all the time. If you would flip over any page, taped to the backside would be clippings from the newspaper, from Newsweek or Time, something that caught his eye and that he wanted to incorporate into the lecture. When we were talking about names for God, before class he had called Butterworth Hospital and asked what the most popular names were for babies at that time. So he had that current list of names which he used to introduce the idea of what a name is in general, and then what it means to have names for God. Stuff like that made his teaching lively and up-to-date.

What is something you recall under Neal’s tutelage that was particularly meaningful to you? Maybe it was something that you had always found really hard to figure out but Neal made it clearer, or maybe it was something you’d been familiar with before but Neal taught it in such a way that it seemed new.

Van Dyk: Justification. Neal lectured on justification as the relational heart of salvation, and that the doctrine of justification is finally acceptance, the imputation of forgiveness. I think that day I heard the gospel in a way that had never reached as deep as it did right then. I “got it” in a way that I never had before, and it’s changed the way I preach and the way I think about relationships with my students and more. That core relational concept of justification was powerful.

De Vries: I remember Neal talking about dying with Christ and rising with Christ. That image of dying and rising is all through the New Testament, so it’s not like I had never thought of that. But as he talked about dying and rising as the core of our lives as Christians, suddenly our traditional baptism forms started opening up in my mind. I still think of Neal when I read the baptism form and whenever I consider ourselves as having died with Christ.

Van-den Berg: I remember being amazed. His class was the first I took at seminary: Doctrine of Salvation. That was my test to see if I really belonged in seminary. I loved it. I loved how he could take difficult things and make them simple. He could draw word pictures like nobody I knew.

Hoezee: I always recall his eloquence in talking about the doctrine of the Trinity. I recall his teaching the social analogy, which I had never heard of before. It’s a model for the whole church: we are in relationship, in mutually edifying relationships. That really opened it up in a very pastoral and beautiful way and changed the way I preached on it as well.

We probably should say something about Neal’s language in the classroom. What do you recall about those lectures in terms of actual verbiage?

Van Dyk: He introduced some new words into my vocabulary. But he applied familiar words so well, too. He used a word like “zestful” with respect to the Trinitarian mutuality. His language is vivid, concrete, startling, using both monosyllabic and multisyllabic words in just the right blend.

Van-den Berg: I was struck by the breadth of his vocabulary and, yes, his elevation of common words, too. A word like “fitting” is one that comes to mind. He’d point out what was “fitting” in theology, what was apt, what went together well. It’s a simple word but used well.

Hoezee: When I lived in Germany, I picked up a phrase that Germans would use when they heard an eloquent speaker: Das kann man sofort drucken lassen! It means, “That can go straight into print!” That often struck me with Neal: he spoke in fully publishable paragraphs. He worked on it ahead of time, of course, but we’ve all heard him in casual settings where he does the same thing! That was what made people work so furiously to write down every word—you wanted to bring those sentences home with you.

I still think of Neal when I read the baptism form and whenever I consider ourselves as having died with Christ. — Paul De Vries
What was something that you learned about theology from Neal that had a profound enough shaping effect on you that it changed how you preached or taught?

Vanden Berg: In the second class I took with Neal, Doctrine of God, one of the first things he talked about was God’s transcendence and his immanence, his hidden nature and his revealed nature. The way he talked about it has stuck with me. He conveyed such a sense of humility on this subject. There’s something really overwhelming about any part of theology, but maybe most especially theology proper. You are almost afraid to speak about it! But Neal handled that sense of mystery well: “This is weighty, but with careful thought you can talk about it.”

De Vries: I also remember his talking about the idea of death being “normal.” There is this modern idea that death is normal such that at funerals it has become fashionable to “celebrate life” and to treat death like it’s not a big deal or not a bad thing. Neal pointed out, to riff on the title of his best-known book, that death is “not the way it’s supposed to be.” And I still think about that to this day when I am doing a funeral and someone says, “I want it to be a celebration of life.” Neal has given me some thoughtful things to say in response.

Hoezee: To my knowledge, Neal has never taught preaching at Calvin Seminary, but nobody taught me more about preaching when I was a student than Neal Plantinga. That was particularly true in the Seven Deadly Sins elective that he used to teach and for which you would write two sermons instead of papers. Neal got me thinking about what it means to “write” a sermon. He was also a master of analogy, of explaining things clearly. Neal is a brilliant scholar who can keep pace with the brightest theologians in the world. But his real gift is translation. This is why smart seminarians use his eighth-grade Sunday school curriculum, A Sure Thing, to study for oral comprehensive exams. It’s a great summary of systematic theology, translated to street level. That is what makes his preaching so good; he does the same thing in his sermons—he makes the rough places plain!

Hoezee: Or in deep waters he had a lot of snorkels! But I remember this part of Neal’s approach to theology, too: he said—and I have never forgotten this—that when it comes to theology, we are all “amateurs.” But then he told us that “amateur” really means “lover.” We are all of us lovers of God; that’s what theology is. The beloved is the one you want to know about.

Lastly, please share your favorite Neal Plantinga story.

Van Dyk: I don’t have a particular story but just this vivid memory of him throwing his head back and laughing! He has a great laugh. He sometimes amused himself! Laughter is a gift, and Neal has a wonderful laugh. But I also want to share something that is not a memory but an important point: back in the early- and mid-1980s, Neal was one of the people at the forefront of those who were very supportive of women in the ministry. He was not afraid to touch that subject. That made an enormous difference in my road to becoming a theologian.

Van Dyk: He inspires good teaching as well. When I first took a class with him, I knew nothing about theology. I didn’t know what the word ontological meant! I was clueless and yet I was fascinated by theology, by being able to explain it well, and so Neal inspired me. He taught me that a living faith asks questions, digs deeper. This inspired how I taught catechism later and everything else I do. But he also taught me about loving God. If you love somebody, you want to know about him or her. If you love God, why wouldn’t you want to ask questions about who he is and about how he works, and his relationship with you?

De Vries: Like you, Mary, when I took theology, I felt like I was swimming in the deep end of the pool or climbing to heights I had not tried before. But Neal had a way of providing the ladder. Yeah, you still had to climb, but he provided the ladder.
Vanden Berg: One thing I will always remember, because it taught me so much, came during the course Doctrine of Salvation. One class period had to do with election. Neal raised some questions in class, and I was waiting for the “right” answer; it didn’t come. I went to him after class and asked him, “So, what’s the right answer?” He looked at me and said, “Well, Mary, I think you should just go home and think about that.” That was a window into how theology and theological reflection works. His confidence that I could do that thinking told me I did belong at seminary. I could do this. He inspired me to be here.

De Vries: I remember the late 1980s when people still smoked inside the building. Neal would have the occasional cigar. Once I knocked on his office door, and he opened the door and this blue haze of cigar smoke rolled out. Neal looked at me, looked at the cigar in his hand, and then said, “One of my very last vices. Really?” I don’t remember why I was there, but I remember that humor!

Hoezee: One of my favorite memories is from a class. I have no idea now what the topic was, but it was complicated and we were working our way through this via Neal’s lecture. At one point I had an idea of a way through this thicket, so I raised my hand and he called on me. As I laid out my idea some of my classmates were even taking notes, so I thought maybe I was onto something. Neal listened carefully with his hand on his chin. After I finished, he was silent for some seconds and then said very slowly and deliberately, “Scott, that idea is subtle, and it is thoughtful, and it is cunning. And it is finally … very wrong!” Everyone roared, but then he went on to explain why it was wrong and we all learned something. I’ve been wrong lots of times, but seldom so memorably!

Van Dyk: Neal was and is a model of good thinking, clear lecturing, and wonderful preaching.

Hoezee: He gives all of us something to aspire to.

Neal Plantinga knows the power of words and loves to put them to work. In many places in this issue of Forum you can read about the impact of Neal’s teaching and leadership in preaching. However, the impact of his writing is no less significant. Throughout his varied career, Neal has been a writer. After graduating from Calvin College and Seminary, Neal served as pastor of Webster CRC in New York (1971-1975), taught at Calvin Theological Seminary (1979-1996), served as Dean of the Chapel at Calvin College (1996-2001), and now has served as president of CTS for the past ten years. Neal’s publication record includes 230 articles, essays, and reviews; 6 books, one of which was co-authored with Sue Rozeboom, and a number of which were translated into other languages; 12 book chapters; 2 co-edited books; many “President’s Letters” in Forum; and countless other memorable communications as CTS president.

Neal’s writing is known and appreciated for being clear, pithy, often laced with humor, and discerning. Though varied in audience and particular purpose, all of Neal’s writings are engaging not just rhetorically, but also in terms of their purpose. Neal seeks to illumine a particular subject in such a way that it actually makes a difference in the reader and to the world.

This commitment to “So what?” kind of writing can be seen in Neal’s primary intellectual area of interest—theology of the Trinity. In his dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary, Neal analyzed a significant 20th-century debate over the social analogy of the...
Trinity, offering biblical, historical, and contemporary grounds in defense of the social analogy—that God is an inherently social being and the Trinity consists of three persons whose unity is grounded in a loving relationship. In addition, he has published a number of articles on the Trinity in both scholarly and popular publications and co-edited with Ronald Feenstra a book entitled *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*. In his various essays on the Trinity, Neal argues that the social analogy of the Trinity provides insights into the nature of interpersonal love, helps illumine the social nature of God’s human imagebearers, and—based on John 17—highlights the church as a human reflection of God. Taken as a whole, these writings not only advance the academic study of the Trinity, but also show practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for the life of the church.

Concern for the life of the church has always been a driving force behind what Neal chooses to write about. During Neal’s early academic career he published *A Place to Stand* (1979), *Beyond Doubt* (1980, rev. 2001), *A Sure Thing* (1986, rev. 2010), and *Assurances of the Heart* (1993, a revised devotional edition of *Beyond Doubt*). At a time when Neal could have set his sights on big publishers and a lucrative writing career, he wrote these studies of the creeds and confessions of the church for the church school program of the Christian Reformed Church. Generations of students, as well as pastors preparing for oral comprehensive and classical exams, have benefited from these primers in basic theology that are at once simple and profound.

Neal’s writing also points the way to his deep loves and passions. Neal’s love for excellent preaching is reflected in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, a collection of outstanding sermons edited with Thomas G. Long in 1993. His passion for engaging Christian worship is reflected in *Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking about Christian Worship Today* (with Sue Rozeboom), published in 2003 and still a major point of reference in understanding the rich interplay between Christian worship and its cultural context.

Though it’s difficult to measure, much less compare, the impact of Neal’s various writings, two of his books stand out. *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (1995) is probably his most well-known publication. A *Christianity Today* Book of the Year in 1996, the book soars in its vision of shalom, astonishes in its insight into sin and human nature, and is immensely helpful in comparing sin and folly. *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning and Living* (2002) provided a Christian view of learning and the theological basis for the new curriculum of Calvin College which was developed while Neal was Dean of the Chapel there. It may be the book that has had the most impact for the kingdom of God. Written for college students, this book inspires readers to love God with their minds as well as their hearts and to use all “knowledge, skills and virtues” in the service of God. A theological foundation for Christian higher education, this book has guided and inspired Christian leaders around the world.

Anyone who has read some of the 230 articles Neal has written over the decades has a favorite one or two. Who couldn’t be entertained and enlightened by his 1990 *Reformed Journal* article entitled, “You’re Right, Dear—Or How to Handle Headship,” or convicted by “Myopic Compassion,” a *Reformed Journal* article written in 1987 that is fully as important and relevant today as it was 25 years ago? What Christian Reformed pastor wasn’t blessed by “Splendour in the Grass: A Sermon on Psalm 103:15-17,” published in *Calvin Theological Journal* in 2001? Less well known but very enlightening is one of Neal’s most recent publications, a chapter entitled “How I Changed My Mind About Women in Leadership” in *How I Changed My Mind: Evangelicals and Gender Equality* (2010).

Thanks, Neal, for a writing career that has taught and delighted so many. Blessings as you now return to writing as your primary vocation. Those who know you and your writing can’t wait to see what’s next.
A Tribute to Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Any new job possesses its share of daunting features. When one is in a new position, there is a fear that gnaws at the back of the mind, a fear that often expresses itself in questions like, “Can I do this job? Am I up to this task?” Every once in a while, however, one encounters something that raises the stakes (and thus the anxiety) even more.

For me that “something” came at a CTS Board of Trustees meeting not long after I took the job of being the Center for Excellence in Preaching’s first director. President Plantinga was introducing me and inviting me to make a few remarks about the Center. I did so, after which Neal then informed the Board, “If the Center for Excellence in Preaching works and flourishes, then one day I will retire a happy man.”

And I thought, “Oh good—now Neal’s whole retirement is in my hands!” I wondered what Kathleen would say to me if I messed that up!

In truth, however, Neal’s desire for the Center was not news to me. Preaching is a passion for Neal Plantinga and always has been. Years ago when he first indicated interest in becoming the successor to President James De Jong, Neal told me one day that if he ever did become president at the Seminary, his number-one goal would be to do something positive to enhance the quality of preaching in the church. The Center was just a gleam in his eye back then; today it is one of the most tangible results of Neal’s dream. As noted elsewhere in this issue of Forum, Neal Plantinga never taught preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary—and yet by sheer dint of his own stellar example, Neal has done much to inspire good preaching among CTS students and alums and now among pastors all over the world.

One of the Center’s pioneering efforts was the launching of Neal’s seminar “Imaginative Reading for Creative Preaching.” In the summer of 2003, twenty pastors spent four whole weeks meeting together to talk about how a program of general reading (novels, poetry, children’s literature, journalism, and more) properly stokes the imagination and feeds the life of the preacher. Since that inaugural session, Neal has hosted scores of pastors both on the Calvin campus and at several remote sites. Neal also turned the seminar into an elective course that many CTS students have taken; and next spring he will take the fruits of his years of reflecting on the reading-for-preaching project and present them at the prestigious Warfield Lectures at Princeton. That, in turn, will likely yield a book, thus ensuring that Neal’s inspiration in this area will affect even more preachers.

But that is just one example of what Neal has done to help preachers get better at what they do. As Neal wrote six years ago at the formal founding of the Center, When preaching works well, the result is eventful. People feel pierced or assured. They sense that they are somehow joined to Jesus Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, preaching naturally binds believers to God by making God audible to them. But a sermon may also take hold of others. A well-designed sermon may make God audible to unbelievers, or to seekers, or to people who are so consciously ambivalent about God that they would hardly know what to call themselves. The Center for Excellence in Preaching will share its resources for exactly one reason: we want your preaching to have power, beauty, and deep simplicity. We want it to make the God of the Gospel audible to listeners.

Today, through the website alone, the Center for Excellence in Preaching reaches an average of well over 8,000 preachers every month, many of whom visit the website weekly for fresh sermon ideas on upcoming preaching texts. The Center’s continuing education programs are also having a wide influence. One of the Center’s annual seminars is “The Preachers’ Oasis.” In the summer of 2011 this one-week seminar will welcome fifteen pastors to campus for an intensive week of hands-on sermon work. Those fifteen pastors will come from no fewer than nine different denominations and from as far away as Hawaii and Jamaica.

Neal Plantinga said he wanted to do something to help preachers do their vital work well. It has been my privilege to shepherd his dream; but it was and is, without a doubt, Neal’s dream and vision that has made all the difference.

Here at the Seminary it is our prayer that having accomplished this so well, Neal will be able to sally forth into his retirement a happy man indeed!
Special Events in Honor of President Plantinga

Two special events this past spring celebrated Neal Plantinga's ten years of service as president and seventeen years as professor of theology. On February 10, 2011, a lunch was held in the seminary student center, attended by members of the seminary’s Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, and student body. Board President Kevin Adams addressed the guests with a tribute that is published on page 3, and presented Neal and Kathleen Plantinga with several gifts.

A few weeks later, on March 24, the seminary’s annual scholarship dinner was held at the Frederik Meijer Gardens. Almost 600 people attended this wonderful event and enjoyed fellowship and dinner together, including 185 seminary students and spouses and 390 friends of the seminary. Following dinner, two seminary students, Michael Ten Haken and Ashley Stam, reflected on the benefits of seminary education and thanked the seminary’s loyal supporters. In the 2010-2011 academic year 188 students received scholarships totaling $1,205,735. What a wonderful gift of support for theological education!

In honor of the President’s ten years of service, trustee Sidney Jansma, Jr. offered remarks of gratitude, and Neal’s brother Alvin Plantinga recounted some humorous memories of growing up with his younger brother. The audience thoroughly enjoyed hearing about the gifts and foibles of young Neal.

At the end of the evening the seminary choir, conducted by Roy Hopp, led everyone in singing a hymn written for the 125th anniversary of Calvin College and Seminary in 2001. “O God, We Kneel Before Your Throne” was written by Ruth Van Baak Griffioen, set to music by Hopp, and published as a choral anthem in 2002 in the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (CICW) series with GIA Publications. A special moment followed as the choir ended the evening by premiering a brand-new anthem commissioned by CICW and also composed by Hopp, in which he set to music the blessing Neal has offered time and time again throughout his presidency:

God go before you to lead you,
God go behind you to protect you,
God go beneath you to support you,
God go beside you to befriend you.
Do not be afraid.
May the blessing of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be upon you.
Do not be afraid.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen.
2011 Distinguished Alumni Awards

The CTS Board of Trustees has named two recipients of the Seminary's Distinguished Alumni Award for 2011. The award is given annually to persons who have brought unusual credit to their alma mater by their effectiveness in Christian ministry.

JOHN B. HULST is a graduate of Calvin College (A.B., 1951), Calvin Theological Seminary (B.D., 1954; Th.M., 1973), and Iliff School of Theology (Th.D., 1981). He is an ordained minister of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. John ministered in Ireton, Iowa (1954–58); Orange City, Iowa (1958–65); and Jenison, Michigan (1965–68). For twenty-eight years (1968–96) John served Dordt College as Dean of Students, Vice President for Student Affairs, Director of the Studies Center, and, starting in 1982, the college’s second president. President Hulst’s leadership was vital in establishing Dordt College as a solid center of Christian higher education and in setting its trajectory for decades to come.

John Hulst has had an immensely fruitful ministry as author, speaker, and servant of the church. He has published scores of articles, reviews, and essays and has addressed innumerable church and educational bodies across North America and in such international settings as Seoul, Sydney, Harare, and Jos. John has been a delegate to synod four times and to the Reformed Ecumenical Council three times; a member of numerous study committees both for synod and for REC; and a member of more than a dozen boards of educational and community organizations, including the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (Senior Adviser for International Programs) and the Institute for Christian Studies (Chairman, 1999-2004).

John Hulst is a Christian statesman. Always far-seeing and alert to developments in the church and world, he has used his intelligence, prudence, and faith to promote thoughtful citizenship in the kingdom of God. He is modest, but also energetic and resourceful. He is tactful, but also firm with conviction when biblical truth is at stake. He has offered and gained respect across a large part of the Christian world.

JOHN T. MALESTEIN is a graduate of Calvin College (A.B., 1948) and Calvin Theological Seminary (B.D., 1951). He is an ordained minister of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. John ministered in Escalon, California (1951–54); Lafayette, Indiana (1954–58); Lansing, Illinois (1958–62); and Clifton, New Jersey (1962–68). From 1968 till his retirement in 1988, John was pastor of the North Hills CRC in Troy, Michigan, a congregation still alive with enthusiasm for John’s wise and seminal work.

John Malestein has served the CRCNA as a member of the Board of Trustees of Calvin College, as a four-time delegate to synod, as a Synodical Deputy, and as interim minister of five congregations. During his years as a church minister, John was active in the civil rights movement, in police/community relations, and in TV religious journalism. Always intellectually serious, John gained further education at Union Theological Seminary, New York, and at the University of Durham in England.

He is a veteran of the United States Army Air Corps who was stationed in New Guinea in World War II.

Twenty-three years after his retirement from North Hills CRC, members still unite to thank God for John Malestein’s eventful ministry. He preached poignant, revealing sermons that rose naturally from their biblical source and satisfied his congregation’s appetite for God. He practiced hospitality. He offered uncommon pastoral insight and sensitivity. He engaged a broad range of people, from laborers to bank presidents—and including unbelievers—with consistent intelligence and grace. He lifted up Jesus Christ in everything. He cared deeply about Reformed integrity in church architecture and liturgy. He mentored seminarians so memorably that thirty years later they still speak of his intelligence, warmth, and wit.

Farewell

CTS is grateful to the following staff members who are concluding their service at the seminary this year: Phil Vanden Berge, Chief Financial Officer; Neal Plantinga, President; Mary Brasser, Executive Associate to the President; Ina De Moor, Assistant to the Dean of Students/International Student Adviser and the Director of Doctoral Studies; Don Byker, Director of Mentored Ministries; and Duane Kelderman, Vice President for Administration.
President as Advocate

by Rev. Jul Medenblik, President-Elect

It was nearly twenty years ago that I entered Calvin Theological Seminary. For nearly a decade prior to that moment, I had been trained as a law student and then as a practicing attorney worked as an advocate. But God was calling me to a different form of advocacy, and he provided instructors for this transition from law to ministry—one of whom became the sixth president of Calvin Seminary, and who taught me what it means to be an advocate for God and for the church.

I remember receiving a letter from Dr. Plantinga that was sent the day after his inauguration as president of Calvin Seminary to pastors and leaders in the CRCNA. The letter contained a request for any and all comments, questions, and nuggets of advice that could be placed on a postcard to be sent to him. Dr. Plantinga has said time and time again that these responses he received some ten years ago helped frame the agenda for his presidency. With thoughtful and prayerful consideration, and using what the church shared in those postcards, Neal has shaped a vision for how Calvin Theological Seminary can best serve God and the church.

As a result of those postcards, the hard work of Calvin Seminary faculty, staff, students, and a supportive community, under Neal’s leadership we have seen and can celebrate such things as

• the establishment of the Center for Excellence in Preaching,
• a new curriculum and calendar that expressly enhance our focus on the spiritual formation of students, and
• the Forum itself as a connecting tool between the church and CTS.

There are many other items for which to give thanks and remember before God; to that end, I would like to present a request to the readers of Forum. Would you provide Dr. Plantinga with the gift of words and memories? Dr. Plantinga’s use of words and turn of phrases is renown, but I know that your words at this time would be a gift to him. Instead of sending a postcard, I invite you to send your note of appreciation via email to PresThanks@calvinseminary.edu.

I have another request. I would like to continue the dialogue with the church that was started by those postcards Dr. Plantinga received some ten years ago. The desire of CTS is to serve the church; and as I prepare to be its seventh president I too desire to listen to the church. Please send your note about the future of CTS and the church to me via email at PresFuture@calvinseminary.edu.

I look forward to reading about your hopes for the future of Calvin Theological Seminary and sharing those notes with the faculty, staff, and students as we continue to prepare and serve as advocates for God and his church!

Julius Medenblik was my student years ago, and a mighty fine one he was. Since then he has distinguished himself in law and ministry—not a bad combination for someone in the Calvinist tradition! He has been beautifully used by God to plant and grow a church, and he brings to his work all the wisdom he earned as president of our Board of Trustees during the time when our new curriculum was still a dream. Significantly, it was his dream too, and his leadership in making the dream come true was critical. In my judgment, his entrepreneurial spirit is just what’s needed at this next stage of our school’s history. I pray God’s blessing on him for years to come.

—Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.
Called to Serve

The Inauguration of

Julius T. Medenblik

as the Seventh President of
Calvin Theological Seminary

Saturday, October 15, 2011, 10:30 a.m.
Calvin College Covenant Fine Arts Center