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Music professor Calvin Stapert examines the importance of daily communal worship in our Christian college.

Apologies, explanations, and (at times) acrimonious debate follow up Dr. Ericson’s essay from the October Dialogue.
Chapel-going is gone as far as I’m concerned. I don’t attend chapel regularly for a mixture of reasons: memories of boring or irrelevant high school chapel services, not having friends around to attend chapel with, busyness, and laziness. Yet as I mull over Calvin Stapert’s “Canonical Crows at Calvin,” I want to escape those bad attitudes. I long for the daily communal worship Dr. Stapert describes, a sort of worship that I experienced in England this summer when I studied the Church of England in Dr. Wells’ comparative history course.

Anglican worship was new to me in two ways: its sense of tradition and its artistic, religious, unabashed concreteness. Westminster Abbey in particular, as one of the centers of the church, is more than a place for living people to worship God. The Abbey also is a monument and mausoleum to only a few of that cloud of unseen witnesses who cheer us on in our race: underfoot, David Livingstone, and carved in marble on a wall, William Tyndale. Gathered in a cliquish corner lie T.S. Eliot, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Lewis Carroll and other beloved writers. Under elaborate effigies or simply carved stones lie kings, queens, lords, soldiers, children of God. Here I kneel where once they knelt, praying at evensong. I marvel at the centuries-old dailiness, the punctual prayers for leaders of the church and world, for oppressed and starving nations, and for the salvation of souls. And I rejoice in the openness of this house of worship. Somehow it upholds its songs and prayers before the Lord and also before a hoard of tourists. As I pray, I like to think Westminster Abbey ministers to those tourists by mere virtue of its presence.

Because if words do not speak to them, structures do. Standing underneath an immense stone vaulted roof or gazing up at the clear colored glass, I hear of God’s majesty, and I respond with wordless awe. Suddenly my faith and my savior are new and precious and mysterious. Still, the familiar words roll off my tongue and join with the words of the people around me: “I believe in God the Father, Almighty . . .”

Why do I write at length of Westminster Abbey in London? Because through it and other places of worship in England, I sensed the importance of the building to worship. Last spring I scoffed at the idea of a chapel building: couldn’t the money be employed better elsewhere? Wasn’t the Fine Arts Center adequate? And most of all, why build a chapel when very few people attend chapel?

Because, I realized, a place of worship, a building itself extends a call to worship, and somehow mustard-gold seats and concrete walls weren’t calling loudly enough. If other Christian Reformed students feel as I do, we are heartily sick of stark brick walls, of plain glass windows, of non-representational blobs of colored glass, of the sudden interest in Sunday school-constructed banners, and of the lack of any sort of loving, intricate detail, whether it be carved pictures on the communion table or patterns on the ceiling. In the same way we are tired of Calvin and its oh-so-functional non-beauty; Calvin’s beauty must lie in its integration of people, trees, and buildings, because its beauty certainly does not lie in the buildings themselves. And that fact makes me fear for the chapel building. I am afraid that we will have only another functional brick building which may fit admirably into Calvin’s architectural structure but that will not convey by its very structure that this is a special place of worship, built by carpenters and craftsmen of God as carefully and as intricately as the temple of Solomon.

In my dreams, I see a chapel of steeples and bells and stained glass surrounded with flower gardens rather than parked cars. The chapel’s size does not matter to me as long as it includes a small meditation room with kneeling benches where I and other students can rest and pray at any time. In my more extravagantly Anglican moments, I even envision a Calvinist church yard—a cemetery, if you will, where simple stone slabs would remind us wordlessly of our wordy tradition, where we can remember the Christian guidance given us by professors who have passed
away and realize that they still watch us, cheering us on our path with the fellow saints David Livingstone and William Tyndale, T.S. Eliot and Edward the Confessor.

There are those who will say that the impetus for chapel-going comes from within and not from the building itself. I will reply that their objection is partly true, but that incentives for chapel-going include more than a plain and pure desire to worship the Lord. Worship does not take place in a vacuum. We are called to or repelled from worship by such things as whether we will be sitting with friends or alone, whether we are comfortable with the liturgy, and whether we benefit from the speaker. I believe a building, too, can call us to worship—by its physical presence a chapel building should stir up within us a desire to meet with fellow believers or to take a moment to meditate alone. For that reason, Calvin needs its own "Westminster Abbey."
In a book entitled *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity*, Robert Webber of Wheaton College emphasized "a need to restore the Christian concept of time . . . to cause us to realize that all time belongs to the Lord who created it, redeemed it, and will consummate it in His coming" (248). Traditionally the Church has done this on three levels. At the level of the year, the movement of time is articulated by the celebration of the events of Christ's life and work. At the level of the week, the movement is articulated by Sunday, a holy day, separate from the other six. At the level of the day, the passage of time is articulated by the so-called divine offices or office hours, periodic moments of devotion consisting of prayer, scripture reading, and psalm singing.

We come out of a tradition that has always placed a very strong emphasis on the weekly level. Recently, there have been some indications that we are beginning to pay a little more than cursory attention to the liturgical year. As for the daily level, I was happy to learn that the researches of Rev. Hughes Old have uncovered a tradition of the daily offices among our spiritual forefathers in Strasbourgh and Geneva. On the whole, however, we have been content to leave the daily level of devotion and worship up to the individual. The devotional articulation of time on the daily level has been relegated to the governance of the moods, whims, or habits of the individual or the family. The larger communal dimension has been ignored.

I think a few short paragraphs from a seemingly unlikely source are apropos here. In the barnyard world of Walter Wangerin's fantasy, *The Book of the Dun Cow*, Chauntecleer the rooster has two kinds of crows:

Certain of them he called his "occasional crows": crows born out of the moment, the occasion, the mood, and not according to any due time. Hereunder he had crows for all moods and feelings . . .

But there was another whole set of crows which he used always at certain special hours during the day. These did come in due time; and these were called "canonical crows." They told all the world—at least that section of the world over which he was Lord—what time it was, and they blessed the moment in the ears of the hearer. By what blessing? By making the day, and that moment of the day familiar; by giving it direction and meaning and a proper soul . . .

Seven times a day, dutifully, with a deep sense of their importance, and by the immemorial command of the Divine, Chauntecleer crowed his canonical crows (21-22).

Our traditional neglect of communal daily worship and the prevailing individualistic temper of our day have led us to emphasize the "occasional crows," those born of the moment and the mood. Even when we do meet communally, it often takes on an occasional and individualistic character with refrains of "I just want to praise God" and "I just want to share what this means to me."

I think we need to reaffirm the importance of "canonical crows" which come in "due time." We cannot let our times of worship be dictated merely by the whim of the moment. We need something regular and reliable, something that arches over the caprice of moods; we need "canonical crows" in "due time" to release us from the tyranny of our moods.

Therefore, I applaud the attempt of the ad hoc Chapel Study Committee, in its March 1985 report to the faculty, to get us to think about chapel at Calvin College in the context and tradition of the daily office. Our forefathers moved the daily office from the monas-
tery to the parish church. Now the parish church is no longer the focal point of the community the way it once was. Therefore, in order to revive the tradition, we need to move it from the parish church to other places where groups of Christians live, work, and play in their daily lives. And at what sort of place could this be achieved more conveniently than at a Christian college?

Of course, I am not advocating that chaplain Cooper say "canonical crows" seven times a day like Chauntecleer. I am not advocating a full-fledged liturgical day for Calvin College. I do not think that would be desirable even if it were possible. But to articulate each day at least once with a communal gathering for prayer, scripture reading, and singing would help to invest all times of the day with "direction and meaning and a proper soul."

In its report to the faculty, the Chapel Study Committee stressed the relationship between worship and community. It said that communal worship will arise naturally out of community. But it also pointed out the other side of that coin; communal worship will help bring about community. I would like to underscore that point. It reminds me of a point made by C. S. Lewis in A Preface to Paradise Lost, in which he quoted Von Hugel as saying, "I kiss my son not only because I love him, but in order that I may love him" (55). We should realize that we have chapel services not only because we are a community but also in order that we might become a community.

The Committee’s report, with its emphasis on the relationship of chapel to the daily office and to community, engenders a vision in me. It is a vision parallel to David Horsman’s vision of European Christendom depicted in his novel on the life of Peter Abelard:

In the second year of the Pontificate of Pascal II,

... the first year of the reign of Henry I of England,

... the three-hundred and second year since Saint Michael commanded a church be built on a mount near the border of Normandy and Brittany,

... in the one thousand and one hundredth year of the Incarnation of the Lord Christ, on the feast of Saint Michael, in the deep dark before dawn, the clerics and canons of the cathedral of our Lady of Paris—joining their brethren from Canterbury to Cologne, from the frozen edges of the world to the Spanish march—trace a cross on their lips and chant the beginning of the Christian day:

"Domine labia me aperies!
Et os meum annuntiabit laudem tuam" (1).

Whether Horsman’s vision of a European Christendom periodically united throughout each day and night in prayer and worship is a historical reality is beside the point here. What matters for us is whether we can make my parallel vision a reality for at least a few acres in Southeast Grand Rapids:

In the last year of the presidency of Ronald the Actor,

... the tenth year of the leadership of Anthony of Calvin,

... the third year since the Board of Trustees commanded a chapel be built on the crest of a knoll in the sight of all passers-by,

... in the one thousand, nine-hundred and eighty-eighth year of the Incarnation of the Lord Christ, on the birthday of Abraham Kuyper, in the deep dark before first-hour classes, the secretaries and administrators from the Spoelhof College Center—joining their brothers and sisters from the Science Building to the Fine Arts Center and from the transportation garage to the seminary—
trace a cross on their lips and chant the beginning of the Christian day:

"Lord, open my lips! And my mouth shall announce your praise."

I appreciate the Committee's report and the new format for chapel services begun last semester. They are heading in the same direction, a direction that stimulates a hopeful vision in me. But let me conclude with a warning. To establish communal worship as a regular and important feature of life on this campus will not be easy. The Committee's report touched on one aspect of our reformed heritage that militates against it:

It can hardly be doubted our way of thinking about chapel is one of the ways in which the Kuyperian movement has been influential among us. Chapel and theology courses do not a Christian college make—that Kuyperian point we have all heard hundreds of times. Colleges in general are educational institutions; teaching and research are their guiding functions. The defining mark of a Christian college is that it conducts its teaching and research in Christian perspective. If a college does that, it is a Christian college—even if for some reason it has no chapel exercises and no theology courses. If it does not do that, the presence of those things will not make it a Christian college (4). This is a familiar line of thought. But, of course, one can agree that the presence of chapel exercises does not define a Christian college and still think that such exercises are right and fitting for a Christian college.

There are, however, stronger foes outside our camp whose influence has penetrated it deeply. We are up against some attitudes that have long dominated Western civilization, attitudes that are alien to the frame of mind that recognizes the importance of community and communal worship. Secularism has made worship seem pointless and materialism has made it seem worthless. As for what is left, individualism and subjectivism have relegated that to a realm where taste and opinion rule supreme. We will have to be patient and determined, not looking for immediate success and not deterred by lack of popularity. In the area of worship, no less than in any other area of Christian life, we have an important educational task, and it is a task we cannot fulfill unless we do much of the teaching by example. I hope the Committee's report and the new format for chapel are indications that we are finally ready to face that task seriously.
Students “Right” Back

Professor Ericson Replies:

When I wrote “Hello Again to All That,” I expected that it would get some reactions. I did not expect the virtual avalanche of comments which I have received. These comments have run the gamut from A to Z. Some people are furious with me. Many more (roughly four to one) have expressed pleasure that someone has said what they have been thinking, though one should not be surprised that those in agreement feel freer to speak to an author than those in disagreement.

Before I reply to my respondents, I must offer sincere apologies to two of my colleagues about whom I made misstatements. Though my errors stem from inadequate information and not from malice, still I wronged these two.

I said that the interim course to Central America would not be led by specialists in Latin-American studies. I did not know that a considerable part of Roland Hoksbergen’s graduate program is in developmental economics featuring Latin America. I think it fair, though, to recall the context of my initial remark, in which the question of credentials was brought up regarding the professors of a different interim course. I do not think, as my own interim offerings indicate, that professors must have scholarly training in the subjects which they teach during interim courses. I do not think, as my own interim offerings indicate, that professors must have scholarly training in the subjects which they teach during interim courses.

Also, there were inaccuracies in my description of Stephen Wykstra as “a professor who lectures on how he was radicalized by one visit to Nicaragua and who gives a pro-Sandinista response in the student newspaper every time Nicaragua is commented on.” Wykstra informs me that he replied only once to a piece in Chimes; he did write another piece of his own for Chimes and one for Dialogue last year.

Of course I knew that my words “every time” were hyperbolic; I used them for rhetorical effect. I am sorry now that I did so, for they have been interpreted with a literalness which I did not anticipate. Also, Wykstra tells me that his comments in Chimes were not “pro-Sandinista” but “anti-contra.” Though the difference may be easy to miss, I agree that such a distinction can legitimately be made. So I wish that I had substituted “anti-contra” for “pro-Sandinista.” And I certainly do not want to give aid and comfort to the persons who put a sign on Wykstra’s office door implying that he is a “Commie prof.” Further, Wykstra says that, when he subtitled a public lecture “How Two Weeks in Nicaragua Turned Me into a Flaming Radical,” he was engaging in self-deprecating irony; he did not talk about his being radicalized. I took the words at face value. I take this occasion to set the matter straight.

Finally, both Hoksbergen and Wykstra have assured me that, for their course in Central America this coming January, they are making every effort to get good spokesmen for all major points of view. I had said, “You can be sure that they [Calvin students] will meet with persons who blame Central America’s troubles on the United States and justify the activities of Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas. You cannot be sure that they will hear good representatives of some other point of view, though I sincerely hope that they do.” I believe the two professors when they say that they are trying their best to make happen what I said I hoped would happen. I wish now that I had skipped that bit of musing in public, for it misjudges their intentions.

It will be observed that the details which got me into trouble were specific examples from our campus, which were designed to support a general position of mine, the concerns of which go far beyond our campus. All of those who communicated with me, including my
One's mind turns to the spectacle of the recent "disinvestment" drive, where moralistic pied-pipers hawked their trendy, purely sentient political wares like elixir at a carnival side-show.

critics, seem to agree that the issues which I raised were legitimate ones for us to discuss, and at least in the promoting of discussion my editorial has fulfilled its purpose. Also, many of my concrete details have not been assailed. Nevertheless, I did make some misstatements, and for these I apologize.

Dear Editor,

Professor Ericson's assertion that Soviet crimes seem to remain "out of sight, out of mind" raises a valuable point. We ought not forget the ruthlessness of the Soviet Union. However, we must not remember 2.5 million murdered Cambodians simply to reassure ourselves that the hundreds of people we have murdered ought to be forgotten. The Soviets must answer for their crimes, and we for ours.

Perhaps there are professors and students at Calvin College who can not remain silent while their government subsidizes terrorism in Central America. Once our government reverts to terrorism, its legitimacy is at stake. Is the American rebuff of the World Court, and America's pledge to destroy the government of Nicaragua another attempt to make the world safe for democracy? Certainly not. The Sandinistas were democratically elected in what most observers saw as remarkably fair elections. No, it is capitalism, not democracy, freedom or equality which the United States represents in Central America. Unfortunately, the capitalism which we represent may benefit us, but it keeps the Third World on the brink of economic disaster.

What does Professor Ericson mean when he says we must not politicize our curriculum? Does he mean that politics has nothing to do with our college? As Christians with a social consciousness we must respond to the actions for which we are responsible. We must right our wrongs. Is Calvin College politicizing its curriculum when its professors and students speak up when they believe something is wrong? Let us never forget the legacy of pre-World War II Germany which justified Hitler by indicting the Russians. We don't have to be easy on the Soviets in order to be hard on ourselves. Doctor Bonhoeffer could have saved his life by keeping his mouth shut, but I admire him for saying what he had to say.

Ted Binnema

To the Editor,

We are all afraid of change. We are all, as people and as nations, afraid to admit that we are often wrong. We are even afraid of seeing the truth when it could point a disapproving finger at us.

As Christians, however, we need not be afraid of truth or of change. Being reformed people we should, in fact, look for change, knowing that we are never all right. In such change, we need not fear making mistakes either. We are not the last people who will ever correct past and present mistakes. Christ has already forgiven our mistakes.

In this light, I would like to express some thoughts concerning Dr. Ericson's article, "Hello Again to All That." The "leftist" movement Dr. Ericson is so concerned about is trying to point out the mistakes we as a nation are making. As such, it is forcing us to admit wrongfulness where there is wrong being done by us. Because we do not like being wrong, we see this movement as "anti-American," but it is not. The movement is only calling for change where it sees wrong being done, and it starts right here at home. Let us not be afraid to admit we are wrong, rather let us change what is wrong.

Let us also not interpret "anti"-Contra as
being "pro"-Sandinista. That would be like saying if you are "anti"-Reagan you are "pro"-Mondale. That is ridiculous. And when a group of students goes to Nicaragua, we cannot say that what they will see will be more biased than what they read in the local paper. Surely living in the situation is preferable, information-wise, than reading about it in the Grand Rapids Press.

In closing, let us not always assume that we know what is right, and let us not fear the change that being wrong should invoke.

In love,
Delwin Vriend

Dear Mr. Ericson,

I read your article in the Dialogue and was impressed. In large part I agree. From the sound of the changes and the people proposing them, the courses will tend to assume that the U.S. is the root of all—or almost all—evil and, also, that we do everything for economic reasons. It is symptomatic of leftists to claim that everyone else is behaving for economic or worldly reasons while they answer to a higher moral calling. On the other hand, rightists are overly fond of labeling any opposition as Godless pinkoes. I think that, to a degree, both are right. And I think that, although you did and do well to point out that the Soviet Union is an evil, despotic tyranny and that the U.S. and Western democracies are better, you could have gone further in saying that the U.S. isn’t the Kingdom come either.

I think, too, that education is the key to the controversy. You state accurately that “True, education certainly must work to diminish parochial and ethnocentric attitudes.” Nevertheless, it seems you are too willing to allow this to slip into a debate about the best set of ethnocentric attitudes—theirs or ours. This comes out clearly in such statements as “Leftists like compulsion.” It would make a good bumper sticker, but they aren’t the only ones. All extremists—be they rightist, leftist, or ambidextrous—like compulsion. Jerry Falwell is as much a threat to freedom as Bayardo Aice—maybe more so. He’s in the U.S., Aice is in Nicaragua.

I also think you are a bit harsh on the CCCS. I agree that it is tiring to have a “Reformed” response to everything under the sun, and I doubt they will have little new to say. I think we should get away from the notion that Christianity was founded in Geneva. We should seek a biblical, Christian response to such things, not a “Reformed” response.

We must find some middle ground. It is all very well for courses to have a political theme, but care must be taken that they inform students without deciding for them.

Sincerely,
Eric B. Verhulst

Dear Dr. Ericson,

Your article in Dialogue and the Reformed Journal meant an awful lot to me. I had just about given up on the Calvin scholarly community in the last few years, and recent RJ articles, especially on Nicaragua, had only deepened my feelings of disappointment and alienation. To read your words gives me hope that Christian scholarship is not necessarily as alienated from and destructive of Western values and institutions as I had feared.

I know that you will get many letters from those more educated and insightful than I, but if you will indulge me, I am going to write a long letter giving some of my background
If we reject the relevant, compassionate, and internationalist ideology that seems to have become such a part of Calvin's intellectual life, what is to replace it?

before coming to Calvin, my experiences there, and my present alienation from the directions my studies were taking me.

Right now, I am a part-time factory worker and member of the Logan Street Covenant House Housing Cooperative. I occasionally work on my Christian Studies thesis also. However, I started out as a third-generation German-Slav, Cleveland, Ohio kid.

About 1966, I saw the Vietnam war on TV. I figured that I would turn 18, have to join the Army, and go to Vietnam. In 1974, I was in the army in Germany, not Vietnam. The controversies and upheavals of the war years had had contradictory effects on me. While I had been generally supportive of the U.S. effort in Vietnam, I felt very alienated from my country. I was anti-flag, anti-U.S. and generally disrespectful, cynical, and demoralized, like the rest of the army of that time.

However, Germany was not Vietnam. It was a peaceful, prosperous, democratic, and friendly country—better than the wrecked-up USA! Thus, I began to see myself as a defender of Western civilization, not the USA. And there was a threat to defend against—I learned that seeing the East-West border and the communities of East European refugees.

I left the Army in 1975 and went to Kent State University from 1976 to 1979, earning a Bachelor of Business Administration. I went to college partly to grow in my faith. I had been some kind of Christian all of my life—I did some reading on my own as a kid and was a practicing Catholic from 1972 to 1976. Well, I met a lot of Christians, but they were Christians without a mind. They had no perspective on culture, art, learning, or justice. Then I met a guy who was different. He read John Howard Yoder, Ron Sider, Art Gish and Sojourners. These writers had real integrity and a biblical perspective. However, their message was hard for me to accept. I tried and tried to repent of my military service without success. I felt that I was hopelessly reprobate, but I hoped that God would either change me or show me a way out.

Oddly, both things happened. I started to believe Sojourners' articles that declared the Shah, South Korea, the U.S., Carter, South Africa, and the Philippines hopelessly demonic. Glowing articles on Cuba and Vietnam, that now appear ridiculous, deeply affected me. When Andrew Young called the Cubans in Africa a "stabilizing influence" and the Ayatollah a "saint," I believed him. I even talked to some Iranian students, read Malcolm X and the Koran, and toyed with the idea of becoming a Muslim. When the Iranians seized the U.S. embassy, I supported them.

Meanwhile, I found out about the CRC, the Institute for Christian Studies, and Calvin College. I read the Belgic Confession section "we do therefore detest the Anabaptists and other seditious persons" and found hope that I did not have to be a pacifist like the Anabaptists. Also, the Reformational ideas I was introduced to, while not pacifist like the Anabaptists, could be very critical of the U.S. and the West.

I joined the CRC in '79, went to ICS for a month, and ended up at Calvin College in 1980-81, working on an MA in CS. While Calvin was not as rabidly anti-U.S. as Sojourners, and I never felt that I was being forced to accept any ideology, many of the attitudes that you speak about in your article were there in the students and faculty. I began to accept many of them. By early 1982, I supported a whole array of liberal views: I was intrigued by liberation theology, I was for the nuclear freeze, less defense spending, the Sandinistas, the new international order, the center-periphery view of global economics, and I was against Pershing missiles.

Then things started to change. I guess it started with a public parade of Soviet missiles
— the cliche “nuclear idolatry” (that I had so often preceded with “U.S.”) hit me. Here was a higher and purer form of nuclear idolatry than the U.S. could ever aspire to, and no protesters, bishops, or intellectuals to mar the sacred festivities. The Euro-missile protests also struck me as odd. When the Soviets were quietly pointing SS-20’s at the Europeans, they did nothing. Only when the U.S., at the request of European governments and after a period of negotiations, began to deploy missiles, did Europe hit the streets. Late in 1982, a friend asked me to write an anti-nuclear freeze article for the Chimes that no one else would write. Its title was “Arms—the Incentive for Peace.”

During 1982-83, I was usually unemployed, and I did a lot of reading and thinking. My liberal positions and attitudes crumbled with amazing speed. Here are some of the books and sources I have used since that time: your book on Solzhenitsyn; his books—The Oak and The Calf, The Gulag Archipelago, and August 1914; Liang Heng’s Son of the Revolution about Mao’s China; Koestler’s Darkness at Noon; Orwell’s Animal Farm and 1984; Jean Francois Revel’s How Democracies Perish; and books and articles by Michael Novak and Norman Podhoretz and Jeanne Kirkpatrick. Two books I read and reread were Paul Johnson’s Modern Times and Paul Hollander’s devastating Political Pilgrims. The Christian Renewal (despite weaknesses in many areas) has provided interesting things, like speeches by Solzhenitsyn and Cuban poet Armando Valladares and articles on church supression in Grenada. The Wall Street Journal has been a treasure trove of information on Nicaragua, Castro, Afghanistan, the peace movement, and Soviet repression. I learned about betrayed Viet Cong and Cuban revolutionaries like Trung Nhu Tang, Doan Van Toai, Huber Matos, and Carlos Kranqui. I never learned this stuff at Calvin!

The final blow to my old beliefs was the invasion of Grenada. At first, U.S. aggression absolutely horrified me. But then the truth about this repressive Soviet-Cuban base came out. I actually started to feel proud about my country.

Unfortunately, I also felt like a man who had vomited. I had rejected the intellectual perspective that I had developed at Calvin. I am lost and confused—spiritually, emotionally, socially, and intellectually. I find it hard to deal with God, the Bible, and the church because I have been taught that they are on the side of the compassionate liberal and against the greedy, brutal conservative. I feel like a traitor because I no longer believe in or respect the positions my professors worked so hard to develop and teach to me. These people are more intelligent, mature, spiritual, and compassionate than I am, and they have been kind and helpful to me, not only as teachers, but as people.

What is there to replace the perspective I have rejected and you have spoken out against? It is still hard for me to really believe that God cares about our country, values, and way of life. It is nearly impossible for me to argue convincingly that He does. If we reject the relevant, compassionate, and internationalist ideology that seems to have become such a part of Calvin’s intellectual life, what is to replace it? What coherent, compassionate and viable ideologies does one turn to?

When I held more liberal values and views, I felt I could answer any problems and questions that arose. I felt part of a community of people that I loved and respected. Now, it is easy for me to get baffled, frustrated, and discouraged. Dr. Wykstra poses questions, scenarios, and facts about Nicaragua that set my head and heart spinning. I have to depend on sheer stubborness to avoid caving in to pro-Sandinista views. What really concerns me is
The Soviets must answer for their crimes, and we for ours.

that Dr. Wykstra refers to me as the best informed and knowledgeable Contra supporter he knows!

I find myself opposed to fine persons I still respect and admire and aligned with persons I do not respect or am repulsed by—Reagan, Falwell, Robertson, Moon, Somocistas, death squads, fascists, mercenaries, Afghan warlords, and drug dealers.

I try very hard to hang on to Solzhenitsyn's words in A World Split Apart about the failure of civic courage and to look at the world around and try to find this courage. American intellectuals seem to feel no need for this kind of courage. They are courageous people, but not when it comes to defending the values and institutions of our civilizations. Intellectuals no longer have to defend America physically (no draft), many are trying to avoid financial support (war tax resistance), but their first and greatest failure is that they do not support and defend us intellectually, but insist on continuing the intellectual blunders of the past that you mentioned. In the '30s, poet Archibald MacLeish exhorted the intellectuals to fight fascism in the universities, their ground, in an essay called 'The Intellectual Defense Against Fascism.' We need exhortations like this today.

I guess I could say more, but I will stop here. Thank you for your time and, once again, for your fine words. I do not know exactly where you stand on a lot of issues, but your article expressed a lot of things I have felt, and I greatly appreciated it.

Mr. Raymond Paul Opeka

Professor Ericson Replies:

My reply to student responses to my editorial must, perforce, be brief. Messrs. Binnema, Vriend, Verhulst, and Opeka have all acquitted themselves well with thoughtful statements. I assure Ted Binnema that I do not think either that Calvin College should avoid the study of politics or that Calvin professors and students should avoid taking political positions ("that politics has nothing to do with our college"), though it does seem that he and I have certain differences of opinion about the relative evils at work in our world. At the same time, I heartily agree that "we don't have to be easy on the Soviets in order to be hard on ourselves." I assure Delwin Vriend that I do not believe that the United States never makes mistakes; however, my list of our national errors would probably not correspond to lists which might be drawn up by him or some others. As for the fear of change, it seems, at least on the local scene that I am the one upsetting the status quo. Eric Verhulst and I have, as far as I can see, only minor differences of opinion. I appreciate his call for moderation; all that I can say is that a short piece like mine can include only some things, not all things, that go through an author's mind—and that my purpose was to highlight some differences among us Christians.

Raymond Opeka's letter is of a different order from the others, for it charts one man's intellectual odyssey. What is most apparent and impressive—even moving—is the authenticity of his search for a place to stand in these confusing times. A few other Calvin students have told me recently, in response to my piece, of similar odysseys of their own. I value the independence of mind which Opeka and they have shown. I am grateful for Opeka's ability to make distinctions between the quality of persons and the positions which they espouse. Also, I could wish that many Calvin students would read the books and authors which this man has read. Disillusionment with liberalism is an not-uncommon story in our time; many ex-liberals are now labeled with that slippery
It is all very well for courses to have a political theme, but care must be taken that they inform students without deciding for them.

term *neo-conservative*, which rankles some of them. It is often the case that persons who abandon one position pass through a "dark night of the soul" experience before they find another position to affirm. Finally, I offer the reminder, though Opeka seems already to understand that political differences among Christians, albeit not insignificant, belong to the second order of our being, not the first.

Dear Editor,

Bravo to Professor Edward Ericson for a timely, eloquent, and courageous article. That he assails such a sacrosanct target as the ideology and ambitions of the politically and socially "enlightened" among us, or as they prefer to believe, above us, is reason enough for praise. Perhaps it is indicative of the nature of the whole leftist-elitist ideology that the fury touched off by Prof. Ericson's article had as much to do with his breaking the veritable code of silence stifling criticism of this petty demagogy as with the content of the piece itself.

Prof. Ericson went out of his way not to question the spiritual and moral integrity of his leftist colleagues. Perhaps this was too generous in view of their attempted co-optation of the moral high ground, if not the entire moral terrain. One's mind turns to the spectacle of the recent "disinvestment" drive, where moralistic pied-pipers hawked their trendy, purely sentient political wares like elixir at a carnival side-show. Searching for evidence of the moral superiority of this position, and discounting moral selectivity as a valid criterion, I found that the best that could be said about the promoters of this policy was that they possess an excellent sense of the melodramatic.

Prof. Ericson's criticism of the abuse of terminology by the "new radicals" is entirely valid. The terms "justice" and "peace" are banded about as if the mere use of the terms constitutes proof of the user's moral correctness. If these terms (and others) are to be more than mere catchwords, void of any substance, their use must include some measure of definition. But perhaps we can discern some of the connotations implied by leftists in their use of these terms. For example, when the non-Communist, right-wing Somoza dictatorship ruled Nicaragua and was being fought by the Marxist Sandinistas, American leftists called for "justice." Now that the Marxist Sandinistas' dictatorship rules Nicaragua and is being fought by the anti-Communist contras, American leftists call for "peace."

This quixotic formula is exemplary of what writer Alan Harrington called "mobile truth," in which objective reality is unimportant as long as one's goals are served. Similar to this is what George Orwell referred to in his novel 1984 as "Newspeak." One aspect of Newspeak was its alteration of language to reduce words to tools of ideology. Terms became defined by their own usage rather than by any correlation to objective reality. Some words were eliminated, others were defined in such a way as to effectively neuter them.

Prof. Ericson notes in his article the general avoidance of the term "freedom" by leftists. Compare this with the following quote from Orwell's 1984:

The word "free" still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as "This dog is free from lice" or "This field is free from weeds." It could not be used in its old sense of "politically free" or "intellectually free," since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless (Appendix, p. 246-247).

As for the phrases we are now hearing around campus concerning curricular "reforms" such
as "peace studies" and "internationalizing the curriculum," well, Big Brother should have been so clever.

Prof. Ericson has certainly done this college, all of this college, a favor by arguing publicly against the one-sided politicizing of the curriculum. In doing so, he exercised a considerable amount of restraint, much more so than his ideological opponents have shown in trying to force their agendas on this institution. It is past time to take off the kid gloves in dealing with these people who have until now been largely exempt from public criticism. The leftist ideology, be it Marxist, Communist, Leninist, Maoist, hard-core Socialist, or any other sundry strain, is by its very nature profoundly hostile to political, social, economic, intellectual, and often religious freedoms. I find it inappropriate to allow those who espouse, support, or sympathize with leftist causes or regimes to hide behind a facade of "good intentions." Let us instead look at the substance of what they support and the results of that support, rather than at the tenuous, post-facto moral equations devised to legitimize these positions. Let us do away with coy pretense and call a spade a spade.

Clark Smith

Editor's Note:
Dr. Ericson was unable to respond to Clark Smith and professors Larry Thornton, Daniel Miller, and Ronald Wells due to the fact that their letters were received after the deadline.
What’s “Left”? The Professors Respond

An Open Letter to My Fellow Professor, Ed Ericson:

It took no special insight on my part to discern, Ed, that one of the people you had in mind with your Dialogue article was me. So let me take up the challenge. And incidentally, perhaps it’s worth my saying for our readers that though you and I disagree on a good many matters of a generally political character, our discussion is conducted not only in the context of Christian brotherhood but of genuine affection and friendship.

Appealing to fashion

The burden of the first half of your piece was that a good many members of the New Left of fifteen years ago have moved over to the right and are now busy pointing out what they see as the folly of their former ways. You quote some of them. But the moral you draw is not the one I would have drawn—namely, that Christians had better set their own social agenda and not steer their course by the cause which is “in” at the moment. Your moral, so far as I can tell, is that these middle-aged erstwhile leftists must have achieved some insight or they wouldn’t have changed, and that we Christians should learn from this not to espouse leftist causes. Where I say that we should learn not to follow the fickle fashions of the times, you appeal to fashion has no appeal for me whatsoever. Though I try to learn from the writings of the right as well as from those of the left, I align myself with neither. I watch their conversions with detachment and amusement.

“The issue came to me”: personally confronted by South Africa and Palestine

You perceive three international issues as prominent on our campus: Palestine, South Africa, and Nicaragua. I think there are more—for example, Ethiopia. But let that pass. Of those three, I myself have never spoken nor written about Nicaragua; I don’t know enough about it. On Palestine and South Africa I have spoken; and it may be instructive for me to explain how I got involved and how I came to my views. I’m not sure I have ever told you.

In 1975 I was sent by Calvin College to a conference in Potchefstroom, South Africa. The swirling controversy concerning apartheid which took place at that conference planted directly in front of me an issue from which I could not walk away. For I am a member of the Reformed tradition; and whatever else it is, apartheid is a dispute within the Reformed tradition in South Africa between black Reformed people and white Reformed people, with the former accusing the latter of oppressing them. After that traumatizing experience in Potchefstroom, I did a lot of reading about the issue and talked a great deal to a great many people on both sides of the dispute. I concluded that the blacks were correct in their charges. They are indeed being oppressed. So I have said that, and aligned myself with them. Today, of course, South Africa has become a chic cause. That frankly puts me off. But what can I do?

My engagement with the Middle East had similarly incidental beginnings. Almost by accident I attended a conference in 1979 at which a good many Christian Palestinians were present. They poured out their guts. I had never knowingly met a Palestinian before, certainly never a Christian Palestinian. I’m not sure I knew there were any Palestinians who were Christian. Though I was deeply moved by their witness at the conference, I was also baffled and unnerved. So again I went home and did a lot of reading. By now I have talked to representatives of a multiplicity of...
different positions of the matter, including ardent Zionists, and have visited the area a couple of times. In my view there is no doubt whatsoever that the Palestinians have been oppressed and exploited for more than forty years, and that the policy of your and my government perpetuates this. Further, the policy of our government and that of Israel may well succeed in driving all Christians out of the land in which our Lord lived and the church began. That touches my heart.

So in both cases, I didn’t go to the issue but the issue came to me. In becoming engaged, I never asked myself whether these were leftist causes or rightist causes. I don’t even think of them as “causes” on my part. I think of them as just my response to a call from God. I would be disobedient to my Lord if I did not do what I can to support the struggle of the blacks in South Africa and of the Palestinians in the Middle East to gain justice and peace and freedom. I don’t know how else to interpret those two decisive unsettling experiences. I base my actions neither on some New Left documents nor on some New Right documents. I do my best to listen to the prophetic call of the Bible and the individual call of God to me. I don’t find the prophets distinguishing leftist oppression from rightist oppression. So why should I? And incidentally, anyone who thinks that defending the rights of the Palestinians is a leftist cause has never talked to a credentialled leftist!

**Rightist and leftist moral selectivity**

In effect you ask me, Ed, why I don’t supplement my speeches against the Afrikaners and the Israelis with speeches against the Soviet Union—against its vile actions in Afghanistan and Poland and those of its cronies in Ethiopia. Well, once again, the issues of South Africa and of Palestine came to me, I didn’t go to them. Perhaps you can give a similar narration concerning your special concern with Russia; I’ve never asked you. Further, I have in fact set down in print my abhorrence for the Soviet regime. Yet the truth is that I have never met an American who admires the Soviet regime. All the people I meet are already converted, though some are perhaps a bit naive. I have, however, met a good many people who admire the Afrikaner regime and a good many who admire the Israeli regime. And then, once again, there’s also this difference: in the former case my co-religionists constitute the regime; in the latter, my country supports the regime.

You quote those erstwhile leftists, Collier and Horowitz, as accusing “the left today of moral selectivity.” No doubt they are right in that accusation. My own firm impression, though, is that the right is today very much more selective in its morality than is the left. I don’t see the Reagan administration supporting armed rebellion against, and refusing to speak to, the Chilean regime as it does the Nicaraguan. Either that is moral selectivity or just plain old-fashioned hypocrisy.

Though it’s a bit unpleasant, this matter of selectivity has to be brought home. As I have already mentioned, Ed, you know that I have nothing but abhorrence for the Soviet regime and the oppression it perpetrates on its own people and its neighbors. And let me add that you have never heard from me “the self-aggrandizing romance with corrupt Third Worldism” that you attribute to the left. But I speak honestly when I say that I don’t know, in counterpart fashion, whether you and your fellow conservatives are disturbed by the oppression in South Africa, and in Palestine, and in Chile. I don’t hear your voice on these issues, nor theirs. Am I just hard of hearing?

I find it so time-consuming to dig beneath the deceptive surface of American news that all I can do is keep up with South Africa and the Middle East. I can’t also keep up with what happens in Russia. I honor you, Ed, for doing so. I myself think that our Christian community (however now we define “our”) ought to have some members who pay attention to one area of the world, others, to another, and so forth, so that in that way the whole community can keep informed. But then those of us who care about what you regard as ‘leftist’ causes must be reassured that you and others who pay special attention to Soviet oppression and aggression are concerned also for the oppression which takes place in such areas as Palestine and South Africa and Chile. And one more thing: we also have to be reassured that you are open to concluding that the U.S. is indeed sometimes “an aggressor state which patronizes . . . unbearable client states . . . .” I say this because the right in general seems to me
thoroughly polluted with the Pelagian heresy of believing that though the U.S. may make "mistakes" of judgment now and then, "fundamentally" it is good. I think the Christian has to affirm that the U.S., like all the other states of the world, is fallen.

Praxis-oriented theory: addressing fundamental social issues in our curriculum

These issues do indeed pertain to our college curriculum, as you observe. For I and some of our colleagues have come to believe that in addition to inducting students into the world of culture and theory, we must introduce them to some of the great social issues of the day that they will be co-responsible with others for dealing with. Further, I have come to think that some of our theorizing must be praxis-oriented theory which is motivated by the need to illuminate and guide our social practice.

In saying this, I see myself as affirming rather than repudiating the classic Reformed understanding of the purpose of Christian collegiate education. One of the most formative figures in the history of Calvin College was the philosopher William Harry Jellema. Jellema used to say that Christian education is education both by the Kingdon of God and for the Kingdom of God. And when he explained what he meant by the life of the Kingdom, it always became clear that he meant vastly more than the life of the mind. He meant our full-orbed life before God.

But clearly you are worried, Ed, by this suggestion that our curriculum be oriented not just to culture and theory but also to the issues of our society. You worry that it will mean a turn to the transiency and emptiness of disciplined study and thought. For me, it means nothing of the sort. What I call for is serious study of and reflection on the fundamental (not episodic) social issues of our day—combined with, and not instead of, the study of Shakespeare and Calvin and Kant.

You worry that it means compulsion. "Leftists like compulsion," you say. Probably some new requirements would emerge. But why suddenly speak of "compulsion" here? Calvin College has always required students to take courses, including courses in English literature and philosophy. I have never known you to be in favor of curricular laissez-faire.

You worry that the issues won't be dealt with fairly—that "leftists" will have control. To this, all I can say is that they must be dealt with fairly—just as fairly as philosophical and literary issues are dealt with. Significant intelligently held differences of opinion in the community must be represented.

You worry that it will politicize the college. This worry I don't much share. Of course a college can fly apart on irrelevant political issues. But we live inescapably in political surroundings. And the Christian does not believe that anything goes in politics. So how can we as a college responsibly avoid addressing issues of politics and economics? Of course we have disagreements with each other on some of such issues. But we also have disagreements on matters, say, of literary theory. We don't cope with literary disagreements by forbidding our professors to discuss literary theory. We don't even cope with them by forbidding professors to express their views on literary matters. So why should the worry about "politicizing" suddenly be raised when it comes to social issues? Let's treat our disagreements over political and economic issues the same way we treat our disagreements over literary and philosophical issues. I am allowed to make the case that Thomas Reid's philosophical views are better than David Hume's, and Dooyeweerd's better than Schleiermacher's, why may I not also make the case that the PLO's proposals for the West Bank are more just than Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon—and that Allan Boesak's proposals for South Africa are more just than those of P.W. Botha? And if somebody asks me, "Who cares about justice here, it's our freedom that counts," I shall say, "God does." The freedom to give that answer and communally to work out its implications is, in my judgment, a great deal of what the Christian college is all about.

As ever,
Nicholas Wolterstorff

Cedar Creek

In summer, when the queen anne’s lace sprouts its creamy head, you and I lay side by side on the bank of Cedar Creek. Down beneath the willow boughs, east of the county bridge, hidden from a passing car behind the river’s bend.

We met there first in early June while purple lilacs bloomed and the creek ran deep and silent like a subterranean pool. I remembered how in years gone by I’d stood further up that shore with boyhood friends on summer days and fished my time away.

I told you how we used to dream of where our small stream went growing even broader, even stronger, outward toward its end. You too said you wished to know where that wandering creek could go and speculated fantasies in the grass upon the bank.

But the world you saw was different—filled with lights of gold and green while mine appeared more humble, like a child’s passing dream.

In autumn Cedar Creek ran dry—the lace had turned to dust—a trickle like a bleeding wound mouldered in the gulch.

I returned in spring the following year to the bank of Cedar Creek and kneeled at the grassy bend in fields of frothy lace. Perhaps I was wrong in thinking that lost moments can be found or that like the Cedar Creek our spring could be reborn.

I never went beyond that bend but sat and merely dreamed of the currents beyond the county bridge where you slipped away unseen.

—Tim Jones
A Response to My Esteemed Colleague, Nick Wolterstorff:

I am very glad, though not surprised, that you couch our disagreements in terms of affection and friendship; for, of the dozens of private responses which I have received to my editorial, a few have accused me of personal attacks on colleagues. Your terms of personal kindness I reciprocate wholeheartedly—and add to them my sincere respect for you as a Christian man and thinker. Nevertheless, you have highlighted differences between us, and I turn now to them—as many as I can address without writing an impolitely long letter.

Historical irony: leftists turn right

For starters, you will allow me to delight in the fact that some middle-aged erstwhile leftists have seen what they (now) and I (then and now) consider the error of their ways. Perhaps, upon reflection, you will not want to stand by your suggestion that this pleasure of mine is rooted in a desire on my part to follow the fickle fashions of the times. For you are certainly correct that never before have you had any reason to lay that charge to my account. In fact, never has anyone else, in my whole life, on any subject, from dress to academics, thought to call me fashionable! In case your imputation to me of fashionableness was a serious one and not just a clever rhetorical ploy, let me explain that I remarked merely the strange historical irony that a once-popular position which has been discarded by some of its leading secular proponents is now showing up among some of my Christian-college colleagues.

Further, when you refer to the “latest fashion of turning to the right,” you must be referring to some other universe than the American academy, in which you and I live and work. Do you not subvert your own point when you acknowledge that “South Africa has become a chic cause”? Surely, you are not referring here to some sort of “rightist chic.”

One of the most astonishing passages in your open letter is the paragraph in which you declare that you are politically unaligned. Imagine that the pollster’s question is, “How do you characterize the political position of Nick Wolterstorff?” Those being polled are your colleagues at Calvin College and readers of such writings of yours as Until Justice and Peace Embrace and your reviews of Michael Novak’s The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism and of books about liberation theology. Can you seriously entertain the hope that you would be declared unaligned? If so, I think that you would be sorely disappointed. You do not hesitate to use terms like conservative and right in describing me. (If you want to label me, try antirevolutionary, as per Abraham Kuyper.) Is it your point that such labeling fits me but not you?

An individualistic, impressionistic approach to moral issues

I raise the next point with trepidation, fearing that it will be misconstrued by those who generally share your political agenda. You state that your interests in other countries have come about because you were confronted personally and that these “issues” came to you, rather than that you went in search of them. (To me it is startling that perhaps you did not know that there were some Christians among the Palestinians.) And you declare that you listen to the prophetic call of the Bible and the individual call of God to me. Since you asked, I shall tell you that I became interested in the troubles of persons under Soviet rule first through reading—the usual way of an academic (and not, first of all, through the reading of Solzhenitsyn, in case you wonder). Perhaps it is the ordinariness of my route to convictions that makes me uneasy about your highly individualistic, impressionistic route. Had you not had an almost accidental meeting with some Palestinians, would you not have considered the issues which affect them? And now, after your encounter(s), are you wanting to say that the rest of us should join you in your special interests? And, most significant of all to me, should your personal odyssey then become the basis for an overhaul of a college’s curriculum? Your impressionistic approach to moral issues raises many more questions than it answers.

For example, you say that your heart is touched by the prospect that the governments of the United States and Israel “may well succeed in driving all Christians out of the land in which our Lord lived and the Church began.” Is your heart less touched by the prospect that Christians will be eliminated in other spots of land on this globe—
Albania, for instance, or Vietnam? Does the Lord love one geographical location more than others? I see in your statement a mirror image of the view of those fundamentalists who, for theological reasons, refrain from making any criticism of the Israeli government.

When you say that you “don’t even think of them as ‘causes’ on my part,” but rather that you think of them “as just my response to a call from God,” I ask how you view Christians who take a different stand on “your” issues? Are they not doing their “best to listen to the prophetic call of the Bible and the individual call of God to them”? Incidentally, if you “don’t find the prophets distinguishing leftist oppression from rightist oppression,” why are you not to be found on the embattlements against any clearly leftist oppression? And can you not discern in your words a wrenching from historical context when you discuss the Old Testament prophets in the post-Enlightenment terms of left and right?

U.S. vs. the U.S.S.R.: equally guilty?

Then, there is that charge of moral selectivity, which, I agree, can cut both ways. You concede that you “can’t also keep up with what happens in Russia.” You note, further, that you do not know enough about Nicaragua to comment on it. And you aver that the right is more selective morally than is the left. (Remember, I am, in your terms, of the right, but you are not of the left.)

Yet, after excusing yourself from the kind of global responsibility which would include an examination of the Soviet Union, one of the two superpowers of our world, you call me to account on Chile. Am I to understand that, although you do not know enough about Nicaragua to venture an estimate, you do know enough about Chile to do so? And that I should know enough about Chile to do likewise? You should not stretch me to the four corners of the earth when you are not ready to join me on that rack.

Nevertheless, there is, I think, a major distinction to be drawn between a “right” view (mine, as you insist) and a “left” view (yours, as I insist). It is that I see the world in shadings, with various degrees of gray, and it seems to me that you do not. I see that some evils are greater than others; you see that all are evil. (Perhaps this is what is meant by being “prophetic.”)

To specify, my view is that, of course, the U.S. government makes wrong decisions; not for a minute do I think that it is fundamentally good and makes only occasional mistakes of judgment. You call hypocrisy what I would characterize as a measured, deliberate choice between greater and lesser evils in this world. The most difficult ethical choices are seldom simply between good and evil but between greater goods and lesser goods, between lesser evils and greater evils.

I find unsatisfactory your effort to be “ahistorical” or “a-contextual.” You might think that you are listening only to a still, small voice. I think that you are much more influenced by the going ideologies of our time than you are willing to admit. You live, as do I, in the maelstrom of conflicting world views of the late twentieth century, and we both speak from within it.

On the subject of the Soviet Union, I am grateful for your expression of abhorrence. But the impressionistic note again bothers me: “Yet the truth is that I have never met an American who admires the Soviet regime.” Paul Hollander’s Political Pilgrims tells a different story. Are you suggesting that a personal encounter with an American not “converted” to your abhorrence of the Soviets would stir you to take up the cudgels publicly against that “vile” regime? I hear repeatedly, sometimes from colleagues, that the USA and the USSR are equally guilty. That both are “fallen” is a truism for Christians. But equally guilty? It might turn out that different answers to this question would provide the clearest distinction between our different viewpoints.

Apartheid: not a black-and-white question

Next, you ask me “honestly” if I am disturbed by the oppression in South Africa. My unequivocal answer is yes. Apartheid must go.

The difference between us on this point is only how apartheid should go. I hear repeatedly from some co-religionists of ours that they are ready to accept the most violent kind of revolution in South Africa for the sake of an immediate release from the bondage of apartheid, even if it means (they imply but do not usually quite say) a Communist regime. Do you agree? I do not. Wise old Alan Paton is one of my guides on the matter. I cannot share the standard line among...
us that we should disregard the consequences of our actions. Perhaps, I suggest to you, one distinction between us Christians and those who embrace South Africa as a "chic" cause is that we Christians will separate ourselves from fashionableness by expressing concern about long-term effects on our fellow humans.

I cannot share your view that there are only two positions on the anguish of South Africa. You say, "... I did a lot of reading about the issue and talked a great deal to many people on both sides of the dispute. I concluded that the blacks were correct in their charges. They are indeed being oppressed. So I have said that, and aligned myself with them." But we know that not all whites support Botha (think of the English-speaking businessmen who decry apartheid), and not all blacks agree with Boesak (think of many black pastors and tribal leaders who decry disinvestment, much less revolution). Hardly is the question merely a black-and-white one, though so you frame it.

Professors' personal odysseys and the shaping of the curriculum

The whole of my editorial pressed toward the climactic point of resistance to proposals for changing the curricula of Christian colleges according to political predilections of some professors. You take note of my concern, but you say, "This is a worry I don't much share." In saying so, you have explained why someone other than you must do the worrying on this point. Your response to my editorial could not have expressed more clearly than it does the role of professors' personal odysseys in shaping the thinking which they bring to the matter of curricular reform. I shall not be surprised if you and I and others have much more to say to one another on the matter of curriculum, though your open letter has led me somewhat away from this overriding concern of mine.

I submitted my editorial primarily because I believed that the piece expressed a viewpoint that was legitimate within our Christian community but secondarily because several colleagues said that it would serve the cause of frank and open discussion among us. It seems to have done so.

Cordially,
Ed Ericson


Dear Editor,

Since I teach one aspect of "Third World History" (Latin America) here at Calvin I was very interested in Ed Ericson's remarks. I must confess that he is absolutely right about one thing—I never discuss the Soviet Gulag in that course. There are some other issues that I omit as well. I do not describe the Nazi concentration camps and I make no mention of the U.S. decision to firebomb Tokyo. Frankly, I never realized that I was supposed to. I do spend more time analyzing—and criticizing—U.S. foreign policy in the region than I do Soviet policy, but that is because the U.S. has been the dominant power in the region for nearly a century while Soviet influence is much more recent and is still minimal by comparison. If I were teaching a course on Eastern Europe, such an emphasis would be inexcusable, but in Latin America it makes perfect sense. The moral of the story is that it doesn't pay to live in the "backyard" of either super power. This, at any rate, is a lesson that impresses itself upon those of us who study the Third World.

Sincerely,
Daniel R. Miller

Dear Editor,

I am delighted that the editor of Dialogue reprinted Edward Ericson's article. When it appeared in The Reformed Journal, some faculty members at Calvin thought it inappropriate for Ericson to air college matters in a journal which circulates to a wider readership. I do not share that concern, because, with Ericson, I believe that the issues raised are larger than Calvin, even though the examples he gave were drawn from Calvin. Nevertheless, it is good that we now have the opportunity to discuss this in the college magazine.

But, is Ericson, perhaps the most articulate and thorough-going conservative at Calvin, right about the issues he raises? There are, on my reading of him, two matters for concern: 1) Christian scholars on the "left" and 2) the
curriculum at Calvin. Let us take these in turn.

For those of us on the putative “left,” Ericson’s first concern has, by now, become a familiar refrain. Many Christian conservatives have said this in recent years, and have singled out Calvin faculty members for criticism. The point is that conservatives find it odd that just as old radicals are seeing the error of their ways, some Christian intellectuals are beginning to take up the “causes” of the sixties. Either we are said to be more “me too” followers in the secular train of radicalism, because of the cultural lag we experience in our sheltered institution, or we are said to be seeking credibility and respectibility with secular intellectuals by cozying up to their positions. Both suggestions are, of course, patronizing, and impugning of our motivations. Moreover, it does not take into account that we arrived at “leftist” conclusions from a different route than secular radicals.

For some of us, our model for society is the family. We do not see the individual as the main focus of society, but the group, in familial terms. We are not autonomous, but rather responsible to God and to each other. While we respect and cherish our individual differences and callings, our task is a common task. The major point of celebration is not freedom but solidarity. We who hold such views did not arrive at them from the same direction of thought as did the secular radicals whom Ericson quotes, so we do not give them up for the same reasons of “realism” which they did. If we are asked to repent of our views, we will have to repent of an entire spiritual/social world-view which begins with the affirmation that we have a comfort in life and death because we belong to a family whose constant prayer begins “Our Father.”

To all of this I hope Ericson would say “Amen,” but he would doubtless suggest that he would like to hear more solidarity expressed with the peoples of Eastern Europe and other places under the oppression of the Soviets and their clients. That is a fair criticism, and there may be some myopia on the Christian left in this respect. But our widened expression of solidarity with the people of, say, Poland will not lessen the whole perspective we have in expressing solidarity with the people of South Africa or Nicaragua. It is precisely on the basis of this solidarity that we advocate “peace and justice” not “freedom.” Even though some of our concerns converge with those of secular radicals, Christian conservatives must accept that we have other reasons—“Kingdom” reasons—for doing so.

This leads us to Ericson’s second concern, about the revision of the Calvin curriculum in the direction of “internationalization.” Ericson agrees that if by “internationalization” one means the attempt to broaden the perspectives and experiences of students, there can be little exception taken to it. However, his concern goes further, to what he fears is a romantic concern with “Third Worldism.” Here I find myself sharing Ericson’s concern. Even though I am not a conservative, I too worry about such a drift. Although I am not persuaded that “a drift” is underway, or even advocated by Professor Wolterstorff, if it were true it would be something against which all of us would have to stand. It is not a matter of ideology but of intellectual honesty about what a college is and what it should stand for. It is critical that a college be open to all persuasions, and, that a college like Calvin, those persuasions should be founded in Christian conviction. No faction should be, or be seen to be, leading the curriculum in one direction or the other. Even though I disagree with Ericson on many matters of ideology, intellectual honesty must require that we all work together to resist a politicization of our curriculum. Even though I have learned a great deal from Marx and Marxists, I do not accept that the worth of our intellectual work in a college can be judged by the standards of praxis and relevance. Furthermore, to judge the college’s work on the post-graduation behavior of our students is to lay too heavy a burden on them.

Having said that, I would conclude by agreeing foundationally with what I take to be Professor Wolterstorff’s essential point: that we at Calvin must seriously face up to the fact that our world is a broken world, and that our teaching and scholarship must assess the causes and consequences of that brokenness and offer prescriptive insights from the perspective of the “kingdom vision.” In that task we really do need each other, conservatives, liberals, and radicals alike, to contribute to the discussion in an atmosphere of Christian solidarity.
which expresses our common citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

Sincerely,
Ronald A. Wells

Dear Editor,

As a newcomer to the Calvin College community, I am hesitant to enter the fray over "Hello Again to All That." I am unfamiliar with the particular issues, processes, and personalities of this discussion, but I am persuaded to offer these observations precisely because I am not laden with this baggage and because "Hello Again to All That" still distresses me. I am most bothered by what I perceive as the mean-spirited or harsh attitude throughout Professor Ericson's essay. Although he states that his intention is not to impugn the Christian integrity of his colleagues, his essay conveys an entirely different perspective. The manner in which he expresses his concern over the politicization of the Christian college curricula, then I think that it reads like a manifesto calling for concerned supporters of Calvin College to wake up to the danger in their midst. Are "freedom studies" any less apt to be highly charged politically (albeit, charged in a more comfortable direction) than "peace studies?" Does every contemporary issue have to be presented through the same filter of anti-communism or abortion? Certainly there is no room for romanticizing any group whether they are Sandinistas, Black South Africans, or Americans; there is no room for the intellectual dishonesty which selectively ignores corruption or oppression. If we are going to do comparisons on some sort of scale of oppression, then few people will deny that the evils of Stalinism far outweigh the current evils of apartheid, but it would be fairer to compare apples and apples. The comparison between apartheid and current Soviet domestic policy strikes me as much less clear cut. Who received harsher treatment from the authorities, Stephen Biko or Andrei Sakharov? Nelson Mandela or Alexander Solzhenitzyn? Are our calls for justice and peace in Nicaragua, South Africa, Palestine, or somewhere else to be withheld until the Soviets remove their military forces from Afghanistan or promote free speech in Red Square? Of course not! Is it necessary to include an obligatory criticism of the USSR in every discussion of oppression or violence to prove one's ideological appropriateness? I hope not! American Christians can have much more impact by working toward exerting a Christian influence on our own government's policies toward Nicaragua, South Africa, or Israel than by spending our energy throwing stones at the Soviet Union. As citizens and Christians, as politically-motivated and spiritually-motivated individuals, we have the responsibilities to oversee and evaluate the standards of our government and our society. Also sometimes it is easier to see the speck in the Soviet eye than to see the log in our American eye.

Larry Thornton
Lest we take this issue too seriously, Dialogue concludes with a quote from J.M. Spier's book, What is Calvinistic Philosophy?

Because of the covenantal relation with Adam, the life of everyone is now by nature directed toward the left. Only through God's renewing grace in Christ Jesus can this defection be healed and in principle restored. Then we again learn to love the Lord with our whole heart and in principle our entire life is directed toward the right again. Then we seek God's honor and rejoice in His laws.

*May we all choose the right side.*

When I think about this time of year, I walk slower. I've just got a call from Hank, and I'm not sure what it's all about, but I'm going, and as I pass the trees, half orange and half green, I dodge under them, as if they are for protection. I can see the house up ahead. It's ready to be painted again. But now isn't the time for me to worry about that. It's this season, this part of the year. I want to sit in it awhile, but I have to go.

Hank's standing in the doorway when I get to his house. He's standing right in the way, his hand on the doorknob, a hat on his head, and beyond him is the kitchen, but I can't see that at all, because it's dark in there. I've seen him this way before: right in the doorway, all locked up. It's like there's nothing in front of or behind him, just this door that he's standing in, and, for that moment at least, it's all he needs.

There's a moth on the doorknife. I touch the wings, and some dust comes off on my finger. "Lookit," I say, but Hank's already headed inside. When I look up, I see him slipping away. I go through the door and follow him upstairs to his room.

Hank's room is at the end of the house, a small room with slanted ceilings and a bed too short and a dresser with a long tall mirror. Besides that, there isn't much, except for a stack of boxes and blankets and a calendar on the wall and a gun in the corner, plus that deer-head on the wall that Hank got from hunting three years ago, on Thanksgiving day.

"I gotta go over there pretty soon," he says, sitting on his bed.

"Where?"

"Over to," he scratches his head, then jerks it somewhere south. "that place. Norma's place across the field that way. I gotta go over and tell her what's up."

"Well, what is up? You didn't say before. You were gonna, but . . ."

The barn is just about full now, this being the end of summer and the haying all done and Hank's dad getting some cattle for the winter to fatten up. The few bales left were sitting in the yard and Bernard wanted all of them inside, right down to these. There was one left so Hank gets to carry it, me being a guest and all. But I walk along and talk, which Hank doesn't see as helping much.

We get to the door. It's dark inside. Pigeons up at either end flutter around, just making a lot of noise but not really appearing much. I hold the side of the door with my hand and look until my eyes are used to the dark. Then I see the walls of bales on either side, about three men high. The sides go almost straight up, like brick walls.

"Not much room left," I say.
Hank replies, "Nope. You got that right."
"Where we gonna put it?"
"How about on top?" he points. The pigeons have settled again. There's three up in the open window, watching us.
I tie the thick rope around the bale a couple times, and we haul it up. We get to the top and it's pretty hot. It seems like a cave, all quiet and dark and no one else around. The ceiling is about two feet from our heads, and down over the edge there's machines that've been greased for winter and won't do anything now but sit and get filled with mice or bats.
Anyway, we set the bale down and Hank crawls up to the window, while the pigeons fly off again. He stands up there looking out at something, for quite a few minutes. Finally I crawl up too and ask him, "What're you staring at?"
He smiles. "See those trees there? Those two big ones side by side. The one has an orange spot at the bottom, just starting to turn. That's Norma's place. If I had some binoculars I could see her better, but she's there, hanging out the wash. See?"
I squint. I can see a figure moving slowly back and forth along the line. She's hanging out sheets, big ones. Sometimes I can see only her bare legs. Then her arms come up with clothespins in her hands, quickly one pin goes on at each end of the sheet. Then her head a second, dark hair that looks short.
"Hey now look out," Hank pushes at me.
"Sorry," I say. "I didn't know it was that important . . . ."
"It is. I gotta go over and ask her . . . ."
"Ask her what?"
He's chewing on a long piece of hay, almost like a cow.
"About before. About what it meant. She's a funny one, that's for sure. Not like a lot of women I've met . . . ."
"Ummm."
Yeah, I'm going over there now. You can wait if you want. It shouldn't take too long."

I stand in the big garden that Bernard has just about cleaned out by now, the tomatoes having been divided up between him and Betty, the corn all eaten long ago, the beans canned and in the basement, the beets given to the pigs, the potatoes in the root cellar. All that's left is a whole bunch of melons and gourds and pumpkins that are soft, yellow, and rotten. There's seeds here and there among the brown prickly vines. From where I am I can just barely see the top of the barn of Norma's farm.
I pass the time by drop kicking the gourds with my foot into the weeds beyond. Finally it gets too messy on my shoes, and I start picking them up and putting them in a pile. I don't know what to do with them, but these gourds are here, and for some reason I stay right among the vines, wandering and looking at them, feeling how soft they are and holding the smaller ones just right so they don't come apart in my hands.
I can't know what they're saying, Hank and Norma. Then suddenly, coming down the trail from the house, Betty, Hank's step mom, is running towards me, her arms bouncing around her sides, acting strange. I can tell by the way she's running—mouth wide open, eyes wide open—that there's trouble.
"Where's Hank? Where is that boy?"
"He . . . he went over to . . . ."
"Just go get him. We need him right away. Hurry now!"
I got a gourd in each hand, and I don't even let go of them when I start running, just keep holding onto them as I head down the trail towards Norma's house. It's
about a quarter mile away across two fields and a stream, the fields already having been harvested so it’s easier to run across. When I get halfway through the first wheat field, I can’t see anything because I’m in a low spot, and there’s just orange and green trees up on both sides of me, turning and breathing in the wind.

When I get to Norma’s place, there’s nobody around, just the brown and white chickens eating bugs and the cow out back, and a cat around my legs, that I kick away. Then I hear sounds, like laughing. It comes and goes. I keep turning around, wondering what it is and where it comes from. It goes way above my head and then thins out, seems to be in the house then the chicken coop then in the air, all at once. My hands are empty now; the gourds have fallen out in the weeds near the house. The next laugh is a little louder, and I know this time it’s coming from the barn. I run past the chickens and through the weeds and up into the mow, and there they are. Hank is lying on the floor and Norma kneeling to one side. I look and don’t notice at first there’s this handkerchief around Hank’s eyes: a dark blue one, tied there. I stand and be quiet, not doing anything, trying to figure it out. It’s so dark that as soon as I come through the door she knows I’m there, the way I block the light. Norma stares at me, her hair all pulled up way back beyond her ears, her eyes small like a pig’s but moving fast like a swallow’s, her nose a kind of lump, and her mouth shut tight, but her lips are so round and red it seems like they’ll open any minute.

Hank doesn’t move, and Norma’s hands are on his chest, as if his heart has stopped or something. But I look close and see his chest rising, up down, up down, and he has a small smile on his face, like he’s having a good dream.

“Is he OK? What’s going on?” I ask, quickly.

“Nothing,” Norma says, her mouth finally opening. She has small teeth. She says it close to a whisper, like something bad has happened. Maybe it has, I don’t know.

I lower my voice and say, “Hank’s gotta come with me. There’s trouble over at his house. I came to get him.” “Right now?”—said like a mother.

“Yeah, now.” I bend down and gently shake Hank; he keeps smiling, and I can’t tell if he’s opened his eyes or not, with that blindfold on him.

“Hank we gotta go. Betty told me to get you. You OK?” Then he rises, pretty quick, and Norma is sitting there, a funny look on her face, almost as if she doesn’t care now that he’s coming with me, because she knows she’s got him.

I grab Hank’s arm and he pulls down the handkerchief, looking out towards the door and the light beyond. It’s a bit darker out now, there’s a few more clouds, and we head down into the ditch that divides the farm. Hank doesn’t say anything as we head for home, over the fields of stubble. He just smiles, all the way back across, like whatever is at home is only smoke and will be gone before we get there, and whatever has been left behind will hide like his eyes behind the blindfold, there all the time.

Illustrated by Dawn Curtis
No sound, no fury

Silent, they wander
a cemetery of flowers.
Faces are grave, etched in stone.
Has the ground turned zero
in the chill of their passing?
Has the beginning become the end?
Does the snake devour its tail?
Hands motion invisible crosses.
The rite is done, winter comes.

Confidence is not here.
There only has been conviction.
Young hearts flutter, butterflies
caught in poison jars.
Old hearts thud, hammers
pounding nails into final homes.

Gestures like lead with weariness,
voices the slowing of phonographs.
Again and again and again
the sun flings its tepid self
across the sky, exhausted.

But there is life.
Love (sex) strive
in this whirling
of wheels and bodies and minds,

Carnivals of kisses and flowers,
sounds of the city,
cities of the world.
There is an endless rushing
that in the end,
(must there be an end?)
is only dread of parting.

The foghorn blows
last kisses on the wind.
Seagulls' laughter
is wave-washed to lament.
The hugs, the smiles, the blossoms,
are forgotten in the wake.
Drowned legacies of what is past.
Beyond the end they have no purpose.
Without new beginning they have no hope.
Neither beginning nor end in sight
and only fading eyes to see.
The waves crawl away forever.
The horizon stifles
into twilight.

—Mike Rubingh

Hospitality

Mary lives in a room at the Y,
Blue and gold wallpaper shrunken to grey,
Another pigeon squatting on the concrete city.
A ceramic toddle of an angel prays on Mary's bureau—
blessings on all who pass.

Mary came from Yugoslavia in 1936,
Left a village gold with wheat and daffodils
where still-warm milk frothed into mugs—
solid as earth molded to the hand,
and brown eggs like rain-smoothed stones sat
in bowls of solid blue.

Last month Mary had her gallbladder out,
so I stopped to see how she was.
From the closet she brought cake,
day-old angel food.
As we talked and ate
I tasted the froth of fresh milk
poured into yesterday's bargain
from the Jenny Lee Bakery.

—Wendy Scott
Portfolio

Drift
Meditation

Apology of a Chapel Cutter

Sin

Tonight many of my friends are attending ALIVE 85; I am staying in my apartment and studying for GRE, October 12. I’ve already gone to chapel once this year. Last year I went four, maybe five times. I was going to meet with one of the pastors from my church this summer—he was to be a kind of spiritual partner. We were going to meet every other week, I think we actually did get together three times—no—twice, then he went on vacation and I didn’t bother calling him back. This year I’m living with four former RA’s and one present RA. I figured they would be a positive influence on me. Maybe they will be yet.

So how’s your spirituality? That’s an odd word, isn’t it? It has six syllables. I don’t think I’ve ever seen it in a poem, and if I ever did, I don’t think I’d like it much. The word is too thick. Too elongated. Words like spirituality prompt some linguists to say that English speakers can’t fully comprehend the Christian gospel. Words that in other languages are dynamic processes, action words, become in

some of the Psalms are pretty good, but none of those hit me like Shakespeare or Matthew Arnold or Phillip Larkin does. I do take comfort in the fact that I enjoy John Donne’s poetry, but I like his early poems—when he was Jack the Rake—better than his Holy Sonnets. I like John Milton, but some English scholars see him as a forerunner of communism, and most think he subscribed to the heresy of Arianism. What am I going to do? All my idols are heretics, profligates, or unregenerates. How will the gospel ever reach me?

But of course the gospel has reached me. I can’t remember when I haven’t considered myself a Christian. I never rebelled against parental authority; I’ve always thought rock groups like KISS and Twisted Sister are silly. When I have a glass of wine—a glass, not glasses—I drink white wine instead of red, because the alcohol content is lower. I only know one person who smokes marijuana, and he goes to a university in another part of Michigan. I visited him once this summer, was thoroughly disgusted, and I haven’t talked to him since.

But when I saw my friend, we did talk seriously: I had been quite close to him in high school. We talked theology. I thought that perhaps I could have a positive impact on his life, but I found him agreeing with everything I said. I said things like, “Strictly speaking, our doctrine says that people who don’t know our God are lost. It just leaves it at that. Personally, though, I hope God will give some kind of salvation to really devout Buddhists and Hindus. At least something like Dante gives the virtuous pagans in his version of hell. They don’t have any hope, but, all in all, hell isn’t unpleasant for them. They’ve just lost hope for something better.” My friend liked the idea.

Sometimes I think I would like to go to Dante’s hell and sit in the Elysian Fields with his pagans. Aristotle and Plato are there, and so is Sartre no doubt. Keats and Arnold are there, and Larkin probably will be by the time I would arrive. What beautiful poetry would be written there! And even if I would be missing Herbert and Hopkins, maybe Shakespeare and Milton too, I find it hard to imagine what they would write about in heaven. Struggles with spiritual weakness forever quenched, the memory of evil rapidly fading, what might they choose to write about?

I don’t know. I do know that hell can’t be as pleasant as I’ve just imagined. And even if certain parts of hell weren’t so bad, I would have already forfeited my chance for those regions. I know too much. Something darker, more painful would be in store for me. So I have to discover what it really means to be a Christian. I need a world-life view. I have to know how I’m going to be a Christian in my chosen profession. I have to let my light shine. But how do I get going? I’ve been starting for twenty years now, but I never get going.

Sometimes I’m disturbed by my spiritual immaturity, but other times I call it skepticism, and then I enjoy it. I enjoy this tottering between faith and unbelief, because as long as I’m undecided I really don’t have to do anything. People suggest that I go to Bible study, that I have daily devotions, that I go to chapel, but no one pushes me very hard. They know I’m
undecided, I’m struggling, so they don’t expect much from me. And I like it that way. Especially because I don’t think Bible study, devotions, or chapel would help. I’d just sit through them and afterwards feel confirmed in my belief that I’m untouchable. I can’t get excited about being a Christian, I certainly don’t get a charge out of being Christian Reformed, but I’ll be damned if I won’t be a Christian when the roll is called up yonder. I don’t want to end up in Hell: I know it’s nothing like Dante’s Elysian Fields.

**Salvation**

I’m not sure if I’m a lukewarm Christian or not. I can’t decide. I don’t hand out tracts or give testimonies at church or even sing in the choir. At the same time, I am sitting here thinking seriously about religious things. That is evidence of some spark of something. But what is it? Is it Christianity? I don’t know. Christianity has taken many forms in the past: in the name of Christianity monk scribes have spent their lives copying manuscripts; revivalist preachers have forsaken their homes and families to preach in cornfields. In the name of Christianity, Catholics have burned Protestants and Protestants have burned Catholics (we all like that example; it makes us feel smug in our passivity). For Christ’s name, missionaries give years to put a Mexican Indian language into writing, and, with luck, if the natives don’t drive stakes through their heads, when the
missionaries turn prematurely gray and stooped, with luck, they produce a New Testament in a new language, and a few thousand more people in the world get the gospel, and some believe and are baptized, just like in their trash, Christians are right. 

How do we know we’re right about these things, though? Who do we think we are, claiming that we know so much? We don’t believe in Christianity for any better reason that Jean-Paul Sartre believed in existentialism, Mao-Tse Tung believed in communism, or Jim Jones believed in himself. Much as we’d like to believe otherwise, Christianity cannot be proven by science, and nowadays science is the only thing anyone trusts, and even that trust is eroding. By some strange combination of thoughts, feelings, and biochemical reactions (if these three can be separated so distinctly), we believe whatever it is we believe. And who knows who’s right when everyone thinks he is? Of course, some people, more every day, believe that no one is right, but then again, their saying no one is right is an assertion that can be logically right or wrong, and wouldn’t they be embarrassed if they found out they were right? Other people nowadays think everyone is right, which is almost as strange. It is an enticing view, but the person who holds to it is going out on a limb, because in believing it, one parts ways with about every world religion. Christianity too, because it’s hard to get past Jesus’ line, “Truly, no one shall see the Father but me.” To believe everyone will be saved is, paradoxically, to become a loner. It is self-reliance at its best. Every religion says that its claims are true and the claims of other religions are to varying degrees false.

How do we know we’re right? I don’t think we do know in any strong sense. But remember, Jesus never asked us to know. He only said—and we think he still says—“Believe on me and you shall have eternal life.” We only have to believe, and in a way the believing isn’t even our responsibility. It is God that makes us, or maybe lets us, believe the right things. It just so happens that we’re the lucky ones who were born into the right family or had the right friend or were in just the right brooding, melancholy mood when a man with a placard saying “Repent and Believe” walked past. It just so happens that God decides that our dim perceptions are the best or, maybe more accurately, God makes our guesses the right ones—absolutely, positively right—like when you guess right which slot the ball will fall into at the carnival game.

The funny thing is that sincerity has nothing to do with it. Christians are right not because they’re better people than anyone else. No doubt many secular humanists are more earnest, most Hindus are more spiritual, and few Christians take the Lord’s Supper with the same fervor as the Jonestown communicants did. Christians aren’t better, they’re just right. No matter how stupid or bungling Christians are, no matter how many third-world countries they exploit, no matter how screwed up their marriages are or how much they resent their neighbors’ dogs scattering their trash, Christians are right. The truth of life on this earth is that God—the God that we believe in—is the one in control. The truth is that Jesus was both man and God and
he died and somehow, in a way that explanations don’t explain, through his death we, his people (you may read, his elect), are saved. We’re saved from death and the world and ourselves and a thousand other nameless things. The truth is that we’re right. Yes—we’re number one, we’re the champions, and we love it, don’t we? We’re glad as any sweaty, blood-streaked boxer with his arms raised and his opponent lying on the canvas.

Service
We ought to be glad. Indeed, God expects gratitude; he calls us to serve. For the most part, I think we like this. Because we’re products of a materialistic, empirical generation, actions have a good feel to them, and while thinking often confuses us, actions clear our heads, make us tingle all over. I think the fact that religion calls people to act—whether that means conquering the Byzantine Empire for Islam or meditating all day and half the night on a Zen riddle—is mostly what makes all religions rewarding and exciting. Actions give life direction. Action equals meaningfulness. The deepest joy of being Christian is not in being right, because we don’t know for sure we’re right if we really think about it; the joy of being Christian is in being purposeful and productive, and all other religions offer these things too, which explains why there is the joy of being Islamic, the fulfillment of being Mormon, the happiness of following Jim Jones.

How then shall we live? Well, for starters we’ll figure out a way to get food and clothing and a house, and doing these things probably means getting a job or, for the time being, sending home our financial statements from Calvin. But beyond these skills of working and begging, of just living by sleeping and eating food and going to the bathroom, what are we supposed to do? Much of our time is spent studying. We take tests and write papers and do a thousand other trivial things that we forget about two days after we do them. How are these things Christian? I know there is at least one Muslim at Calvin, and he doesn’t look any different than anyone else when he’s studying or taking tests (or serving on Student Senate). Maybe the only way actions are Christian is that we can say we’re doing them for God, our God. So if anyone asks why you’re writing that paper or reading that text or buying that bluebook, you can say, “Because I’m a Christian. I’m reading this Microeconomics book ‘cause I love Jesus.” You can say this about almost anything you do. Eating at Western food service? Say you’re doing it because God rules. Squirting Wisk on a shirt collar? Exclaim that it’s all to God’s glory. Why not do it? It’ll be fun. You can even do it as a joke to see how people react. I think God loves jokes. He told a funny one to Abraham and Sarah, and Sarah thought it was a real good one too. And God didn’t ignore Sarah at all but he called her outside the tent and they chatted over coffee and orange streusel swirl cake. He told her it was all the funnier because it was a true joke. God loves good jokes, and I think he’d love it if we all included him on some of ours.

Let’s include God in other ways too. Let’s do some things that everyone will recognize as Christian. Obvious things. Shoot, let’s do some external things. Why not go to church twice on Sunday, get dressed up and make ourselves as beautiful as possible? Why not spurn dancing, which is especially easy if you don’t like it but heard that you were supposed to reform it. Maybe you don’t think the dance is worth reforming. My goodness, doing external things to show our love for God is easy: we have a tradition rich in externals. Let’s take Sunday afternoon naps, and if anyone wakes us up, let’s say we’re taking a sacramental nap and we’re not to be awakened. Let’s follow the lead of Calvin’s profs, who are always thinking of new ways to glorify God. Hey, we can fight injustice in Third World countries and make sure the Soviets don’t trample any more of the same. We can bring brotherhood to the inner cities. We can proselytize in Nigeria and Japan and Eastbrook Mall. Let’s borrow ideas from other traditions: like Baptists let’s refuse to smoke, like Catholics let’s put shrines in our back yards. Let’s even borrow from cults. We can make public service commercials with fuzzy edges to them, like the Mormons do. And if anyone asks us, and sometimes even when no one asks, tell everyone that we’re doing all this in God’s name.

And explain who we think God is, because after all we’re right and other people should have the opportunity to be right. Why not be around to watch when God decides to present himself
I've got another idea. Prof. Calvin Stapert has written an article about chapel in this issue of Dialogue. In it he explains why chapel-going is important, why it's important to worship as a community. If you agree with him, go to chapel; many people who think chapel is important are already going. Others of us—and this is where I'm at—think chapel is important but don't go anyway, and we joke about it, but we don't feel good about it. Often I claim I'm too busy; I'm doing too many things at 10:00 in the morning (10:00 in the morning is an important time for doing things). But why shouldn't I say that for God's glory I'm going to not study or not run errands? Instead I'm going to sit in chapel and sing out of tune and let my eyelids droop and jerk my head up suddenly. If the chapel meditation is boring, I don't get anything out of it, I don't grow spiritually, why should I care? Religion was never designed to make my sorrows less. I'm supposed to suffer many things for Jesus. What harsher suffering is there than a boring chapel service? I suffer, I get bored, maybe I nod off to sleep, and, provided God can forgive my sleepiness, I can call it all holy and sacramental. Okay, I'm decided. I'll see anyone who's willing to join me in chapel, the first day after this issue of Dialogue appears. You can encourage me to continue coming. I'll smile and laugh. It'll be our holy joke for the day.

-Mark Van Wienen
Master of the Spheres

JOHN CALVIN

A new educational toy for your youngster. Manufactured by the Committee to Promote Calvin College