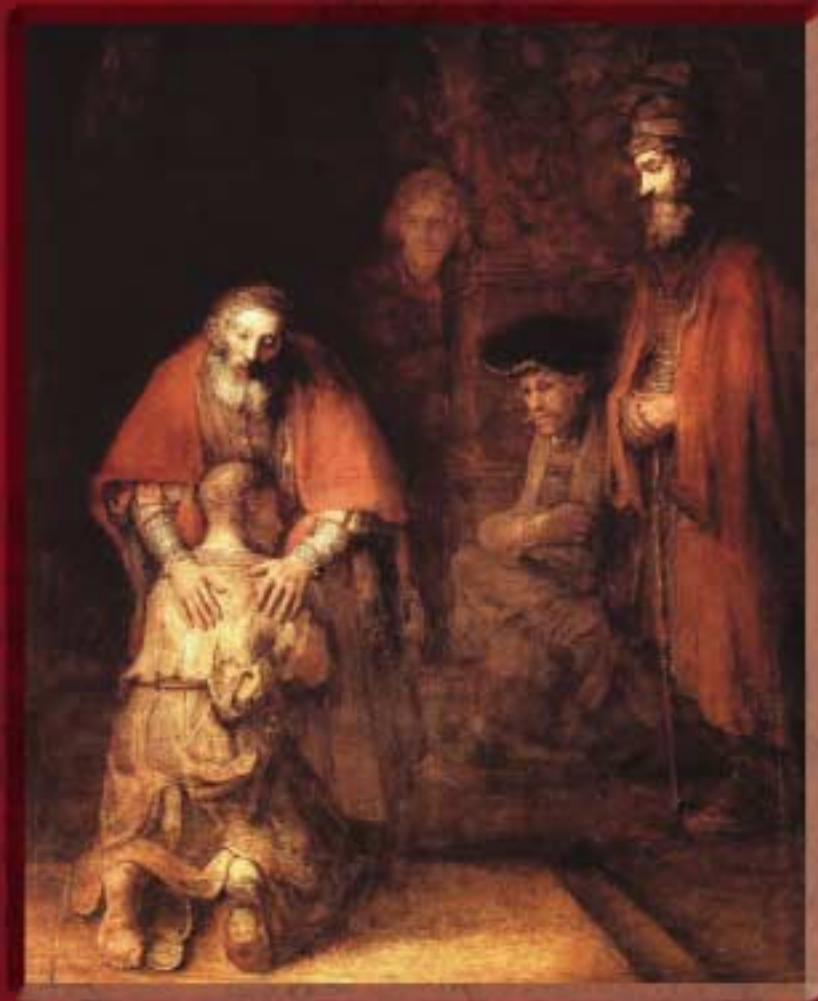


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FORUM



FALL 2002

Forgiveness

FORUM

Providing Theological Leadership
for the Church

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from the president

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

During a talk I sometimes give in churches on “Forgiveness of Sins in an Angry Age,” I often notice that the topic is personal for many in the audience. I can tell by people’s facial expressions and body language, by their tone of voice during the Q&A, by the depth of some of their questions. Christian people have “issues” where forgiveness of others is concerned, and some of them are tender.

So those of us who come to the side of victims will need to be thoughtful in both senses of the word. We’ll need to care for the victim in ways that really help and heal, and to do that we’ll also need to give the topic itself some reflection.

This is where good writers on forgiveness can help us, including, for example, Lewis Smedes, L. Gregory Jones, and Robert C. Roberts. One service such writers provide is simply to raise questions about the topic, and to show us that the good answers are seldom the easy ones.

Suppose someone really hurts you. What would have to happen before you could forgive him (or her)? Would he have to repent? Suppose you never see him again. Could you forgive him anyway? As a Christian, *must* you forgive him? How soon? For his sake or for yours? What if you try to forgive him, but can’t? May your pastor, sedate in his wisdom and serene in his marriage, urge you to forgive? Doesn’t that just add a load of guilt to your trauma?

Anyhow, isn’t forgiveness too good for some offenders? Isn’t there something almost unjust about it—something that trivializes the offense and encourages the offender to repeat it? May people just go around hurting other people, changing their lives forever, and then nonchalantly accept forgiveness for all the litter they leave behind?

In this issue of the *Forum* two of our theologians reflect on forgiveness, one (Ronald Feenstra) from the point of view of a systematic theologian, and the other (Ronald Nydam) from the point of view of a pastoral theologian. We will find in their thinking, I believe, not only some of the “issues” people have, but also some of God’s grace, which is often so hard for us to receive and so hard for us to pass on.

Grace and peace.

Yours,

Neal

REFLECTIONS

Forgiven—and Forgiving

During the Second World War, Simon Wiesenthal, a Polish Jew imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, was suddenly brought to the bedside of a dying SS soldier. A year earlier, the soldier had participated in a massacre in which perhaps 200 Jews were herded into a three-story building along with some gasoline cans; then grenades were thrown into the building. As people fled or jumped from the burning building, this soldier and his comrades shot them. But now the soldier's actions—in particular his role in killing a mother, father, and small child—tormented him. He wanted to confess to a Jew in order that he could die in peace. As the soldier told the story, Wiesenthal recalled people he knew and loved whom the Nazis had exterminated. Although the man appeared to be truly repentant and asked for forgiveness, Wiesenthal left the room without offering a word: no word of forgiveness or understanding, no word that would let the murderer die in peace. Wiesenthal then asks whether his silence at the bedside of this dying, repentant Nazi was right or wrong. He reports that a fellow prisoner, a Christian, later argued that he should have offered the mercy of forgiveness. And he prods his reader to ask, "What would I have done?" (*The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, rev. ed. [New York: Schocken, 1998]).

In the light of Wiesenthal's harrowing account, I want to raise two questions related to forgiveness. What moves Christians to forgive others? And what is the goal of forgiveness? I believe that, as those who have been forgiven by God, Christians face the formidable task of forgiving, and even being open to eventual reconciliation with, those who wrong them. I have come to this conclusion with real misgivings, knowing that many, like Wiesenthal, have been asked to forgive wrongs far more egregious than any I have forgiven.

Why Forgive?

Jesus' statements about forgiveness are some of the most challenging and difficult passages in the Bible. For example, he



by Ronald J.
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Philosophical
Theology

teaches his disciples to pray, "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). If that is not strong enough, immediately afterwards he says, "if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matt. 6:15). And the Beatitudes teach that the merciful "will be shown mercy" (Matt. 5:7).

So Christians must forgive others, but what moves them to do so? What leads them down the painful, often

lengthy path of forgiveness? Jesus' parable about the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:23-35) suggests that, through their being forgiven by God, Christians become people who forgive. The parable involves a comparison between two situations, each of which involves a debt, a demand for payment, a plea for mercy, and a response to the plea. The key differences between the two situations are the size of the debt and the response by the creditor.

In the first situation, while settling accounts with his servants, a king called in one who owed an astonishing amount of money: 10,000 talents, or nearly 200,000 years' worth of wages. (For a full-time worker earning \$25,000 per year, this would be close to \$5 billion!) Jesus uses astronomically large numbers

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Forgiven and Forgiving

in order to make a spiritual point: we could never work our way out of our deep debt to God. Even now, when some corporate executives borrow millions of dollars from the companies under their care, imagining a wage earner who owes billions of dollars is shocking. According to the parable, the master ordered the man, his family, and his possessions to be sold to begin to repay the debt. But the debtor fell on his knees, pleaded for patience, and offered to pay back everything. Of course, a moment's reflection would reveal that no servant could ever repay nearly 200,000 years' worth of wages. Then, in the second amazing development in the parable, the servant got much more than he asked: not just patience and a repayment schedule, but complete forgiveness of the debt.

Jesus then describes a second situation in which the same servant found another servant who owed him 100 denarii, or about four months' worth of wages. In this scenario, as in the first, the creditor demanded payment and the debtor fell to his knees, asking for patience and offering to repay everything owed. Now this is not like meeting someone who owes us five dollars, to whom we can say, "Don't bother to repay me. Forget about it." If someone owed us the equivalent of four months' worth of income, we would notice. The point is not that forgiving someone costs us nothing; it costs more than we want it to. Yet despite the cost involved in forgiving someone else, we have been forgiven by God infinitely more than we are asked to forgive others.

Given the story up to this point, we expect the first servant to follow the example of the king and forgive the second servant's debt completely. Even a stingy response would set up a payment plan. But, in the third astonishing development in the parable, Jesus describes a response that would cause his audience to *gasp*. The first servant refused the request and had the debtor "thrown into prison until he could pay the debt." The other servants were so distressed by this turn of events

that they reported it to the king, whose question to the first servant makes the crucial connection: "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In this parable, Jesus teaches that we should forgive others because God has forgiven us. And refusal to forgive others indicates ingratitude for—even a failure to have received—God's forgiveness. Even if others have hurt us deeply, their sin against us pales in comparison to our sin against God, which God has forgiven.

But how does this work in ordinary life? In a powerful passage exploring love and forgiveness in a troubled marriage, Stephen Carter's novel *The Emperor of Ocean Park* shows that seeing our need to be forgiven can move us to forgive another. Suspicious that his wife, Kimmer, is

Although God's forgiveness moves us to forgive, forgiving often comes slowly. When someone wrongs or hurts us, especially if the person was close or hurt us deeply, it usually takes time to overcome the anger and forgive the person. (On the flip side, when we hurt others, we need to realize that it probably will take time for them to forgive us.) But even though forgiveness may come slowly, those who have been forgiven by God will work toward forgiveness—if nothing else, praying that God will instill willingness to forgive. Rather than nursing grudges, they tell themselves that even this wrong needs to be forgiven. Although anger is an appropriate response to being wronged, eventually anger needs to be overcome by forgiveness.

The Goal of Forgiveness

The goal of forgiveness is reconciliation—with God and with the wrongdoer. First, forgiving a wrongdoer helps to heal the person who was wronged and to bring that person closer to God. When wronged, we respond to the injury with anger. If that anger is not washed away by forgiveness, it will turn to bitterness and eventually pull us away from God. When we refuse to forgive we become not only victims of the original wrong, but also spiritual victims of our own brooding anger and bitterness. Only forgiveness can heal and move us closer to God.

Second, forgiving someone involves committing ourselves, insofar as it is possible, to eventual reconciliation with the person who wronged us. Forgiving means willingness to enter a new, grace-filled relationship with the wrongdoer; it does not mean re-entering the same hurtful situation. It does not imply picking up where we were the day before things went wrong. So a victim of physical abuse who forgives, and is open to reconciliation with, her abuser may decide not to return to the dating or marriage relationship in which the abuse occurred. And sometimes, perhaps because the other person has died or continues to present a threat, the only realistic hope

When we refuse to forgive, we become not only victims of the original wrong, but also spiritual victims of our own brooding anger and bitterness.

having an affair, the protagonist, Talcott Garland, seeks pastoral counseling, where he comes to see that both he and his wife have needed God's forgiveness and that her sins, no matter what they are, are different from his, but not necessarily worse (Stephen L. Carter, *The Emperor of Ocean Park* [New York: Knopf, 2002], ch. 25). Through the wise intervention of his counselor, Talcott comes to see that God's forgiveness of him should move him to a loving, forgiving relationship with his wife.

for reconciliation is on the other side of the grave.

When re-establishing a relationship with someone who has hurt us, much depends on whether the wrongdoer has repented. Although forgiving does not depend on repentance, reconciliation usually does. Someone who truly repents commits to being a new person, not the same old person who harmed us before. So, although re-entering a relationship with someone who has hurt us involves risk, we should expect that the person will behave differently this time around. In fact, one way to tell if someone has truly repented (instead of just saying some words) is to see whether his or her life has truly changed. When appropriate, we allow

opportunities for the person who wronged us to show that he or she is trustworthy

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and then, especially if the person is also reconciled to God, hope for a relationship with that person that is as deep as—or perhaps even deeper than—the previous one. That is the goal of forgiveness.

In sum, just as persistent refusal to forgive others shows that we have not been forgiven by God, so too willingness to forgive—or at least to work toward forgiveness—is a good indication that God’s forgiveness has taken root in us. Although forgiveness is never easy, Christians, as those who have been forgiven by God, forgive others and even hope for reconciliation, in Christ, with those who have harmed them. I laud those who have traveled the road of forgiveness and regard them as my teachers.

Good Resources on Forgiveness

The following books on forgiveness are recommended by Professor Feenstra to his students in his Doctrine of Salvation class at Calvin Seminary:

L. Gregory Jones. *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995. In this book Jones thinks theologically about forgiveness as it ought to be embodied in the context of our lives as members of the church. He describes the complexity of forgiveness with a wealth of references to literature and film. An excellent resource for preaching.

Lisa Barnes Lampman, ed. *God and the Victim: Theological Reflections on Evil, Victimization, Justice, and Forgiveness*. Foreword by Charles W. Colson. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999. A theological examination of the spiritual issues faced by victims of crime. Contributors explore issues of evil, justice, victimization, and forgiveness and their practical implications for ministry.

Robert C. Roberts. *Taking the Word to Heart*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993. In chapter 10 Roberts makes a very thought-provoking comparison of Christian forgiveness with contemporary individualistic therapeutic conceptions of forgiveness.

Lewis B. Smedes. *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How*. Nashville: Moorings, 1996. This book goes beyond Smedes' earlier *Forgive and Forget*, outlining how to pursue forgiveness in difficult and complex situations.

Desmond Mpilo Tutu. *No Future without Forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday, 1999. Archbishop Desmond Tutu gives a

narrative account of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, touching upon the relationship between justice and forgiveness and reconciliation in a divided society.

Miroslav Volf. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996. As a Croatian, Volf was once asked whether he could embrace one of the Serbian fighters who were destroying his country and his people. His response was: “No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.” This book is a theological exploration of the two sides of that response, with thoughtful interpretations of familiar biblical stories such as Cain and Abel, the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus’ appearance before Pilate, and Pentecost.

Simon Wiesenthal. *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. With a symposium edited by Harry James Cargas and Bonny V. Fetterman. Revised and expanded edition. New York: Schocken, 1998. Wiesenthal’s question, “What would you have done?” is answered by fifty-three different thinkers from a variety of religious traditions. A fascinating look at a wide spectrum of thought about the possibilities and limits of forgiveness when faced with massive evil and injustice.

Philip Yancey. *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997. This book is an eloquent expression of the magnificence of God’s grace, filled with anecdotes and reflective observations that help one appreciate and understand the forgiveness that is woven through our life in Christ.

Forgiving Seventy Times Seven

As a pastor, it has always been interesting to me that forgiveness has been given so little press in the field of mental health. Forgiveness is considered a spiritual matter, a concern of religious life and, curiously, this often kept it off-limits as a theme in mental health counseling. Mental health providers have only recently seen fit to include forgiveness as an important ingredient in good relationships. Today advocates of marriage enrichment, for example, call for forgiveness as a necessary component of healthy marriages. It is a subject long in coming to the public consciousness.

But many church-related counselors have not given forgiveness the emphasis that it deserves either. Some within the evangelical Christian community have been shy about stirring guilt into the lives of believers. They know that a strong dose of guilt can be misused and may add to the burden of people already feeling defeated in their lives. In today's Western world, guilt is not a primary issue as it was in the sixteenth century. Today meaning in life and the "abundance" that Jesus promises in John 10:10 may be of greater concern to many people.

Most people in our neighborhoods do not feel very guilty; they feel empty. Those in the leadership of fast-growing churches know about this. They preach to the *felt* needs of our culture—the needs for connection, for friends, for meaning in life. Forgiveness for guilt, in our American and Canadian communities, is most often an *unfelt* need. But it still matters as a barrier between us and God. The atonement we have in Jesus is clearly brings forgiveness, forged in the death of Christ on the cross. But some in the church community have neglected forgiveness as a theme in Christian living. An incomplete appropriation of Christianity would have us be comfortable at the price of the deeper transformation and redeemed living that comes

with the pain of forgiving and being forgiven. Forgiveness remains central to real life in Christ.

In my years as a pastoral counselor in Denver, I came to believe that *90% of counseling is about forgiveness*. The need to *be* forgiven and the need to *do* forgiving are at the root of many of the problems people bring to counselors. Both of these challenges present difficulties in our walk as Christians. And to whatever degree they are incomplete within us, we suffer unnecessarily as unforgiven and unforgiving people.

Sometimes people, especially older people whose lives were formed in the struggles of the past century, carry a sense of guilt that never quite goes away. Though they know that in Christ we are free from the guilt of our wrongdoing, and though they know that their names are written in the Book of Life, these people can not quite take it in. For them, the Gospel is too good to be true. Here it is important to recognize when we know something in our heads, but it does not reach our hearts. Jesus teaches us that forgiveness needs to be known in the heart. (Matthew 18:35)

When the message of the Gospel fails to reach the hearts of people, they are sometimes left living with a poor sense of

By Ronald Nydam
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Pastoral Care



self and are bound for depression, irritation, anxiety, and a sour outlook on life. These sad, bitter people have yet to really hear the good news that God sees us differently. In Christ we *are* counted as worthy, truly forgiven children of God. Some Christians have yet to see themselves the way God does: not through the cloud of our sinfulness and the darkness of Good

Friday, but in the clear light of new innocence and in the bright dawn of Easter Sunday. Experiencing the grace and the freedom of God's forgiveness is sometimes a long reach even for those who know the Gospel story.

There remains the problem of forgiving others even seventy times seven, as Jesus commands. We know from the Bible that God remembers our sins against him no more. But we do remember the sins against us. As a pastoral counselor, I have been in many conversations with Christian people who are locked inside bitterness, unable to do the "letting go" that must be done if others are to be forgiven. This is understandable because it is very difficult to let go of the hurt others cause.

One pastor remembered the hard-fought battle of forgiveness in his own life. As a young boy he found himself always on the edge of anxiety about pleasing his demanding father, who himself had struggled all his adult life with a sense of personal inadequacy. This pastor's default impulse was to find a way to please at the risk of his own self-depletion. At times depression overtook him. But when he was able to discern the graciousness of God as different from the demanding voice of others, when he was able to understand his own father's struggle as part of the mix between the two of

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them, *when he forgave him* for these demands of childhood, he found himself free, in some ways for the first time, to be gracious as well. This is the freedom that comes from forgiving others.

The difficulty here often has to do with facing *the pain of forgiveness*. It is important to make a decision, a cognitive choice, to forgive someone for the wrong done to us. This is about being obedient to God's call to be forgiving people, to "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39) toward those who would do us wrong, and to kindly "heaping coals of fire on the heads" (Romans 12:20) of our enemies because revenge belongs to God, not us. Such forgiveness of others is to flow out of the rich experience that we have in the forgiving hand of God toward us. Unlike the unmerciful servant of Matthew 18, we are called to "let go" of our grievances precisely because God did. But this is hard to do. Sometimes it may take a lifetime, but it needs to be done.

Following the Columbine tragedy, many people in Denver spoke understandably harsh words about the two boys who shot and killed twelve classmates and a teacher. Thirteen crosses were planted on a hill near the school to remember these tragic deaths. When someone placed two additional crosses there to remember the lives of the two boys responsible for this tragedy who had also committed suicide, people ripped them down. Someone posted a sign: "Forgiveness: never!" But no matter how horrific their actions were, not forgiving them sets the stage for bitterness and self-destruction. Unless we forgive as the Lord commands us, we are held hostage by our own bitterness.

There is nothing, nothing done to us that ought not be forgiven. This is a hard saying to accept. It includes the horrors of the Holocaust, the terrible realities of the rape and murder of children, as well as the hatred expressed against America on September 11, 2001, in New York and in Washington D.C. and in the sky above

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Pennsylvania. But it must all be forgiven because God's forgiveness reaches that far, and ours must do the same. The phrase "united we stand" needs to mean that we *all*—Christians and Muslim extremists alike—are in need of the saving, forgiving grace of Jesus Christ. All humanity stands together in need of the salvation found in the forgiveness of that cross. Whatever hatred we carry against our so-called "enemies," whatever bitterness we carry toward an unfaithful marital partner, whatever inner rage we carry toward the drunken man whose driving killed our child—whatever the offense may be, as great as it may be, it must *not* stand in the way of the freedom we find in practicing forgiveness.

We must forgive even 490 times, if need be, because not to forgive is to sell short the power of the cross, to keep in

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our hearts that which must be released to God. Of the many people that I counseled, inner spiritual freedom almost always depended upon finally letting go of the hurts of yesterday. To forgive a distant father, an abusive husband, an alcoholic sister, an anxious mother, an insensitive teacher, the perpetrator of sexual assault, the speaker or believer of a racist remark... all of these acts of forgiveness are critical to finally being free in Christ. This is not to say that there should be no accountability for sins committed. There must certainly be justice, as justice, too, is healing. But there must also be forgiveness.

Returning to the memory of the sin committed against us often hurts so much that we hesitate to journey so close to the sting of that memory. To really forgive as God forgives is to feel once again the agony of the hurt done against us. That is what happened on the cross. The question "Why have you forsaken me?" is the echo of God's question in the Garden, asking of Adam and Eve "Why have you forsaken me?" In its willful disobedience in the Garden, humanity hurt God the Creator, and in Christ God had to feel that pain again.

We must do the same to truly forgive someone; that is, open our hearts to the suffering we have endured. Otherwise, we carry that suffering without its redemption and without its release to God, to the cross, to the Spirit that comforts and heals. That is why 90% of pastoral counseling is finally about forgiveness. Doing forgiveness is one of the most crucial and significant challenges of the Christian life. Being Christ to others includes the grace of forgiving no matter what the hurt may be. Forgiving opens us up to the love of God, making room in our hearts for the grace that the Spirit of the living Christ brings, that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). That is why we must join in the suffering of Christ and do our forgiving too—seventy times seven and more!

Charge to a Young Leader

1 Timothy 6:11-12

This meditation was delivered in Calvin Theological Seminary chapel on April 26, 2002 by the Rev. John Stott of John Stott Ministries for Biblical Preaching and Scholarship.

This morning I'd like to talk to you about Timothy. I confess that I find him a very congenial character, and I suspect that you do as well. Timothy was very far from being a stained glass saint; a halo would not have fitted comfortably on his head. No. He was a real human being like us, with all the frailty and vulnerability which this implies.

First, he was comparatively young. By the time Paul wrote his two letters to Timothy he was probably in his thirties, but still ill-prepared for the heavy responsibilities that were being laid upon him. Secondly, we know that he was temperamentally shy. For he needed to be reassured and encouraged, so that Paul urged the Corinthians to put him at ease when he came among them (1 Cor. 16:10). Thirdly, he was physically infirm. He had a recurrent gastric problem which led Paul to prescribe a little alcoholic medicine (1 Tim. 5:23).

So here was Timothy, young, shy and frail. Three handicaps which are often found in Christian leaders today. However, they endear him to us.

With that introduction, let's consider my text. *"But you, O man of God, flee from all this and instead pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you have been called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses"* (1 Timothy 6:11-12).

"But as for you..." Paul expects Timothy to lead a life that is different from the prevailing culture around him. That

little phrase, "but as for you", which appears as many as half a dozen times in Paul's letters to Timothy, is a resounding call to resist the pressures of the surrounding world. It is still a call to men and women of God today. From this theme the apostle Paul develops a three-fold appeal to young Timothy: an ethical appeal, a doctrinal appeal and an experiential appeal.

(1) An Ethical Appeal

First the *ethical appeal*. Verse 11 reads, *'flee from all this and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.'* Negatively, Paul urged Timothy to flee from sin. The context of this passage alerts us to what Paul considered the most treacherous threats: materialism, the love of money, covetousness and all evil associated with these things. In addition Paul instructs Timothy elsewhere to *'flee the evil desires of youth'* (2 Timothy 2:22). Timothy was to turn not only from immorality but also from selfish ambition, indiscipline and impetuosity.

Positively, Paul urged Timothy to pursue the good. This is elaborated in verse 11 with six meaningful words. "Righteousness" refers to right dealing with our neighbour, while "godliness" is a right relationship to God. "Faith" is confidence in God, while "love" is the service of other people. "Endurance" is patience with difficult circumstances, while "gentleness" is patience with difficult people. What beautiful qualities these six things are! They remind us of the fruit of the Spirit, and they seem to paint a portrait of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So here is Paul's ethical appeal, with both a negative and positive aspect. They

by the Rev. John Stott



complement one another well. Negatively Timothy was to flee from all evil, and positively he was to pursue those qualities that represent the Lord Jesus Christ. Put simply, we are to run away from evil and to run after righteousness.

Now we human beings are great runners. We run away from anything that appears threatening, and we run after such things as pleasure, wealth and power. So Paul seems to say to Timothy, "Why not run away from evil instead? And why not run after righteousness?" Paul's appeal reflects no passivity in the attainment of biblical holiness. Nor does he prescribe any distinctive method or formula that offers a quick path to sanctification. No, we are simply to run for our lives, fleeing from everything we know to be evil and pursuing everything we know to be within the will of God. I hope, sisters and brothers, that you will learn to become great runners. God calls us to run from evil and run after righteousness. This is Paul's ethical appeal.

(2) A Doctrinal Appeal

Secondly, we move on to the *doctrinal appeal*. "Fight the good fight of the faith" (v.12), writes Paul. It is almost certain that he is referring here not to faith without the definite article (although, to be sure, he has named it as one of the qualities we are to pursue in verse 11), but to "the" faith, with the definite article. Over against the post-modern fashion that there is no such thing as universal or objective truth, the Pastoral Epistles insist that there is. It is called the *faith*, the *truth*, the *teaching*, the *tradition* and the *deposit*. This body of revealed doctrine is the teaching of the apostle Paul and his fellow apostles, which is a sacred deposit that has to be carefully guarded,

protected and proclaimed. Timothy must fight the good fight of the faith, protecting it from all corruption and perversity.

It is surely significant that just as good and evil are contrasted with one another in verse 11, so, truth and error are contrasted in verse 12. Just as ethically we are to run away from evil and pursue righteousness, so doctrinally we are to turn from error and fight the good fight of the faith.

Nobody enjoys a fight, except perhaps those with a pugnacious temperament. Fighting is an unpleasant business, always undignified, and often bloody and dangerous. The same is true of fighting for the faith. We don't enjoy controversy. It is distressful to a sensitive spirit. Nevertheless the fight is called by the apostle "the *good* fight". It cannot be avoided.

Why must we engage in this combat? Because truth is sacred. Not only is the good of the church involved, but also the glory of God. When truth is imperilled, as it often is in the world and even in the church today, there is a painful necessity before us to fight and defend it. Even the gentleness which we are to pursue according to the previous verse is not to stop us from fighting!

(3) An Experiential Appeal

We've examined the ethical appeal and doctrinal appeal, and now thirdly we come to the *experiential appeal*. "Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (v 12).

It may seem strange that a Christian leader of Timothy's stature should need to be exhorted to lay hold of eternal life. Had he not already received eternal life, maybe long ago when he first believed? How can he be told to lay hold of something that was already his? In answer to that question, we must remember that it is possible to possess something without enjoying it. Let me give you an example.

Louis Delcourt was a young French soldier during the First World War. He oversaw his leave while visiting his mother,

and fearing the disgrace of returning late to his regiment, he decided to desert. He persuaded his mother to lock him up in the attic of her home, and there she hid him for 21 years. But in August 1937 his mother died. Realizing that he was no longer in a position to be kept hidden, in his weak and haggard state he staggered to the nearest gendarmerie where he gave himself up. The gendarme looked at him incredulously. "Where have you been all these years that you haven't heard?" "Heard what?" replied Louis Delcourt. "That an amnesty for all deserters was proclaimed years ago."

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already won for us.*

Louis Delcourt had his freedom, but couldn't enjoy it because he didn't know he had it. Do not be like Louis Delcourt! We are called to enjoy the freedom that is ours in Christ, to lay hold of the eternal life that he has already won for us.

So here is Paul's threefold appeal to men and women of God: 1) *ethical*: to run away from evil and pursue the good, 2) *doctrinal*: to turn from error and fight for the faith, and 3) *experiential*: to lay hold of the eternal life which is already ours in Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, I would like to call your

attention to two things. First, notice the extraordinary *relevance* of Paul's threefold appeal to us today. The postmodern mood is unfriendly to all universal absolutes. Yet the apostle sets before us three absolute goals. He seems to say that there is such a thing as goodness, so pursue it; there is such a thing as truth, so fight for it; there is such a thing as life, so lay hold of it. This is a refreshing vision for us who are struggling to come to terms with the cultural pressures of today. In the midst of the postmodern world we live in, may God give us an unashamed commitment to those three absolutes: to what is *true*, to what is *good* and to what is *real*.

Secondly, notice the *balance* of Paul's threefold appeal. It incorporates Christian ethics, Christian doctrine, and Christian experience. Not many Christians are able to maintain such a healthy balance. Some are very good at fighting the good fight. They can smell a heresy a mile away. Their nose begins to twitch and their muscles to flex, and they are ready for a battle. But they don't pursue goodness, let alone gentleness. Others are good and gentle but they have no comparable concern to fight for the truth. Still others despise both doctrine and ethics, and instead concentrate on their quest for religious experience. Why must we always polarise? All three of these are God's purpose for us.

May God raise up a new generation of twenty-first century Timothys, who pursue not just one of these goals but all three. These are men and women who simultaneously fight the good fight of the faith, run after righteousness, and lay hold of eternal life. These men and women are fine exhibits of what I like to call "BBC," standing now not for the British Broadcasting Corporation, nor for Beautiful British Columbia, nor for the Bethlehem Bible College, but for Balanced Biblical Christianity. It is a rare form of Christianity in the church today. My prayer is that Calvin Theological Seminary may be notable for the production of balanced biblical Christians.

Prayer for the Students of Calvin Seminary

Convocation, September 5, 2002

David Rylaarsdam,
Professor of Historical Theology

Father in heaven,
hear now our prayer for the students of Calvin Seminary.

Thank you for bringing them to this day and to this place.
Thank you for gathering these students
whom you have given wonderfully diverse experiences
and talents beyond telling.

Thank you for inviting them to study theology, Father.

Now speak to them:

Bring the ear of their hearts close to your mouth.¹
Give them eager ears which strain to catch the melody of your Gospel,
which keenly listen till their joy is made perfect at the sound of the Bridegroom's voice.²

Speak to them

through Scripture, wise authors and teachers,
through worship and friends.

Speak to them when you sustain them through sickness and suffering,
and when they touch and see your goodness in the faces of their children,
and when they walk with loved ones through the valley of the shadow of death.

Speak to them.

You know the heart of each student, Father.

You know precisely when they need harsh or gentle words.

When needed, pummel the door of their hearts with your words,
break through thick pride,
beat down stubborn fears which push out all faith,
drive out sin before it grows sleek on their excesses.³

At other times, let your words gently fall on them, like manna from heaven.

Allow them to savor the sweetness
that you are a God who equips those you call,
that your love is too much for them
so that gazing into its bottomless deep makes them dizzy
and brings them to their knees.

Speak to these students, Father.

So that they may learn to *speak rightly about you*.

Untie the knots of their tongues,⁴
teaching them to speak about you truthfully and powerfully
so that your good news reverberates deep into the future.

May what they learn to say about you have rippling effects on the world around us, a
testimony of who you are and who you have recreated us to be.

Teach students also to *speak rightly to others*, O God.

Deliver them from talkativeness, from idle chatter that avoids needs.

Make us a community
where the tired are encouraged to continue the climb when the demands of study are steep,
where playful words and laughter are often heard,
where calm words steady the nerves of new students,
where friendly words are a balm to those separated from loved ones.

Teach the students to *speak rightly to you*.

Open their lips, O God, and their mouths shall declare your praise.⁵

Teach them to speak rightly to you in prayer.
May their knees grow rough from kneeling.

And may you, O God, be on your knees for them,
stooping to wash their feet,
bending to pick them up when trials flatten them.

O Father, be their God,
and continue to make them your people,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Spirit
be praised forever,

Amen.

¹Augustine, *Confessions* 4.10.

²John 3:29

³Augustine, *Confessions* 2.8.

⁴Augustine, *Confessions* 1.14.

⁵Ps. 51:15



In this column, Dr. Henry De Moor, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Professor of Church Polity answers one of the many questions he regularly receives from church council members.

Q. My sister complained to me recently that professors and/or students of a seminary not affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church lead her congregation in worship on a regular basis. She wonders if that is permissible and what, if anything, she can do about it (from a Michigan member).

A. You're not telling us anything about precisely who these people are, the content of their sermons and prayers, the way they lead in worship, their bearing in personal conversations, etc., and I'm not about to ask. There may be more behind her question than simply the issue of whether this is permissible, but that is pure speculation. So I'll limit my response to the issue of legality.

If seminary professors are not ordained, as some are, they would need licensure from the classis to which your sister's congregation belongs. According to Article 43 of our Church Order, a "classis may grant the right to exhort within its bounds" to those "who are gifted, well-informed, consecrated, and able to edify the churches" when need for their service is established and they have sustained a classical examination. It is assumed that such persons are not seeking to become ordained as ministers of the Word.

If seminary professors are ordained as ministers of the Word, as many are, everything depends on what denomination holds their credentials. If they are Christian Reformed, they are permitted to lead worship in any of our congregations. If they are not Christian Reformed, they may be invited by the local consis-

tory to do so. With respect to such invitations, our denominational covenant is that consistories will respect synodical decisions on churches in ecclesiastical fellowship with us. So, for example, if they are ordained in the Reformed Church in America (RCA) or the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), it is assumed that there is "automatic" occasional pulpit fellowship. In other words, consistories need not subject these individuals to any sort of scrutiny. If they are ordained in denominations not in ecclesiastical fellowship with the CRC, it is assumed that consistories will examine these persons prior to any invitation to lead in worship.

The matter is wholly different with respect to students at seminaries other than our own. Article 22 of the Church Order holds that "students who have received licensure according to synodical regulations shall be permitted to exhort in the public worship services." Current synodical regulations permit the Board of Trustees of Calvin Theological Seminary to grant licensure only to those enrolled in its programs: the regular M.Div. program, of course, but also the Special Program for Ministerial Candidacy (SPMC). This latter program is for those who pursue their studies at other seminaries. When that happens, students are expected to pre-enroll in the SPMC so that they can be licensed and their exhorting and other field education work may be monitored by our Director of Field Education. Upon completion of their studies, such students typically come to Calvin Theological Seminary for a final year leading to ordination in the Christian Reformed Church.

I am aware of cases where a classis has licensed a student at a non-CRC seminary under the provisions of Article 43 (quoted above). As I indicated earlier, this article should not be used for those who are seeking ordination as ministers.

It may be useful, at the same time, to remind ourselves that a study committee mandated to "provide guidelines for alternate routes to ministry" is scheduled to submit a report to the churches this fall. I am confident that it will be discussed widely in view of our denomination's great need for more ministers. For my part, as a member of said study committee and now in a new role at Calvin Seminary, I am doing my best to avoid the temptation of pursuing our institutional self-interest. This discussion has been and is being conducted in an atmosphere of openness where what really matters is advancing the Kingdom of God and building up the church of Christ. It is not at all outside the realm of possibility that these synodical guidelines—if not also the Church Order itself—will change when Synod 2003 meets, the Lord willing, in Sioux Center, Iowa next summer.

In the final analysis, as Article 52 of the Church Order says, it is the consistory that regulates the worship services. That's where the buck stops. I would advise your sister to inquire how her consistory justifies its actions. If she is not satisfied with the response, she may wish to appeal to the classis. These are her rights. Perhaps her consistory has erred in judgment, but whatever action she takes should be done in a spirit of love and with a desire for the well-being of the church.

Celebrations of Gratitude for New President and New Facilities

Friday, September 27, 2002 was an eventful day at Calvin Theological Seminary—filled with celebrations of dedication and inauguration from morning until night. The day began with a gathering of students, staff, faculty, board members and many friends of the seminary at a dedication service for our new student center, administrative offices and renovated facilities. Prayers and songs of thanksgiving were offered as the sun streamed in the windows of the student center. At noon a picnic lunch was served on the seminary's "front yard" on Burton Street, complete with great food, wonderful music by Glenn Bulthuis, balloons for the kids, and more sunshine!



Kathleen and Neal Plantinga

The afternoon brought a mixture of scholarship and family stories as two of President Plantinga's brothers presented inaugural lectures. Alvin Plantinga, Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame, gave a lecture entitled "Against Materialism," after telling a few tales from childhood about his little brother Neal. Leon Plantinga, Professor of Music at Yale University, continued the theme with reminiscences from their family life intertwined with his lecture recital on "Schumann in the 1830s: A Decade of Piano Music." His performances included *Kinderszenen* (Scenes of Childhood) Op. 15 and *Fantasiestücke* (Fantasy Pieces), Op. 12.

The evening worship service for the installation of the Rev. Dr. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. as the sixth president of Calvin Theological Seminary included marvelous music of brass, string, wind and pipe instruments accompanying the congregation and the seminary choir. In the liturgy, members of the congregation were reminded, along with Neal, of their baptism and profession of faith. The installation was conducted by the Rev. Peter Jonker of the Woodlawn Christian Reformed Church. In his inaugural sermon on John 12:24, entitled "Unless a Grain of Wheat Falls," Neal challenged all to remember their dying and rising with Christ and the call to bear much fruit. This text was also displayed in the beautiful banner created for the occasion by artist George Langbroek of St. Catherines, Ontario.

After the service luminaries guided all to the student center for a celebration with fine food and friends. Student Angela Taylor Perry said it was an "absolutely fabulous time. It was like



The laying on of hands by Neal's family, friends, and colleagues



President Plantinga delivers his inaugural sermon.

a celebration of our covenant relationship with God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; a love feast of Christians celebrating the goodness of God."

President Plantinga was gratified by the events of the entire day. "All day I was thinking of Samuel Miller's prayer: 'O Lord, where we stumble, help us to kneel,' and it occurred to me that a whole Seminary community can rise from its knees together to do great things in the Kingdom of God," he said.

Brother Leon Plantinga plays Schumann.



Vice President Kelderman leads the dedication service in the new Student Center.



Brother Alvin Plantinga gives inaugural lecture.



Inaugural picnic on the seminary lawn



Glenn Bulthuis provides musical entertainment.



Inauguration Continues In California

On October 6, 2002, the inaugural events continued on the west coast. Just over a week after the inauguration of President Plantinga in Michigan, he was honored with an installation service at the Orange Korean Christian Reformed Church in Fullerton, California. Rev. Il Yong Kang, senior pastor of Orange Korean CRC, presided over the service and charges were given by Rev. Norberto Wolf of Christian Reformed Race Relations and Rev. David Sung of Ann Arbor, Michigan, one of Neal's former students. In a moving time of intercession, the entire congregation prayed fervently and simultaneously for President Plantinga during the laying on of hands. Neal repeated his inaugural sermon with translation into Korean by Rev. Tong Park. The final blessing was given by Dr. Jung Suk Rhee, another student of Plantinga's and now a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary.

The service followed a conference on "Reformed Worship in a Changing Culture" on October 4 and 5 hosted by the Orange Korean CRC, and co-sponsored by Calvin Theological Seminary,



Orange Korean Christian Reformed Church, Fullerton, California

the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Christian Reformed Home Missions, and the Korean Council of Christian Reformed Churches in Southern California. President Plantinga was one of speakers at the conference along with CTS Professors Emily Brink, Duane Kelderman, Pieter Tuit, and John Witvliet; Professor Won Lee of Calvin College; Rev. Christian Oh; and Cindy Holtrop, Kathy Smith and Howard Vanderwell of the Worship Institute.



Professor Tuit speaks on global worship at conference.



Pastors pray and lay hands on President Plantinga: Il Yong Kang, David Sung, Norberto Wolf, Peter Holwerda, Howard Vanderwell, Orlando Alfaro, and Tong Park.

Korean CTS Alumni Organize and Sponsor Scholarship



New Korean alumni association chapter officers with Vice President Kelderman; Secretary: Rev. Moses Chung (l.) of First CRC in Bellflower, California, and President: Dr. Jung Suk Rhee (r.) of Fuller Theological Seminary.

Korean alumni of Calvin Theological Seminary from all over the United States gathered in October for a first ever meeting, sponsored by Rev. Christian Oh of the Han-Bit Korean CRC of Rochester Hills, Michigan, and Rev. Tong Park, Korean Ministry Director for Christian Reformed Home Missions. Coming from places as far apart as New Jersey, Michigan, Iowa, Washington and Alaska, they met in Los Angeles with others from California to discuss the needs and hopes of Korean students and pastors. One of the concerns expressed was the difficulty of recruiting Korean students to attend CTS. Before the end of the meeting, the group had begun to work on at least one answer to the problem. They formed a Calvin Theological Seminary alumni association chapter and decided to provide a new scholarship to cover a year's tuition for a Korean MDiv student. Rev. Oh had dreamed about this event for a long time, as had Rev. Park, and they were thrilled to see it becoming a reality.

New Church Development Class

This summer students from throughout the country met at Calvin Theological Seminary to enter the Master of Arts program in New Church Development. The program is a joint venture of Calvin Theological Seminary, Christian Reformed Home Missions, and Reformed Bible College. Jim Osterhouse and Gary Teja of Christian Reformed Home Missions teamed up to offer a two-week orientation to the program and a foundational course in new church development. The program continues with distance education courses offered online by seminary professors throughout the year in the areas of biblical studies, systematic theology, and practical theology. Current participants are from Chicago, Miami, Wisconsin, Michigan and New Jersey. In addition to online classes, students also meet regularly with a local mentor. The program is designed to train church leaders for involvement in church planting in the Christian Reformed Church.

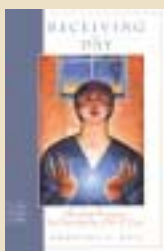
New student Diego Flores is a security supervisor of a large Chicago supermarket chain and a member of Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church in Berwyn, Illinois. He explains, "God opened my eyes later in life to opportunities to use



my gifts in the church. This program involves intense, hard work for someone who is working full-time, but I am learning important things that help me in my

work at Ebenezer." Diego frequently preaches and leads worship, and he and his wife serve in youth ministry and in discipling new believers.

Books of the Quarter announced for 2002-2003



In the second year of our Book of the Quarter program, President Plantinga has chosen the following books to be read and discussed by the seminary community:

Fall:

Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (John Wiley & Sons, 2001).

Winter:

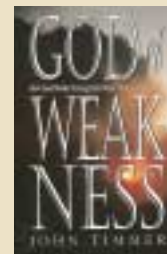
Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: the*



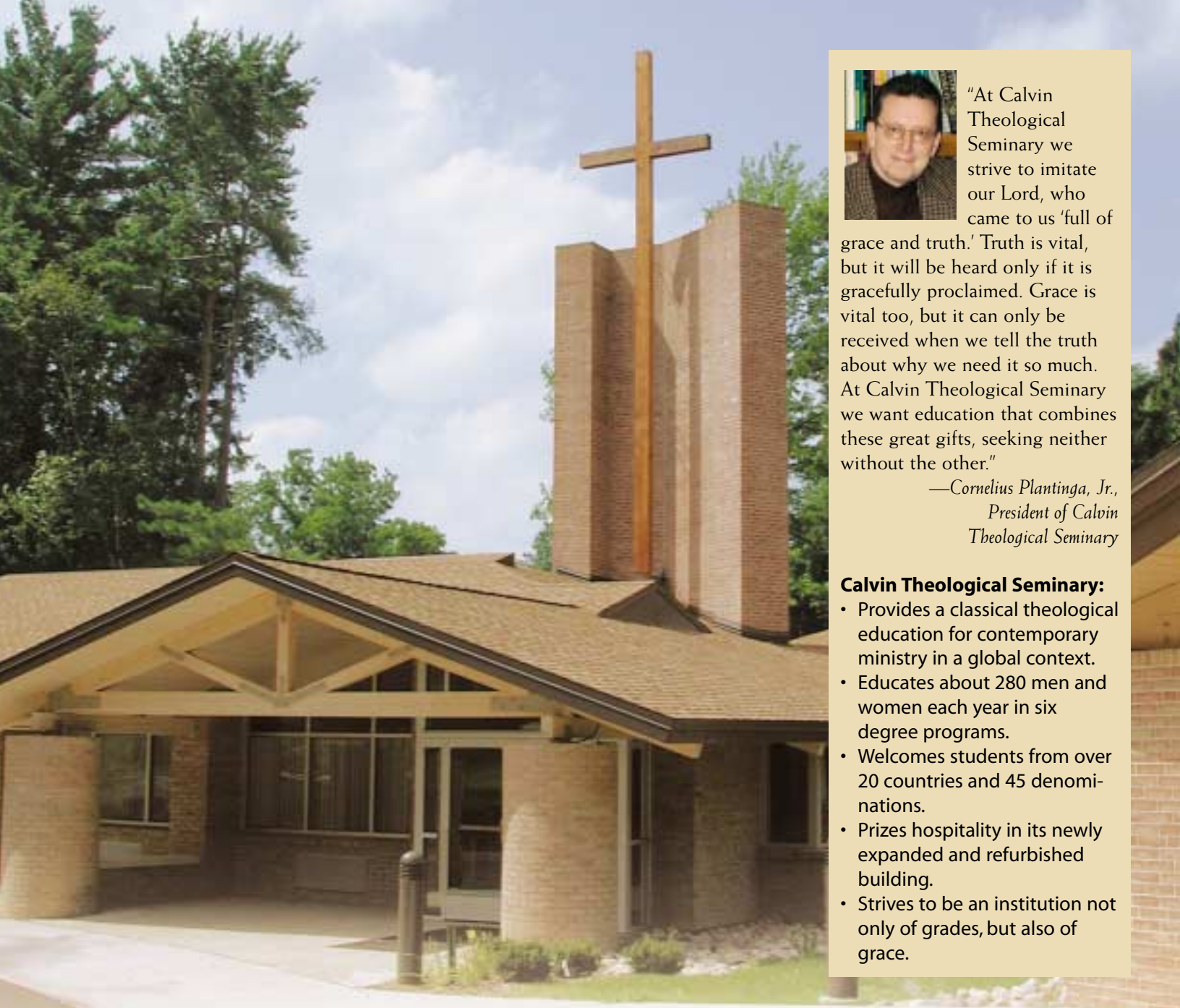
Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale (Harper & Row, 1977).

Spring:

John Timmer, *God of Weakness: How God Works through the Weak Things of the World* (CRC Publications, rev. ed. 1996).



Also this year, the seminary is hosting groups of area pastors and church leaders for lunchtime discussions of the books of the quarter.



"At Calvin Theological Seminary we strive to imitate our Lord, who came to us 'full of grace and truth.' Truth is vital, but it will be heard only if it is gracefully proclaimed. Grace is vital too, but it can only be received when we tell the truth about why we need it so much. At Calvin Theological Seminary we want education that combines these great gifts, seeking neither without the other."

—Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.,
President of Calvin
Theological Seminary

Calvin Theological Seminary:

- Provides a classical theological education for contemporary ministry in a global context.
- Educates about 280 men and women each year in six degree programs.
- Welcomes students from over 20 countries and 45 denominations.
- Prizes hospitality in its newly expanded and refurbished building.
- Strives to be an institution not only of grades, but also of grace.



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