from the president

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Ashley Smith wasn’t your stereotypical evangelist. She didn’t holler or whack her Bible. She didn’t stride a stage or point a finger. Before she “gave her testimony” one morning last March, she was out at 2 a.m. to buy cigarettes. And she gave out an illegal drug right along with her testimony.

When she returned from buying the cigarettes, a man in a truck was waiting for her. He followed her to the door, forced her inside at gunpoint, and, for a time, tied her up. She recognized him as Brian Nichols, whose image was all over TV news. At the start of his trial for rape in Atlanta’s Fulton County courthouse, Nichols had reportedly overpowered one deputy, shot her in the face with her own weapon, and had then executed the judge, the court reporter, and a sheriff’s deputy.

What transpired next was miraculous. Here was Ashley Smith, the mother of a five-year-old daughter, trapped in her own apartment by a desperate man. She did what she could: she witnessed to him. And she did it so simply. She blessed his desire to take a shower, and told him where he could find clean clothes. She told him about the death of her husband, and the needs of her daughter, and of how she trusted God to help. She then read to Nichols from Chapter 33 of Rick Warren’s *The Purpose-Driven Life* about God’s gifts and plans, and how to use them and fit into them. Ashley Smith explored with Brian Nichols what God’s purpose was for him, and how he’d never find it if he went down in a hail of gunfire. She also gave him crystal methamphetamine.

After some hours she cooked him a hot breakfast of blueberry pancakes with real butter. At one point Nichols told Ashley Smith that she was his sister in Christ, that she was an angel sent to him from God. An *angelos* bearing good news for the poor, the guilty, the desperate. Ashley Smith had been quietly practicing her evangelism, her angel news service. As it turns out, she needed it for herself too.

In the pages ahead, good colleagues explore several facets of Christian evangelism. As you follow them, remember the angel in the middle of the word.

Grace and peace,

Neal
I could barely reach the top of his head. At 6’3” he was, without a doubt, the tallest person I had ever baptized. Andy came to our church after his sister-in-law received our mass-mailing. She attends another church, but after reading our mailing thought Andy would relate more to ours. Andy’s a bright, articulate, Ivy-League-trained engineer; gentle, wise, and thoughtful; and at that time a skeptic, not a believer. He began attending to please his wife. For six years he brought his doubts and skepticism. During those years he volunteered to assist his daughter’s preschool class and, later, our technical team. For six years we loved him, prayed for him, and accepted him as part of our community. On a family retreat he finally “crossed the line.” At his baptism the whole church celebrated. Andy was already part of the church family—now as a believer.

We find that evangelism is messy. In our church plant in California pre-fabricated plans crumble. After fourteen years of reaching into our community, we’ve stopped looking for a magic formula. That doesn’t mean that we, like the CRC’s first missionary, simply put out a sign announcing “religious services” and wait for folks to turn themselves in. We work hard to keep the rhythms and attitudes of our community mission-oriented. Here are a few we’ve found helpful.

Participation

Andy’s story shows that we invite people into community before they believe. People without any church experience often want to “try on” the faith like you might test a new car or fit a new shirt. Folks in our neighborhood, even seniors, have no Christian memory. Christian virtues—generosity, chastity, secret service—seem outlandish. It takes time, often a lot of time, before people find themselves believing. So we let them join our family as they test drive the faith. We find that an experience of belonging, more than well-shaped arguments, helps the gospel become real to our friends. Frequently, new attendees introduce themselves, “We’re just here for our kids. We believe they need moral training.” I used to think, “That misses the gospel entirely.” Now I just smile and say, “What a terrific idea, we’re so glad you’re here.” We invite them into the family and trust God’s grace to work.

Invitations

We encourage folks to invite their friends to church in non-threatening ways. That’s the way it’s supposed to work. But God has his own, non-formulaic ways. One evening our music leader hosted a jam session at his house. He looked at the drummer and asked, “Do you believe in Jesus?” The guy was shocked, and mumbled until he finally said, “Yeah, I guess.” “Good,” replied the band leader. “We need someone to play the drums this week in church.” Play he did, and every week afterwards. Mike, the drummer, now says that six weeks into attending he “found himself believing this stuff.” A year later he was baptized. Today he’s one of our elders.

Modeling

I coach youth soccer. Honestly, I don’t have time to coach. Starting a new church is relentless work. Recently a church building project added to my schedule and now our work pace is quickened by a wave of new visitors. My calendar screams, “I’m full.” But soccer is one routine that lets me build relationships with folks outside the church. I coach soccer as a spiritual discipline. It re-orientes me to love people outside the church. A few years ago I was co-coaching with a new friend. After we knew each other a few months, he learned...
Keeping the Front Door Open

my vocation. “What?” he said, “you’re a pastor! Now I have to think again about all the jokes I told you.” The ordination form for Ministers of the Word says we are “called not only to serve those who are already members of the church of Christ, but also to engage in and to promote the work of evangelism.” The form for elders agrees. Having “evangelism stories” as a regular agenda item might be one way to make council meetings more interesting.

Hospitality for “Messy People”

Last week our elders received a letter that said, “At Christmas my son and his wife were visiting. I knew that I could bring them with their tattoos and piercings and that they would not feel judged. They really enjoyed the service and said, ‘If there was a church like yours back home, we would attend.’” Over the years we’ve had all sorts of people in our services and events: Mormons, couples “living together,” bikers, suburban professionals, white-haired great-grandparents and blue-haired teenagers. We cannot know in advance how people will look or behave.

One attendee swore in the church parking lot and later at a small group. She wasn’t trying to offend; she just hadn’t learned proper “church behavior.” Eventually she became a different, Christian person. Years later, when wheeled into the operating room for multiple cancer surgeries, she clutched Bible verses in her hand. She had become a new person, in part because she was welcomed as an unpolished person. At her funeral half the folks were her church friends, the other half were her old drinking buddies. During the party after her funeral the attendees didn’t split into groups, but laughed and reminisced together.

Over the years, we’ve tried all sorts of things to keep our church mission-directed. We’ve studied neighborhood demographics, read books, and attended seminars. Small group leaders have started “seeker groups.” Children’s ministry teams have hosted “Christmas Carol and Kids” nights. Another group has hosted “wine and cheese” parties. Our elders recently listened to a tape on “missional churches.” Some ideas work better than others. Recently, after moving into our new facility, we began a Saturday night “Vintage” worship service. We hoped it would reach a whole new segment of our community. It died after nine weeks.

My soccer friend eventually started coming to church. So did his wife and four children. But after a few weeks they stopped. When I asked why they replied that they didn’t like to hear about “sin.” Two years later, the Sunday after September 11, 2001, they came back. Several months later I baptized the entire family! Being a missional church is always messy, always risky, always uphill, and always rewarding.

Keeping the Front Door Open

REFLECTIONS ON EVANGELISM

Closing the Back Door

Bill came to Christ and to Hillside in one of the best ways possible—he saw the body of Christ in action. One of our members had a baby, and Bill watched as this family received meals and support from their small group at church. Bill felt a need to experience that kind of community, started attending church, made a commitment to Christ, and then joined the church and was part of a small group himself.

Five years later Bill drifted away. He wasn’t mad about anything. He just sort of slid away. Occasionally one of us will see Bill and ask how he’s doing. He sometimes attends another church (more charismatic), but not regularly. He says maybe he’ll come back to Hillside, but neither of us thinks we’ll see him.

Bill’s not the only one we’ve had this experience with. We’ve worked hard at reaching out to people who are not Christians. We’ve seen them discover something new in a relationship with Jesus Christ. They become a part of us, but then a year or two or three later, we stop seeing some of them. They drift away.

What do we do? How do we hold on to those whom God has found? And what about long-term Christians and members of our church? How do we keep them from joining the large number of Christians who continually move from one church to another?
We wish we could give you a short list of things we’ve done that have solved the problem, but we can’t. We’re still struggling to figure it out. What we intend to do here is to share some of our thoughts and struggles on our journey. Here are five lessons we’re learning.

First, we’re learning that the best way to keep people in church is to get them connected to something more than the Sunday morning worship service. The sooner we can get them involved in a small group or serving in a meaningful ministry, the more likely they are to feel connected and stay with us. If the only connection people have to the church is Sunday morning worship, they may stay for a while but will often drift away. We’ve also found that if we depend on Sunday mornings to keep people connected we feel tremendous pressure to make that time ever-more exciting, new, and (dare we say it?) entertaining. If we put all our eggs in the Sunday morning basket, we need to hit a home run with every service because that is why people are coming. If we’re not good enough for a few weeks in a row, they’ll find someone who is. We believe that it is much more helpful (for keeping people and for discipleship) to get people involved in a small group or serving in a ministry of some sort. When they are connected in those ways they have much stronger reasons to stay.

Second, we’re learning that we need to keep preaching and teaching on what the Bible teaches about the church. In an age in which the church is seen as a service station and members consider themselves customers and consumers, we need to help people see what the church is really supposed to be. Certainly the gospel is good news and we are passionate about sharing that news. But we also need to teach a biblical ecclesiology that keeps Christ at the center rather than man. Until people understand the role and purpose of the church we will forever be looking for new strategies to satisfy the demands of our customers.

Third, we’ve learned that it’s best to be very clear about the vision, goals, and expectations of the church. At almost every new members class we will say that Hillside is not a church for everyone. This is not to say that we don’t welcome everyone, but to recognize that we have a certain theology (Reformed) and we have certain passions and practices. Even something like our size allows us to do certain things (offer a greater variety of programs) but also prevents us from doing other things (knowing everyone in the church). Being clear about these things helps people to have a better idea of whether our church is a place that God is calling them to serve and grow.

Fourth, we’re learning that those who are leaving can provide some of the best help in learning where we have room to grow. It is not fun to call folks who are leaving the church and ask them why they are leaving, especially when you have a sense that you might be at least part of the reason they are leaving. We’ve heard things about our failure as pastors to contact members at important times in their lives, such as at the loss of a loved one or the birth of a baby. We’ve heard about how our need to control things has caused deep hurts. We’ve heard about frustrations with other members or programs that weren’t working well. While we’d like to believe that these things aren’t true, we have had to recognize that some (more than we’d like to admit) of these criticisms have been exactly right, and we have had to apologize and make a commitment to do better.

Finally, we’re learning that sometimes it is appropriate to clearly challenge someone on a reason for leaving. If members are leaving because of a conflict with one of us or with another member, we attempt to challenge them and say that even if you do leave the church, you still need to deal with the conflict you are having with this person. If someone is leaving to avoid dealing with a difficult issue in his or her own life, we want to encourage that person to deal with the real issue and not run. These conversations are not easy, but we believe they are necessary.

It’s a lot more fun to celebrate the people who are joining the church than it is to face the fact that there are also people who are leaving. But those people matter to God as well, and they might be able to teach us some of the lessons we really need to learn. Working on the back door isn’t easy, but it is part of being faithful in ministry.
n my church heritage (the Christian and Missionary Alliance and various independent Bible Churches) we often viewed the Bible as a “how to” manual for evangelism. We learned how to take someone through the Gospel of John, using key texts that outlined the “plan of salvation.” We utilized the “Romans Road,” which mapped out Paul’s letter to the Romans in such a way that we could show someone the way to heaven. Or, if we really knew our Bibles well, we presented the gospel simply by prooftexting our way through the New Testament.

We prided ourselves in knowing that we were “ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15 KJV). Our propositions were logical and rational, and we were convinced that we were accurately speaking for God—though, truth be told, few people ever did ask us for the reason for our hope. Nevertheless we were ready, with some degree of meekness and a healthy dose of fear. We were convinced that this was the way the Bible told us to witness—a way that in actuality reflected late twentieth-century North American culture far more than the Bible.

While I do believe that many people have been introduced to Jesus Christ through the above methods, I no longer believe this is the best way to use the Bible in sharing my faith. However, I do believe we ought to share the gospel using generous references to Scripture. I challenge students in my classes at the seminary to avoid the above-mentioned prooftexting, propositional models and be prepared instead to share the gospel through the dominant themes of Scripture. The Bible is above all else a book of stories—all summed up in one grand drama, consisting of four acts with scenes too numerous to count. This grand story is best told in vintage Reformed terminology: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation.

God is the main character in the Bible’s storyline. This focus on God flies in the face of the “me” focus of many evangelistic presentations. Such presentations easily focus the attention on a “wonderful plan” for the individual who is the target of our evangelistic enterprise. This is bad theology. True evangelism has a singular theme and focus—God: as Creator, Judge, Redeemer, and coming King.

Besides being true to Scripture, a story centered on God offers a “softer” approach to evangelism (which more fittingly follows the NIV translation of 1 Peter 3:15, “…do this with gentleness and respect”). As I interact with my neighbor or coworker, I might talk about creation and environmental issues, for example. Instead of emphasizing that she is a sinner and that she must accept Christ, I point her to the Genesis story of God, the author of all creation, who made all things good in the beginning.

I might continue by sharing the Genesis story of human disobedience and failure, which results in a fallen creation, and the corruption of humankind. The Bible’s storyline demonstrates human hearts’ capacity for deceit and pride and selfishness, which results not only in so-called personal sins but in corporate sins as well (for example, our failure to care for the environment and our failure to care for “the least of these” in our midst).

In telling my neighbor the story of the Bible, I might outline for them the story of God’s chosen people Israel. They are to be a light to the nations. God desires that they be a righteous people known for good works. “He has told you … what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8, NRSV).

I might introduce my neighbor to the Bible by telling the story of Jesus, who did not carry a little booklet to illustrate the Four Spiritual Laws (one that I as a college student used many times while accosting strangers sunning in the sand at New York State’s popular vacation spot in Lake George), but who lived the gospel by his example. Jesus simply said, “Come, follow me.”

In practicing this evangelism, we need to keep in mind that we ourselves need to be evangelized; Jesus is talking to us too. If I am not following Jesus as a disciple, how can I call others to come follow along? If I am not following the Lord by serving others, for example, by ministering at a local homeless shelter, how can I call my next-door neighbor to come along? If I am not giving up two Saturdays to work on a Habitat house, how can I ask my coworker to come and help out? The evangelistic call to follow Jesus comes first to me and then through me to others.

Good evangelism is not the verbal presentation of a set of laws or principles or seven Bible verses strung together. Evangelism is pointing others to God as he is revealed in Scripture and calling others to come along and follow Jesus, as we ourselves follow and serve Jesus.

Is the Bible then superfluous? No, indeed. Without the Bible there would be no witness. For that reason, I always include Scripture passages in my course outlines, and I challenge my students to use those texts not only when they are facing faculty members in their oral exams but also—and most importantly—when they are sharing their faith with others. I cannot teach missions and evangelism courses without teaching the Bible.

The longer I teach the more I realize that I learn more from my students than they learn from me. Some of my students have come straight from college. But many come to seminary with years of experience: a firefighter, a mega-church pastor, attorneys, teachers, farmers, and missionaries too numerous to mention. Indeed,
my most important education has come from my students—inside and outside the classroom. And as I contemplate sharing the gospel through the grand narrative of Scripture—Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation—I sit at the feet of one of my students.

Yeon-Jeong Kim and his wife Anne have both been in my classes, and I’ve come to know their children Hanna and David as well. Their homeland is Korea; they have served as missionaries in the Philippines and Nepal. In class and through the research and writing of his Th.M. thesis, Yeon-Jeong brought the grand narrative of Scripture to life. I had challenged him to be true to his own culture, to tell stories, to share his own experiences in ministry. He worried that such things might not be scholarly enough for an academic thesis. But I pushed and prodded, and the final product was the finest thesis I’ve mentored in my teaching career.

Yeon-Jeong’s thesis demonstrated that there were points of contact between the biblical worldview and the traditional East Asian worldview. He showed how the elements of the biblical story could be shared in that culture, and gave me a model for thinking about my own culture and how to share the gospel here in my own context. His focus on creation drew from his Asian background—from paintings and music and literature. He evoked feelings of awe and reverence for God’s creation that made my Kuyperian Reformational worldview seem small. That awe and wonder of creation is the starting point in the story of God. And Scripture is our source. The Genesis story of the glory of God’s created work must take hold of us before we can effectively communicate the gospel with others. The gospel message starts with creation.

Evangelism is not four verses or seven rules or twelve steps. It is the story of God and his great love for us.

The matter of sin is a bit more tricky. The sin of eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden is a difficult and much debated matter among biblical scholars. For one not schooled in biblical teachings, the story may make little sense. How do we explain it to someone sitting beside us on a two-hour flight to Phoenix—whether that person is a Korean corporate executive or an American university student? Yeon-Jeong’s approach helped me. Without becoming bogged down in trying to explain the Fall, he moved beyond to the horrific results. We best understand sin though murder and death, the story of Cain and Abel. For Asians this ultimate breach of filial piety is a potent story—as it is for all of us. The results of sin infect the whole of human nature and the whole of God’s good creation.

In explaining redemption, once again Yeon-Jeong is my teacher. Love and sacrifice in his culture (and perhaps Western culture as well) is most often represented by the mother. Here Yeon-Jeong drew from a wealth of stories and poems and songs that speak of the heart of the mother—the one who would give her very life for her children. But a mother’s love pales in comparison to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The gospel stories of Christ’s passion are at the heart of the biblical drama. Jesus died to redeem us, and the story of that death speaks clearly in an Asian context.

Yeon-Jeong has now returned to Nepal, where he is retelling that story as an evangelist in a way that makes sense in his East Asian culture, and where he is living a lifestyle that fits that story. Evangelism is not four verses or seven rules or twelve steps. It is the story of God and his great love for us. It is a story that is not only contextualized to our own culture but also woven into the multicultural fabric of humanity. To effectively tell that story we must immerse ourselves in the Bible, allowing it to shape our lives, and retell the biblical story both verbally and through our lifestyle. Our role in this drama is as complex as it is simple—following Jesus as a disciple in word and deed and calling others to come along.

The Kim Family (l. to r.): Hanna, Yeon-Jeong, David, and Anne.
Giving a Reason for the Faith
Apologetics and Evangelism in Postmodern Culture

Postmodern Questions

Have you ever spoken with a non-Christian acquaintance about the gospel? People can raise lots of questions. “How do you know the Bible is true and the Qur’an or Book of Mormon is not?” “How do you know that Jesus’ resurrection is fact, not fiction?” “If Christianity is the real thing, why do so many Christians act worse than non-Christians?” “Are all the rest of us going to hell?” Non-Christians have lots of issues with the claim that Christianity is the only Truth.

If you’ve taught high school catechism or been in an adult discussion group, you know that Christians wonder about these things too. Even some of us who profess Jesus as Lord and Savior can be uncomfortable with stating that other religions are false and dangerous. It is especially hard to say these things to good non-Christian friends.

Agnosticism (the belief that we don’t know and really can’t know about ultimate Truth) is especially characteristic of contemporary culture, often labeled postmodernism. Postmodernism is a variety of outlooks that modify modernism—the Enlightenment belief that human reason can determine the Truth using science and optimize humanity with the right technology and social system. The World Wars and Cold War convinced most people that modernism is a false god: religion hasn’t died out; conflicts between religions and ideologies still threaten world peace. Responding to the failure of modernism, postmodernism has more limited expectations of reason, technology, and politics, and focuses on helping us get along in spite of our limitations and differences. Postmodernism makes some sense.

But there is a problem in postmodern thought in the way it views Truth in a world with a plurality of religious and cultural traditions. Postmodernism asserts that there are various truths, so it celebrates the diversity of religions and cultures. Any claim that one perspective is the Truth for all people is considered arrogant, intolerant, and oppressive. Postmodernism rejects traditional religions (such as Christianity and Islam) and modern philosophies (such as scientific humanism and Marxism) that claim to have Truth. It preaches, “I’m OK, you’re OK,” to a pluralistic culture.

This attitude is in the air we breathe. For many of the non-Christians with whom we want to share the gospel, it’s simply common sense. Even committed Christians are affected by it. As ambassadors of Christ, we must deal with it directly and helpfully.

“Pop-postmodernism”

A caricature of postmodernism, call it “pop-postmodernism,” celebrates a non-intellectual approach to life. It claims that the average person no longer even cares about the “head knowledge” involved in the search for Truth. People are pursuing more important things—having successful “journeys” and fulfilling relationships, sharing their stories, making a difference, and feeling good about it all. Pop-postmodernism suggests that contemporary people don’t want, don’t need, and can’t handle sustained thought about Truth.

Some Christian ministries reflect pop-postmodernism. Their approach to worship, evangelism, and discipling effectively engages postmodern feelings, attitudes, and cultural tastes. They present the Truth of Jesus Christ. But they tend to avoid “left-brain” or “linear” thinking. Expositional preaching, doctrinal instruction, and contemporary Christian world-view are marginal or absent. A few proponents of pop-postmodern Christianity dismiss concern for theology and apologetics as a hangover of modern rationalism.

But pop-postmodernism is misrepresentation. Postmodernism, in fact, strongly endorses critical thinking even though it rejects rationalism. The way to engage postmodern people is not by avoiding questions of Truth. A wiser, more biblical approach to ministry addresses our minds as well as our feelings, relationships, and lifestyles. God made us in his image as unities of body, mind, soul, and spirit to live in relationship with others and with him. Christian ministry ought to address minds as integral aspects of whole persons, especially when culture thoughtfully questions Truth.

I do not claim that the mind is most important or that ministry should marginalize people’s feelings, relationships, and aspirations. Admittedly, sometimes Christianity, including our own tradition, has been too intellectual, emphasizing doctrine while overlooking matters of the heart and life. Sometimes our theological wrangling has wounded souls, split Christ’s church, and diverted its mission. But marginalizing knowledge of the Truth is an equal and opposite mistake. Let’s pursue an integral approach to life and ministry. Apologetics makes an important contribution.

The Importance of Apologetics

Apologetics uses the best reasons we have to defend God’s revealed Truth from
charges that it is false, harmful, or unbelievable. In classical Greece, an apology was not an expression of regret but a defense of the accused in court. Socrates' trial was an apology. But apologetics is not Greek philosophy imposed on Christianity. It is urged by Scripture. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet. 3:15). The Greek word for “answer” is apologia, from which we get the term apologetics—giving reasons for the faith. Paul’s case before Agrippa, his sermon to the Athenian philosophers, and his defense of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 use apologetics. To support his claims, he gives reasons that might be persuasive to the persons he is addressing.

In each historical situation, Christians have done the same. In the early church apologetics developed as Christians answered charges that Jesus’ resurrection was a fraud and that worship of Jesus was treason to the Emperor. During the Crusades, Thomas Aquinas’s Summa contra gentiles The Case against Unbelievers was a handbook for educated Christians to use in debate with Muslims. Pascal responded to Enlightenment deism, rationalism, and atheism. In the nineteenth century, Darwinism and higher criticism elicited responses from learned Christians, including the Reformed theologians Hodge, Warfield, Kuyper, and Bavinck. C.S. Lewis and Pope John Paul II were great twentieth-century apologists who took on secular humanism, Marxism, and religious pluralism. Apologetics has been important for Christian witness.

Apologetics in today’s culture must address pluralism. Before people will consider whether the gospel is the Truth, they need to be convinced that it’s OK to claim to have the Truth. Consider how the following story could help postmodernists see why it might be “reasonable” to say “Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”

A young doctor was visiting a country where an epidemic broke out. The disease was fatal, progressed slowly, and had to be treated early. Local doctors offered various medicines, all of which were ultimately ineffective. The visiting doctor knew the real cure because she had studied with the scientist who discovered it. Local people preferred their own doctors and distrusted the visitor: “How dare she say, ‘I have the cure. Your doctors don’t’?” But she was right. Those who took her treatment lived. Those who stayed with local doctors died.

This story can help pluralists see a couple of things. First, it is not always false and immoral for someone to say, “I have the Truth.” In fact, it would be false and immoral for the young doctor not to share her truth. Second, everything depends on whether the young doctor does have the truth. If her treatment is just another folk remedy, her claim is false and immoral. But if she really has the truth from an authoritative source, then she must say so. Truth can be OK.

The point is this: If Christianity is just another product of human culture, then we have no right to claim the Truth. But if the gospel is accurate information, otherwise unavailable, from an authoritative source—a revelation from God—then it is true and those who know it must say so and share it.

But now the pluralist asks: How do you know that the Bible is true? We respond by admitting that we can’t prove divine inspiration or the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Luke 1:1-4 is impressive, but it does not prove the factual accuracy of the gospel any more than a witness’s oath in court verifies his testimony. However, no one has disproved what Luke says he so carefully wrote. The power of higher criticism, the Jesus Seminar, and The DaVinci Code to falsify biblical history is vastly overblown. Scholarship supports at least as strong a case that the Gospels are historical as that they are mythical “spin.”

So we can’t prove or disprove that the Bible is Truth. But that does not reduce belief in Scripture to an irrational leap of faith. Even in postmodern culture, we think it is rational to believe people whom we have good reason to think are trustworthy and knowledgeable: doctors, salespersons, witnesses in court. In the same way, the Christian church trusts the Bible because it has good reason to believe that the people who wrote it by God’s inspiration are “trustworthy witnesses” (John 21:24). We can’t prove it, but as far as anyone can tell, the way the biblical books were written and passed on to be canonized by the church is reliable and trustworthy. Scripture has all the earmarks of a trustworthy, knowledgeable witness. It stands up very well in comparison with other alleged revelations from God. We can’t prove that the Bible speaks Truth, but it is reasonable to believe that it does.

Whether postmodern people believe the Word of Truth depends on whether it elicits their trust. Reformed evangelists and apologists leave that to the Holy Spirit. Even on a human level, no amount of reasoning can convince people to trust something they don’t find trustworthy. But trust has its reasons, and apologetics points them out.

Like all ministry, apologetics ought to be done with love and prayer. It ought to respect people’s personalities, educational level, cultural habits, and their cherished beliefs and aspirations as it speaks the Truth in ways that they find relevant and persuasive.
Throughout the past decades churches in the CRC have been introduced to a succession of different evangelism methods and church planting models. In the early 1970s during the “Key 73” evangelistic campaign the “Kennedy Method” of personal evangelism was very popular. Then thousands of pastors and church members were trained to use the Evangelism Explosion method; I remember using this evangelistic technique in Australia and in the Philippines. Campus Crusade came out with their Four Spiritual Laws, the Navigators with their Bridge Illustration, and the Roman Road became popular.

Members of the CRC have used not only these personal evangelistic techniques, but have also worked seriously on techniques and methods for church growth and revitalization. In recent decades many CRC pastors and church leaders have attended seminars at the Crystal Cathedral in California, at Willow Creek Community Church in the Chicago suburbs, and at Saddleback Church in California. Church developers have also worked with Christian Schwarz’s model of “Natural Church Development.”

Today one hears a lot about the “emerging church movement” as offering possible strategies and a new model for doing evangelism in a postmodern context. (For a definition of postmodernism, see the article in this issue written by John Cooper.) The postmodern context brings special challenges to the church, but also wonderful opportunities for evangelism. The postmodern attitude allows room again for a spiritual conversation. There is an intense interest in “spirituality” in North America. Yet many people describe themselves with the words of the title of a recent book: “Spiritual, but not religious.” They see themselves as open to “spiritual” matters, but they identify “religion” with the organized church. Our students at CTS experience this in their efforts to reach out with the gospel. While they find that starting a spiritual conversation is not all that difficult, they learn that moving from a spiritual conversation to a presentation of the gospel can be quite a challenge.

Dr. Paul Visser is the pastor of a Protestant congregation in The Hague, the Netherlands. On the basis of his extensive experience in a very postmodern European context he recently gave us a helpful perspective on such evangelism efforts. He not only presented new possibilities for evangelistic outreach, but also cautioned us that this reawakening of spirituality is not exclusively positive. What I write here follows the basic thrust of his presentation at Calvin Theological Seminary.

We must begin by evaluating postmodern religious experiences and spiritual hunger in the light of Scripture. Our fundamental perspective is this: 1. We are separated from God because of our sin and rebellion. Human beings have turned against God with the idea that they can be gods themselves. In the depths of their being they no longer want to know about God. In the secularized West many have taken radical leave of God without any sense that they are missing anything. 2. But God is not separated from us. Although people may no longer overtly seek after God, in their emptiness they are continually searching for themselves, asking the fundamental questions: Who am I? (for identity); What must I do? (for guidance); How do I escape? (for help); What is my purpose in life? (for meaning). The unbeliever senses that there must be more to life than a flat empirical reality. This sense is the notion of God, a religious consciousness that comes from God who reveals himself through his general revelation. Every person living in the world responds to this.

We are grateful for God’s continuing effort in this respect; the revived religious sensitivity we see in postmodernism is more than simply a human product. But we also must question the content of a person’s revived religiosity. We human beings are highly susceptible to “exchanging the truth of God for a lie” (see Rom. 1:18-25).

Keeping in mind such warnings, we can observe that the postmodern situation does bring about new possibilities for evangelistic outreach. If we want to fulfill our evangelistic task in a relevant and adequate way we must take the other person completely seriously and attempt to understand his source of inspiration; any attitude of arrogant condescension would certainly be a barrier to our witness. The authors of the emerging church movement have something to teach us about this sensitivity. At the same time, we need to do more than simply be sensitive to the person and his culture. Perhaps at this point the emerging church movement tends to be as captive to postmodern culture as it accuses the modern church of being captive to modernity. Reformed evangelism teaches us to look at the spiritual dynamics behind what we see in our culture and evaluate them in light of Scripture.

Those who enter into evangelistic conversations with people living in our post-
modern culture should train themselves in the humility of Christ. We should realize that our efforts are a knock on the door, and we must wait until the other opens the door for us. As we wait we may need to provide places where such conversations can be conducted freely. Many churches have found programs like the Alpha Course (which combines mealtime conversation and small group discussion with instruction) to be very helpful in providing such opportunities.

In having these conversations with unbelievers we must be careful not to make statements that are judgmental and prejudicial about contemporary religious experiences and feelings. Truly listening to another person is vital if an honest conversation is to take place. The postmodern person desires that her individual opinion and authentic experience be honored and accepted, and will be very sensitive as to whether this occurs. It can be helpful to introduce our own authentic personal struggles into the conversation, telling the significance of the great narrative of Scripture from heart to heart via the story of our own real life experience. In one of my courses my students are assigned to share the gospel story to an unbeliever in a meaningful way, telling the broader narrative of the gospel via the personal narrative of what has happened in the student’s own life.

But we must also realize that this conversation, no matter how patiently it may be conducted, can lead to tension. There comes the moment when a person’s religious truths are confronted with the claims of the gospel. And when this happens a purely rational approach in which we attempt to prove the truth of our faith with logical arguments will not convince the other person’s heart. *Meta-noia* (repentance) refers to a change in the *nous*, which is more than the rational part of the mind.

So how do we confront the other with the gospel of Christ? It comes down to encountering another person with the sincere desire that Christ will do with that person what Christ has done with us through the Holy Spirit—enlightening the eyes of our heart (Eph. 1:18), offering a surprising and discovering insight that convinced us of the truth of the gospel. In this context one should see the unbeliever’s religious experiences and convictions as responses to God’s speaking. Ask which points of contact with the Bible are present and speak to this person’s life. Be willing to explore with the unbeliever, in a questioning way, seeking the deepest meaning of his religious experiences and desires and holding them up to the light of the Bible. Ask, “What have you done with God? and “What will you do with God?”—basic evangelistic questions that are applicable in any culture or context.

In the end, it must come to light whether rebellion hides behind a person’s postmodern religious experience—whether they would prefer to be equal to God rather than submit to him. It is at this point that the phrase “making the gospel relevant for today” becomes problematic. God has determined that the gospel is relevant for the sinner’s most basic need; it is not the world that determines whether the gospel is relevant or not. The Bible teaches us that unless one is born again one cannot see the Kingdom of God and cannot understand the relevance of the gospel. Of course, the way this message is brought will be impacted by the particular cultural context.

Above all, we must remember the cross of Christ as God’s answer to our struggle. The cross shows us how all our attempts are under judgment, but also how God responds to our hostility with redemption, to our guilt with grace, and to our resistance with love. This is where our hearts must be as we engage in evangelistic conversations—in complete dependence on the Holy Spirit, remembering that we are no different from or better than the person with whom we are in contact. We ourselves must be continually convinced of the truth of the gospel over against the resistance of our own hearts.

This is not an easy thing to teach. This is not an easy thing for a professor to model in his or her own life. Yet it is one of the keys for more fervent evangelistic pastors and congregations. It is not the method or the program but the hearts of the people bringing the message that is of primary importance.

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Formation for Ministry at CTS

Formation is fast becoming a household word around Calvin Theological Seminary as the seminary’s curriculum is reshaped around the goal of “Theological Education as Formation for Ministry.” As reported in our last issue (Spring 2005), all incoming MDiv and MA students this fall are taking a new interdisciplinary course by that title, affectionately known as the “formation course.” There are 70 students taking the course with Professor David Rylaarsdam, who won an award from the Yale Center for Faith and Culture for his course proposal. Underlying this course is the seminary faculty’s conviction that preparation for ministry involves not only giving information, but encouraging a process of deep personal, spiritual formation.

This new emphasis on formation has brought a number of other changes at CTS, especially in the area of field education. Students who take the formation course continue with that theme in formation for ministry groups, in a mentoring relationship, and in ministry practices in local congregations. In the summertime they will also participate in formational internship experiences, including an immersion experience in a cross-cultural or horizon-expanding setting, and in a congregational setting. All of these experiences will culminate in the final installment of the formation course in their last year of seminary.

The formation for ministry groups of seven to eight students meet weekly with a faculty adviser to integrate spiritual growth, theological studies, and pastoral skills development. Over the course of their education, seminarians will explore their sense of pastoral call, investigate their own personality strengths and growth areas, discover ways to nurture their own spiritual life, and explore the practical skill sets that make effective ministry possible. They will also reflect on their involvement in ministry practices in local churches by bringing case studies to the group for discussion.

This new emphasis on ministry formation will be enhanced by meaningful involvement in the church community. Part of that involvement is a mentoring relationship with a pastor or other ministry leader. And, if possible, mentors are asked to provide opportunities within their place of ministry for students to complete at least some aspects of their ministry practices portfolios. Ideally, the relationship between mentor and student will expand into a relationship that the student builds with a local congregation. Our hope is that churches will take a personal interest in our students and their families, and provide supportive contexts as students prepare to fulfill their vocational callings.

A key goal of this new program is to make better connections between the seminary and churches and ministry organizations. One more new feature of the curriculum is a service-learning day (see p. 15) in which students are involved in a day of service at local ministry sites, followed by theological reflection on those activities in their formation for ministry groups. We hope students formed by this service experience and its integration of head, heart, and hands will continue to be involved in service throughout their seminary years.
Leadership in church plant settings requires deep conviction, passion, and vision. But church-planting leaders today point out that articulating the vision is usually not as challenging as finding the convergence of that vision, with this pastor, with this group and its particular gifts, in this community, at this time.

This was just one insight gained from a recent consultation CTS hosted to listen to church planters from Alberta, California, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, and Ontario. The purpose of the conversation was for professors at CTS to learn more about the thrills and challenges of church planting in order to enhance the seminary’s education for people who are headed for that type of ministry, and to help sustain them through lifelong learning opportunities.

The two-day conversation covered many topics, and especially focused on the challenge of presenting the gospel in its entirety, in a language and context that people will understand. That’s what keeps church planters up at night. Their desire is for people to hear the whole truth about the gospel, yet they have to do it in a way that people can understand.

CTS is committed to this age-old mission principle and learned much about how to apply that principle to contemporary church planting. The Center for Excellence in Preaching is making efforts to help church planters apply this principle in their particular settings. In March 2005, it sponsored a preaching workshop on computer-based exegesis for church planters in the Sacramento area, and is ready to offer the workshop in more locations. The Center is also supporting a peer learning group of church planters in the Calgary area as they meet together to discuss the relationship between preaching and culture; this group has had conversations with Duane Kelderman and Neal Plantinga of CTS, and Richard Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary. Another group of church planters from sites around Michigan is meeting at CTS once a month for lunchtime discussions on how to use the Heidelberg Catechism in preaching to and reaching out to postmodern seekers; Stan Mast, pastor of LaGrave Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, leads this group.

CTS hopes to increase its connections with church planters in the future—through regular invitations to church planters to attend continuing education events (either at the seminary or in their own settings), to speak to students at our mission emphasis week, and to provide learning sites and mentors for students in the formation for ministry process. We hope the conversation will continue so we can listen and learn together about forming pastors for this important ministry.
We Need Each Other
by Gary Brouwers, Pastor of Hollandale CRC, Hollandale, Minnesota

We were five different individuals coming from five very different careers trying to be obedient to God’s call. We came knowing that God wanted us at seminary but not at all sure how we were going to get through it. But God blessed us, we graduated, and now we are a group of five different pastors fulfilling five different callings. And of all the gifts we received from our seminary education, this group of friends is one of the best. We need each other.

We met one another through our classes at the seminary, but it wasn’t just mutual class assignments that drew us together. There was a passion in each person that was attractive to the others. Each passion was unique. One saw the theme of worship running through each class, for others it was missions. One saw the freedom that Christ brings and another consistently applied pastoral care.

Those themes determined, to a large extent, the type of ministry we took up after seminary, and these differences continue to make our group stronger. Without the balance of one another, we tend to become myopic. When we communicate, we know that we will be inspired toward missions by some, toward worship by others; and each person’s tendency toward one aspect of ministry brings balance to us all.

But our group is more than simply a ministry resource. Our lives are open to one another. We can trust each other. We’ve taken risks by opening up to each other, and we each have been received with love. We try out ideas on each other, knowing that even absurd ideas will be handled honestly but gently. We can share personal struggles easily with one another, because we know that the others have also had their share of personal challenges.

Our group is now separated across the United States, and being together physically is becoming more difficult. We’ve been able to participate in each other’s ordinations, for the most part. We’ve been able to attend conferences and classes together once a year since we graduated. E-mail has been an effective way to stay in touch, but nothing substitutes the real-time connection of seeing and hearing individuals or the group as a whole.

But we still need each other, and that awareness keeps us diligent in maintaining contact. When one member has been silent for a while, others in the group will check in. It’s wonderful to know that there are others watching out for us, making sure we don’t slip away into isolation or unhealthy habits. We stick together. We have to. We need each other.

The Power of Peer Learning Groups
by Kathy Smith, Director of Continuing Education

“The best continuing education I’ve ever had.” That’s how pastors in peer learning groups describe their experience. Recent research on this growing trend in continuing education shows that pastors are excited about peer learning groups, and congregations are benefiting as well. Bruce Roberts of Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis conducted a peer group program and an evaluation of such groups and found that “congregations are telling us that they have noticed a difference in their pastors—that the pastors have been more energetic, have started more programs, and have interacted better with the congregations than they had before” (Marlis McCollum, “A Journey with One’s Peers: The Power of Group Learning Programs,” Congregations, Vol. 31, No. 3, Summer 2005).

Why are peer learning groups so successful? In the same article, Larry Dill says that “the key principles underlying the peer group learning model’s success are that the groups are self-selecting, they design their own learning agenda, they study together over time, and the members hold each other accountable for the learnings.”

Many graduates of CTS are involved in peer learning groups, largely due to grants available from the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program of the CRC. One group consisting of five members of the class of 2002 reflected on their experience and assigned group member Gary Brouwers to write it up. We hope their story will encourage you to think about a peer learning group for yourself—or your pastor.
Students Reach Out to Serve and Learn

Service to others is a critical piece of our spiritual formation; so practicing service is also important. On Thursday, September 29, 2005, over 70 Calvin Theological Seminary students took to the city of Grand Rapids for our first Service-Learning Day, partnering in service with agencies such as Habitat for Humanity, Cherry Street Health Services, Mel Trotter Ministries, Safe Haven, and many more. All first-year MA and MDiv students participated as a part of the new Formation for Ministry course that explores personal formation and how habits developed during their theological education are vital to a life of ministry practices. Several other students, faculty, and staff also volunteered.

Whether by building a house or serving food to the homeless, scrubbing toilets or providing a listening ear, service demonstrates our obedience to Christ's call to love our neighbors. However, in service, there is an interesting twist: service also provides us with an opportunity to be formed more into the likeness of Christ. Those we traditionally think of as “being served” are actually also serving us: they provide settings for our learning and growth, and share with us their culture, heritage, and friendship. In service-learning we live out the upside-down, “last shall be first” nature of God’s kingdom in which servers are served and teachers become learners. To learn this attitude of service in our daily lives is vital — in our own Christian life, and as we lead others to a life with Christ.

New Faces at CTS

We are excited to announce the addition of four new faces to the faculty and staff of CTS.

Dr. Darwin Glassford has begun teaching church education and directing our MA programs. He brings much teaching and administrative experience to CTS, most recently sixteen years at Montreat College in North Carolina where he served as assistant academic dean and professor of Bible and Christian education. He writes, “My interest and approach to this area of ministry is informed by experience as a church educator and youth worker along with specialized interest in the equipping process, youth and family ministry, and contemporary youth culture.”

Rev. Scott Hoezee is the new director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching. After fifteen years of weekly preaching in two congregations and writing several books, Hoezee is now working to help other preachers in the “always difficult, yet utterly vital, task of proclaiming the Word of God to a world starving for the gospel’s good news.” Currently he is busy organizing events and providing a wealth of web resources at the new CEP website: http://cep.calvinseminary.edu.

Rev. Robert Heerspink is helping CTS develop a new field education program in his part-time position as Ministry Practices Specialist. He continues to serve as pastor of Faith Community CRC in Wyoming, Michigan. CTS has begun a Formation for Ministry program with new students, which includes involvement with mentors and local churches, and Heerspink is helping students to make connections with churches and mentors. His goal is “to assist students as they walk the paths that integrate theological study, ministry practice, and personal spiritual formation.”

Dr. Ronald Sjoerdsma has also joined the CTS staff in the part-time position of Online Education Center Development Specialist. A professor of education at Calvin College, Sjoerdsma has great interest and experience in the area of technology and education. His vision is “to assist in the development of the CTS Online Education Center so that CTS is better able to reach a wide audience of students and local church leaders and members with excellent leadership concepts along with quality biblical and theological knowledge.”

Heerspink and Sjoerdsma joined the CTS staff as part of the Making Connections Initiative. For more information on all these new faces, please see our faculty and staff bios at www.calvinseminary.edu.
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