Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Several months ago I got the assignment to write the lead piece for this issue on sin. The editor of *Forum*, namely, my colleague John Cooper, helpfully noted that I was “the obvious choice for this topic.”

It’s true that I’ve been thinking and writing about sin for many years. A main conclusion I’ve drawn is that, like an addiction, our sinfulness damages not only those we sin against, but also our own judgment and will.

A woman who has gotten into the habit of lying might eventually find it hard to tell the difference between a lie and the truth. Whatever’s convenient seems “true” to her. She now lies because she’s a liar. And she has no particular desire to change. Similarly, a man who thinks women are “broads” might feel insulted—and angry—when a woman refuses to be treated like a broad. The reason is that he feels entitled to his sexism, and he feels sure that she isn’t entitled to object to it. His sexism has corrupted his judgment.

When we sin we corrupt ourselves. Evil starts to look normal to us. In a racist culture, racism will look normal. In a secular culture, indifference toward God will look normal, as it does in much secular education. Human character forms culture, but culture also forms human character. And the formation runs not only across regions and peoples, but also along generations. A boy can “inherit” his father’s sexist idea that men ought to dominate women. A daughter can “inherit” her mother’s sexist idea that women ought to let men do it.

The result of all this corruption is devastating. Each of us has been born into a world in which, for centuries, sin has damaged the great interactive network of *shalom*—twisting the thousands of bonds that give particular beings integrity and that tie them to others. Sin is thus a *dynamic* motif in Christian thinking: it is not just a particular breach of conduct. It’s a multiplying power, a kind of spiritual AIDS that eventually breaks everything down and opens the way for hordes of opportunistic sins.

Sin is why our world needs its Savior. And self-deception about sin is a reason to speak candidly about sin and its miseries. That’s principally why good colleagues and I have devoted this issue of *Forum* to a topic we all would rather ignore.

Grace and peace,

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.
The first thing to say about sin is that it spoils everything. Recall the Bible's opening chapters: In the beginning, God delights in his creation. Like an artist stepping back from his day's work, God keeps saying “Good!” And when the work is done, God exults in it. "Very good!” says God.

Creation is an overflowing of God's love and hospitality. It was his idea to make room for others and his nature to do it with supreme exuberance and command. The result was a wonder, a world of deep orders and beauties superintended by its crowning species—human beings created to be God's spit and image.

Only five chapters later (Gen. 6:5) these marvelous beings are already hopelessly corrupt. Human beings had become "wicked," with their hearts full of "evil all the time." In words of unimaginable consternation and sorrow, the narrator tells us of God's response to human sin. The God who had been filled with an almost boyish enthusiasm at his work, now grieves over it: “The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled” (v. 6).

Next the flood, which is uncreation, the first stage of God's anguished do-over of his original project.

For centuries, theologians have worried about an anguished and regretful God. I understand. But I don't want to lose what the Bible is teaching me with stories of God's creation and uncreation. The stories say that sin spoils everything, even for God, and that the fitting response to it is grief.

A Definition and Some Distinctions

The reason sin is a spoiler is that it's a species of evil. Evil is what's wrong with the world, and it includes trouble in nature as well as in human nature. It includes disease as well as theft, birth defects as well as character defects. We might define evil as any spoiling of shalom, any deviation from the way God wants things to be. Thinking along these lines, we can see that sin is a subset of evil: it's any evil for which somebody is to blame, whether as an individual or as a member of a group. All sin is evil, but not all evil is sin. A killing by a two-year-old who picks up a gun is a terrible evil, but not an actual sin, at least not by the two-year-old. But a premeditated killing by a drug dealer of a drug enforcement officer is both evil and sinful. We could say, in short, that sin is culpable evil.

This means that sin isn't quite the same thing as disease. True, sinful acts sometimes cause disease, as when promiscuous sex causes AIDS. But having AIDS isn't by itself sinful, as we know from the millions of women and babies who contract it only because of a husband and father's promiscuity. True, also, that disease is a favorite image of sin: “What he did,” we say, “was so sick.” Still, the two evils remain distinct because sin is a spiritual evil and disease is a physical one. We thus need saving grace for our sin and healing mercy for our diseases.

Sin isn't quite the same thing as addiction, either. Just as in the case of disease, sinful acts can cause addictions, as when a man hooks himself on booze by freely consuming a lot of it for ten years. In general, the sins of appetite—greed, gluttony, lust—are especially likely to show some of the main dynamics of addiction: desire for pleasurable mood
Sin

change, obsession, compulsion, and, especially, tragic attempts to relieve distress by partaking of the same thing that caused it (think of curing a hangover with a morning binge). But these classic dynamics don't show up in all forms of sin. A person who simply "forgets God," as Jeremiah so often laments, isn't at all likely to be seeking a mood change, or to be obsessed with his sin. And this is true of other listless sins, too, such as mindless conformity to local bigotry. Not all sin is addictive. And not all addictions are sinful. After all, some addictions start in the womb. Some start from innocent use of prescribed medication. Addictions in these cases look a lot less like sin than like physical evils for which the addict needs not God's forgiveness, but his healing mercy.

Is all sin equally bad? Most Christians have said no. And they have had Jesus on their side. Speaking of those who reject the words and deeds of gospel grace, our Lord used the formula "more tolerable for Sodom than for you" (Matt. 10:15; 11:20-24). His followers do generally believe that all sin is equally wrong because all of it spoils shalom. But they've noticed that some sins spoil shalom a lot more than others do. Given a choice, our neighbor would rather have us covet his Lexus than steal it. Most Christians have thought that covetousness is a bad sin because it corrupts the heart and may also lead to theft. But they have thought theft was worse than covetousness because it damages more than the heart of the thief. And they have thought envy worse than covetousness because envy (resentment of the good fortune of others) clusters in the heart with pride and malice, and may thus lead to murder. Think of Cain. Bad enough for Cain to resent his brother Abel: worse to act on his resentment.

But there are mysteries in this neighborhood. Most of us would say that adultery in one's heart damages others less than adultery at the Marriott. And yet, adultery in one's heart may corrupt us in subtle, progressive ways, rippling out unpredictably to affect others, so that the final tally in grievousness between adultery in one's heart and adultery in a hotel room may be closer than we think.

In the System

The power of sin to spoil things is compounded by its terrible tendency to get into systems and corrupt them. We will never understand sin until we face the fact that sin is not only personal, but also interpersonal and even suprapersonal. Sin is far more than the sum of what sinners do. Sin becomes a power of darkness when it gets into the bowels of institutions and traditions and makes a home in them.

So the Romans, for example, made a habit of crucifying their enemies. It became part of their mystique. Like all terrorists their goal was not only to cause pain, but also and especially to cause fear. So they turned the torture of troublemakers into a public spectacle. And the whole thing—the practice of public torture, the fear of it, the silencing of enemies, the use of informants to spy on enemies of the state—became a power of darkness, no matter what Satan's personal role in it was. A power can be a demon, but also a practice, a pattern of expectation, a structure of iniquity.

Genesis 4 shows us terrorism getting into the family system of the human race. In the land of Nod Cain starts a family and passes sin down the generations like a gene. At the sixth generation, the Genesis narrator pauses to snap a picture of a homicidal braggart by the name of Lamech.

"Lamech said to his wives: 'Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." (Gen. 4:23-24)

You hit me, I kill you. You kill one of mine, I kill seventy of yours. Don't mess with me. Pass the word on.

Notice one other little piece of terrorism in this text. Lamech wants his whole village to know that he's a thug so they'll fear him and favor him. But who's his first audience? Lamech said to his wives: "Listen to me. I kill guys who even think of raising their hand to me. Do you get the message? Adah? Zillah?"

From there, the history of sin and corruption moves on, down the ages, in a cast of billions. Each new generation, and each new person, reaps what others have sown, and then sows what others will reap. This is true not only of goodness, but also of evil, which each generation not only receives, but also ratifies by its own sin. Terrorists, for example, do not think of themselves as others think of them—irrational zealots consumed by nameless malice that has turned them into enemies of the peace established by decent people. Like Lamech, they think of their violence as retaliation. And because they have short fuses and long memories, terrorists may think of themselves as redressing grievances that are decades or even centuries old.

The powers that cause suffering are bigger than the individual acts of human beings. And so the confessions of the Christian church say one way or another that it's not just particular acts or thoughts that are now corrupt. It's our whole nature. We're born sinners, the way Michael Jordan is a born athlete. Sin is what we do. It's not only that we're sinners because we sin; it's also that we sin because we're sinners.

We're born sinners, the way Michael Jordan is a born athlete. Sin is what we do. It's not only that we're sinners because we sin; it's also that we sin because we're sinners.

This drum roll of disaster has never been fixed by human hands. Who in heaven's name can save us?
The Calling of Matthew

When most people speak publicly about themselves, there are two things you can usually count on. First, people tend to have a lot to say about themselves. Second, they have generally good things to say. You never hear politicians, for example, herald their mistakes or any misconduct. Doctors hang their diplomas or licenses on the wall, not malpractice lawsuits they may have lost. Some public speakers are self-deprecating, but usually as an attempt at humor in a self-serving way of feigning humility. The truth is that few of us want to publicly expose our failings and weaknesses. We want others to think well of us, and we usually judge that putting ourselves in the best possible light contributes to that end. Sometimes we may even stretch the truth a bit to make ourselves look better.

In the ninth chapter of Matthew, the author writes himself into his gospel. Bucking the natural tendencies, he doesn’t waste very much ink on himself, and also doesn’t present himself in a very flattering light. He isn’t even neutral; he makes himself look bad. Yet he does so without any hint of the kind of self-deprecation that is often used to make one seem humble. He simply states the truth about his calling. Apparently Matthew didn’t receive the kind of popular parenting that promotes self-esteem. When his father watched him strike out three times in Little League, he probably didn’t criticize the umpire.

Matthew tells us he was sitting at the tax collector’s booth when Jesus passed by and said to him, “Follow me,” and so he got up and did just that. Together they went to Matthew’s house and had dinner, the setting and meal provided by the excess taxes he was able to collect from his fellow Jews because he had Roman backing. Matthew invited his friends, other tax collectors and sinners—all persons ostracized from the Jewish religious community. The Pharisees found this setting and these diners objectionable. They correctly presumed that an orthodox rabbi (the sort they approved of and didn’t consider Jesus), would not enter a tax collector’s house or eat with such people.

Matthew could have put a better face on all this. He could have said that while he was a tax collector, he was one of the more honest ones. He could have said that his friends were really good people who were unfairly counted as sinners by the Pharisees. He could have described the generous table he set for Jesus and all the other guests. Matthew didn’t have to take it on the chin; there are ways an author can weave words to slip the punch. But he doesn’t use any of them. He leaves us to believe that Jesus called him to follow for no apparent reason, and then tells us that Jesus referred to him and his buddies as sick sinners.

Jesus explained his hanging out with Matthew by saying, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick …. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” So Matthew writes himself into the gospel, not only admitting that he was a tax collector who associated with sinners, but that Jesus himself described him and his dinner guests as sick, in need of a doctor. Paralleling this with Jesus calling them “sinners” (as opposed to righteous), it’s clear that the sickness was spiritual. The Pharisees no doubt agreed with this assessment. They too called Matthew and his friends “sinners.”

It’s possible to read Jesus’
The Calling of Matthew

response to the Pharisees as a compliment to them, as if they really were on the right track and had no need of Jesus’ help. Reading that way means there are two groups of people, those who are sinners and in need of Jesus and the salvation he offers, and those who are doing all right without Jesus and don’t really need any other help to be righteous before God. Jesus helps the first group, like a medic attending to the wounded, and ignores the rest who are doing well enough on their own. The sinners need the righteousness of Jesus, but the Pharisees had a righteousness of their own.

But surely this is the wrong way to understand Jesus. The Pharisees weren’t righteous by keeping the Jewish law. Paul (when he was Saul) was a scrupulous Pharisee, “a pharisee of Pharisees,” yet he writes, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.” Paul did not think being a law-keeping Pharisee helped him become righteous before God. “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.”

In Paul’s teaching it is clear that Jesus did not mean the Pharisees had no need of him. It wasn’t that the Pharisees were actually righteous, but that they only thought they were righteous. As a result they failed to see their need of Jesus and the righteousness he offered. Everyone has the sin sickness, but only those who realize their condition and come to the Physician will receive the life-saving treatment. The rest will die in their sins.

So the people who come out the worst in all this are those who don’t think they need any help from Jesus. The Pharisees, by following strict religious rules, came to the conclusion that they were righteous—clearly more righteous than the sinners with whom Jesus was associating.

We are sometimes like the Pharisees. When we compare ourselves to others, we think we look pretty good. We follow the rules better than many. After all, we aren’t like those we see being arrested for drug dealing or murder or fraud. We may not be perfect, but we certainly aren’t as bad as some people.

Comparing ourselves to others is only one way of coming to the view that we don’t need Jesus, or that we don’t need him very much. Another way of coming to this view seems to stem from years of having a positive self image reinforced. I once asked a young man who was making his profession of faith whether apart from Christ he was dead in his sins. After some moments of reflection he responded honestly, “I am wounded by my sin, not dead in them.” Jesus was his friend, he said, less so his Savior. This self diagnosis is not unusual today. It is the Pharisee’s error, and it can be fatal. If you are not a sinner—or not a very bad sinner—then you don’t deserve death, you don’t deserve to go to hell, and Jesus did not need to die for you.

The Heidelberg Catechism says that there are three things you must know to live and die in the comfort of the gospel, and the first is that you must know how great your sin and misery are. Today we are in danger of losing our joy because we don’t see ourselves as great sinners. Not knowing that, we don’t see our desperate need of a Savior, and we are not that grateful to God for our salvation through Christ. Is it not true that many of the good deeds we do are more of an effort to shore up our positive self images than a response to God’s grace shown to us wicked sinners?

The difference between people that really matters to God is not the difference the Pharisees noted or that we often do—how good a person is in contrast to others or to her level of self-esteem. The difference that matters in spiritual affairs is not a difference that we can note at all, for it is not visible to us. It has to do with a person’s deepest conviction about himself. The question we must ask ourselves is this: Am I a sinner who deserves the death that Jesus died? Matthew understood that he needed Jesus. He needed a Savior because he knew the kind of person he was.

I could tell you not to be fooled by your own efforts to be good. I could tell you not to be fooled by the good opinion others may have of you. I could tell you to examine your own heart of darkness. But that will not bring about the conviction that matters. The text of the song “Amazing Grace” has it right: “‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.” The only way we can come to the conviction about ourselves that leads us to the cross of Jesus is by the work of the Holy Spirit creating in us that godly sorrow for sin that is a prerequisite to true joy. When that occurs, the grace of God in Jesus Christ liberates us from the terrible burden of being self-righteous, and we can live in the abundance of what God has done and continues to do for us.
Get Rid of Sin in Church

Several years ago I heard about a minister from western Michigan who entertained a call from a church somewhere in New York. Since they wanted to hear him preach and he wanted to check out the lay of the land, he and his wife booked a flight. The congregation was rumored to be “liberal,” but then doesn’t almost every church out east seem “liberal” by Midwestern standards?

Whatever else they were, the church out East turned out to be friendly. They rolled out the red carpet for the visiting couple and welcomed him into the pulpit. And from many perspectives the service went well. Though he was a bit nervous—and who isn’t a bit nervous in a strange pulpit?—the sermon exceeded his expectations even as he hoped it met theirs. At the end of the service he headed for the center door in back to greet the departing worshipers as his hosts had instructed him to do.

Mostly people smiled and said nice things as they shook hands at the door. People back East have a reputation for being more polite than your average blunt Midwesterner. But one woman paused mid-handshake, leaned over, and confided her feeling about the sermon directly. “All that talk about sin in your sermon,” she said, “left me feeling really dirty.”

Worship is not intended to leave a person feeling dirty, though in the history of the Christian Reformed Church it has sometimes had that effect. Sermons frequently failed to speak of God’s grace with sufficient clarity or at sufficient length to counter a strong preaching of sin. Further, when sermons addressed issues of holiness, they often left the impression that pleasing God amounted to reading the Bible and trying harder. And most listeners knew from experience that simply trying harder usually left them stuck in the same old sinful patterns.

Other parts of worship sometimes worked to overplay the importance of sin too. The CRC way of celebrating the Lord’s Supper rightly looked to the Bible for guidance. But since much of that biblical teaching came in response to particular irregularities in the ancient church of Corinth, the CRC’s looking to the Bible tended to prompt an overemphasis upon penitence in the Supper. The preparatory form that some churches still use is a special call to self-examination the week before celebrating communion. Not that there is anything wrong with self-examination, but too often the images of the joyful feast of the Lord or wedding banquet of the Lamb have been absent from these celebrations, if they could be called celebrations at all.

In the old days practically every CRC also typically featured confession of sin in worship. This section of the service usually began with a reading of the Ten Commandments employed in the spirit of Calvin’s first two uses of the law: showing us our sin and prompting us to run to Jesus. The pastor invited people to examine their lives as the Commandments fell upon their ears. The confession of sin usually was concluded with a brief assurance of pardon. Yet despite this assurance, worshipers were known to have left the service thinking of themselves as wretched sinners. And they felt ashamed that their behavior had prompted the suffering and death of Jesus. After worship they were inclined to think of themselves not as those deeply loved of God, but as barely tolerated sinners.

In recent years the CRC has more and more looked beyond itself, especially in the area of worship. Worship experiences outside the denomination gave rise to the impression that CRC worship was stodgy, even dull compared to what was going on elsewhere. Christians outside the CRC, especially in the evangelical/charismatic tradition, were singing new songs accompanied by worship bands! This upbeat worship found favor especially among the newly middle-aged who were raised on rock music and also among the young. So rather than stand by and watch younger members leave to worship elsewhere, many churches moved to bring this newer worship style home.

As CRC congregations imported new styles of worship, they also discovered that evangelical charismatic churches often worshiped without enacting confession of sin and assurance of pardon. Perhaps in some instances, those in search of a new style imported this lack of confession without really thinking much about it. But something about this omission also appealed to CRC members who in the face of an overemphasis on sin had grown accustomed to leaving worship “feeling dirty.” Less mention of sin came to some as a welcome relief. “We are new creatures in Christ,” they
Get Rid of Sin in Church

argued, "so why linger over sin forgiven once for all with Christ’s death on the cross?"

This jettisoning of a time of confession also worked well with a new strategy for evangelism that suggested churches become "seeker sensitive." The rule was to make what happened on Sunday morning as inviting as possible to those who might visit. If there was risk in overemphasizing sin in the ears of seasoned Christians, non-Christians who showed up at worship services stood in mortal danger of misunderstanding and probably taking offense at a call to confession. Telling people that they were dirty sinners who needed to confess their sins seemed less than sensitive, even if it were true.

All of these pressures have left too many Christian Reformed churches today without a well-balanced time of confession and assurance of pardon as a regular feature of Sunday morning worship. The Ten Commandments are often nowhere to be heard, hell goes unmentioned, and mention of sin in the sermon is muted or transmuted into a vague sympathetic emphasis on human brokenness. Assurance of pardon often still leaves worshipers feeling dirty.

Unfortunately, getting rid of confession and assurance doesn’t get rid of sin. Human beings are still sinners, individually and all together. And even though Jesus died on the cross for our forgiveness nearly two thousand years ago, sin continues to distort and interrupt our relationships with God and each other.

Most of us could think of examples without trying very hard. A heated argument with a spouse can leave us disinclined to pray. Envy of a fellow church member can make serving God together on the mission project practically impossible. Arrogance can make it difficult for others to follow us and so for God to use us in leadership. Self-regarding nationalism can make us too quick to support tactics that wrack violence upon our fellow human beings elsewhere in the world and grieve the heart of God. These sorts of sin and others like them are fully covered by the blood of Jesus, but they still need to be identified and confessed. Why?

God uses our confessing in his presence and in the presence of one another to shape us as those who live in partnership with him in his church. Practicing confession and assurance brings us more deeply into relationship with him and with those who love him, to give us life in abundance.

This sort of confession will begin by acknowledging that we need God even to begin to take an honest look at our sin. We will invite the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and to make us aware of those specific ways in which we have offended God and hurt other people. We will take the needed amount of time and not rush through it. We may use periods of silence from time to time to quiet ourselves in God’s presence and give opportunity for the Spirit to move within and among us. And then we will give voice to those specific things in our lives of which the Spirit makes us aware. Being open to the Spirit and aware of our sin is a first step in beginning to change.

And we will listen for God’s assurance of pardon. God uses assurance of pardon to keep us from an unhealthy fixation upon our sin. In the assurance God reminds us of who we are—not first of all sinners, but forgiven sinners, deeply loved by God, filled with and empowered by the Spirit, now living an abundant life in Christ. We are not loathsome worms, but sons and daughters of the King, freshly bathed, newly clothed, dazzlingly bejeweled with our names on God’s gold-embossed invitations. Assurance of pardon underlines our identity in Christ and banishes any lingering sense of shame.

Those words of assurance will come spoken in the first person always using the teaching or words of Scripture: “I declare to you this morning that your sins are completely forgiven and God has removed them from you ‘as far as the east is from the west.’” But assurance will not stop with a simple declaration of forgiveness. It will also pause to speak words that remind us of our identity in Christ and the power God provides to live out that identity. And the sermon will always move in rhythm with the music of those words reinforcing it through its overtones of grace.

Confession and assurance of pardon are powerful ways that God shapes us in our relationship with him and with each other. Along with preaching, celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and other parts of worship, God uses confession and assurance to deepen our relationship with him, and make the theme of his forgiving love the dominant music of our lives
The Threads of Guilt and Shame in the Gospel Message

Before the police officer pulled me over, my conscience had already given me a ticket: I was guilty. But when the siren screamed my sin to the world, I felt ashamed. My guilt was about breaking the law; my shame was about being exposed as a moral failure. Guilt and shame accompany all sin. They are what make sin so grievous and the preaching of forgiveness so urgent.

Preaching the Gospel in a Shame Culture

As a missionary sent from a western “guilt culture” to preach the gospel in the Asian “shame culture” of Japan, I soon learned how difficult it is to use the thread of law, sin, guilt, and atonement to communicate the gospel in a shame culture. For people who think of sin either as crime or as a dust that collects on the mirror of the soul, guilt is not a pressing issue: Guilt is something only criminals worry about; if people commit a sin that is not a crime, they brush it off as easily as they would wipe dust off a mirror. Shame, however, operates as a powerful moral sanction. The exemplary moral behavior of the Japanese people is due in part to the strong desire to save face. Loss of face disrupts relationships and leads to despair and even suicide.

So how should we communicate the gospel in a shame culture? First, we need to communicate God’s grace as his answer to the problem of guilt—difficult as this is. All people are guilty and in need of forgiveness. Deep down we all know this. The law is written on our hearts and our consciences accuse us. Even anthropologists who divide guilt cultures and shame cultures are now admitting that people of all cultures know both guilt and shame to some extent. So in Japan I stubbornly persisted in teaching about God’s provision for our guilt in Christ.

But I also used a second strategy: preaching the gospel as an answer to the problem of shame. The two threads of guilt and shame run through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. And for people of a shame culture, the shame thread is often easier to follow.

The Difference between Guilt and Shame

The terms “guilt” and “shame” can be understood in two ways. Objectively, guilt refers to our culpability as people who have broken God’s law, which results in punishment, death, and God’s judgment. Subjectively, guilt is experienced as the burden of responsibility for transgressing a moral boundary. We feel it as pangs of conscience, as blame or self-accusation when we know the offense is our own fault. Guilt is the inexcusability we feel for our sins.

Objectively, shame is like pollution in our relationship with God; the uncleanness of our sin clashes with God’s holiness. It is the dishonor and marring of the image of God caused by our sin. Subjectively, shame is our sense of defilement in the presence of the holy God. It is our painful realization that as sinners we are naked before God (Gen. 3:7). Unwanted visibility and the desire to conceal are at the heart of the shame response.

Guilt is our sense that we have gone too far, but shame is feeling that we have not gone far enough. It is a sense of moral failure that leads to embarrassment, feelings of unworthiness, and despair. Guilt feelings focus on what we do, whereas shame feelings focus on who we are, how we look, and how we relate to others.

The answer to objective guilt is punishment and restitution—a balancing of accounts. The answer to objective shame is covering what is exposed, exchanging the shame for honor or glory, and restoring relationships. The answer to both subjective guilt and subjective shame is love—love that forgives, and love that affirms, honors, and restores broken relationships.

Guilt and Shame in the Bible

The threads of shame and guilt both appear already in the story of Adam and Eve’s first sin in Genesis 3. Their first reaction was one of shame. “The eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.” In answer to God’s question, “Where are you?” Adam said, “I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” Before they sinned, Adam and Eve “were both naked and they felt no shame.” After they sinned they covered themselves, were afraid, and hid—three typical characteristics of the shame reaction.

God’s response introduces the thread of guilt: “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” After establishing their guilt, God punished them. But in the promise of victory over the serpent through the seed of the woman and the provision of better garments for their bodies, God hinted at...
The Threads of Guilt and Shame

The marvelous answer to guilt and shame that would come in Jesus Christ. Later in the Old Testament God called for purification ceremonies and guilt offerings that also pointed toward the final solution to our guilt and shame dilemma.

Jesus’ death on the cross was a perfect answer to our guilt problem. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus’ crucifixion was also a perfect answer to our shame problem. He “endured the cross, despising its shame” (Heb. 12:2). On the cross our naked Savior took responsibility for our spiritual nakedness. And now, with the veil of the temple torn, we can approach our holy God without shame. To all who believe in him he offers white clothes to cover our shameful nakedness (Rev. 3:18). He not only covers our shame; he exchanges our shame for a glory that reflects his own. Jesus referred to his death as the hour of his glorification (John 12:23). In taking responsibility for our sin on the cross, he transformed the cross from a symbol of shame into a symbol of glory.

Guilt and shame are not only aspects of God’s punishment of our sin. They are also grace-filled provisions designed to move us to godly sorrow, which “brings repentance that leads to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10). They function together in a healthy way to motivate people of all cultures to seek God’s gracious forgiveness and reconciliation.

Preaching the Gospel in North American Culture

I believe the strategy we used in Japan can work in North American culture as well. As terms like “law,” “sin,” and “guilt” become fuzzy and even quaint, we need to redouble our efforts to teach these concepts. We need to resist the temptation to avoid these terms because they are not pleasant. Preaching grace includes calling sinners to repentance. Reading the law and confessing our sin in public worship will not take away joy in our worship, but will deepen it.

At the same time, if it is true that guilt language speaks with less and less clarity to our North American postmodern ears, we may gain a better hearing if we frame the gospel as God’s answer to our guilt and God’s provision for our shame. The message of God’s love will speak powerfully to many people—especially our youth—who often struggle with feelings of worthlessness, failure, and low self-esteem.

Love is the one theme that best sums up the gospel for those wrestling with shame. God’s love makes it safe for people to expose what causes them shame. Love casts out fear, restores our true humanity, mends broken relationships, and banishes shame. And love also forgives and banishes guilt, bringing joy to the guilt-ridden. God’s love is his marvelous answer to both guilt and shame. We must preach that love and mirror it in our lives. “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood . . . to him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen” (Rev. 1:5-6).

Sin and Grace in Pastoral Care Class

Mountain climbing, sin, and theology. What do these three have in common? They were all part of a student discussion on the first day of a Calvin Theological Seminary pastoral care course this fall. Students heard a story of life and death on Mt. Everest, observed sinful behavior in that story, and reflected on the motives of sin and pastoral responses to it.

The story from National Geographic Adventure magazine recounted the dramatic rescue of mountain climber Lincoln Hall from 28,000 feet on Mt. Everest—a man who had been left for dead one night but was found alive the next day, severely frostbitten and hallucinating from the effects of cerebral edema—swelling of the brain (read the story at http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/everest/2006-climbing-season.html). The team of climbers that found the delirious and half-clothed man gave up their chance of reaching the summit of the highest mountain in the world in order to save Hall’s life and bring him down to base camp.

Just days earlier another Everest climber, David Sharp, was also stricken with the disorienting effects of cerebral edema. Although he was obviously ill, some 40 climbers passed him by as they proceeded to the summit. Sharp froze to death on the mountain; Hall lived to tell about his rescue on the Today show and landed a lucrative book contract.

In their pastoral care class, students listened to the story and then to a reading of Luke 10:25-37, the parable of the Good Samaritan. In
small groups and then as a whole class they pondered the reasons why so many climbers passed by an obviously distressed man. Was it their desire to reach the summit for success or pride? Did they hope that others would stop and help? Were they concerned about their $40,000 investment in a climbing trip?

The students also wondered why a team of four climbers stopped to help the half-naked, hallucinating Lincoln Hall, who thought he was in a boat and needed to jump overboard to save himself. It took all the strength the team could muster to restrain him from throwing himself over a precipice. One of these rescuers who missed the chance to summit Everest on a beautiful clear day admitted later that he was “gutted with disappointment the day after the rescue.” But he soon got over his disappointment and realized that he could not have made a different decision.

The students mulled over this life-and-death story, comparing the two responses and the rugged North American individualism that so much affected the varying responses.

They also reflected on our mundane behaviors that belie the same kinds of values—such as how we sometimes drive our cars and use our cell phones—and wondered how marriages, families, and congregations might be affected by sinful behavior that is self-centered and insulated from the world of caring relationships. They wondered about ministry among church members who are being moved and shaped by a competitive, selfish culture—and, at the same time, by the self-giving Spirit of Christ.

As the students ventured opinions and teased out distinctions between sin and evil, healthy and selfish individualism, courage and pride, they imagined how they might guide future parishioners to follow the way of life that is shaped by Christ.

Few, if any, of the students in that class will have Everest-climbing church members. But they will all run into people who are insulated from concern for others, who think of themselves first, who would prefer to focus on their own lives rather than sacrifice personal success to meet the needs of others. As these future pastors contemplated preaching, teaching, and—even more important—modeling the kind of behavior Christ calls his followers to, they gained insight from the rescue team. Just as the team members were relieved when Lincoln Hall came and thanked them sincerely and didn’t turn out to be a jerk just trying to make a buck off a good story, so the students were relieved to realize that God’s grace saves all of us, even when we act like jerks with sinful motives.

That insight was a formative moment for these seminarians. As they integrated the story of life and death on Mt. Everest and their analysis of sinful human behavior in light of the gospel, they reflected on the role of pastors in addressing such behavior, realizing that this discussion and learning will certainly guide them as they enter a ministry of helping others to be formed in Christ’s likeness.
Students are Formed through Ministry Practices

Every church or organization needs to know why it exists and what it is trying to achieve. The same is true for Calvin Theological Seminary. The overall purpose of the professional degree programs (M.Div. and M.A.) of Calvin Theological Seminary is to form people for ministry.

But what exactly is this “ministry” for which people are formed? Obviously each church’s ministry is unique, but CTS identifies six ministry practice areas in which all graduates must have competence. It further identifies 21 specific ministry practices in which students must demonstrate basic competence before graduating from seminary.

It’s important for you as seminary supporters and congregational leaders to know what ministry practice competencies the seminary is seeking to give to future pastors and church leaders. We constantly reexamine these competencies to make sure they’re right for the church today. We welcome your feedback (write to forum@calvinseminary.edu).

Basic Ministry Practice Competencies

The student will be able to:

1. Evangelism, Discipleship, Teaching

   1.1 Tell the story of God’s grace at work in his or her life in a lively and engaging way.

   1.2 Join with other Christians in intentionally communicating the gospel message to those outside the church with the goal of enfolding new believers.

   1.3 Demonstrate the ability to disciple believers as they grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

   1.4 Engage in age-appropriate teaching that is biblical, authentic, contextual, and life-changing.

2. Service, Social Justice, Cultural Engagement

   2.1 Engage in a variety of community and church service ministries.

   2.2 Participate in ministries of the church that promote social justice.

   2.3 Enter into cross-cultural experiences in a way that deepens one’s appreciation for the contextual nature of all ministry.

3. Worship, Preaching

   3.1 Prepare and lead worship effectively.

   3.2 Collaborate with others in the process of preparing for, leading, and evaluating worship.

   3.3 Preach sermons that are biblically faithful, authentic, contextually sensitive, and life-changing.

4. Community Life, Fellowship

   4.1 Engage in ministries which foster connection and care within a local congregation.

   4.2 Model a life of hospitality within a community, welcoming people and paying attention to their needs in ways that impart God’s grace and blessing.
4.3 Confess wrongs in an appropriate way and ask for the forgiveness of those you have injured.

4.4 Demonstrate the ability to address difficulties constructively and mediate conflict within Christian community.

5. Pastoral Care, Counseling

5.1 Demonstrate the capacity for empathy by listening to others carefully, discerning their needs, and responding in appropriate ways.

5.2 Guide and counsel people within the bounds of one's expertise as pastor, referring them to other professionals as necessary.

5.3 Use Scripture and prayer appropriately in pastoral care.

5.4 Offer pastoral care to various people (young, old, and ethnically diverse) in a variety of life situations—in their homes, in jails, in hospitals, etc.

6. Administration, Leadership

6.1 Engage in ministry in ways that reflect a biblical understanding of leadership in the church.

6.2 Understand the dynamics of a healthy congregation in relation to its leaders and staff, and learn what to do when that relationship encounters difficulty.

6.3 Know how to lead and administer effectively within the church, following through on commitments and developing and promoting the leadership abilities of others.

New Staff Bring Ministry Experience to CTS

Two key staff positions at CTS have been filled this year by individuals with a lot of experience in ministry: Rev. Greg Janke is our new Director of Admissions, and Joan Beelen is our new Registrar and Academic Program Adviser; both are alums of CTS.

As the son of a Christian Reformed pastor, Greg Janke was no stranger to church and ministry, but he wrestled with his own call to ministry. Providentially, God brought people into his life at different times to encourage and affirm God’s call on him. After receiving an M.Div. degree from CTS, Greg became a pastor and enjoyed serving in this role in two congregations. As Director of Admissions, he is excited to help potential students discern their own call to ministry and looks forward to guiding them through the admission process. Greg says, “Serving two congregations has provided me with a wide range of ministry experience and convinced me of the necessity for ministers to be well trained and well prepared.”

After graduating from CTS with an M.A. in church education, Joan Beelen served in educational and ministry coordination positions in three different churches across the United States and Canada and on the Staff Ministry Committee of the Christian Reformed Church. Having enjoyed her time at the seminary as a student, Joan is thrilled to be back at her alma mater! She now looks forward to serving the students, faculty, staff, and the broader church in her new role: “In my position as Registrar and Academic Program Adviser, my hope is that I will serve the community by doing my task well but also by treating each person with respect and kindness. My time in staff ministry at various churches has given me a clear idea of the joys and demands of ministry, and the gifts, knowledge, and character needed to thrive. It is my prayer that we will all grow together in each of these areas as we live together in community here at CTS.”

CTS is grateful to God for these new staff and the commitment and experience they bring. We also give thanks for almost thirty years of service by the former registrar and director of admissions, John Vanderlugt, who retired this past summer.
Ministry
A chapel talk given on September 8, 2006

In recent years at Calvin Theological Seminary we have talked a lot about “formation.” The phrase has been “formation for ministry,” but most of our focus has been on formation. As we begin this year together, I’d like to focus for just a few minutes this morning on the other word, on that for which we are formed, ministry.

Many of us already know that the Greek word that best captures the New Testament teaching about ministry is diakonia (service, from which we get our word deacon). In Ephesians 4:12 Paul says that Christ gives all these gifts for ministry “to prepare God’s people for works of service [diakonia, ministry], so that the body of Christ may be built up.” To be in ministry is to be a servant, a servant who prepares others to serve, a helper, one who helps the body of Christ be the body of Christ. And lest you think “helper” is too weak a word to describe a pastor or ministry leader, remember that the word help or helper in the Bible most frequently refers to God.

No doubt the most radical, and clearest statement of the nature of ministry comes from Jesus himself. In Mark 10:35, James and John are bickering about who is going to get the corner office and private jet privileges in Jesus’ kingdom. Jesus lets it go on for a little while, but then calls them all together and says, Let’s get something straight: “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve (diakonia), and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

Christ forms us . . . and calls us to serve, to imitate him who served and gave his life. Christ calls us to help the body of Christ be the body of Christ.

No matter what your particular gifts for ministry, no matter what particular set of experiences in your life God has worked through to lead you to this point in your preparation for ministry and to form you in unique ways—if you have been called to ministry, you have been called to be a servant.

Now I realize I’m leaving myself open to some misunderstandings when I talk about pastors and other ministry leaders as servants, particularly as that applies to one’s role as leader. The call to be a servant is not a call to be a pleaser, a middle-of-the-road, never-take-a-position chameleon, nor is it a call to be, as Stanley Hauerwas puts it, a “quivering mass of availability,” or a person with no conviction or vision about what God has created the church to be and to do, or a person with no willingness to suffer to follow through on that conviction or vision. The call to be a servant is not a call to be anemic, flimsy, spineless.

It is a call to empty one of self. It is a call to understand, at a profound level, that ministry is not about you. It’s not about privilege, reputation, power, control; it’s about Christ. It’s about helping others be the body of Christ. In words our seminary president often uses to describe this, it’s about helping others flourish.

And the best thing we all can do here this year is practice being servants to one another. Administrators, staff members, faculty members, students—we’re all servants, we all wash one another’s feet. Distinct roles, different forms that washing one another’s feet takes, but we must all be careful to not “lord it over,” but to help, to be helpers. Indeed, this challenge to be servants, this formation challenge, goes to the heart of not only ministry, but also the nature of our community here. Anything we do this year in the absence of that disposition and practice of service, that mind of Christ, will be a noisy gong and clanging cymbal.

At our seminary commencement three months ago, we honored two distinguished alumni—Rev. Jason Chen and, posthumously, Rev. Norman Meyer. It struck me as I was working on this meditation that both of these people—recognized to be great leaders in ministry—are models of servant ministry. In fact, as I went on to think about all the distinguished alumni awards we have given now over the past four years, I realized that all of the recipients of this award understood themselves and their ministry, at a profound level, first of all as an exercise in service. None of them ever sought any award, much less this one. They knew deep in their soul that they were merely servants of the Servant.

May God use everything we do this year at Calvin Seminary to form us for ministry, to form us to help the body of Christ be the body of Christ, to the praise of his glory. Amen.
CTS Learns from Urban Pastors

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with people, and he will live with them.” After reciting these words from Revelation 21, veteran urban pastor Tony Van Zanten said, “The city is the place where God is and where hope is.” It was the most moving moment of Calvin Theological Seminary’s recent Consultation on Urban Ministry.

Tony and Donna’s passion for the city and commitment to ministering in it for so many years inspired the pastors and CTS faculty, staff and students who gathered for two days in August 2006. In addition to honoring the Van Zantens’ ministry of service, worship, and training at Roseland Christian Ministries in Chicago, those present talked about both the challenges and the joys of urban ministry—the unique obstacles and the incredible thrills of ministry in the city.

Although the ministries of those present varied greatly—from the United States to Canada, from working with the resourceless, from leading commuter churches to working with the urban poor, and struggling with race and justice issues—the pastors all agreed that urban ministry, while hard to define, is both exhilarating and exhilarating. They acknowledged that ministering in the city can involve struggling with systemic sin and poverty, facing human suffering close at hand, and being available 24/7, even though successes are often few and far between. Moreover, urban pastors spend much time ministering to people beyond church members and attenders, and find that the questions and categories of the institutional church often clash with the messy realities of the city.

But they also agreed that the frustrations are outweighed by the joy of watching God transform lives in powerful ways, seeing the church meet the needs of people, and enjoying diverse relationships with people who are experiencing God’s grace in their lives. They enjoy crossing denominational boundaries, networking with civic and private organizations, and gaining more than they give as they see God’s work changing the city one person and one block at a time.

The urban pastors helped CTS representatives understand the type of students who may do well in the city—those who are curious and adventurous, flexible and comfortable with ambiguity, bold enough to stay the course, yet having the kind of humility that is open to learning the culture of the city. As Denise Posie put it, “Sometimes when we go into cross-cultural settings we can go in thinking we know more about the people than we really do—this destroys our right to be in that community.” They also need to know who they are. Carl Kammeraad advised, “Urban ministry stretches you like crazy but you can’t let it stretch you beyond who you are.”

The group also challenged CTS to connect with the city more and draw students from the urban context. One way to do that is to have professors with urban ministry experience, or urban pastors involved in the educational process. Mostly, they recommended immersion experiences for students in major metropolitan centers—living and working in settings where they can’t avoid the issues of the city.

They also talked about the need to ask different theological questions in light of urban realities, and to explore different teaching and preaching methods that are fitting in the city, realizing that worship always needs to be contextualized. Mark Charles, Reggie Smith, and John Zayas all wondered aloud about the different effects of urban ministry in various ethnic groups and called for some experimenting—with storytelling in the Native American community, or hip-hop in the African American and Hispanic communities.

Students need to learn to think globally and learn about a theology of power and mercy in the gospel, according to Andrew Zantingh, “understanding the role of suffering and poverty and injustice.” They also need to learn the history of the CRC in urban ministry, even as new chapters and possibilities are explored for placing students in the city. CTS should think about partnering with others in the city for the sake of students’ formation for urban ministry, and include urban ministry experiences in students’ training.

All of these urban pastors obviously love their ministry in the city. As Sheila Holmes put it, “It’s tough and rough but I’m only here by the grace of God.” The greatest joy of urban pastors seems to be seeing people grasp God’s grace, accept Jesus Christ, and understand that God still loves them no matter what. They have a Revelation 21 vision of the city of God!
A Community of Faith. At Calvin Theological Seminary, formation for ministry is the center of everything we do. Our goal is to be a community of faith that nurtures, challenges, and encourages you, allowing Christ to form you into his likeness so your ministry will do the same for others.