CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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The Dearest Idols I Have Known





CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Forum

Providing Theological Leadership for the Church

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Idols of Our Time

Articles

3

Pleasure: The Greatest Idol of Our Time by John W. Cooper

7

Idols of Our Time: What Does the Church Have to Say? by Jul Medenblik

Called to Serve

10

Be Holy by John Rottman

12

Making Her Way: Dr. Catherine González by Kristy Manion

13

From the Ends of the Earth: Dr. Justo González on Missions by Bruce Buursma

14

Center for Excellence in Preaching Celebrates Ten Year Anniversary by Scott Hoezee

15

New Faces at CTS

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from the president

Julius T. Medenblik

Still Manufacturing!

very one of us is, even from our mother's womb, a master craftsman of idols."

John Calvin made this observation about humanity in his commentary on Acts. This issue of the *FORUM* focuses on the all too present reality that we create and serve idols.

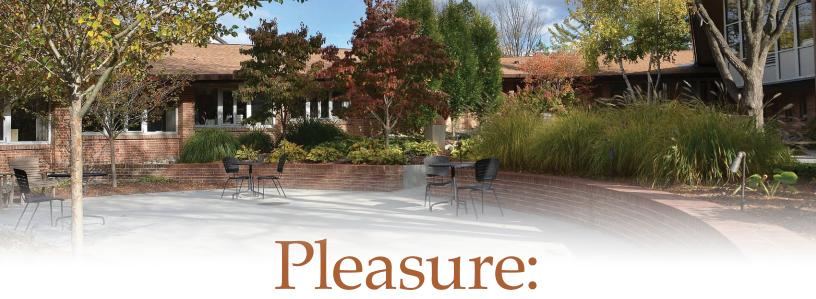
Our idols are usually culturally approved and even endorsed. They also have an individual "bent" that each of us has from "our mother's womb." The shape of my particular idol is a little different from yours.

A current idol category that has risen to the top in our 21st Century context is pleasure. Our society has made it a supreme value so that what we do and what we say and how we live is filtered through the value grid of what is most pleasurable for us.

As you read through the *FORUM*, we hope you will find this issue informative about the work and ministry of Calvin Theological Seminary.

We also hope that it will provoke self-reflection and communal conversation on how we must continue to be alert to the snares of idols so that we do not continue to exchange "the truth of God for a lie, and worship and serve created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised." Romans 1:25

May the Creator be praised—now and ever!



The Greatest Idol of Our Time

Overview

he First Commandment requires us to worship God and nothing else. Jesus warns against trying to love and serve both God and money (Matt. 6:24). Paul challenges the idolatry of the Athenians (Acts 17:16-23) and condemns worshiping and serving creatures rather than the Creator (Rom. 1: 23-25). These admonitions are necessary for people of all times and cultures—certainly ours.

Our culture worships many idols—wealth, power, freedom, science, technology, pop culture, sports, sex. Most of us want our idols to make us *feel good*. So perhaps our greatest idol is pleasure or enjoyment, whether it makes us mellow or gives us a rush. Consuming as much as we can of whatever makes us feel good becomes our "only comfort in life and death." A technical term for this way of life is *hedonism*.

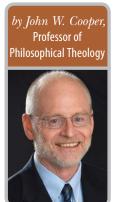
We Christians have been freed from idolatry and hedonism to love and serve the Lord by the saving and sanctifying work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. But we are still tempted to love ourselves and the things of this world more than we should—sometimes even more than God. We have not outgrown

Scripture's warnings against idolatry or its calls to seek first God's kingdom. We ought to cultivate a lifestyle that finds pleasure in what is good and pleasing to God. We should help our children to live this way, and we should reach out to those who are trapped in hedonistic idolatry with the Gospel of true happiness through Jesus Christ.

Pleasure and the Idols of Our Time

Postmodern people are not so different than the Roman and Athenians idolaters about whom Paul wrote. In Greco-Roman religion, Zeus, also

More than anything, we want to be happy, feel good, enjoy pleasure, and be excited about life with as little pain, sadness, frustration, and boredom as possible.



called Jupiter, was the greatest god who ruled the gods and goddesses of wealth, fertility, pleasure, war, love, imperial power, luck, nature, and the like. Modern secular culture worships these powers too, but without the mythology that symbolizes them. Like polytheists, we idolize many things—affluence, power, science, technology, social status,

food, drink, sex, drugs, pop culture, sports, recreation, and leisure. But above all we worship Pleasure—good feelings, enjoyment—as the high god over the other gods. Cultures of other times and places value religion, community, tradition, power, wealth, knowledge, or reputation most highly. But in postmodern society we focus primarily on our feelings. More than anything, we want to be happy, feel good, enjoy pleasure, and be excited about life with as little pain, sadness, frustration, and boredom as possible. We do not value things primarily because they are healthy, good, true, beautiful, or right but because we like them. Common expressions suggest that feelings determine what we think: "I'm comfortable with that proposal." Advertisers and politicians manipulate

Pleasure: The Greatest Idol of Our Time

our emotions. Parenting is a non-stop (and often unhappy) effort to keep kids happy and feeling good, especially about themselves. We work for the weekend and labor for leisure. "TGIF"!

"Have it your way!" "Supersize me!" Fast-food ads invoke the spirit of the age. The economy flounders without over-consumption, advertising manipulates our desires, and community values encourage a self-indulgent lifestyle. From made-to-order coffee and hamburgers to customized apps and playlists, to online dating services and church growth strategies—everything is tailored to our tastes. The whole culture reinforces the illusion that we are entitled to life just the way we want it. And if this world does not please us, computers or drugs can access better ones.

Hedonism is not limited to the usual suspects-food, drink, sex, drugs, and consumer goods. Every aspect of life is a source of pleasure. We also want religion, morality, politics, relationships, work, and recreation to make us feel good, especially about ourselves. Hedonism is not specific to one social class. Elite connoisseurs of fine art, sophisticated conversation, and gourmet cuisine can be just as self-gratifying as tailgaters who gorge on beer and barbeque at football games and auto races. Many who are not able to live the hedonist's dream envy it. Many who advocate for social justice confuse it with the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. The obesity epidemic is not merely physical but symbolic of gluttony in every area of life. Our hearts, minds, and souls are as bloated and diseased as our bodies from overindulging on all kinds of pleasures.

According to the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the pursuit of happiness

is the God-ordained purpose of life. If God does not exist, then evolution has wired us for happiness. If happiness is feeling good, as hedonism claims, then feeling good is the purpose of life—the standard by which all other obligations and values should be judged. Thus hedonism is a world and life view shared by theists and atheists alike. Consider the implications for religion and morality.

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The purpose of religion is to promote the healthy, happy, successful lives that God wants for each of us. Worship must always be upbeat and exciting. The presence of the Spirit is measured by emotional intensity. The staging and music must cater to our tastes and get our juices flowing. The service might be trite or disorderly, but it better not be boring. Evangelism advertises the benefits of salvation without mentioning sin and repentance. We want the happiness that religion promises without taking up our cross. The spiritual disciplines take too much time and effort, so we dabble at them like we diet and exercise. If our children give us too much hassle about church or catechism, we wave a white flag. "Pick your battles." Reformed Christians are not alone. People of all faith traditions face these challenges. Culture is transforming religion, not the reverse.

Pleasure and enjoyment determine morality as well. Hedonism affirms that all people have the right to seek happiness and enjoy life as they see fit, as long as they do not harm others. Concern for our own happiness need not be selfish but should make us want others to feel good too. Empathy (feeling others' feelings) makes us feel good when others feel good. Also, if we help others feel good, then they are more likely to do the same for us. The Golden Rule is to grant others the same freedom and opportunity for happiness as we want for ourselves. This principle gives inclusivism and political correctness the status of moral absolutes in our society.

Changing attitudes about sex are a clear example. Everyone has sexual desires whether or not they are married and want children. The pleasure principle implies that all adults should be free to seek sexual satisfaction as they see fit as long as they don't harm others. Thus we should permit all genuinely consensual sex-male-female or same-sex, free or purchased, casual or in relationship, married or not. But we should oppose sex with non-adults, involuntary prostitution, and cheating on commitments. This perspective does not abandon morality but affirms hedonism instead of Judeo-Christian morality. (Christians who favor more progressive sexual ethics on the basis of "Christ-like compassion" or "unconditional love" should ponder the worldview supporting it.)

Space does not allow us to consider how hedonism pervades education, popular culture, the economy, politics, recreation, and the other dimensions of postmodern culture.

Idolatry in Scripture

According to Scripture, idolatry is an inevitable result of rejecting God. We were created in God's image in a relationship of love and obedience, which means that relating to God is as necessary as breathing air. When our first parents tried to break away from God, they opened a "God-shaped void" (C. S. Lewis) that we have been trying to fill ever since. We attach ourselves to God-substitutes, like lungs suck in water or poison gas instead of air. Paul saw and confronted the idolatry of the Athenians, who even worshiped an Unknown God (Acts 17:16-23). He understood what happens when humans turn away from God: We worship creatures rather than the Creator-humans, animals, birds, and reptiles (Rom. 1:25), food (Phil. 3:19), money, self, and pleasure (2 Tim. 3:2-4). The idolatry of hedonism is not a recent development.

Idolatry steals from God, undermines human well-being, and distorts whatever is idolized. In the case of hedonism, it makes true and lasting pleasure, enjoyment, and happiness impossible by cutting us off from their real source, by expecting more from them than they can give, and by twisting everything else in life to produce them. Let's consider these consequences.

Idolatry robs God by failing to give him what we owe. He created us in his image, which means that we ought to love, honor, trust, and obey him. When we substitute a creature for the Creator, we love, honor, trust, and obey

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that creature. We rob God of what he deserves.

We also give an idol what it does not deserve, and expect from it what it cannot deliver. Isaiah 44:6-20 ridicules the folly and futility of idolatry. Humans make gods from what is obviously not divine—a tree in this text. Half the tree is used for construction and fuel, and the other half is made into a god. How silly, the Prophet asserts. Even worse, humans act as though the idols made us even though we make them. But idols do nothing because they are nothing, so the whole project is a colossal failure of self-deception. We waste time and talent serving things that cannot give us life or blessing. As a result, we must work even harder to make up the deficit caused by their failure to

deliver. Idolatry is not a sustainable lifestyle, much less the key to flourishing. Hedonism is no exception.

Biblical Wisdom and the Experience of Pleasure

Pleasure is a wonderful aspect of God's creation and our relationship with him (Ps. 16:11). He created us able to enjoy the goodness and beauty of his presence and of everything he made, as long as it works as designed. Food and drink, love and sex, family and community, nature and culture, productive labor, creative leisure, Sabbath rest—all are God-ordained sources of good pleasure as we love and serve him and each other. In addition, God created us so that our senses and feelings as well as our minds and spirits can help us discern what is right and good. We can taste whether food is good or bad, feel that we are well or sick, sense whether a relationship is wholesome or not, and intuit right from wrong. We even have a sensus divinitatus, a sense of God. But if we make good feelings our basic guide and ultimate goal of life, we will suffer instead.

Human experience agrees with the wisdom of Scripture. Pleasure cannot give us the lasting happiness and satisfaction that we crave. Food, sex, music, sports, money, fame, love, and success might make us feel good for a while. But our desires return, and we must satisfy them again and again. Pleasures that were once exciting and gratifying become boring or distasteful. Our capacities for pleasure wane with sickness and age. We wonder what playboy Hugh Hefner can still enjoy in his eighties. Even if life is pleasurable, can one enjoy death? Everlasting life and joy are gifts of God that cannot be provided by anything in creation.

Pleasure: The Greatest Idol of Our Time

The feelings and desires of fallen humans are often unreliable and deceptive. We can feel well in spite of undiagnosed cancer or an impending heart attack. Health-destroying amounts of salt, sugar, and fat make our food taste delicious. We can crave substances that make us feel wonderful while they kill us. One person can feel certain about another's feelings ("s/he loves me") but be completely mistaken. Morally wrong acts can feel so right and good. Human experience confirms the truth of Scripture that sin affects our whole being, including our feelings, desires, and even our compassion. Good feelings cannot be a reliable guide to life.

Good feelings also cannot be the purpose of life. God created the world so that happiness, enjoyment, and pleasure result when we love and obey him, love one another, and relate to nature as he intended. They are not the goal of life but outcomes of pursuing the goal. When we make them the bottom line, we work against God's design, which makes it so much harder to achieve them. Consider some examples. Eating for pleasure rather than health undermines health, which reduces pleasure. Being good to others in order to feel good about ourselves diminishes our moral character and gives us less reason to feel good about ourselves. Serving God so that he will make us happy is loving ourselves more than him, which undermines the joy of a real relationship with him. By bending all of life

toward pleasure, hedonism imperils human welfare by undermining the divinely-designed benefits of marriage, family, education, the economy, justice, morality, and religion. Hedonism is not a sustainable lifestyle. It consumes more than it produces, lives off the work and wealth of other people and previous generations, and it fails to maintain a sound natural, social, economic, moral, and spiritual environment for future generations.

Pleasure in the Christian Life

God has freed us from the power of idolatry by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. But we still wrestle with our sinful nature and its unruly desire for pleasure. The temptation to serve idols or serve idols along with God remains a challenge for us, as it was for the people of God in Scripture. Even if we do not idolize worldly pleasures, we often desire them in ways that do not fit God's good will for creation and redemption. We want pleasurable experiences far too much, spend too much time and money pursuing them, and allow them to absorb too much of our mental and spiritual energy. We pursue them in

Real pleasure and happiness are aspects of the shalom that benefits all creatures in God's kingdom and reflects his good pleasure and glory.

wrong ways and expect too much happiness from them. They squeeze out more important things. Our lifestyle suffers from internal tension, spiritual laziness, immature discipleship, poor stewardship, and failure to seek first God's kingdom.

In a pleasure-obsessed society, Christians ought to live counter-culturally. We ought to cultivate lifestyles which truly enjoy the good things that God gives us in ways and proportions that he intends. We can even take pleasure in avoiding the hedonistic excesses which tempt us. Empowered by God's Word and Spirit, we can learn to enjoy choices that are motivated by love, justice, and stewardship, as well as our own satisfaction.

Asceticism—suppression of enjoyment—is not the answer. We are created for enjoyment. The Westminster Shorter Catechism states that our ultimate purpose is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." The Heidelberg Catechism points to Jesus Christ as the source of our true comfort and happiness in life and death. Real pleasure and happiness are aspects of the shalom that benefits all creatures in God's kingdom and reflects his good pleasure and glory. We can radiate this joy in our own lives, our families, churches, and in the public square. Then our children and hedonistic neighbors can see that real happiness does not come from idolizing pleasure but practicing the wisdom of Psalm 37:4: "Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart."

Idols of Our Time

What Does the Church Have to Say?

n his FORUM article, Professor John Cooper persuasively argues that "seeking after pleasure" is one of the key idols of our age. This culturally approved idol mis-shapes lives, relationships and society; but how does the church begin to re-shape lives, relationships and society?

The Biblical framework of creation, fall, redemption and consummation is the larger narrative in which the mis-shaping and re-shaping of lives, relationships and our society is to be placed. Living under the rule of God's Kingdom is to change how we live life today even as we anticipate that God is at work in forming a "new heaven and new earth."

I have had the honor and the challenge of preaching on money, sex and power (places where people seek pleasure) to people who expect the church to pile on guilt when dealing with these hot topics. From various surveys it is clear that the message many people, especially young people, expect to hear from the church is that having money is bad, sex is dangerous and power is illegitimate. While this is a simplistic characterization, the preacher who brings a message on any of these three topics is entering into a field of landmines.

What are some ways that the church can frame the conversation so those who have ears can hear? How do we help people live wisely and well in keeping with a relationship with God?

Placing the Conversation within a Covenant Framework

"Thou shalt not ..." is still a phrase that dominates our understanding of the Ten Commandments. People expect the church to say—"thou shalt not" have premarital sex. "Thou shalt

not" have affairs, steal or take advantage of people. Good preaching and good pastoral care will place the conversation in the context of covenant. Exodus 20, for example, cannot be read apart from Exodus 19. God rescues His people and then invites them into a relationship. Exodus 20 recalls that rescue and then the framework of that relationship is developed. The Fall has occurred, but the story of God's ongoing grace continues.

One result of this understanding is that Christians should not expect

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people who are far from God to act like followers of Christ. For example, when a Christian comes across a couple living together, the first step in the conversation is to get to know them as people before exploring what they know of their need to be "rescued" by God followed by

a call to live in God's framework when they have a relationship with Him. Such a sequencing in the conversation of evangelism and discipleship can make people nervous and you will even hear the statement that we are "soft on sin," with such an approach but we are in good company. What do you think it meant to have Jesus be identified as a "friend of sinners?" It did mean that he was accused of eating and drinking with them even while they were living a lifestyle contrary to God.

Placing the Conversation within the Reality of Wisdom

Another avenue to explore is what Professor Cooper identifies as wisdom. Wisdom literature looks at the world and identifies themes for a fruitful life. In our current age that is dominated by post-modernism, we are individualistic in our judgments and focused on our feelings as the ultimate measure of what is "good" for me even if it is not "good" for you.

At the same time, the experiences of others can still serve as a testimony to the created order.

Idols of Our Time: What Does the Church Have to Say?

A recent summer television show that our family has watched is "Married at First Sight." In this reality show, three couples are matched up by four identified experts. The first sight of each other for these couples is when they meet before an officiant. They meet and get married and then proceed to a honeymoon and begin living life together. After thirty days, these couples get to decide if they will remain together or will they seek a divorce.

During the course of this particular show, "wisdom reality" is shared. For example, the show highlights the statistic that couples who live together before marriage are twice as likely to divorce than those who do not live together. Another wise insight is given after one of the couples becomes physically intimate before they really know each other. In response, the experts share that physical intimacy is no substitute and it can actually get in the way of life-long intimacy. There is also a statistic that notes that married persons rate a higher satisfaction in the area of sexual relationships and intimacy that those who are not married.

What is particularly striking is that this show is not on a "Christian" network, but on mainstream television. The wisdom of our created reality is shining in a place where one might not expect it. That wisdom can become the basis for conversations and has even helped me as a parent talk to my own children about relationships.

Another place where I recently encountered wisdom at work was in a New York Times op-ed piece by Arthur Brooks. In the article "Love People, Not Pleasure" (July 18, 2014) Mr. Brooks starts by uncovering the wisdom of a 10th Century Spanish Prince. The

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article begins by noting the elusive and exhausting search for pleasure.

The article goes on to note that the quest for fame, fortune and sexual variety is like getting hooked on drugs; once you have a little of it, you want more. The author then notes that numerous academic studies are under-scoring what faith communities have taught for generations: it is better to give than to receive, and satisfaction does not come from extrinsic benefits like material wealth but from intrinsic ones, such as better relationships with others.

The Church can use the wisdom that is still in the created order to point people to the Creator.

The Church can use the truth contained in the world to point people to the truth of Scripture.

Placing the Conversation within "Corrected" Biblical Knowledge

When Jay Leno was hosting "The Tonight Show," he did something called "Jay-Walking" where he asked people

on the street to answer questions ranging from current events to history to even questions on Bible knowledge. "Leno may ask, "Who was the wife of Noah?" Answer: "Joan of Arc."

One Scripture passage that is consistently misunderstood is 1 Timothy 6:10. In this text, Paul warns that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." The usual twisting of this passage is to conclude that "money is the root of all kinds of evil." As Jamie Smith has so insightfully argued in *Desiring the Kingdom*, we are shaped by love and our discipleship is a matter of developing appropriate loves.

As part of my journey of life, I was an attorney in Palm Beach, Florida. This playground of the rich and famous is where I could see six Rolls Royces in a "ten-minute" period while picking up mail from the post office. It was while a member of Lake Worth Christian Reformed Church that I heard a guest preacher "put down" people who owned Cadillacs. What that guest pastor did not know is that a member of the church ran the body and repair shop for a Cadillac dealer. He felt that the pastor, but also the church had judged him and his vocation.

Churches need to affirm that the "love of money" is easy to hide. This "love of money" danger is something for all people, no matter their socio-economic level, to be alerted to and to be discipled about. The church must spend more time correcting misquoted and misunderstood Scripture and helping people understand the fullness of Scripture.

One particular area that the church needs to correct is the perspective that

sexuality has been "repressed" by the church. The church can rightfully note that sexual desire and expression is part of the created order as designed by God even as we also note the brokenness of our sexuality since the Fall. God designed sex for certain purposes and fulfillment comes by following that design.

Framing a Picture of a "Better" Life—Full Life vs. the Fleeting Nature of Pleasure

Pastor Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City consistently asks what is "the sin underneath the sin?" By that he means that we must understand what is going on underneath the surface and even the sin we see.

In the case of misuse of money, sex and power as tools to seek pleasure, the reality is that people are using created things to fill an ultimate need—connection to God and to one another. A person may use the greedy gathering of wealth to fill a gnawing sensation that their worth and well-being is not secure. As a result, that gnawing sensation causes them to "gather more" even

though the more will never be enough.

In an age of anxiety, where will there be security and certainty? In an age that seeks pleasure, where will there be satisfaction? The Rolling Stones sounded the cry—"I Can't Get No Satisfaction"—but they did not provide the pathway to where satisfaction may be found.

Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35 provide vignettes into the life of the early church as a community of provision, connection and service to one another. We are still called to live a life as a community formed by God to be a witness in this world.

What is striking about these pictures is that this is a community marked by transparency and authenticity. For the community to meet a need, the need had to be identified and expressed. In

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our communities, do we hide behind the masks of pleasure? Identifying the idol of pleasure is a first step in helping a community to see clearly that the sin is not "out there" alone, but it is also "in here."

Acts 4:32-37 is immediately followed by the story of Ananias and Sapphira. These two church people tried to gain a certain reputation by manipulating the testimony that they were shaping about land that they sold and how much they then gave to the church. They were seeking a measure of fame even while they held back some of the proceeds. They wanted the pleasure of a certain reputation for generosity even though they were gripped by greed and turned to lies rather than the Lord. Ananias and Sapphira are found out and they are struck down-dead. The community is shaken to the core. "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events." Acts 5:11

Idols are deadly. Even idols having to do with pleasure are deadly. As followers of Christ, we need to not only be aware and watch out for idols, we need to warn others about the idols of our time. Witnesses point to danger as well as to grace.

Called to Serve

Be Holy

For the Convocation that opened the 139th Academic Year at Calvin Theological Seminary, Professor of Preaching John Rottman presented what he does best—a preached sermon entitled BE HOLY that offered both challenge and support to an academic community of faculty, students, and staff. Here is an excerpt from that sermon address, based on I Peter 1:13–2:3, in which Rottman led the community through a kaleidoscope of stories and insights that candidly exposed our resistance to holiness and its boundaries. Nevertheless, the boundaries designed by God are meant for our good, for our life. And he intends us to choose holiness within community. No more "push and pull of all those unholy desires in our lives." Instead, a place in community that percolates with the Holy Spirit and God where "is working overtime to reestablish holiness in and among us."

1 Peter 1:13-2:3 (New International Readers Version)

So prepare your minds for action. Control yourselves. Put your hope completely in the grace that will be given to you when Jesus Christ returns.

You should obey. You shouldn't give in to evil longings. They controlled your life when you didn't know any better. The one who chose you is holy. So you should be holy in all that you do. It is written, "Be holy, because I am holy." You call on a Father who judges each person's work without favoring one over another. So live your lives as strangers here. Have the highest respect for God.

The blood of Christ set you free from an empty way of life. That way of life was handed down to you by your own people long ago. You know that you were not bought with things that can pass away, like silver or gold. Instead, you were bought by the priceless blood of Christ. He is a perfect lamb. He doesn't have any flaws at all. He was chosen before God created the world. But he came into the world in these last days for you.

Because of what Christ has done, you believe in God. It was God who raised him from the dead. And it was God who gave him glory. So your faith and hope are in God.

You have made yourselves pure by obeying the truth. So you have an honest and true love for your brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply, from the heart.

You have been born again by means of the living word of God. His word lasts forever. You were not born again from a seed that will die. You were born from a seed that can't die. It is written,

"All people are like grass.
All of their glory is like the flowers in the field.
The grass dries up. The flowers fall to the ground.
But the word of the Lord stands forever."

And that word was preached to you.

So get rid of every kind of evil. Stop telling lies. Don't pretend to be something you are not. Stop wanting what others have. Don't speak against each other.

Like babies that were just born, you should long for the pure milk of God's word. It will help you grow up as believers. You can do it now that you have tasted how good the Lord is.

the boundaries that God put into his creation for them, they fail to flourish and even die. For example, when human beings violate God's boundaries for sexuality,

they find their marriages falling apart, sexually transmitted diseases running rampant, the grisly practice of abortion becoming commonplace. Turning away from God's holy ways means travelling in



the direction of death. Holy is all about living within and with respect for the ways God made his world to work. Peter mentions that when people turn away from being holy, deceit, hypocrisy, envy take over. Later, Peter mentions debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, and carousing as the deathly products of an unholy life. Turn from the Holy God to live in unholy ways, then death and degradation will surely follow.

So what hope do we have, even if we really were to ask for holiness? In a world stricken by unholy rave desires, what are the chances that places like Calvin Seminary can become a Holy place and for faculty, staff and students to become holy people. Peter points to God and reminds us about how the holy creator God was not content to let his deeply loved creation languish in unholy suffering and death. Peter tells us how God hatched a plan to redeem his people. God moves in all his triune power to reestablish holiness.

Remember that The word "holy" has to do with separation. God is holy because he is totally separate from sin. But more than that, God is also holy because he separates himself from his creation in an important way. He gives his creatures an existence distinct and separate from himself in order to give them space and freedom, room to live and love. God creates people, not robots; people with their own created space. God limits himself to give us real created life. In that sense too God is Holy, the holy creator ... and the holy recreating redeemer.

So Peter reassures us that the day is coming when each one of us who belongs to Jesus will no longer feel the push and pull of all those unholy desires in our lives. The day is coming when Jesus will kill off those inclinations to color outside the lines and will banish the death and destruction that comes along with it.

But in the meantime, there is also grace for us in the middle of the battle. Grace for Calvin Seminary students, staff, and faculty. This God of grace places us within a holy community, percolating with his Holy Spirit. He places us in a community where he is

Holiness is human beings fully alive.
Holy is what we were made to be. Maybe we asking for greater holiness wouldn't be so bad after all.

working overtime to reestablish holiness in and among us.

Last night I taught the opening Calvin Seminary class in one of the seminary's prison classes. Twenty-five students, each of whom had strayed from holiness in spectacular ways. One of them whom I call Bill, took a handgun, used it in anger, and ended up in prison for the rest of his life.

The prospect of life in prison was so daunting that Bill wondered about taking his own life. How could he go on after what he had done and where he was? But God didn't leave Bill alone, even in prison. Some of his family kept in touch and prayed for him. When Calvin Seminary started its first prison course, Bill decided to try it. There God introduced Bill to a few other people who loved Jesus. When a new church started a few months later, God gave Bill an opportunity to join the leadership team. Today, that small group of six has grown to more than sixty. Imagine a CRC church plant behind fortified prison walls. God commissioned Bill to be a key leader there. And in his spare time Bill "unofficially" ministers to psychiatric-patient prisoners. A few months ago, Bill's brother told me, "I want you to know that I have never been prouder of the church and of this seminary when I

see the new life that God has given my brother Bill in prison." New life. Born again. Holy.

If God can do it there, I know God can—and will—work his holy mystery of transformation here at Calvin Seminary. God is all about making us holy, renovating and saving what sin and evil aim to wreck. God is all about making Calvin Seminary into more and more a holy place where God's love and God's life flows and flourishes.

Early in his letter, Peter mentions that when angels hear about advances in the worldwide reclamation project that Jesus is working in and among his people, they can't get enough. When the angels see what lengths God has gone to save and restore people like Bill and like us, they shake their holy heads in awe. "My God," you can hear them saying, "I can hardly believe it. Look at what God has done with him. Look at what God has done with her." Almost unbelievable.

Well, here we are, angels looking on. As we face life's battle with its unholy desires, God places us within a community of holy people. Calvin Seminary, half church, half school. Look around. God has gathered us as people bought not with silver or gold, but with the precious blood Christ. God places us within this seminary community, a community percolating with the Holy Spirit love of Jesus. A place where smiles and loving words prompt us to say, yes, here we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. You see, Holiness is life. Holiness is human beings fully alive. Holy is what we were made to be.

Making Her Way

Dr. Catherine González on a Career of Firsts as a Woman in Theological Education

ne afternoon in late September, Calvin Seminary hosted its first-ever event exclusively for women: a candid conversation about navigating life as a female pastor or theologian.

The guest of honor was Dr. Catherine González, a pioneering theological scholar

and ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Local female pastors, denominational leaders, seminarians, and others discerning a call to ministry laughed and empathized with González, punctuating her reflections with their own questions.

Newly-appointed Old Testament professor Amanda Benckhuysen took the lead in interviewing González. Benckhuysen's colleagues, Professor Mary VandenBerg (systematic theology) and Professor Sarah Schreiber (Old Testament, also new to the department), joined her as hosts.

Ordained in 1965, Dr. González says she entered seminary intending to pursue campus ministry. At the time,

she had "no idea" that women could not yet be ordained in the Presbyterian Church.

"I knew that my mother opposed [the ordination of women], but I didn't know that the whole church did!" she says.

Her mother's convictions about women in ministry

aside, González says she always sensed encouragement to work outside the

"My mother had had a career, and her mother had had a career until they [each] were married, and married late My mother's opinion was, 'Marriage is great, but have a career.' [She valued] the sense of self that came with that."

Mary was, González says, "a force of nature." Yet it was Mary's memorable example that allowed González to grow up "knowing that women could be ministers."

As González entered seminary, she discovered that it was the lectern, not the pulpit, that was calling.

"I realized I would just die if I couldn't teach. I entered the Ph.D. program. I also wanted to officially represent the church in my teaching, so I sought ordination. That's when I found out I couldn't have [sought ordination] earlier."

González completed her Ph.D. in systematic theology and the history of doctrine at Boston University. She went on to become the first full-time female professor in historical theology in the institutions where she taught; and one of only two or three female faculty members nationwide instructing students in subject areas more usually taught by men.

With good humor and a strong sense of call, González made her way as a professor, first at the undergraduate and later at the graduate level. Male colleagues and their families "took me under their wing," she says; and when students who opposed women's ordination tried to cause her trouble, González took it in stride.

"They would pull out their tape recorders when I start[ed] to say anything so that they could run back to their presbyteries if I was teaching heresy. But I gave grades," she remembers, chuckling. "There was a limit. If you've got power, use it."

With her academic career well underway, González met her husband-to-be at a conference. He, too, was a theologian, professor, and author. And he, too, had blazed a trail in the field of theological education.





"When Justo and I married, he was the only Hispanic teaching on a tenure track in any seminary in the country," she says. "So he was a great support."

For women making their own way in ministry or theological education, González stresses the importance of maintaining focus on their vocation.

"One reason why I didn't get married earlier was that I had a strong sense that if I married I would cut out my other

vocation. It was almost as if I didn't dare get married When I met Justo, I already had such a strong sense of vocation. [I was able to embrace marriage and household life] without being scared of ... not doing the theology."

Unpacking the call takes patience and creativity, González says. "It takes a while first of all to understand [your call], and second to figure out how to live it out given the options available to you."

Yet holding that call at the center provides a rudder in times of doubt or difficulty. Prioritizing it gives shape to the other vocations that characterize many women's lives, keeping it from being eclipsed by them.

And living into it serves God's people now and into the future, as those yet to come make their way for the sake of the church too.

-Kristy Manion

From the Ends of the Earth

Dr. Justo González on Missions

he United States is now a mission field just as much as China or Angola."

Thus spoke Justo González, the noted Cuban-American church historian and theologian, during a Calvin Theological Seminary-sponsored lecture this autumn. Gonzales, who authored the two-volume

Story of Christianity and the three-volume History of Christian Thought, addressed the sweeping shifts taking place in Christendom and the impact on Christian ministry and mission in the world today.

"Mission is not—or should not be—a one-way enterprise," he declared. "It is not just a matter of Christians telling, giving, teaching, and others hearing, receiving, learning. When Christians tell, they must also hear; when they give, they must also receive; when they teach, they must also learn. Otherwise, mission runs the risk of becoming just another form of imperialism under the guise of faith."

In his presentation, González not only provided a broad overview of the history of missionary work but he also delved into a deeper examination of the Great Commission and the development of a theology of mission.

"Mission is both the announcement



of what God has done and is doing in us," he said, "and the discovery of what God is doing in others. And in that very discovery God often tells us something we need to know."

González's appeal for a spirit of humility and mutuality in mission is rooted in his understanding of the "sign of Jonah" in the gospel accounts, including Luke's assertion that

"for as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation The people of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."

He asserted that the sign of Jonah today is "ever present" among us—"but it is not directly present in the good, religious people who follow our traditions and our customs. It is present in the new world that we are unable to understand, but where all authority has been given to Jesus."

González acknowledged that current trends prompt many to "try to live in closed communities where we seek to keep this new world from impinging on our lives. We may try to close our borders to any who are not quite like us—in culture, in color, in education and in social standing."

What's more, he continued, "we may even use the church as the last stronghold of the world we knew, under the pretext of doing everything 'decently and in good order,' or...that we must defend the Reformed tradition in its pristine purity."

But followers of Christ, González said, "have to remember that we don't own the church. We are just stewards. It's the Lord's church. We can't keep people out becomes we don't like them or don't understand them The local church has to learn it is part of the great church universal—not only through all the world, but through all the centuries."

Born in Havana, Cuba, in 1937, González was educated in his home country and then immigrated to the U.S. to earn both his master's and doctoral degrees at Yale University. Ordained in the United Methodist Church, he taught at the Evangelical Seminary in Puerto Rico and at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta.

In addition to his epic treatises on church history and theology, González has written more than 100 academic books and 1,300 journal articles. He is married to Catherine Gunsalus González, an ordained Presbyterian minister and expert in church history and liturgy who is a professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

-Bruce Buursma

Called to Serve

Center for Excellence in Preaching Celebrates Ten Year Anniversary

t began with a dream and a hope of the Seminary's then-new pres-▲ident, Neal Plantinga, around the year 2001. Preaching generally had a high profile in the Christian Reformed Church as well as in the Protestant tradition. John Calvin esteemed the Word preached as a key means of grace for the church, and thus Reformed churches that bore the stamp of Calvin's influence had long accorded the sermon a particular place of prominence in worship services. Given this history as well as the present-day importance of the weekly sermon, what could the Seminary do to promote good preaching? Plantinga found an answer: create a center whose sole purpose would be to help active preachers do their job better.

By 2004 the Seminary had secured generous funds from a number of donors who quickly caught the vision for doing something to make preaching better. By late spring of 2005, Rev. Scott Hoezee was selected as the Center's new Director effective July 1 of that year.

Since the Center got off the ground in 2004, its programming has steadily increased both in-house at the Seminary itself and throughout North America. Today the Center's biggest "front door" is its website. Visited by as many as 10,000 different pastors every month, the

website houses a standing collection of resources to put preachers in touch with outstanding commentaries, books, and sample sermons.

But the vast majority of visitors to the website gravitate to the Lectionary-based

sermon starter articles that are posted every Monday morning with ideas for next Sunday's sermon. These are the most viewed part of the website each week. (And yes, the busiest day of the week for this part of the website is Saturday!) These weekly postings provide the "jump start" in creative thinking that many pastors are looking for in order to craft a fresh, invigorating sermon. The website's archives now house sermon ideas on hundreds of preaching texts as well as for the entire Heidelberg Catechism. Over 750,000 pages have been downloaded.

Continuing Education seminars for pastors are another key part of the Center's work. Among the most successful one- and two-week seminars that have been offered the past decade are "Imaginative Reading for Creative Preaching," "The Preachers' Oasis," and "From Text to Sermon." In addition to these seminars—typically offered in the summer—dozens of regional events have also been sponsored for pastors and



led by Seminary Professors Jeff Weima, John Rottman, Neal Plantinga, and Scott Hoezee. The Center has also co-sponsored big conference events like the annual Symposium on Worship and the Festival of Faith &

Writing and smaller one-day fall and spring preaching conferences that have featured outstanding preachers like Thomas G. Long, Mark Labberton, Craig Barnes, and Jeff Manion.

In its ten-year history and in addition to the generous funds provided by many donors, the Center has been awarded two major grants. In 2008 the Center received \$200,000 from the John Templeton Foundation to develop resources to help churches make positive use of the insights of science in ministry settings. More recently in the Fall of 2013 the Center was awarded a \$500,000 grant from Lilly Endowment aimed at refining how preaching is taught at the seminary level and to form peer learning groups of pastors throughout North America.

Other activities sponsored by the Center are the Seminary's "Book-of-the-Semester" program. This program has brought many award-winning authors to interact with the Seminary community, including Pulitzer Prize winners Marilynne Robinson, Sonia Nazario, and Elizabeth Strout and other award-winning authors like Richard Rodriguez, Gary Schmidt, and Walter Wangerin, Ir. The Center also oversees the Jacob Eppinga Rhetoric Center and the Ted Spoelstra Toastmasters Club, both of which aim to help students in developing good skills and instincts in oral and written communication.

The Center for Excellence in Preaching continues to fulfill the vision of doing something positive to help current and future preachers in their vital work of proclaiming God's Word.



New Faces at Calvin Theological Seminary

n the Fall of 2014 Calvin Seminary welcomed a few new faces to our faculty and staff. These men and women have all been "Called to Serve" at Calvin Theological Seminary.



Amanda Benckhuysen Associate Professor of **Old Testament**

Dr. Amanda Benckhuysen joined the faculty this summer as Associate Professor of

Old Testament. Dr. Benckhuysen graduated from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, with a Bachelor's degree in English and Political Science. She then went on to study at Calvin Seminary where she earned her M.Div., then furthered her education by attending the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto where she received her Ph.D. in Theology with a specialization in Biblical Studies. Before returning to her seminary alma mater, she had been teaching at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. Amanda is married and has two young daughters.



Aaron Einfeld Director of Admissions and Enrollment Management

Mr. Aaron Einfeld took up duties in June as our new Director of Admissions and Enroll-

ment Management. Aaron majored in Music Theory and Psychology at Calvin College, then completed a Master's Degree in Student Affairs and Higher Education at Indiana State University. He has several years of higher education experience working in the areas of service-learning, residence life, and most recently, admissions. Aaron is one year away, he hopes, from finishing a Ph.D. at Michigan State University in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education. He is married and has two young daughters.



Danjuma Gibson

Lecturer in Pastoral Care

Dr. Danjuma Gibson began a two-year lectureship in Pastoral Care this summer. He recently sustained his Ph.D. defense

at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Pastoral Theology, Personality, & Culture. Dr. Gibson also holds a Master of Arts in Christian Studies and a Master of Arts in Urban Ministry from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School as well as a Master of Business Administration from DePaul University. Dr. Gibson is a bi-vocational pastor and has served Zion Faith Center Bible Church in Chicago since 1999. Danjuma is married and has one young daughter.



Robert Keeley Director of Distance Education

Dr. Robert Keeley has taught in the Education Department of Calvin College since 2000 but he's no strang-

er to Calvin Seminary as he has taught education courses in our professional masters program. With a background in mathematics and great affinity for technology, Dr. Keeley was a good fit to serve as our part-time Director of Distance Education. You may recognize his name as a Music reviewer for The Banner; he is also a writer for Think Christian, thinkchristian.reframemedia.com. He and his wife Laura are Co-directors of Children's Ministries at Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church, in Holland, Michigan where they reside.



Chloe King Administrative Assistant to the Faculty and

Mrs. Chloe King began in August as the Administrative Assistant to the Faculty. She

delighted the search committee when she confessed that she had discovered Calvin Theological Seminary and this open position through a web search for seminaries in Michigan after her family relocated to the midwest from Chloe is originally from California. the Philippines and had been living in southern California where she completed her undergraduate education as well as an M.A. in Christian Leadership from Fuller Theological Seminary. Chloe is married and has two daughters, ages 10 and 4.



Sarah Schreiber Assistant Professor of **Old Testament**

Rev. Sarah Schreiber was appointed Assistant Professor of Old Testament after her successful interview at

Synod this past June. Her interest in ministry and theology was cultivated during her Facing Your Future experience at Calvin Theological Seminary. She is a graduate of Calvin College with a B.A. in Religion, Greek, and Business. She went on to receive her M.Div. at Calvin Seminary. Sarah plans to complete her Ph.D. in Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity at the University of Notre Dame in 2015. She was recently ordained as a minister of the Word at Grace Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. Sarah is married and has one son.



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