

CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

# FORUM

FALL 2015

## FORUM Theme:

**Biblical and  
Hermeneutical  
Reflections on  
Same-Sex  
Relationships**

## ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

*Called to Serve News*

- Recovery in Nepal
- Convocation 2015
- New Faces



# FORUM

Providing Theological Leadership for the Church  
Volume 22, Number 3: Fall 2015

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The *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum*  
is published in Winter, Spring and Fall editions.

Calvin Theological Seminary  
3233 Burton St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546.  
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PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40063614  
RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO:  
CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
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BURLINGTON, ON L7M 1A9  
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## Is There a Future for Sacrifice?

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via Girard to Contemporary Feminisms

Thursday, Nov. 12, 2015, 7:30 p.m.  
DeVos Auditorium  
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Refuses to Die

Sarah Coakley

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# BIBLICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTIONS ON SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

## Entering the Conversation

In the Christian Reformed denomination and the wider church, there is a palpable restlessness when the issues surrounding homosexuality and the LGBT (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender) community are raised. As President of Calvin Theological Seminary, I have had an increasing number of conversations and I have heard multiple stories in this area.

I have been particularly touched by the number of Christian leaders who identify that their son or daughter is gay or lesbian. The family story and even the family struggle is something that remains hidden for many. We may seek to find a better answer to the issues that face the church in this area, but that answer will not come without genuine listening to individual stories while also placing those stories within the context of the biblical story of God forming us and redeeming us.

In this *Forum*, we also include Professor David Holwerda's 1994 inaugural article which frames the purpose and goal of the *Forum* (see p. 17). In that very first issue, he made clear that Calvin Theological Seminary is called to serve the church by providing guidance as teachers for the church and that the *Forum* was developed to come alongside the questions and challenges

faced by the church.

In keeping with that purpose, we are providing some framework for one of the key conversations in the life of the church today. In this issue, Professor John Cooper raises important hermeneutical questions; Professor Jeff Weima provides insights into the New Testament, especially from the writings of the apostle Paul, and Professor Arie Leder presents a theological view from the perspective of the Pentateuch with a focus on Leviticus 18-19.

We know that there are many other issues and angles to explore, but we begin with looking at Scripture and how we interpret Scripture. While the culture has made dramatic shifts, we seek to anchor our conversation in what the Bible says and how we come

Jul Medenblik  
President



to understand it together in the church.

But before you turn to the articles and other news from Calvin Theological Seminary, I would like to present a real life situation for the unfolding conversation. As a church planter, I spoke with countless people who were explor-

ing faith and some who were openly concerned about how the church has treated or would treat persons of the LGBT community. I specifically remember this question—"My sister/brother is gay, will she/he be welcome here?" This is a key question and I certainly understand and appreciate the call to welcome those who have a homosexual orientation into the community of the church.

Another key question is how can the church disciple and show pastoral care for those who have a homosexual orientation? As churches, we have not done enough. We have a long way to go to consistently develop the type of community longed for and recently described by Wesley Hill in his book, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian*. We wait along with others as the Study Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance Regarding Same-Sex

*I specifically remember this question—"My sister/brother is gay, will she/he be welcome here?"*



## ▶ “Entering the Conversation”

Marriage prepares to present their insights to the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 2016.

I want you to know, that as this issue was being developed, we specifically thought about and prayed for persons that we know would identify themselves as part of the LGBT community. We know that you may read this issue with a brother or sister, son or daughter, uncle or aunt or even mother or father in mind. We also know that you may read this issue with great interest because of your own same-sex orientation.

As Pastor Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City recently blogged, (<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-bible-and-same-sex-relationships-a-review-article>) we need to start with relationships and being in relationship with those in the LGBT community.

Out of my studies and the stories that I have heard, I am sharing with you some of the personal statements that have framed my engagement to friends and family in this area, including to those who identify themselves as part of the LGBT community.

### “I am sorry.”

*I know that I have not always spoken up or sought the best for those who are in the LGBT community. I am so glad that our culture has helped me see every person—no matter their sexual orientation—as an image bearer of God. We are all broken in so many ways. Maybe you don't think we are broken sexually, but for those times when I saw sin in your life, but not mine, I was and I am sorry.*

### “Is it time to say, we (the church) were wrong?”

*As a former lawyer, I still remember when the church was wondering how to respond to the civil union approach that*

*I know that I have not always spoken up or sought the best for those who are in the LGBT community. I am so glad that our culture has helped me see every person—no matter their sexual orientation—as an image bearer of God.*

*many people were advocating in order to define the rights of those in partnerships. Visitation rights in hospitals, inheritance rights and even rights to parent were being presented as clarified by a civil union approach. Many churches were concerned at what would happen with such an approach and that concern helped lead to the passage of “Defense of Marriage” legislation in the U.S. In my opinion, we were wrong. We failed to use the lens of justice and mercy as members of a pluralistic society. We failed to confront discrimination within a civil society. In North America, we quickly moved from consideration of civil unions to the current focus on and advocacy of same-sex marriage.*

### “The need for forgiveness.”

*I know that how I enter into this conversation is important. I know that to gain a hearing there are elements of our conversation that will need to come from a heart of repentance and a desire for you to forgive me. As others think of their own conversations, I would suggest that many times, we need to begin with a request for forgiveness. We need to come to the conversation full of love,*

*respect and humility. At the same time, I am not saying that we should not seek biblical truth together or even articulate such truth.*

*What I am saying is that our first moves in this conversation need to start from looking with eyes of love. When Jesus challenges the rich, young ruler about a new life of discipleship and the rich, young ruler turns away, the Scriptures record that—“Jesus looked at him and loved him.” (Mark 10:21) Do others see our eyes of love and hear of our love?*

One critique I have with the title —“LGBT”—is that this is a label that limits conversations. For some in the LGBT community, the title “Christian” is a negative label that also limits the conversation as we ask questions of one another such as—“Is a person more than their sexual orientation? Is sexual orientation the foundational, defining category of humanity?”

I hope that no one will use this issue as a “club” in conversation. Our hope is that while there may be disagreement about what has been written in this opening letter or in the articles that follow that we will continue to seek the best for each other and engage the conversation.

### “What does it mean that we are brothers and sisters in Christ?”

One of the concerns I have about the current state of the debate or dialogue in the culture is that it has turned into a matter of “rights” and “being on the right side of history.” I would hope that we can frame the conversation in the church in ways that are different than the culture because we recognize that the person who we are speaking to or about is a brother or sister in Christ.

I hope that we will seek to listen to the voices of brothers and sisters in Christ from the global church. I hope that we will seek to learn from brothers and sisters in Christ from other church denominations as they deal with and struggle with similar issues in this area.

I hope our shared understanding of being disciples of Jesus Christ includes a sturdy conviction that we may very

well be called to stand out and even stand against the culture and deny ourselves. For example, in the area of sexual ethics, what does it mean for Christians to be “counter-cultural?”

Part of our new paradigm of being a North American church in an increasingly post-Christian culture is that we are not “in power” and we may even find ourselves being ridiculed for having “biblical” perspectives and

express that outlook in the areas of morality and ethics.

What does it then mean to be a disciple under the authority of Scripture and to be a part of a “family” with brothers and sisters in Christ?

May our conversation unfold in a way that is full of grace and truth and may that conversation be aided by the articles that are being presented for consideration by the church.

## Not Like Women in Office: Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Same-Sex Relations

In previous decades, the ordination of women was the most polarizing issue in the Christian Reformed Church. It divided families, friends, and congregations. Some left the denomination. Now we are having a similarly painful conversation about same-sex marriage. Synod 1995 decided the debate about women in office by declaring that both sides are consistent with Scripture and allowing congregations to decide for themselves. Some of us hope that same-sex marriage will be resolved the same way, and others fear that it will. Many people on both sides view same-sex marriage and women in office as similar issues that stand or fall together.

But the issues are very different. One is about the church order, the other about the moral order. More basically, there are biblical texts affirming female

leadership, and ordaining women can be defended from Scripture using the standard Reformed hermeneutics (that is, our method of interpreting the Bible)\*. But there are no texts supporting same-sex relations, and none of the dozens of recent new interpretations is consistent with our approach to Scripture.

In this article I urge our denominational conversation to focus on hermeneutics to determine whether the Bible, *properly interpreted*, permits same-sex activity. I explain why the methods used to support it are different and problematic compared to the standard Christian Reformed approach to Scripture. I suggest that Synod commission a definitive study to address the current confusion and tension in the CRCNA.

by John W. Cooper,  
Professor of  
Philosophical  
Theology



It is important to note that I address same-sex activity, not sexual orientation, emotional intimacy, friendship, living together, or legal status. I also believe it is wrong for the church to focus on same-sex activity while neglecting the sexual sanctity required of all members—single, married, and divorced.

### We Must Engage Scripture Openly and Honestly

I understand why people question the church’s position. We feel compassion for family members, friends, fellow believers, and all people who suffer because of their sexual orientation and unwanted celibacy. It is difficult for most of us not to empathize with the happiness of same-sex couples in love. We want to affirm and support them as persons. We wonder whether their happiness is truly displeasing to God. Didn’t he create us all with a need for sexual fulfillment? What if we were homosexual? We note

\* Synod affirmed this position in 1995 and 2000. I showed how both positions can be derived from Scripture using Reformed hermeneutics in *A Cause for Division? Women in Office and the Unity of the Church* (Calvin Theological Seminary, 1991). I also noted that this approach does not validate same-sex relations: “Using Reformed hermeneutics as outlined here will not result in our blessing homosexual behavior or ordaining those who practice it” (58).



## ► Not Like Women in Church Office

that the church has revised its teachings about monarchy, slavery, and the roles of women. Reputable scholars claim that Scripture allows committed same-sex relations too, and we believe them. In this way compassion moves some of us to affirm same-sex relationships and new readings of Scripture. I understand this journey because I know and care deeply about people with same-sex attraction—some in committed relationships. I too have reexamined the church's exegesis for the sake of compassion and fairness to see whether I could support revision.

But appeals to compassion and the leading of the Spirit are misguided if they run contrary to Scripture. All of us must be open to correction by the Word, whatever our position. Those opposed to same-sex activity can be tempted by homophobia, conservatism, or fear of moral relativism not to consider any new interpretation. Those in favor can be equally prejudiced, sure that Christian love requires non-judgmental inclusion and determined to square same-sex activity with Scripture by any hermeneutics necessary. Unbiblical factors pressure both sides to seek their preferred outcomes. But if we are truly led by the Spirit, we want to hear and obey God's Word.

Openness therefore requires that we reconsider Scripture properly and thoroughly without bias. But it does not mean that we cannot draw definite conclusions. It does not mean endless debate until Synod finally gives in. Openness also does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid contenders. The denominational position stands as the proper interpretation of Scripture unless modified by Synod. The burden of proof rightly rests on the case for revision, as it did for women in office.

*But appeals to compassion and the leading of the Spirit are misguided if they run contrary to Scripture. All of us must be open to correction by the Word, whatever our position.*

### **Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Arguments for Same-Sex Marriage**

The denominational conversation must be based on our Reformed doctrine of Scripture and methods of interpretation. In my view, the standard reinterpretations of the texts about sexuality are based on approaches to the Bible that are not compatible with the Christian Reformed position. If they are not, then they lack validity for our denomination even though they are endorsed by evangelical or Reformed theologians.

There are two main strategies of reinterpretation. I will call them the "validation" approach and the "divide and conquer" approach.

"Validation" is the typical mainline Protestant strategy. It argues that same-sex relationships can model the same biblical values as male-female marriage. It is based on the modern theological assumption that the enduring truths of Scripture are compatible with "enlightened" scientific paradigms and moral intuitions. It holds that the Bible teaches the universal ideals of love, justice, inclusion, faithfulness, happiness, and quality of life (shalom), but not the particular culturally embedded views

of gender, sex, marriage, and family expressed by the Bible's writers. This approach validates same-sex relationships by claiming that our culture's views of gender, sex, and marriage can express the same "biblical" values as the traditional views. The validation strategy does not need to reinterpret the texts that limit sexual relations to heterosexual marriage, because it does not believe that they teach universal norms.

But Christians who affirm the historic doctrine of Scripture must reinterpret the relevant texts because the Bible is the full and final authority for everything it teaches. Their standard strategy is to "divide and conquer" traditional sexual ethics by proposing limiting interpretations of the passages about sex and marriage. They deconstruct the textual connections among the image of God, gender complementarity, marriage, sex, and reproduction. They claim that the seven texts about same-sex behavior are not universal but condemn only specific *kinds* of same-sex behavior. Genesis 19 is against inhospitality and rape, not homosexual activity as such. Leviticus addresses pagan cultic practices, not sex in general, they say. Romans 1 condemns the emperor Caligula's orgies and heterosexuals who unnaturally engage in homosexual acts, not all same-sex relations. 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 are either unclear in meaning or only address inappropriate man-boy or master-slave sex. The divide and conquer approach concludes that Scripture does not reserve sex for heterosexual marriage or condemn faithful same-sex relationships.

Combined, the two strategies seem to make a good case. Divide and conquer argues that the Bible is not against same-sex unions. Validation claims that it implicitly affirms them.

## Christian Reformed Hermeneutics and Same-Sex Activity

Both strategies are used by some members of the CRCNA and organizations that they support. Some used them a generation ago to justify women in office (“it’s a justice issue; Paul is out of date”), and they were accurately identified as “a new hermeneutics.” Neither strategy is compatible with our Reformed hermeneutics (hereafter RH). To explain why, I’ll introduce RH and then compare the three.

Our Reformed hermeneutics is not obscure or parochial. With all historic Christian churches, we confess a full, infallible, and definitive view of biblical teaching. RH continues the method of interpretation developed by John Calvin, who is widely regarded as the father of Protestant hermeneutics. His general method is still used even by non-Reformed denominations and scholars who embrace the Reformation view of Scripture and reject same-sex activity—including John Stott, N. T. Wright, Gordon Fee, and Richard Hays. Nuanced in the Dutch Reformed tradition by Bavinck and Kuyper, our RH emphasizes the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Gerhardus Vos promoted this hermeneutics, and Louis Berkhof spelled it out in *The Interpretation of Scripture*. Our RH is still alive and well. It leads us from the Bible to our confessions, ethical positions, and testimonies. It has been restated and applied in recent decades by synodical studies on the authority of Scripture, homosexuality, women in office, creation and evolution, inclusive language for God, and other important topics. RH is not unclear, arbitrary, or narrowly denominational.

What is the method? We confess that God speaks in Scripture today as he did

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in the past. To understand what God is teaching us, we must understand what the Bible meant to its original authors and readers and apply its teaching now. That is what good sermons and Bible studies do. Understanding Scripture involves both interpretation and application. I’ll explain and illustrate each aspect in relation to sexual norms.

Proper interpretation considers four factors that determine a text’s meaning: its grammatical, literary, historical, and theological dimensions. We must look for the clearest, most likely interpretation of each dimension in relation to the others, based on all available evidence, because we confess that Scripture is clear about the essentials of faith and practice. We must not manipulate the data or arbitrarily construct improbable meanings.

Grammatical interpretation seeks the meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek words and sentences. For example, Paul’s term *arsenokoites* (a male who has sex with a male) is a compound word derived from the Septuagint (Greek) translation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. *Phusis* (“nature”) in Romans 1 connotes the universal normative order in Genesis 1, orthodox Judaism, and Greek and Roman Platonism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism in spite of diverse views of same-sex activity. (*Nature* can refer

to an individual’s [sexual] nature in modern parlance.)

Literary factors include a text’s genre (narrative, poetry, law, etc.) and mode of expression (literal, figurative, symbolic, etc.). Genesis 19 is narrative, not law or ethical instruction. But Leviticus is law—the Holiness Code. 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 list *arsenokoitai* with others who break the Ten Commandments—clearly an enduring judgment.

Historical interpretation focuses both on development within Scripture, such as Paul’s appropriation of Levitical sexual boundaries, and the historical context of Scripture—for example, views of same-sex activity among Israel’s neighbors and Paul’s contemporaries.

Theological or canonical interpretation is the culmination of RH: Scripture interprets Scripture. It considers individual passages within their books and ultimately within Scripture as a whole (*tota Scriptura*). Each text contributes to the meaning of the whole Bible, and each in turn has meaning within its book and in relation to the other books. The Bible is not a collection of isolated texts but is like a living organism in which each part shapes and is shaped by the whole body. Biblical doctrine emerges from theological interpretation. The teachings of all parts of Scripture on particular topics—including God, creation, sin, grace, and the Savior, as well as God’s will for sexuality—constitute a coherent unity.

The divide and conquer strategy is contrary to theological interpretation. But it is consistent with (post) modern theological hermeneutics, which regards the Bible as a collection of socially-historically limited, diverse, and sometimes incompatible perspectives. According to RH and all historic Christian doctrines of Scripture, however, God intends us to combine everything it teaches about



## ► Not Like Women in Church Office

his will, creation, sin, grace, obedience, gender, sex, marriage, and chastity as we interpret the relevant texts about sex. Biblical doctrine therefore includes the normative order of creation—the image of God, male-female complementarity, marriage, and procreation—and all kinds of post-fall sexual aberrations that are narrated or explicitly judged. Jesus himself reaffirmed marriage as instituted by God in Genesis 2. Theological interpretation leaves no room for non-sinful kinds of sexual relations outside of heterosexual marriage or for sinful kinds within marriage. “Divide and conquer” puts asunder what Scripture joins together.

The final aspect of our hermeneutics is application. A crucial question asks which biblical imperatives are still normative and which were intended by God as temporary. RH uses theological interpretation to answer. Given everything that Scripture teaches, we can regularly distinguish what is temporary from what endures, and thus we no longer insist on monarchy or permit slavery. We also realize that the cultural specificities of Old Testament cleanliness and civil and ceremonial laws were fulfilled in Christ and are no longer in effect. Thus some precepts in Leviticus, such as methods of menstrual purity and criminal penalties, no longer hold. But the Levitical sexual boundaries that these instructions point to remain in force because the creation order, the Ten Commandments, and the virtues that image God in Christ are universal norms that still guide our lives. For RH, specific commands and applications of biblical imperatives are universal and enduring unless Scripture allows that they are not. The mainline validation approach has the opposite effect, relativizing particular biblical standards to current value-ideals.

The texts about homosexual activity

*After following the conversation for decades, I am still convinced that the conclusions about biblical teaching adopted by the CRCNA in 1973 are sound and relevant for ministry.*

almost certainly teach or imply that all same-sex acts without exception are sinful. Genesis narrates homosexual acts and a number of heterosexual sins in light of the creation and fall in Genesis 1–3. Holiness in Leviticus includes all of life and domestic relationships, not just cultic practices. Paul lists a term derived from Leviticus with other sins against the Commandments. His judgment in Romans 1 is almost certainly universal, as stated above. Straightforward exegesis, theological interpretation, and sound logic can only conclude that these texts regard all kinds of same-sex activity as contrary to the will of God. The reason Paul did not address “faithful” same-sex relations is not his limitations but their impossibility according to Scripture. The Bible need not explicitly judge each kind of same-sex behavior, just as it need not condemn every kind of murder or disrespect for parents. If Scripture is not clear about sexual boundaries, is it not clear about any specific ethical issue.

After following the conversation for decades, I am still convinced that the conclusions about biblical teaching adopted by the CRCNA in 1973 are sound and relevant for ministry. I remain open to considering revisions that claim to fit RH, but I do not see how any could be valid.

## What Is at Stake?

If the hermeneutics supporting same-sex marriage is legitimate, then it can be applied to other ethical and doctrinal issues as well. There are progressive Christians who use these methods to validate consensual temporary and open marriage, friendship with sexual benefits, and other “compassionate” sexual relations that supposedly enhance people’s lives. They also support “compassionate” quality-of-life abortion and euthanasia. CRCNA members who affirm same-sex marriage might not agree with these other positions, but they have no right to object from Scripture. It is arbitrary and self-contradicting to claim that the Bible allows same-sex unions but rules out sexual friendships and requires life-long commitment in marriage.

Problematic methods of interpretation readily spill over into doctrinal and confessional matters. For example, some Reformed theologians who support same-sex marriage use the same hermeneutics to claim that Christ’s death on the cross is not about God’s displeasure and just punishment of sin. That view of the atonement cannot be right, they say, because it validates child abuse, blood sacrifice, retribution, and capital punishment.

These examples illustrate that sexual ethics, hermeneutics, and confessional orthodoxy are inextricably interrelated. If the approach to the Bible that supports same-sex marriage cannot reliably generate and defend the creeds and confessions, then it is not compatible with our Reformed understanding of Scripture or the Covenant of Office-Bearers. Are we reforming our sex-drenched, pleasure-worshipping culture or being transformed by it? The unity and integrity of the CRCNA before God are at stake.



I therefore hope that Synod will authorize a conclusive study of biblical sexual boundaries. Let all the methods and arguments for and against same-sex relations be evaluated thoroughly and

fairly. If the study committee competently applies our Reformed doctrine of Scripture and hermeneutics, I am confident that it will reaffirm and update our current position. I realize that this

outcome will cause pain for some, but faithfulness to God requires it. So does our ability to be a church that welcomes, loves, and discipled all people, whatever our sexual identity and sins may be.

## Same-Sex Activity: What Does the New Testament Say?

**W**hat does the New Testament say about same-sex activity? The answer to this question is clearer than is often claimed. The answer is also more important than whatever experiences or feelings we may have about this controversial subject. Our experiences with gay friends and family members are important and do matter. Those who read this article and are gay, your experiences and feelings are important and also do matter. But for Jesus followers, the only thing that ultimately matters when it comes to same-sex activity is what God says in his Word.

### Preliminary Observations

Before turning to the relevant texts of the NT, there are some preliminary observations that ought to be made. First, a key distinction exists between *orientation* and *activity*: the NT texts we will look at refer to sexual acts and do not deal with same-sex orientation. The Bible clearly condemns same-sex acts, but there is nothing inherently sinful about people who have a same-sex orientation.

Second, same-sex acts, though wrong and not part of God's will for humanity, should not be ranked as worse than other sins. The NT texts list same-sex acts alongside many other things that

are equally forbidden to followers of Jesus. For example, the fact that 1 Corinthians 6:9 lists the "greedy" shortly after "men who have sex with other men" as those who will not inherit the kingdom of God suggests that the church should be just as concerned about those who pile up more money than they will ever need in their 401(k) retirement fund and yet fail to share their abundance with others as it is with those who engage in same-sex conduct.

Third, the church needs to demonstrate more compassion and support for those with same-sex orientations. It is a sad truth that the Christian community as a whole, including our Christian Reformed denomination, has failed in its calling both to demonstrate in concrete ways empathy for our homosexual brothers and sisters and to provide the kind of supportive environment in which they, along with heterosexual members whose orientation is also negatively impacted by the fall, are equipped to live a life of holiness.

### The Testimony of Jesus

Revisionists—those who argue against the traditional position that the Bible condemns same-sex activity—are often quick to point out the silence of Jesus on homosexual conduct: "If

same-sex acts are so bad, why didn't Jesus say anything about it?" The weakness of this argument, however, becomes clear from several observations.

First, the Judaism of Jesus' day was in complete agreement in denouncing same-sex activity. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that Jesus would differ from that view, unless he explicitly stated so. Yet

Jesus never even hints at an affirmation of homosexual conduct that would reveal his supposed contrast to the condemnatory statements by fellow Jews of his day.

Second, despite the popularity of "red-letter" Bibles, Christians should not treat Jesus' words as more important than the other parts of Scripture. What Paul has to say about same-sex acts is just as much the "word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13) as what Jesus says, or, in this case, does not say.

Third, Jesus never says anything against other sexual sins such as prostitution, incest, pederasty or bestiality. Yet no one concludes from Jesus' silence that he was tolerant of such behaviors.

Fourth, Jesus lists in Mark 7:21–23 several things that defile a person, and at the head of the list is "sexual immorality" (NIV 2011). This

by Jeffrey A.D.  
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Testament



## Same-Sex Activity: What Does the New Testament Say?

particular rendering may be misleading because the Greek term *porneiai* is rendered in translation as singular but is plural in the original: “sexual immoralities.” This suggests that Jesus, a rabbi who knew well the Torah, or OT law, has in mind the different kinds of sexual sins (plural) forbidden in texts such as Leviticus 18 and 20—texts that condemn all kinds of unlawful sexual relations, including those of same-sex partners (Lev. 18:22; 20:13).

The appeal to Jesus’ silence on the issue of homosexual conduct and the portrayal of Jesus as someone who would be open to certain forms of same-sex acts, therefore, suffer from significant weaknesses. The evidence instead indicates that Jesus shared with the Jews of his day a universal agreement that same-sex acts were sinful and not to be done by God’s covenant people.

### The Testimony of Paul

Paul, like Jesus, was a first-century Jew and thus would have been similarly influenced by the unanimous condemnation of same-sex acts found in the Jewish community of his day. Furthermore, the apostle’s position on sexual matters generally is very conservative. For example, he writes to the Thessalonians “that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans” (1 Thess. 4:3–5). Paul strongly rebukes the Corinthian church for tolerating a sexual relationship between a man and his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1–11) and for accepting certain members who were engaging in the sexual services of prostitutes (1 Cor. 6:12–20). The apostle’s position on sexual matters is so conservative that he writes to the Ephesians that “among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality” (Eph.

*The evidence instead indicates that Jesus shared with the Jews of his day a universal agreement that same-sex acts were sinful and not to be done by God’s covenant people.*

5:3). In light of both Paul’s Jewish background and also his statements on sexual conduct more generally, we can plausibly expect to find that the apostle would not approve of same-sex acts. This is, in fact, exactly the position of Paul that emerges from the three texts where he explicitly addresses homosexual practice: Romans 1:24–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10.

Let’s look at 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 first. These two texts address same-sex acts with just two words in Greek: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. Here is the context in which both words occur:

<sup>9</sup>Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men [*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*] <sup>10</sup>nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9–10)

<sup>8</sup>We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. <sup>9</sup>We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, <sup>10</sup>for the sexually immoral, for those

practicing homosexuality [*arsenokoitai*], for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine <sup>11</sup>that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (1 Tim. 1:8–11)

The issue centers on how to translate accurately each of these two Greek words. Revisionists claim that these words refer narrowly to abusive forms of same-sex activity, namely, man-boy sex (pederasty) and prostitution. According to this view, Paul is rejecting the exploitive nature of these specific kinds of same-sex acts that were common in his day, and so 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 cannot be used to condemn the consensual, monogamous same-sex relationships characteristic of our contemporary age.

This interpretation suffers from at least three major problems. First, if Paul had in view only exploitive same-sex relationships such as pederasty, he could have easily made this clear by using any one of several Greek words that refer specifically to this exact same-sex act (e.g., *paiderastēs*, from which we get the English word “pederast”), all of which were commonly known and used in the writings of his day.

Second, there is the OT allusion to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 in Paul’s use of the unique word *arsenokoitai* in both 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. This word is a compound term made up of two parts: *arsēn*, which means “male,” and *koitē*, which literally means “bed” but euphemistically refers to sexual acts that take place on a bed. Even the person who does not know Greek can easily see how the two parts of the compound word *arsenokoitai* come from the Greek translation of



Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13:

Leviticus 18:22 *kai meta arsenos ou koimēthēsē koitēn gynaikeian*

“And with a male you shall not lie as with a woman”

Leviticus 20:13 *kai hos an koimēthē meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos*

“And whoever will lie with a male as with a woman”

Why is it significant that the unique word Paul uses in two key texts dealing with same-sex acts comes from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13? Since these OT texts deal with *all* types of same-sex acts, not just exploitive ones such as pederasty and prostitution, Paul’s use of this word indicates that he is also likely thinking of the Mosaic law where any kind of sexual act between two males is forbidden. This likelihood seems confirmed by the double use of the word “law,” a reference to the OT law, in 1 Timothy 1:8–9. Paul’s word choice of *arsenokoitai* in the immediately following verse means that he has in view the OT’s comprehensive prohibition of males sleeping with males and not only exploitive same-sex acts.

Third, the pairing of the two words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 is significant. There is widespread agreement among grammarians that the first term, which means “soft” or “effeminate,” refers to males who played the female role in sex and allowed themselves to be penetrated by other males while the second term refers to males who penetrate other males. This consensus is reflected in the NIV 2011 and ESV translations, which both have exactly the same textual note on this verse: “The words *men who have sex with men* translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.” Paul, by pairing these two words, is referring not narrowly to pederasty

*Nevertheless, the apostle’s words here are pointed and clear: women having sex with other women and men having sex with other men are sinful acts deserving of God’s wrath.*

or prostitution but comprehensively to both the passive and active partner in any same-sex relationship.

The final text from Romans 1:24–27 is the most important because of its length, its explicit reference to both gay and lesbian conduct, and its argumentation:

<sup>24</sup>Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

<sup>25</sup>They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

<sup>26</sup>Because of this God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.

<sup>27</sup>In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

The larger context (Rom. 1:18–32) shows that Paul’s primary goal in these verses is not to condemn same-sex behavior but to show how same-sex behavior is another example—in addition to idolatry (1:21–23, 25)—of the extent of human sin and why

God’s wrath for such sin is justified. Nevertheless, the apostle’s words here are pointed and clear: women having sex with other women and men having sex with other men are sinful acts deserving of God’s wrath.

Revisionists have argued that Paul is not addressing all forms of same-sex acts but only a specific form in which women who had a heterosexual attraction to men nevertheless acted in an “unnatural” way (the Greek states more literally “against nature,” *para physin*) by having sex with other women; similarly, men who had a heterosexual attraction to women nevertheless also (“in the same way”) acted in an unnatural manner by having sex with other men. According to this construal, Paul is narrowly condemning “unnatural sex”—heterosexuals who ignore their “natural” desire for the opposite sex and are “inflamed with lust” for members of the same-sex. This reading, of course, leaves the door open for the apostle approving of other, more noble forms of homosexual relationships in which gays and lesbians follow their “natural” same-sex orientation.

This nuanced and novel interpretation, however, is contradicted by Paul’s key argument in these verses: same-sex acts are wrong because they violate God’s created order for male-female relationships. The word “unnatural” refers not to heterosexuals acting against their natural desire for the opposite sex but to same-sex acts that violate God’s design for men and women, the design established already in creation. That Paul does, in fact, have the Genesis creation account in mind is obvious from his multiple allusions: the larger context of Romans 1:18–32 opens in 1:20 with a reference to the creation of the world; the threefold combination of “birds and animals and reptiles” in 1:23 echoes

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Genesis 1:30; and there is a reference to the “Creator” in 1:25. Most significantly, the words translated “women” and “men” in 1:26 and 1:27, respectively, are actually “females” (*thēlesai*) and “males” (*arsenes*), thereby alluding to Genesis 1:27 where we read “male and female he created them.” Paul’s argument, therefore, is clear: sexual acts between a female and another female or between a male and another male are “unnatural” and wrong because such conduct goes against creation order and God’s creation of each gender physically so that male and female fit the other in a “natural” way.

One additional point about Paul’s words to the Romans should not be overlooked. The apostle ends his discussion with the sober warning that it is not only those engaged in same-sex acts who face divine judgement; it is also those who approve of such gay and lesbian relationships: “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also *approve of those who practice them*” (1:32). Same-sex activity is not a subject that Jesus followers can simply ignore or tolerate.

### Additional Revisionist Claims

Little space remains in this brief article to raise and respond to two additional revisionist claims about these Pauline texts. First, it is frequently claimed that Paul had no examples of a more “noble” form of homosexuality involving consensual, monogamous, long-term same-sex relationships but knew only of exploitive relationships such as pederasty and prostitution. This common assertion, however, is simply false. The existence of many different types of homosexual relations—including consensual and even

*Same-sex activity is not a subject that Jesus followers can simply ignore or tolerate.*

monogamous—is well documented in the literature of the period (e.g., T. K. Hubbard, ed., *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* [Berkeley, 2003]; L. Crompton, *Homosexuality & Civilization* [Harvard, 2003]). Paul, as a well-educated and widely traveled man, would have had ample opportunities to know about such supposedly “noble” forms of same-sex relationships.

Second, it is also frequently asserted that Paul did not have any understanding of same-sex orientation and that such ignorance relativizes his condemnation of same-sex acts. But while ancient writers such as Paul did not have a scientific explanation of same-sex orientation, there is a wealth of historical evidence that they did in fact recognize that same-sex desires were biologically rooted. It is certainly historically possible, if not probable, that Paul also knew of men who were born with a sexual desire for other men. For the apostle, however, orientation makes no difference: same-sex acts violate the male-female relationship established by God at creation (Rom. 1:24–27) and are contrary to God’s law (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10).

### *Sola Experientia* or *Sola Scriptura*?

This brief survey of relevant NT texts has shown that the second half of the Bible agrees with the first half: Scripture teaches in a clear and consistent way that same-sex activity of any kind is sinful and not in agreement

with God’s will for his covenant people. The real issue facing the Christian Reformed church, then, is not one of interpretation but one of obedience.

Will our position on same-sex acts be controlled by our “experience alone” (*sola experientia*)—our encounters, either personal or via public media, with gays and lesbians? Will we rebelliously pursue all kinds of clever arguments until we finally get the Bible to say what our secular culture wants us to say and what we perhaps personally desire? Or will we submit to the clear teaching of “scripture alone” (*sola scriptura*)?

Those today who find themselves beset by same-sex attraction are ultimately in the same position as heterosexuals who face inclinations to act outside of God’s revealed intention for humanity. While individual feelings and personal experiences ought to play an important part in current discussions about same-sex relationships, what Scripture teaches must come first and foremost.

### What about Grace?

The final word on the topic of same-sex activity should not be about law and judgement but about grace and changed lives. After warning the Corinthians about various kinds of wrongdoing—including men having sex with other men—that prohibit membership in the kingdom of God, Paul reminds them that such sinful conduct is, by God’s saving work in Christ and the Holy Spirit, part of their past: “And that is what some of you *were*. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 6:11). The good news of the gospel is that God’s grace is so powerful that it can transform any kind of sinner into a saint.



# Until my Body Finds its Rest in You, O Lord

Contemporary discussions about human sexuality tend to focus on the physiological aspects of the kinds of sexual intercourse which are possible, whether same-sex or female-male. Transformation of one's gender requires physio-mechanical changes before experience of the other sexuality is physically possible. These discussions do not lack in concerns for human love and companionship. No matter where you find yourself in contemporary debates about human sexuality, however, certain questions are seldom addressed. Is our our bodily life more than its sexuality? Is our identity totally bound up in our sexuality? Do our sexual desires and passions set the direction for our bodily life? Is embodied sexuality self- or other-directed? How does the Bible view embodied sexuality? And what are the implications of the biblical view of the body for our debate about human sexual intercourse?

This essay will focus on the Old Testament book of Leviticus because Leviticus discusses specific aspects of human sexuality: the post-partum womb (Lev. 12), menstrual blood, emissions of semen (Lev. 15), and (prohibited forms of) sexual intercourse (Lev. 18, 20), are taken up into a theology of intimate life with God. The debate about same-sex intercourse includes discussions of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:33, but seldom the other texts of Leviticus, and hardly ever the role human sexuality plays in the Pentateuch's depiction of the relationship

between God and the embodied sexuality of his people. This essay will describe, in broad strokes, the role of human sexuality in Genesis through Leviticus, with a strong focus on Leviticus 18 and 20, but will also draw on passages from elsewhere in Scripture.

## Human sexuality then and now: restless

The embodied sexuality which confronted biblical Israel in Canaan and that of 21st century North America are astonishingly similar: both are highly sexualized, daily life is inconceivable without it, human sexuality is part of "world-making." But there is also a crucial difference: in the ancient world sexuality belonged to what we would call religion, it had communal concerns. Contemporary views of sexuality are highly individualized.

Embodied sexuality in Canaan focused on fertility (family, rain, good harvests), and maintaining order against the constant threat of enemies, disease, and famine. Religious rites assured harmony between heaven (the gods) and the earth (the cycles of nature-humanity), a harmony based on the belief that everything shared in the divine in some sense. Because earthly fertility in part depends on successful divine intercourse, New Year's ceremonies included ritual sexual intercourse between the king and a cultic prostitute. In a strange *imitatio dei*, heaven and earth come together to maintain proper world order for the next year, the natural cycle of nature, and thus fertility.

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In that world embodied sexuality was about more than the physio-mechanical act of intercourse; it participated in keeping the created world safe from intrusion of disorder, of securing fertility for daily life. Embodied sexuality in the old world served a higher purpose.

Embodied sexuality in the 21st century is also about world-making, but not necessarily the world that is received. Maleness and femaleness are believed to be social constructs; they have no intrinsic value. Received femaleness and maleness are valuable only as elements one uses to create a world desired by the self. And, where the received body gets in the way of felt desire, medical technology is available to recreate: a female from a male and vice-versa. It can also rescue same-sex couples from their infertility. This embodied sexuality serves the pleasuring self, creates a unique sexually embodied world among other kinds of sexual embodiments. (There is no right way to do it.) Twenty-first century sexuality does not seek to maintain in good order the received, that is, the created body; nor does it participate with the Creator in securing proper order and fertility. Rather, by recreating according to the self, it introduces disorder, restlessness, into created human sexuality.

What the old world sought to avoid, the threat of disorder and infertility, is in some ways embraced by 21st century sexuality. To paraphrase

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Paul: The creature become a creator creates unnatural, disordered worlds (Rom. 1:21-27). Embodied sexuality in 21st century North America does not serve a higher purpose.

Biblical talk about embodied sexuality is more like that of the old world in one crucial way: human sexuality is not about us, nor for us; it is part of a created order which God maintains but which human sinfulness (an unwillingness to accept what God has given) threatens by disordering what is received.

### **Human sexuality in Leviticus**

Any reading of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 must recognize the wider context, beginning with Genesis. God creates humanity in his own image, male and female. Embodied as such God instructs humanity to till (Heb., “serve,” *abad*) the soil and to keep (Heb., *šamar*) the Garden. God creates female and male humanity to live in his presence according to his instruction (Gen. 2:15-17). Attempts to reshape the Garden introduced disorder in God’s garden-presence with the result that he expelled the female and male disorder-makers. There they became restless in their embodied sexuality (Gen. 3:7; cf. 2:25).

East of Eden humanity’s service of the soil would continue (Heb., “serve,” *abad*; Gen. 3:23; 4:2), but an indifference to divine instruction emerged: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Heb., *šamar*, Gen. 4:9) In their restless wandering (Gen. 4:12, 14) Cain and his descendants began to create their own worlds and embody murderous and violent disorder (Gen. 4:8, 23; 6:11, 13).

Exodus defines God’s people, female and male, as a holy priesthood (19:5-6). Committed to him by covenant vow, they swore not to serve other gods (Ex. 23:24, 25, 33; Heb., *abad*) and keep his commandments (Ex. 23:21;

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Heb., *šamar*). This holy priesthood, not the tabernacle, becomes God’s dwelling-place (“Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among *them*.” Ex. 25:8; 40:34-35). By embodying the divine instructions of Leviticus (Lev. 1:1), Israel becomes a living temple (cf. 1 Peter 2:4). Failure to keep God’s instructions introduces disorder in the world God has organized (the desert camp). The intimate bodily phenomena discussed in Leviticus 12 and 15 remind Israel that only divine regulation keeps disorder at bay, in their bodies and in the community.

The prohibited forms of sexual intercourse in Leviticus 18:6-23 and 20:10-21 instruct God’s living temple how not to embody its sexuality. All prohibited forms of sexual intercourse—various forms of female-male intercourse, same-sex intercourse, and bestiality—are defined as “detestable” or “abominations” (Lev. 18:22, 26-29). Detestable behavior is that which introduces disorder into the world God has created. Any attempts to remake the divinely created sexual partnership of male and female (Gen. 2:24-25) is forbidden, for it defiles the presence of God (Gen. 3:8; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 23:14).

It is argued that the instructions of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are no longer valid because they forbid activity linked to forbidden forms of worship, temple prostitution. If temple prostitution is not a concern in the 21st century, then Leviticus does not address non-cultic same-sex relationships. But, if ancient

worship required certain sexual practices, so does the embodied sexuality of God’s people. A body dedicated as a living sacrifice to God (Rom. 12:1-2) expresses its sexuality accordingly. Thus Paul instructs the church that an improper exercise of human sexuality defiles the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:12-20; Rom. 1:26-27).

It is also argued that Leviticus prohibits a form of same-sex intercourse that reflects an unacceptable and demeaning hierarchy among the male sexual partners, i.e., one of the partners is passive, the other active and dominant. A more progressive and egalitarian attitude invalidates these prohibitions. Does it invalidate the other prohibitions too? The discussion about same-sex relationships includes views about the Bible that make allowances for such practices.

It is commonly believed today that the Bible is merely the product of a particular socio-cultural community whose ideas the modern world finds unacceptable because they are patriarchal, oppressive of the poor, hegemonic, abusive of women, or because the traditional readings are deemed colonialist. Proper historical and sociological exegesis can rescue this historical product by stripping it of its patriarchal, oppressive, otherworldly idealism. Once rescued by deconstructive exegesis, the Bible as human construct is then placed in “dialogue” with the 21st century reader’s self-constructed world. In this model the Bible has no authority; its world is no different from ours.

It would be more honest simply to acknowledge the Biblical prohibitions and then dismiss them because they don’t fit in the reader’s world. Would this dismissal also include the notion that God created the body to embody his will? Will the modern



reader's self-constructed world allow for a deity? Can it allow for an "other" to determine the shape of embodied sexuality? And, if so, which divine instructions are acceptable and which not? Are they revelation? Human desire to be all it can be also produces restless Bible readings.

### **Our body, its sexuality, and God's will**

There is one more context to consider: the introductions to the prohibitions (Lev. 18:1-5; 20:1-5) and the stated consequences (Lev. 18:24-30; 20:22-24) of violating the instructions.

Leviticus 18:1-5 instructs God's people to keep (Heb., *šamar*, v. 5) his instructions, not those of Egypt or Canaan. In this context the reader hears the prohibitions saying: Do not embody your sexuality as practiced in Egypt, nor as in Canaan, where other gods will tempt you to embody your sexuality. Here it is important to remember that the divine speeches of Leviticus are part of the Sinai instruction. As such God's people is reminded that its words are not shaped by any earthly culture; they come straight from the ruler of heaven and earth. The cultures of the nations may not shape Israel's faith and practice, including its sexuality, for God has separated them from the nations (Lev. 11:43-45; 20:22-24, 26). Paul reminds the church of this separation in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1.

The warnings that follow are clear: If you imitate these detestable sexual practices the land will be defiled and it will "vomit" you out as it did the nations before you (18:28; 20:22). The Canaanite practices defiled the land because after God, the Lord of all the earth (Josh. 3:11, 13), had entered the land the Canaanites found themselves in an alien holy space; their gods' instructions ... invalidated. The

*[The Sinai instructions] are not shaped by any earthly culture; they come straight from the ruler of heaven and earth. The cultures of the nations may not shape Israel's faith and practice, including its sexuality, for God has separated them from the nations.*


whole land was now a temple precinct, governed by instructions from Sinai. Because the Canaanite descendants of Adam and Eve violated God's will, like their ancestors in the Garden, they too were expelled from God's presence.

It is true that the nations embodied sexuality served religious purposes, but, as Paul would later say, they turned religion to their own purposes (Rom. 1:18-32). As explained above, the nations' sexual life-force participates with the divine forces to secure order and fertility in the world against the constant threat of disorder (war, disease, famine). To that end, the nations would even sacrifice their children (Lev. 20:1-5).

For Israel the world is not under constant threat from dark forces; these do not exist. The creation is a thing, all its creaturely elements have been put in their proper order by the God who revealed himself to Israel. The flood narrative demonstrates that disorder in the world is linked to human disobedience (cf. Amos 3:1-10); there are no capricious outside forces. There is only human caprice. Among all others,

human sexuality is also a created thing whose power stands in the service of its Creator, not the creature. Human sexuality serves within a God ordered world. This truth conflicts with the sexual practices of Canaan and other nations. This is why, in addition to the prohibited forms of sexual acts, Israel is forbidden from sacrificing its children to Moloch. A word about Leviticus 20:1-5.

The word translated as "children" in Leviticus 20:2, 3 and 4 is the Hebrew word "seed." It can also be translated as "descendants" (Gen. 12:7), or, "semen" (Gen. 38:9). In the biblical world "seed" or "semen" does not have the power to keep the world functioning properly. To the contrary, it participates in human disordering of God's world, including the individual human body. Human sexuality enables Cain's descendants to grow by leaps and bounds east of Eden (Gen. 5; 11:10-26), but only because blessed by God (Gen. 1:28; 9:1, 7). Nevertheless, all die amidst a vengeance sown by Lamech and the violence rampant in the days of Noah, the result of human disobedience. Human sexuality, no matter the orientation or practice, can only participate in a disordered world; it has no power to build a world, never mind redeem it from disorder.

Unlike the nations, God's people does not arise by the power of its sexual life force: Sarah was barren, as was Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, Hannah, Ruth (Ruth 4:13) and Mary (Matt. 1:20). Israel's mothers, unlike those of the nations, are not remembered for their fertility. God is remembered for opening their wombs, for bringing blessing into a world filled with human violence. Among God's people "seed" and "semen" participates in the redemption God is working through the descendants 

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of Abraham, especially the promised “seed” (Gen. 12:7; Gal.3:8). Offering the “seed” or “semen” of Abraham to Moloch by sacrifice, in order to secure fertility and keep chaos at bay, actually introduces chaos, for the sacrifice kills the promised seed. It is a use of “seed” that can only promote barrenness. This is not God’s will.

**Moving towards Rest in God**

Can the Church of Christ contribute to the debate about human sexuality? Of course, but its voice must coincide with that of its Lord. This includes the following: Your male or female body is not your own (read 1 Cor. 7:4!), they are God’s good and well-ordered creations. Let us receive them as such. Furthermore, our bodies have been bought at a great price, and are temples of the Holy Spirit. Unlike the world, we are committed by covenant vow not to construct our own worlds, neither economically nor sexually.

Although Christians are committed

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to keeping our bodies clean, and not to defile the temple of the Holy Spirit in any way, like Israel of old, we are easily seduced. Israel repeated prostituted (that’s the word in Hebrew) itself, surrendering its sexuality to other powers. For that they were exiled from God’s presence.

Christians are not different. The unrestricted, unruly, never satisfied, restless self, seduces us into surrendering our sexuality to worldly pleasures and desire. Christians engage in prohibited extra-curricular female-male sexual acts, prohibited same-sex acts

(and who knows what other kinds of sexual acts), are conflicted about their sexuality and seek freedom from these conflicts in attractive worldly solutions. Like Cain of old, we too are restless wanderers, especially in our 21st century sexual wasteland. Until our Lord comes again, what shall we do?

Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who confessed his youthful sexual proclivities, wrote: “My heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.” No human being can escape sexual restlessness and the desire to remake our given bodies. With God’s people of all ages—and we have not done it well at all—may the Lord help us to deny what the world considers restful sexual practices. Denial of the self is unacceptable in contemporary culture. It is, however, essential to a Christian discipleship which strives to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1-2). Doing so, we also begin to find and enjoy our rest in the God of our salvation.

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David E. Holwerda, Editor

# From Dream to Forum

Welcome to the first issue of the Calvin Seminary Forum! A long cherished dream has now become a reality. We hope the reality lives up to the expectations of our dream.

## WHY THE DREAM?

Professors like to be heard. In fact, that is their job. The church appoints seminary professors to teach the Word. To test the spirits of the age. And to train leaders who will build up the church and guide its ministry. Professors do such work all the time. But their words are heard mainly in the classroom, sometimes at synod, often in articles written for special journals, and even in books. Today that seems not to be enough.

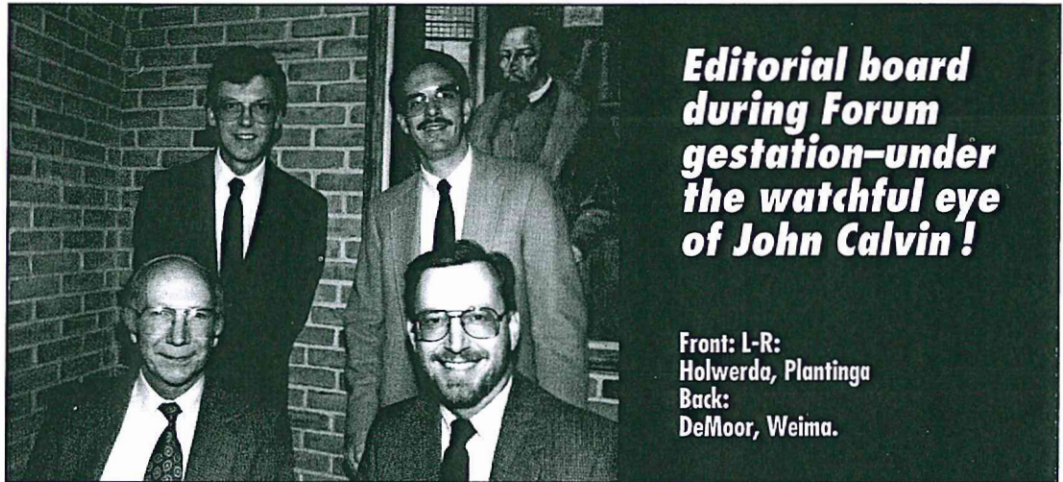
We have heard voices in the church suggesting we are too silent. They mean, of course, we are too silent in the public arena of church discussions. Interestingly, in a recent selected survey of CRC church opinion, many respondents wanted to hear more from us. One of the most important services desired from us is that we "write popularly on church

forum. Thankfully, the Lilly Foundation agreed such a forum would be a significant way for the Seminary to serve the needs of the church. And a partial subsidy grant from the Lilly Foundation has made it possible to transform our

society? To challenge it? Do we have to change?

Although the church possesses and is possessed by the unchanging truth, its grasp of the truth is never perfect. Thus the church must always be reforming. Of course, reforma-

really. Our agenda is set by the Christian Reformed Church, by the questions and challenges affecting her life and ministry: questions about marriage, sexual morality, and homosexuality; questions about artificial insemination, abortion, and the



**Editorial board during Forum gestation—under the watchful eye of John Calvin!**

Front: L-R: Holwerda, Plantinga  
Back: DeMoor, Weima.

dream into this reality: the Calvin Seminary Forum.

## WHY THIS FORUM?

We have all been shocked by the rapidity of cultural change. How quickly the unthinkable becomes thinkable! When belief in God disappears, almost anything becomes possible. As society jettisons Christian truth, the values of ancient paganism reappear: from witchcraft to satanism, from spiritism to pantheism, from abortion to euthanasia. Shocking, isn't it, how easily in a formerly Christian society paganism again raises its head?

The world in which the Christian Reformed Church exists is changing rapidly. Are we ready for it? Are we prepared for ministry to it? Do we know how to address our

tion is never fun and games. It is a serious, painful business for the sake of the truth and for the sake of the world.

Because change occurs so rapidly today, there is a real danger for the church to change without thinking. If that happens, the church will succumb inevitably to the spirit of the age. *Change in the CRC must be governed by the truth of Scripture and by that truth as understood in the Reformed tradition.* Change must not occur willy-nilly and must never be capitulation to the spirit of our age.

So how do we change? How can we be faithfully Christian and fully Reformed in our witness to the world? That is what our conversation must be about. The agenda of the church in the midst of such change is enormous. We will not be finished with it until the Lord returns.

## A SPECIAL AGENDA?

Does the seminary have a special agenda in mind? Not

right to die; questions about the structure of the church and its offices, women in office, and worship practices; questions about outreach and church growth, youth ministries, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the presence of demonic forces. The questions go on and on. How do we think about such matters?

This magazine is a forum, a place where voices can be heard. Even though most of the voices will be those of seminary professors, we do welcome other voices. If you wish to join the discussion, we invite you to submit an article, a few paragraphs, or just a question or problem you think should be discussed. This Forum is intended to be a forum for the Christian Reformed Church.

We dedicate this Forum to the Lord of the church. We pray that He will use it to assist us in becoming more fully Christian and Reformed in our lives and in our ministry to the world. ■

**“How can we be faithfully Christian and fully Reformed in our witness to the world?”**  
— Holwerda

issues and religious matters." Well now...that also has been our desire. And the source of our dream.

Often in the past we have been silent not by choice but by necessity. There was no forum in which we could be heard. Other church papers and journals had their own agendas. Thus it became clear that we had to create a new



## As First Cohort Graduates, Second Cohort Enters Calvin Seminary's Certificate for Hispanic Ministry Program

This May, Calvin Seminary graduated its first cohort of students in the Certificate for Hispanic Ministry program. And as those 36 students graduated, 41 more enrolled to begin the program this summer.

Additionally, 20 Hispanic students started a new, bachelor's-level program in August designed to train and certify family counselors; and six of the 2015 certificate program graduates enrolled as M.Div. or M.A. students at the seminary this fall.

"This is more than we ever quite dreamed [when the certificate program began]," says Dr. Mariano Avila, professor of New Testament and the program's project director. "It has been very good."

Most of the students in the Hispanic ministry programs are bi-vocational, serving as pastors and leaders in Grand Rapids churches while working full-time in other jobs. About half of the students originate from Mexico, with the other half coming from islands in

the Caribbean or countries in Central America. Most have not had access to formal theological training.

This spring as the first class graduated, the certificate program underwent an external evaluation that included student assessments and exit interviews. Even prior to reviewing the evaluators' report, Avila was making plans to strengthen the program for the next group of students.

Program leaders recognized student needs in the areas of technological proficiency and study skills; and in Spanish and English literacy. So this summer for the first time, new certificate students met for twelve weeks to gain skills in these areas.

The DeVos Foundation, which helps support the program, provided new iPads to each student. "We [taught] them skills with a computer, because many of them have a hard time using the computer—it's not their world," Avila says.

Students also began a weekly course

in Spanish writing that will continue throughout the first year of the certificate program. During the second year, English literacy instruction will help prepare native Spanish-speakers who want to go on for further seminary training in English to do so.

The seminary hopes to offer two more cohorts beyond 2015, one beginning in 2017 and another in 2019. The program's stated goal is to serve leaders and pastors at most of the 200 Hispanic churches in greater Grand Rapids by the time the final class graduates in 2021.

If a 20-member waiting list for this year's class is any indication, it will not be difficult to recruit students for the 2017 cohort.

Graduates of the program cite the community formed among students and the education they receive as program highlights. 2015 graduate Raquel Cordova has served as a worship leader and assistant pastor in Grand Rapids. She says students especially valued



Professor Avila (third row, far left) stands proudly with the first cohort of 36 graduates in the Hispanic Certificate Program.



learning from personable professors who were experts in their fields.

“[We] loved that we were given classes by the actual people who wrote the books. Not everybody gets that opportunity .... Even though all the [professors] that came to give us classes

had all these accolades, they were still humble and willing to listen to us; to clarify whatever questions we had and be very patient.”

Avila says he continues to be amazed by the students he serves and the broad influence the program is having.

“It is really a blessing to see the interest the pastors [have in the program], and that it is affecting the congregations .... We are affecting and touching many communities in the city. So we are very happy about that.”

—By Kristy Manion

## Convocation 2015 — 140 Years of Seminary Education

# Make Them Like Trees ... Rooted ... Watered ... Pruned

Dr. Mary VandenBerg, professor of systematic theology, gave the convocation address to the seminary community of students, faculty, and staff assembled in the Seminary Chapel on Wednesday, September 9.

In introducing Professor VandenBerg, President Jul Medenblik publicly marked the moment in Calvin Seminary’s 140-year history by announcing that she is the first female faculty member to receive tenure at Calvin Seminary – and then to give the convocation address.

“Make them like trees” was both the teaching and prayer undercurrent of her address. Using the horticultural images of Psalm 1, she challenged and encouraged students to experience a season of fruitful formation while “planted in the soil” of the seminary and watered by the streams of God’s Word and Spirit.

Following are some excerpts from her address:

### Rooted ....

Let your **ROOTS** grow deep in this community. Take advantage of the many learning opportunities it has to offer. Don’t, as one of my doctoral mentors taught me, let your studies get in the way of your education.

### Watered ....

... make time to be **WATERED** by his word and Holy Spirit

The psalmist tells us that the person who flourishes like the tree sinks her roots deep into the consistently moist soil of God’s word, meditating on it “day and night.” Day and night. The psalmist might just as well have said ‘all the time.’ In

other words, crucial to flourishing is making space for God, listening for his voice, letting his Spirit-filled word shape and form you for ministry in his kingdom.

### Pruned ....

... during your time here at Calvin Seminary you will be **PRUNED** by the same Gentle Gardener who planted you here.

Pruning will happen in unexpected ways and at unexpected times.

... when you are attentive to God’s pruning knife, recognizing that God forms and shapes you through both the positive and negative experiences during your time here, you will in fact yield abundant fruit at God’s appointed time.

**Prayer** Lord, you have planted each of us in the soil of Calvin Seminary. Water us with your word and Spirit so our roots may grow deep here. Nurture us; tend us; train us; prune us so that in your time, we may bear abundant fruit for your kingdom and your glory.

Lord, make us like trees! Amen.



Dr. Mary VandenBerg

# Called to Serve

## Nepal

### A Young and Growing Church



Population: 31,551,305 (July 2015 estimate)

Religious Profile (2011 estimate):

- Hindu: ..... 81.3%
- Buddhist: ..... 9%
- Muslim: ..... 4.4%
- Kirant: ..... 3.1%
- Christian: ..... 1.4%
- Other Religions: ..... 0.5%
- Unspecified: ..... 0.2%

**W**hen Chudamani Koirala returned to Nepal this summer to visit churches that had been devastated by the earthquake earlier this year, he didn't know what to expect. Whole villages had been swept away by landslides, and people were living in temporary shelters and worshiping under tents. "I was surprised by their lives. There is nothing. Yet they are thankful in the Lord."

Koirala is one of three Nepali students at Calvin Seminary. In Nepal, both Koirala and another Calvin student, Yakuv Gurung, have been pastors and lecturers at Evangelical Presbyterian Theological Seminary (EPTS) in Katmandu, Nepal, where two Calvin Seminary alumni, Revs. Arbin Pokharel and Troy Bierma, serve. The third current Calvin student, Ram Aryal, came to the United States to attend college, where he was converted to Christianity from Hinduism, and he now seeks training to fulfill a calling to be a pastor.

The church in Nepal is young and growing fast. The country remained closed to the outside world until it opened its borders in 1950. According to a 1951 census, there were six Christians in the whole country. In 60 years, that number has grown to over 375,000, which is about 1.4 percent of the total population. Bierma suggests that the Holy Spirit uses the culture of the people to grow the church. "Nepalis are culturally social and less privately-oriented than Americans. That doesn't just go away when they come to Christ," Bierma says. "The Nepali church is excellent at evangelism and church planting, and we can learn from them."

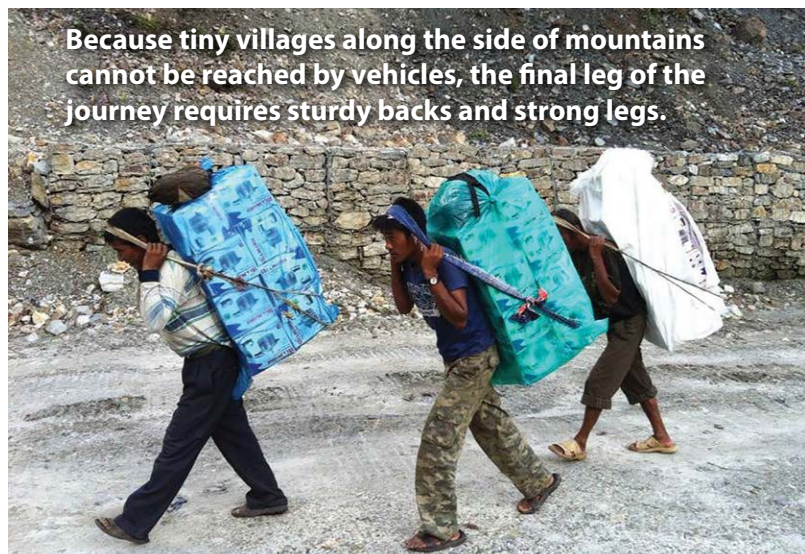
Nepali Christians often face great trials. Bierma wonders how the churches survive with meager resources while facing persecution, and yet they continue to plant churches and evangelize. When new believers become open about their faith, they are often kicked out of their homes and communities. He says that for a Nepali, "becoming a Christian means choosing between

faith and family, between your home ...and Christ. That kind of fierce, 'all in' mentality is something we can learn from, something that can inform our own faith."

Koirala saw this "all in" mentality as he returned for a few weeks this summer to encourage his congregation and the pastors he mentors. One pastor serves seven churches in a region in the mountains that was devastated by the earthquake. Two of the smaller villages were completely destroyed, and 21 believers lost their lives. Still, the Christians there tell stories of people being miraculously saved from landslides and thank the Lord for their lives. Koirala said the people in these devastated areas have the basics (food, temporary shelter), "but the question is, what next?" The tremors continue and take an emotional toll, even if they don't do much physical damage. The rainy season has come, delaying any rebuilding until drier weather returns. It will take a long time to restore what was lost.



**Seminarian Chudamani Koiral (red and white striped shirt) helped with recovery efforts this summer in Nepal by distributing much needed cooking utensils that had been destroyed in the earthquake.**



**Because tiny villages along the side of mountains cannot be reached by vehicles, the final leg of the journey requires sturdy backs and strong legs.**



Pokharel has been helping to coordinate relief efforts through EPTS and agencies such as World Renew. In addition to restoring and rebuilding, the church in Nepal needs trained leaders. The church has grown quickly, but according to a 2007 estimate only 15 percent of church leaders had three

years of theological training, and 35 percent of pastors had no theological training at all. Aryal encourages pouring into the Nepali church: “This mountain people, invest in them. Pray for the church and invest in students.” Calvin Seminary is thankful to have invested through alumni working faithfully in

Nepal and through welcoming pastors and teachers from Nepal to study. We are glad to also learn from them and their strong, steadfast faith and effective evangelism.

—Jeff Sajdak, Dean of Students

## New Faces at Calvin Theological Seminary

In the Fall of 2015 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.

### Called and Sent: Meet Cory Willson, Jake and Betsy Tuls Chair of Missiology and Missional Ministry

Long before Cory Willson received the nomination to his new post as assistant professor of missiology and missional ministry at Calvin Seminary, he and his wife Monica were listening intently for God’s voice in the process.

In fact, before Willson even interviewed for the position, the couple sought the witness and wisdom of their church family in California.

“We gathered together 25 of our closest friends and had dinner,” Willson recalls.

“We said, ‘We don’t know what God is doing, but we’re sensing that he may be calling us [to Calvin Seminary]. And...we believe that God speaks not only to us, but also through our community. So we want you to be discerning with us in this process, telling us what God puts on your hearts; because if we’re called, we want to be sent.’”

Willson was indeed called—and sent, making the move from Long Beach to the Heartside neighborhood of Grand Rapids, Michigan, in early August. And he says the degree of convergence between his background and gifts and the position he now holds is remarkable.



Cory and Monica Willson

“I want to do theology for and from the church .... As a missiologist at a school that is deeply committed to the Dutch Reformed tradition...my job is not only to be robust academically, but [also to ask], what does this mean for the church and society?”

Willson grew up in a nondenominational Christian tradition and earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees in business from California Polytechnic State University. He later went on to earn an M.Div. and a Ph.D. at Fuller Seminary, where a budding interest in Reformed theology piqued by the writings of Tim Keller came into full bloom as he studied under Richard Mouw.

At Fuller, Willson worked closely with Mouw as his course coordinator

and research assistant. Mouw is on Willson’s dissertation committee and the person Willson credits as helping refine his own sense of calling.

“I saw a model in Rich Mouw where I could have a pastor’s heart, yet be a theologian and missiologist too. [I saw I could be] more on the academic side, [and] have a heart for the church.”

As a missiologist at Calvin Seminary, Willson teaches classes and directs the Institute for Global Church Planting and Renewal. Following in the Leslie Newbigin tradition, he is fully persuaded that missional ministry means all-of-life discipleship, and that it takes place wherever the body of Christ is found.

“Missions is not just overseas; it’s wherever the church exists. It’s about church planting but also church renewal... [and] interfaith engagement here [in North America].”

In his teaching, leading, and discourse, Willson’s posture is one of hospitality and mutual learning. Coupled with his commitments to principled pluralism and convicted civility, that posture forms a strong basis for exchange between Christians of different traditions as well as

# Called to Serve

## ► New Faces at Calvin Theological Seminary

between Christians and members of other faiths.

“The Reformed tradition is my theological tradition, but not everyone is in that tradition.” Willson says. “So how do I bring the best of that tradition to bear ... to support the church’s mission in the world? [I seek to be] unashamedly Reformed-Neocalvinist-Kuyperian ... and hospitable in stewarding that tradition.”

Willson aims to foster a similar posture of learning in his students, connecting classroom study with the pressing issues faced by churches and pastors.

“I see The Renewal Lab [church revitalization program] and the church

planting we do as feeding into the classroom. What are the questions that are coming from the churches? And what kind of reflection can [the seminary] give based on these front-line issues?”

Willson is energized by helping equip ordinary Christians to share their faith, holding this passion in common with the supporters of the chair he occupies. When he teaches students or church leaders about evangelism and interfaith conversation, Willson seeks first to defuse anxiety.

“[When we] think of engaging people of other faiths, [often we] feel like it’s on [us]; [afraid that] if you don’t

have the right word to say, Christianity is defeated or it’s not true.”

“I want to say, ‘Relax. It’s not all on you. God is sovereign. It’s not your job to convert anyone, or change anybody’s mind .... We can have confidence that every human soul is restless for God, and that every human person longs for the new creation.’”

“If you present people with Jesus ... the Spirit of God works in that.”

By pointing to the centrality of Jesus, expecting the Spirit to move in the words and lives of ordinary Christians, Willson helps others listen for God’s call—so that they can be sent, too.

—Kristy Manion

**Michael Phua** joined Calvin Theological Seminary on the 1st of June 2015 as the Admissions Counselor.

He graduated from Calvin College where he studied International Relations and German, and also worked there after graduation as the International Admissions Coordinator in the admissions department. He loves Calvin College, continues to be in contact with his mentors and friends, and considers it one of his many homes.

Although his name is Michael, he was given the nickname Miki since he was born, and responds most consistently to that moniker. He grew

up in different countries and enjoys learning about new cultures. Miki is married to Dominique, who also graduated from Calvin College, and is currently working at Wellspring Lutheran Services doing a fantastic job handling foster care.

Miki enjoys his work at the Seminary and has already expressed his keen desire to help the Seminary grow. Recruitment and statistical analysis and reporting are his favourite parts of the job, and together with Aaron, Amanda, and the student workers, he



believes that the Seminary can continue to be a vibrant, positive force in the church and community.

In his free time, Miki likes to read, play soccer and strategy games, and keep up with F1 Racing and the Bundesliga.

He also has one cat whom Dominique strongly dislikes and wishes did not exist. Other than that, the marriage is going splendidly, and Miki and Dominique are actively looking for community to be involved with, and hope that Calvin Seminary can be a part of that.

**Rachael Hoekstra** became a member of the Seminary Development Office on August 3 of 2015. She will be managing the data processing side of the department as the Development Services Administrator.

Rachael grew up in the Christian Reformed Church. She graduated from Calvin College in 1985. While there, she studied Special Education and Psychology. Since then she has had a variety of work experiences—from

home educator, to administrative assistant, to small business owner. Because she desires to be always involved in furthering God’s kingdom here on earth, she is excited to have the opportunity to use her organizational skills to benefit the Development Office as it builds support for the preparation of men and women in ministry.

Although she is a native of Denver,



Colorado, Rachael wouldn’t give up the green byways or sandy beaches of Michigan for all the sun that the west has to offer. She enjoys touring the Lower Peninsula where she and her four children scour beaches for the elusive Petoskey Stone. Rachael also enjoys the fiber arts—knitting, spinning, and weaving—and provides instruction to keep those traditional crafts alive.



# CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY



# PASTORAL MINISTRY INTERNSHIP SITES 2015

*Calvin Seminary is very grateful to the churches and ministries that welcomed these students as interns in Pastoral Ministry.*

## CANADA

**NEW HOPE CRC**  
CALGARY, AB  
Cari Fydirchuk

**FIRST CRC**  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE, AB  
Brian Dunn

**NEW LIFE FELLOWSHIP CRC**  
RED DEER, AB  
Peter Rockhold

**CHRIST COMMUNITY CHURCH**  
NANAIMO, BC  
Mike McCarty

**ZION CRC**  
OSHAWA, ON  
Laura deJong

**FOREST CITY  
COMMUNITY CHURCH**  
LONDON, ON  
Anthony Vander Laan

**FIRST CRC**  
OWEN SOUND, ON  
Tim Kooiman



## UNITED STATES

**IMMANUEL CRC**  
RIPON, CA  
Samuel Lee

**VISALIA CRC**  
VISALIA, CA  
Ivan Santoso

**ESCALON CRC**  
ESCALON, CA  
Brandon Kim

**NEW HOPE CHURCH**  
SAN DIEGO, CA  
Minbo Shim

**FRUITPORT CRC**  
FRUITPORT, MI  
Kelli Sexton

**PLYMOUTH HEIGHTS CRC**  
GRAND RAPIDS, MI  
Betsy DeVries

**THORNAPPLE COVENANT CHURCH**  
GRAND RAPIDS, MI  
Ram Aryal

**CHURCH OF THE SERVANT**  
GRAND RAPIDS, MI  
Trent Elders

**WESTMINSTER PRES. CHURCH**  
GRAND RAPIDS, MI  
Kyle Kooyers

**ELEVATION CHURCH**  
GRAND RAPIDS, MI  
Matthew Pearce

**HOPE CRC**  
GRANDVILLE, MI  
Kendall Everett

**MARANATHA CRC**  
HOLLAND, MI  
Nate Klingenberg

**HARDERWYK MINISTRIES**  
HOLLAND, MI  
Jennifer Palkowski

**MAPLE AVENUE MINISTRIES**  
HOLLAND, MI  
Joella Ranaivoson

**KALAMAZOO CHINESE CHURCH,**  
KALAMAZOO, MI  
Weiqing Lin

**KOREAN PRES. CHURCH  
OF METRO DETROIT**  
SOUTHFIELD, MI  
Jonathan Kim

**TRINITY CRC**  
SPARTA, MI  
Willem DeVries

**CALVARY CRC**  
WYOMING, MI  
Joanna Wigboldy

**BETHEL CHURCH**  
PRINCETON, MN  
Jason Ruis

**MANHATTAN CRC**  
MANHATTAN, MT  
Brian Tarpy

**SPIRIT AND TRUTH CHURCH**  
PHILADELPHIA, PA  
Grant Hofman

**SUNRISE CRC**  
AUSTIN, TX  
Bailey Sarver

**FAITH COMMUNITY  
FELLOWSHIP CRC**  
MOUNT VERNON, WA  
Brian Hofman

*If your church is interested in hosting an intern in pastoral ministry next year, please contact Rev. Al Gelder ([ag094@calvinseminary.edu](mailto:ag094@calvinseminary.edu)) at the Mentored Ministries office.*





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3233 Burton Street SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49546

Publications Mail Agreement No. 40063614  
3475 Mainway, LCD STN 1  
Burlington ON L7M 1A9

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U.S. Postage  
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Grand Rapids, MI  
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# Distinguished Alumni Awards

Each year Calvin Theological Seminary is pleased to honor two alumni who have made significant ministry contributions in the Kingdom of God and have reflected positively upon the values and mission of CTS.

You are invited to submit nominations (with brief statement of rationale) by December 14, 2015 to: Rev. Jul Medenblik, President, Calvin Theological Seminary (email: [sempres@calvinseminary.edu](mailto:sempres@calvinseminary.edu)).

The recipients will be honored at the Seminary's Commencement on Saturday, May 21, 2016.



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