



kerux

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***Kerux* interview: Miroslav Volf**

Yale University professor, systematic theologian, and author of *Exclusion and Embrace*

Miroslav Volf is the Henry B. Wright professor of theology at Yale University Divinity School and director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. His book *Exclusion and Embrace* was selected as one of the 100 best religious books of the 20th Century by *Christianity Today*.

Volf spoke at the January Series in the Fine Arts Center of Calvin College on Thursday, January 18, and sat down with *Kerux* Contributing Editor Meg Jenista to discuss his recent theological writing and some of the themes that have driven his work.

***Kerux*: Without diminishing the whole of your book, *Free of Charge*, I was struck by your Postlude, in which you wrote that you do theology as a spiritual enterprise. I quote, too, from the Afterward: “Spirituality that’s not theological will grope in the darkness, and theology that’s not spiritual will be emptied of its most important content.” Considering that our audience is seminary students and faculty, how do you think the duality of theology and spirituality effect the enterprise of seminary education?**

Volf: It *ought* to affect it in at least two ways. One way is the content that is being taught. Theology can be taught almost like religious studies, as an “objective” description of various dimensions of faith, convictions and practices. Of course, there are inherent components of the descriptive task in all good teaching but that alone isn’t, properly, theological education. Both the understanding of the subject matter and love of it, is very important. Both the understanding of God and God’s relationship to the world and the love of God are essential in the way content is presented. It ought to be presented as that which shapes lives, a script for how we perform our Christian lives.

The other way is the practical side of being theologically educated. This is more than attempts at grasping content but is connected with living a way of life. Theology is best studied out of deep commitment and, indeed, out of the practice of Christian faith. In this way, theology can become, almost, the ideational side of something that is integral.

***Kerux*: When you talk about the practice of theology and spirituality, how do you see the themes of giving and forgiving playing out in the academic arena?**

Volf: They play out in both small and large ways. I think one of the best complements I’ve received, about the book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, was that the book instantiates and embodies the thesis for which it argues. That it is generous. It is open, welcoming, embracing of people with whom I fairly strenuously disagree. So, that is one way in which theology can practice generosity as a style of thinking, even a certain capaciousness, which is willing to learn. Certainly theology can be practice with a hermeneutics of charity. In other words, reading other people charitably rather than nit-picking or zeroing in on disagreements, differences, wrongs, intellectual sins that a person has committed.

So, from the large way, a style of thinking, to the smaller ways with which we engage each other as a Christian community of scholars, whether that’s as teachers or students. A teacher expresses this by the way he or she relates to a student, by the way they relate to a question, a dumb question maybe, or maybe a good question by a student which the teacher is not sure how to handle. Is there a gift of recognition of the wonderful mind behind the question

that can be given, even when the teacher feels called into question?

There are multiple ways in which we can be generous and forgiving. In fact, my students sometimes tell me that they remember the style of my teaching more than the content of what is being taught. Now, that may be a commentary on how lousy I am as a content conveyor but I take it, on the whole, as a compliment. In a sense, without wanting to diminish the importance of the content, what stays with us over the years is the style, the gesture that really expresses the substance of an attitude, of a character.

Kerux: When I first read *Exclusion and Embrace*, one of the things that struck me was, exactly, this hermeneutic of charity. You chose to deeply engage with critical theorists, like Derrida or Foucault, where my experience of Christianity has tended to dismiss postmodernity. Could you again state what it is, within critical theory, which helps us, as Christian theologians, reconsider and reformulate our orthodoxy?

Wolf: That's a broad question but maybe a good example is the granddaddy of critical theory, Nietzsche. Nietzsche is, in many regards, the fiercest of fierce critics toward Christian faith. I think Christian faith is worthy of criticism. It ought to be attuned more to criticism. When I moved to the United States, which is so much more predominantly Christian than where I grew up or was educated, in Germany, I felt I needed to have a few good atheists, a few good critics, around. I think that such fierce and smart atheists are closer to God, struggling against God than some lukewarm and sloppily thinking Christians, in their run-of-the-mill disengaged, but smug, Christianity. In that sense, theology can learn a great deal from someone like Nietzsche or Foucault, even if, in the end, one ends up going quite a different way. In the process of dialogue, we have seen our own tradition with completely different eyes, from a different vantage point and that is, essentially, what I take away from many of those critics of the Christian faith.

Now, there is an element in which we also need to engage with them in a critical way. But I want the critical word not to be the first word and certainly not the only word. As a result, the word of appreciation, learning, and being challenged to do better in one's own tradition is significant.

Kerux: In writing *Exclusion and Embrace* and engaging issues of identity and otherness, it seems you hit a profound nerve for this generation, particularly because of the issues brought to light by postmodernity. How, then, do issues of identity, gender identity, for example, help us reconsider and reformulate orthodoxy.

Wolf: Identity and otherness are significant as the reality of our social experience. They are also significant for a number of current thinkers. They became especially significant for me as I learned, through reading the work of poststructuralists, how to better understand what the Christian tradition is after but, for some reason, hasn't been able to express and formulate. The notion is that identities are not encrusted or bounded by an impenetrable wall, so that you have this discrete thing here and that discrete thing in the other place. Rather, identities are such that the other shapes identity. It is dialogical, in some sense, unstable or, put more positively, identity is dynamic. Identity goes and travels over time and changes as it encounters the other.

Now, I end up emphasizing the bounded character of that identity in *Exclusion and Embrace*. Even though boundaries are porous, they are, nonetheless, boundaries and these boundaries are good for us. This may be a lesson learned by reading in poststructuralism but it is also a lesson that it is quite obvious if you look at key aspects of the Christian faith. Look at the doctrine of the Trinity and the way that the persons of the Trinity are constructed. Think of the Cross of Christ, the nature and Catholicity of the church. These themes are part and parcel of Christian

theology, they just haven't been mined for the question which we are facing today, namely encounter with the other.

Kerux: This is a question particular to the obscure denomination behind Calvin Theological Seminary, the Christian Reformed Church. We are at a time in our history where there is extreme tension and division over the issue of women in office. There are strong opinion and hurt feelings on both sides of the divide. How can the Christian orthodoxy of otherness help our denomination weather the storm without breaking apart?

Wolf: The reflections on otherness that I undertake in *Exclusion and Embrace* or reflection on forgiveness and generosity that I undertake in *Free of Charge* won't tell you how to settle that question in terms of content. Some of the things I say, particularly in the chapter on gender in *Exclusion and Embrace*, have significant bearing on this issue but, more significant, or at least equally significant to the content of these debates is procedure. What does it mean to imaginatively, truly inhabit the perspective of the other? What does it mean to inhabit the concerns, not just the perspectives, but also concerns of the other? What does it mean to practice, here, the hermeneutics of charity rather than hermeneutics of suspicion. It is these issues, the habits of the mind and heart in relation to the other, that should characterize exchanges between Christians on any issue. Indeed, exchanges Christians have with anybody on any issue! As we retrieve these habits, we'll be able to at least pursue discussions, even hard discussions at times, in a way that is civil, in a way that is loving toward others and forgiving when the other hurts us. I would concentrate more on issue of process. Of course I have my own convictions and they are on the side of women's ordination and equality in ministry but, that, in a sense, is neither here nor there in this discussion. What is significant, then, since both sides recognize the centrality of God's grace, if everyone began attending to God's grace in these debates themselves.

Kerux: You spoke a bit about giving and forgiving, bringing the focus back on your book, *Free of Charge*. As I was reading it, I was stunned that the same author could write *After Our Likeness, Exclusion and Embrace* and then write *Free of Charge*. What was the process like, moving from academic theology into popular, devotion writing?

Wolf: Well, I've been writing both ways for a long time. When I was in Croatia, I founded a monthly magazine that I wrote for regularly. When I came here, I started writing for *Christian Century*. At all times, I was trying to attend to a more popular audience. There is a similar thrust in *Exclusion and Embrace* and *Free of Charge*, not just in what I argue but how the books are conceived and what they are meant to do. *Exclusion and Embrace* is also not simply an academic argument. It is the book that grew out of life engagement and questions very close to life. It contains arguments with major philosophical and theological traditions but they are all under the same service as *Free of Charge*, which was simply stripped down from that apparatus.

It is important to me that academic theologians don't write simply for academics but also write for the broader public, to pick up issues that are of interest to the broader public. This was my way of doing that. The pressure of specialization is very strong. The pressure of novelty is also very strong. Especially Ph.D students have to figure out some kind of Ph.D topic and there are zillions of books that have been published and you have to find this narrow niche. Then that becomes a mode in which you think and write instead of an academic rite of passage through which you go in order to pursue a grander theme of life, which should move theology, philosophy. These are the themes that move us. These are the same themes of which good preaching is made. Its those themes that we need to address afresh for each generation and think, in a vigorous way, about how to address them and, hopefully, do that in a way that will be accessible to a bit wider audience.

If we don't do that, we'll be sitting somewhere in the corner of irrelevance where a few of like-mind will be reading it and it will be completely inconsequential. Churches won't be reading it. Pastors don't read, their congregations don't read. Students read because they must but otherwise they wouldn't have particular interest unless its their particular little obsession. That's the surest way to make theology completely detached from life.

Kerux: I notice, in *Free of Charge*, you use wonderful illustrations from movies and from *Gilead*, which warmed my heart, and all of these different sources. It strikes me that in theological academia, the temptation really is to read only in your own discipline. How do you make time to nurture the non-theological side of your mind?

Wolf: I'm a pretty curious person. I read novels on a fairly regular basis. I always have something going on. Immerse oneself in the life. You do have to make choices. You have to limit yourself. On the other hand, if I thought that I could keep up with my own field and that I ought to keep up with everything that's happening my field, I certainly wouldn't have any time. I couldn't keep up, for one, and I would be left with no time for anything else. So I give up. I keep up on things that are significant for me and the areas where I am working and have a broad overview but then I have to choose. Do I read another book of theology, a monograph, or do I use the time to read a novel?

Kerux: So then, the question is: what are you reading now that is engaging your mind and imagination. Are there any new projects on the horizon?

Wolf: In the area of literature, I've been reading Najib Mafuse who is an Egyptian, Nobel Prize winner in Literature. He has written a great deal about the transformation of Egyptian society from conservative Islam to various stages of the lives of three generations. On my way here, I read Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Memory of My Lonely Horse*. I've read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

My own theological project right now is that I'm starting what will someday be a book right now a project called *God and Human Flourishing*. I want to examine our convictions about God, not simply as a topic of systematic theology but how these convictions intersect with and provide foundation for human flourishing. Against the background of present day resurgence of critique of religion with someone like Dawkins or Harris, folks of that type who don't have much new to say but, nonetheless, there is a broad cultural receptivity. At the same time, there is a difficulty of the secular culture to provide sufficient resources for some very important aspects of human flourishing. Generosity is one but there are others. So I want to pursue the question: what does belief in God, convictions about God, worship of God, how do these feed human flourishing.

Kerux: So, "The glory of God is the human person fully alive?"

Wolf: That's wonderful. Ireneaus, right?

Kerux: Well, it sounds like another book that I'll want to read. One last question: the President of the Seminary has written a book on sin and people now consider him an expert in the field. How does it feel to be the person who writes on reconciliation, giving and forgiving? Do you live up to your own expectation?

Wolf: So, you are asking whether I'm as good a forgiver as your president is a sinner?

Kerux: In a round about way, I suppose I am! But then you could be really good friends!

Wolf: I suppose, one of my experiences *Exclusion and Embrace*, when I came to a situation where I was challenged

to respond to someone who had transgressed against me in egregious ways. Well, I had this small voice that said, "But you argued in your book." Then I realized what I had already known that these arguments are tough. So the book was no longer an exercise in simple reflection. It was speaking back to me, calling me to a different, ultimately more faithful kind of life. That is ultimately one of the reasons I write, so that I can be challenged and, to the degree that people feel the same, can be a challenge to others as well.

Leaving at the top of her game

June Hamersma says goodbye to Calvin after 20 years of the January Series

by Christian Bell, Editor in Chief

The first time I was assigned to write a story about the January Series at Calvin College, I had no idea what I was getting into. I had been assigned by my editor at the Calvin College newspaper *Chimes* to do a preview article on the upcoming year's series.

As I walked into a small office on the top floor of the Spoelhof Center building, my assumption was that I'd be meeting with a kindly old lady who'd tell me a bit about what to expect and I'd be on my way in twenty minutes.

Then I met June Hamersma.

June had, some people told me, a slightly eccentric personality. For instance, she'd been photographed for the previous year's *Chimes* calendar climbing legs-first out of a tiny yellow sports car. Compare that photo the lead photo for an article in the Calvin alumni publication *Spark* of June balancing a giant silver award bowl in each hand and – yes – one on her head, and you begin to understand what an understatement “slightly eccentric personality” is.

Common journalistic parlance is to refer to a subject by their last name. But as I wrote this article, “Hamersma” just wasn't right. June is June, and if you've ever met her, you understand why. June is a figure at Calvin unlike anybody else. At age 77, her energy outlasts students 50 or more years her junior.

“I know I'm 77, but I don't know what it means to *be* 77,” June said.

Her enthusiasm for talking at length about the January Series and its speakers is infectious.

“This is the greatest example of engaging God's world,” she said.

Of the numerous conversations I've had with June, not a one of them has ever been less than a half hour long; my last interview with her in December went for nearly three hours. But it is always time well spent.

June is deeply rooted in and committed to the traditional Reformed roots of the school, and yet her daily reading list is a smorgasbord of contemporary writers and thinkers. In a sense, June Hamersma has a foot in both worlds, and for 20 years has been maintaining a bridge between the two.

She stresses that her work is done first and foremost for the students of Calvin College. She reserves a large block of seats at every daily January Series lecture for the students, and she continually lobbies students and their professors and administrators to be encouraged to attend.

June's recipe for success includes never losing a contact, knowing the responsibilities of the job, and always double-checking decisions with the people in charge. For instance, Calvin was the only school that didn't cancel a speaking engagement with Charles Murray after controversy erupted over his 1994 book *The Bell Curve*, but after conferring with then president Anthony Diekema, June got the go ahead.

June has been an asset to the Calvin community in a number of ways. She has brought big-name speakers to

campus for 20+ years. This has simultaneously exposed the Calvin community to new ways of thinking given exposure of Calvin College to wider professional and academic world.

“I hope people will see themselves and Calvin College as a place that is for open minds, not closed minds,” June said.

January Speakers have included such people as C. Everett Koop, Garrison Keillor, Neil Postman, and Peter Kreeft. In addition to January Series speakers, June was also involved in inviting William Rehnquist to speak at the Calvin College commencement in 2001 and in bringing the Petra exhibit to Calvin’s campus in 2005. While a prestigious list might be attributable to networking or good luck, in June’s case, her enthusiastic personality is almost certainly the cause.

“I am not shy, but neither am I a Christopher Buckley,” June insisted, referring to the political satirist and who precedes her on Monday. “I operate on one principle: I want the best in a given field.”

And nowhere is June’s rapport greater than amongst her invited speakers. The January Series is highly regarded in speakers’ circles, and was thrice awarded ‘Best Campus Lecture Series in the U.S.A.’ by the International Platform Association. Every time I’ve met with a January Series speaker – I’ve interviewed a dozen or more over the years – they have always expressed amazement at June’s seemingly endless energy and her enthusiasm for Calvin College and its mission.

June’s passion for Calvin College comes out of her own experience as a student.

“Calvin College is where I learned to listen with critical skepticism,” June said, recounting philosophy classes she had taken. “I learned to *think*, and that was a defining moment.”

That connection to Calvin College has continued for 75 years, together with her husband John and their family. John, who was a professor of music at Calvin College for 50 years (the first person to serve that length of term), was also the organist at President Gerald R. Ford’s funeral at Grace Episcopal Church earlier this month. To call the couple instrumental in shaping Calvin’s legacy would be an understatement. June and her husband John will celebrate their 50th anniversary in June.

Despite her effervescent personality, June is at her core deeply humble about the work that she does and the way in her January Series has shaped the educational framework of Calvin College. June continually asserts that her life and work are a response to God’s calling and work in her life.

“I want to live a life of prayer and reflection,” she said. “We live in a sinful world, but I have been redeemed. The bottom line is that it comes down to creation, fall, redemption, and judgment; that’s where it’s at in life.”

Several weeks ago, I was at a dinner hosted by June at the University Club in honor of N. T. Wright. Before sitting down I caught up with June, who was busy introducing and talking with everybody, as usual.

“Have you had a chance to breathe?” I asked her. At that time, it was already three days into the January Series, and President Ford’s funeral – at which John played the organ – had just finished.

“You know,” June said with an expressive look of enormous seriousness, “I went to bed last night and I didn’t wake up until 9 o’clock this morning.”

For someone who makes a habit of getting up at 4:00 a.m. every morning to read and who always has the energy of two pots of coffee, the decision to sleep an extra five hours was truly a concession to the busyness of the week. Yet despite a schedule that would have sidelined most 30-year-olds, June was in full character and energy for dinner that night.

In all her energy and all her work for the school, June embodies what the purest *ethos* of Calvin has always been: an unwavering commitment to Reformed Christian scholarship that sees the pursuit of knowledge as a full and tireless expression of worship to God. For 20 years, Calvin College and Seminary have had their environment richly expanded by the speakers that June has brought to campus, and her dedication to living out the mission of Calvin in her work will provide an example to be followed for decades to come.

“John and I have given 75 years of our lives to Calvin College,” she said. “It’s been a lot of faith, a lot of belief, a lot of commitment.”

On Tuesday, June will deliver her personal memoirs in the closing session of the 20th year of the January Series to what will doubtlessly be a full house. June insists that her manuscript has been prepared long in advance, but as June’s friends and colleagues know, she won’t be able to get through it without a decent amount of improvisation and commentary as well.

June has said it is her desire to “always leave at the top of my game.”

On Tuesday, she will do precisely that.

The Josiah Initiative: Jesus loves porn stars

The fourth of a four-part conversation regarding the church's need for renewal

by Jeffrey Vandermeer, Contributing Editor

On Thursday, January 18, the pornography conversation began at Calvin Seminary with a bang. After a very pointed town hall discussion in the morning, Craig Gross the founder of xxxchurch.com, spoke to 200 predominately college and seminary students on the subject, "What's the Deal with Porn?"

Craig, who is an engaging and non-threatening speaker, founded xxxchurch, the #1 Christian porn site, in 2002 to help anyone who is affected by pornography. One of the more "out of the box" methods that his ministry uses to reach people stuck in porn is by attending porn shows all across the country. Craig shares the gospel and passing out Bibles, titled Jesus Loves Porn Stars, to fellow image bearers of God that most of us would never be caught dead with. The conversation was riveting, engaging, and at times, tough to hear, but for those who listened, the conversation was started.

The three-minute video clip that began Craig Gross' talk on pornography was a shocking reality check into the world of pornography, both from the exploited Constance in the Philippines, but also from the "exploited" young man in America who didn't want to view, but just had to get his next fix. The image of the 13-year-old Filipino named Constance who was sold for sex for six dollars will remain with me for a long time. The image of the young man in America that was paying to view this heinous crime will also stay with me for a long time.

Craig, through his demeanour and candid speech, brought the audience into a place where we could talk about porn without the normal embarrassment that most of us feel. Craig clearly indicated that this \$70 billion industry is not simply an embarrassment that the Christian community should not talk about, but indicated that the Christian community must begin to take stock of what pornography is doing to the church, and the fact that it will not go away on its own. How will the church deal with the "porn-generation"? One can go from being a non-porn viewer to a habitual viewer, needing to view every day in a matter of three days, according to study cited by Craig.

Bill's story was one of the hardest to hear. Bill, a man who grew up in the church, was a police officer that had viewed pornography for sixteen years. One day, Bill showed up at the station and one of his fellow officers told him to go home as they were raiding his house, looking for child porn. Bill is now going to spend 5 and a half years in jail. He is bankrupt. His wife has left him. He has nothing. Bill didn't plan on being a trafficker of child porn. Bill thought he had "control" of his porn habit. Bill, a normal all-American guy, will spend the next half decade of his life behind bars, and those will probably be the easiest 5+ years that he will live from now until the day he dies. A sad story, but what makes it so hard to hear is that it is being repeated time after time all over the country.

Responses from people to Craig's talk were varied and insightful. One seminary professor mused about the loss of an understanding of sin, about how sin sucks the life out of us. He talked about how we as a church simply don't understand how pornography sucks the life right out of us. Another professor wondered if the church is ready to have this conversation and if the church really realizes how rampant pornography is. A seminary student talked about how he could see how pornography could become habitual in three days. He was not surprised by that number. Another student lamented the fact that in all these conversations, the topic of what it practically means to be a "Single Sexual Calvin Seminary Student" is never talked about.

At the end of the day, 300 people have had a conversation about pornography, and it seems that the conversations

have continued into the next day and will hopefully continue into the future. Many questions were raised and will continue to be discussed.

Let's continue the conversation going and try to figure out together what the deal with pornography is, how to love porn stars in the way that Jesus does, and to figure out how to send out leaders into the church that are better equipped to deal with this growing \$70 billion industry, both in and out of the church.

To continue the conversation, visit ctspornfree.org.

Sem Eye: Your best board game now

We all know Joel Osteen as the perfect smile poster boy for the two blessings all good evangelicals expect to receive in abundance: health and wealth. He taught us his seven steps to living richer, fuller lives through mountains of books, journals and calendars, but there was still something missing from the Osteen Empire. Little did any of us suspect he could fill the hole in our hearts by transforming his *New York Times* number one bestseller *Your Best Life Now* into the number one best board game ever! Grab a comb and some mouthwash and prepare for the ride of your family's life as Joel takes you from the drudgery of today to a shiny new tomorrow filled with your very own maximized potential.

On the surface *Your Best Life Now: The Game* looks strikingly similar to the aforementioned book, calendar, journal, t-shirt, scented candles and abdominal exerciser. In practice the game brings Osteen's book to life in your living room, and it will only cost you \$24.98 (instead of the \$11.19 the book commands on Amazon- a small price to pay for the hours of fun your sixteen-year-old daughter is sure to enjoy inviting her friends over to play). User reviews on Amazon just prove the power of this game to influence lives. Never before have I seen a product unanimously rated "one-star." Surely this is the sign of a coordinated attack by dark forces afraid of the power Mr. Osteen can unleash in your life.

Unfortunately we don't have the time to walk you through all seven steps of the game here. Even if we did we would not do it; Joel's lawyers made that very clear in a memo scratched into the hood of my car with a set of keys. Suffice to say the game progresses as players draw "Have Faith" cards, (think of Community Chest in Monopoly, only God gives you the fifty dollars for winning a beauty pageant), making positive statements about yourself, (failure to come up with adequate self-worth results in losing your turn), and finally opening each person's "My Miracle" envelope, where their heart's deepest desires are read aloud to the group by the game winner. Incidentally, only that winner is assured of receiving their best life. All other players run the risk of an eternity of mediocrity so the game also teaches the capitalist (read: Christian) virtue of clawing one's way to the top not matter the cost to your friends and family.

Well, that's it for this week. Until next time this is SemEye wishing nothing but the best life to you and yours; unless your best life gets in my way.

Letters to the editor

(Re: "[Come on, white people!](#)," Kerux, Jan. 15, 2007)

At the risk of sounding defensive, while I appreciate Adam's concern for justice, I was uncomfortable with some of the assumptions in his article. It has become quite culturally acceptable to identify racism and sexism as being perpetuated primarily by white males, but I don't think this is theologically acceptable. I do not deny the historical and present reality of white male privilege, nor do I deny my own sinful prejudices (incidentally, I also have a lot of other prejudices that don't fall into the categories of race and gender). I do, however, strongly deny that racism and sexism are primarily white male problems, and I think that to identify them as such is racist and sexist. I also do not think that privilege and power make a person uniquely susceptible to racism or sexism. Racism and sexism are not primarily behaviors of which only the privileged are capable; they are sins of the heart and are committed by every type of person.

There might be many who voted to ban affirmative action out of sinful motives (*e.g.* fear, indifference). But there are also many (like myself) who voted for the ban because addressing prejudicial behavior with prejudicial legislation seems wrong to them. (With the number of empty pulpits in the CRC, I have no reason to oppose affirmative action out of fear for personal well-being.) God hates racism and sexism whether it's committed by/directed at the privileged or the underprivileged. It seems that a discussion on the appropriateness of affirmative action would be more helpful than a call for (only) white males to be sensitive.

Craig Hoekema, M.Div.

Notice to candidates for ministry

Qualifying persons who wish to be candidates in 2007 for ordained CRC ministry should request application procedures by February 2, 2007. For further information, please email Karlene Werner at kaw5@calvinseminary.edu or write her at Calvin Theological Seminary, 3233 Burton Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546.