



Volume 42 ♦ Issue 2 ♦ 3 October 2007

In this week's issue...

- **Notes on the Candidacy Committee Town Hall Meeting**
- **When Did We Forget How to Say “Thank You?”**
An essay on starting the candidacy policy discussion
- **Man is Wolf to Man**
Taking a closer look at David Cronenberg's *Eastern Promises*
- **A Call to Worship**
Why is chapel attendance so meager in a seminary?
- **Sacred Realty**
SemEye examines capitalism at its finest in Israel

Notes on the Candidacy Committee Town Hall Meeting

by Nate Van Denend, Contributing Editor

On the 13th of September, several members of the candidacy committee held an open meeting for students interested in learning more about the candidacy process. The members of the committee present were Duane Kelderman, Chair, John Bolt, Don Byker and Doris Rikker and an estimated 100 students also attended. Ron Nydam, a committee member, was absent from the meeting. The meeting began with a description of the place of the Calvin Theological Seminary candidacy committee among the other committees and groups that are involved in the candidacy process. The students were assured that that candidacy committee was ultimately their advocate and would stand by them when their names are submitted to Synod. After these matters were discussed the floor was opened for questions.

The first was a question regarding the means of communication between students and the committee. The questioner suggested that the progress of the student and the student's intent to comply with the committee's recommendations and suggestions be duly noted in the yearly communication from the candidacy committee. This was interpreted by the committee to mean that the letter should be more encouraging. Yet, in speaking afterward to the questioner, she believed that the question was misinterpreted. What the questioner was after was a simple recognition of work completed and an acknowledgement of the student's intentions and plans.

A second question was raised regarding so-called "11th hour" recommendations concerning psychological evaluations. The questioner wanted comment on the situations of several students who felt that they were given additional recommendations at the last minute by the candidacy committee. While the committee was not able to comment on specific cases, it suggested that what often seems to a student like an 11th hour recommendation from the candidacy committee is actually a recommendation that has been made repeatedly over many years but is only finally taken seriously by the student at the 11th hour. The committee cautioned students to remember when they hear the claim of an "11th hour recommendation" that there is usually another side to the story.

The conversation then took a different turn, with a question about how seminary students should keep each other accountable particularly in the areas of moral and ethical conduct. Coupled with this question was a question about whether or not moral and ethical infractions should be reported. This question made everyone chuckle a little. The committee responded by saying that such reporting should not be formalized, because this may make for an unhealthy environment at the seminary.

A fourth question related to psychological assessments and particularly the technical

definitions of the terms “suggest” and “recommend.” According to the Candidacy Committee, the term ‘recommend’ is used to promote a dialogue with the student about the results of the psychological testing. The questioners disagreed with this use of the term ‘recommend’ positing that the term ‘requirement’ more accurately communicates the weight the committee places on the words of the psychologists. To this the committee responded that the term ‘require’ may make the psychologist’s recommendations seem like more hoops to jump through and therefore may not be taken seriously. At this point time ran out for the meeting and the committee was thanked for its openness and willingness to hold the meeting.

When Did We Forget How to Say “Thank You?”

A prelude to continued candidacy discussion

by K.C. Vande Streek, Contributing Editor

There's been a lot of talk lately about the Candidacy Meeting on September 13. We (students) have been talking about a lot of things regarding that meeting: how helpful it was or wasn't, whether or not the Candidacy Committee is putting too much emphasis on psychological analysis, if the word “recommend” should be used instead of “require,” and so on and so forth. These conversations have been very passionate and appropriate as further dialogue is clearly needed on all these issues.

Can we back up for just a minute please, though? There's one really crucial step in this process that I feel is being left out. I noticed it in the auditorium that day and keep seeing it pop up in the student center and elsewhere around campus. I hate to admit this, but another reason why I noticed this step was missing was because I neglected it myself: Has anyone stopped to say “Thank you?”

After the meeting I asked a number of third- and fourth-year students if the Candidacy Committee had ever done something like this before. The response was “no.” In light of the fact that in the past the Candidacy Committee has, in the past, worked mainly through emails and letters, this face-to-face meeting was pretty significant. To top it off we now have a whole new pamphlet about the process using colloquial language and an invitation to email the committee our thoughts, questions and comments.

For us, as students, this is a big privilege. We've been asked to speak and to participate in shaping CTS for ourselves and for future students. Because of the significance of being asked to speak, the enormity of this opportunity, I feel like what we say in response is important, but I want to emphasize that the tone we use to convey what we say is just as important. Have we, as a student body, neglected to be grateful in this situation?

I realize that it's hard to be grateful when you feel frustrated, apprehensive and a little afraid. If I moved my family to Grand Rapids and started at Calvin Seminary last year and then found out I might need to be here for four years, not three, and then was ‘recommended’ for C.P.E. (which is a lot of extra time and money) or I might not be ordained—yeah, I'd be legitimately angry too. But this only reinforces how significant Thursday's meeting was and the need to begin the conversation in gratitude. Last year, you had to take it or leave it. This year, go ahead and email Duane Kelderman.

Again, I want to say that the concerns that still exist are legitimate problems. Some of

these will be addressed in future articles in this publication and interested students are invited to write for themselves and join in the conversation. There are many good ideas out there for improving this process. I just want to suggest that all of these things need to be blanketed in love and gratitude.

Sadly, I don't think a lack of expressed gratitude is applicable only to this situation. How many of us MDiv students took the time to write notes or letters saying "thank you" to the administration of this institution when they cut our program by 19 credits? For many of us, that act allows us to graduate a whole year earlier than we would have. Think about that, really think about it, and then say these words slowly: a whole year earlier. How many of us, after thinking about how great that is, then responded by thanking the administration?

Three weeks ago Duane Kelderman gave a chapel message on gratitude. Last week President Plantinga gave a chapel message on praising God and one of his reasons for encouraging us to do so was "because it is just plain healthy."

Let's do those things. Let's be a student body that expresses gratitude and thanks, that gives praise to God. Let's be gracious even when there are still a number of issues and emotions lingering over a sensitive topic. Let's stop, take a deep breathe and say "thanks." Then, with gratitude, let's dive in wholeheartedly and speak our minds.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a few letters that need to be written and they are long overdue.

Man Is Wolf to Man

Examining David Cronenberg's new film *Eastern Promises*

by Brian Bork, Contributing Editor

The House of Meetings, Martin Amis' recent novel, is a glimpse into the conflicted lives of two brothers who spent a portion of their youth in Soviet labor camps. The experience of these camps - brief though it may be when compared to the span of an entire life - lingers, and defines the remaining days of the novel's two main characters. The reader quickly learns that it's futile to think that anyone "gets over" the gulag. Instead, lives are immeasurably wrenched, distorted, and refashioned by it. The malnutrition, the toil, and the frostbite ensure its victims emerge as wraiths. But the real damage - the permanent affliction - is left for the soul, for human nature. The hunger, terror, and "violent boredom" of the camps instill, or at least augment, human savagery; they are places, says the novel's narrator, where "man is wolf to man."



These sorts of wolves abound in David Cronenberg's latest film, *Eastern Promises*. The story centers around the activity of the *Vory V Zakone* (Thieves in Law), an organized crime syndicate born in the grindhouse of Stalin's labor camps. These are expatriate gangsters; they've set up shop in London as human traffickers, promoters of a sex trade between London and former Eastern Bloc countries. This insidious business is conducted out of the back of "The Trans-Siberian Restaurant," owned by Semyon (Armin Mueller-Stahl), the godfather of the outfit, and his lunatic son Kirill (Vincent Cassel). Escorting this pack of wolves through the London night is Nikolai, an icy threat of a man played by Viggo Mortensen. Ostensibly little more than a laconic limousine driver, at least as far as mob hierarchy goes, Nikolai is far more chilling than his superiors, and he's more than willing to take care of some especially morbid business.

This underworld comes into contact with the "regular" world when Anna (Naomi Watts), a hospital midwife, delivers the baby of a hemorrhaging Georgian girl named Tatiana. The baby lives, but the mother doesn't make it; she leaves behind on the hospital gurney a small diary which Anna snatches up. The diary is all in Russian, so Anna brings it home to her uncle, a "wodka"-soaked old Russian coot. Uncle Stepan has something of a moment of clarity upon paging through the journal - he's not going to translate it for Anna, under no uncertain terms. Deciding to outsource the translation, Anna tracks down "The Trans-Siberian Restaurant" from a business card left in the journal, and meets up

with Semyon, who puts on his kindest grandfatherly countenance for her. Anna's demeanor is not exactly one of trepidation, but of caution and intense bravery – it's as if she doesn't trust Semyon right from the start, but her desire to protect the newborn causes her to willfully walk into the wolf's lair. It's concern that is well placed, though, as she realizes in horrifying detail when she returns home to find out that Uncle Stepan has had a change of heart and translated the journal. The journal is at once a plea and an indictment: we learn that Tatiana was an unwitting prostitute from Semyon's fold, a recipient of powerful narcotic injections, and that her child is genetic proof of the wanton criminality of the highest ranking members of Semyon's outfit.

It's not long, of course, before the *Vory* learn about the words in the diary, and come around looking for Anna. The chase is on, through the rain-slicked nighttime of a London that Cronenberg has painted with sickly green and jaundiced hues. It's one of bone-bending tension, which is to be expected of Cronenberg, whose early career was spent suturing together horror flicks. Though his skill as a director places him many orders of magnitude beyond that genre, many of its tropes remain, right down to the way in which the ignition in Anna's motorcycle fails with perfect and horrible timing, allowing Mortensen's Nikolai to sidle up to her with glacial menace. Despite such menace, Nikolai is strangely softened when he interacts with Anna, and the viewer hopes that his violent and chilly exterior is a facade.

The not quite-tenderness of the relationship between Anna and Nikolai is really a brief respite in a film that has some pretty spectacular brutality. It'd be easy to identify this tendency as arising from Cronenberg's past as an auteur of horror movies, for which a lurid fascination with sliced and diced body parts is part of the job description. That would be too easy of an assessment, too dismissive of what Cronenberg is trying to do here, though. His prior film, *A History of Violence* (also starring Mortensen), was an exploration of the vagaries of violence in American culture: in its history, in its myths, and in its entertainment. *Eastern Promises* is no different in its aims, it has just broadened the scope of its examination; it goes past London, through Russia, and toward human nature in general. On a very visceral level, the violence in *Eastern Promises* is an indictment of our taste in films: the brutal summer blockbusters with their violent saturnalia. The logic of *300* or *Die Hard* or *V for Vendetta* is that there is redemption to be found in lethal violence, especially if that violence is in collusion with a surplus of wisecracking machismo. But Hollywood knows that we're not always interested in redemption, and we just want a little sex and violence, so they combine the two: firearms look much more appealing when they're holstered to the lithe haunch of Angelina Jolie. The violence of *Eastern Promises* functions in a completely opposite way – its aesthetic is not one of seduction or pyrotechnic action-film savvy – it is swift, graphic and brutal. It is cinematic barbarity that exposes just how *awful* violence is; it's not something to hoot and holler at over a tub of popcorn, but something from which we recoil.

Man's wolfish traits are certainly under scrutiny amid this violence, but Cronenberg isn't just interested in showing us how man is wolf to man. Man is also wolf to woman, as is obvious from the subject matter here, and the perils of masculinity get their due exposure.

The female characters in *Eastern Promises* aren't developed like their male counterparts are, and they inhabit what could be considered to be stereotypical roles: the noble prostitute, the maternal nurse, the concerned mother. They all have angelic characteristics, too, visible in the innocence of Semyon's granddaughters, the soft and lovely singing of a Ukrainian girl, and in the way Anna's golden locks cascade out of her black motorcycle helmet. It could be argued that the thinness of the female characters here is a result of some quasi-sexist oversight on Cronenberg's part, or that Watts' performance is simply overshadowed by Mortensen's (the latter is certainly true; the former, not so much). These "woman on a pedestal" characterizations aren't the result of some subtle sexism in the film; instead, they're in place to help illustrate just how *male* the problem of physical violence is. Semyon and Kirill dwell excessively on their macho heterosexuality, and Nikolai's late father's masculinity is called into question, simply for not participating in the gangland lifestyle.

Physical violence may be a mostly male problem, but that's not to say that men are inherently violent creatures. Instead, this is violence that has been amplified and extended far beyond what we expect of normally functioning men, and it's because of the horrors that lie in their past that they behave this way. In a soliloquy regarding the death of his family before a group of high-ranking *Vory*, Nikolai describes how his existence is one that is in a perpetual "dead zone." The death of his family came in the labor camps, under the soil of Russia (to repeat one of the film's refrains), where Nikolai did his own share of hard time. It was in this morbid servitude that his human nature devolved and was stripped down to reptilian brass tacks (or, as in the penultimate scene, down to bare flesh and gangster tattoos). Even in scenes where his full humanity is in better focus there is a pallor, a brooding darkness that can't be dispelled.

This is where the film's chief theme comes to the fore: when we are in slavery, our joy, civility and compassion become moribund, and we turn into spiritual and emotional ciphers, creatures stripped of what it is that makes us who we are. This film, though perhaps not overtly humanistic, is one that is deeply concerned with this affliction on the human condition. It demands an answer to the question: what happens to people when they are enslaved to each other, when they are offered up as oblations to ideology, to politics, to grinding poverty or war? It is a question that moves deeply into the darker regions of human nature, which makes it difficult to ponder, even for people who know something about light prevailing in the darkness. But it's one that we need to reckon with, sent out, as we are, as "sheep among the wolves."

A Call to Worship

Why is chapel attendance so meager at CTS?

by Andrew Zomeran, Guest Essayist

At CTS we are privileged to be pastors and church leaders in training. Why is it then that so many of us do not lead by example? Every Wednesday and Friday morning there is time set aside for us to gather communally for worship. There are no classes, no meetings, and donuts are even provided afterwards. These are great times for us to take a few minutes from our busy lives, slow down, and worship. Each chapel is different, some with prayer, some with a message, some with singing and some with liturgies. The format is always changing, but the goal is always the same: chapel provides an opportunity for us to worship God together.

I have heard plenty of excuses offered as to why some of us do not attend chapel services. Some are more legitimate than others. For example, if you don't have class on those mornings, driving in for chapel might be too much to ask. Some students don't care for the worship style, others simply need a half hour to go for a quiet walk during their otherwise hectic school day. For many of us, however, chapel time is simply a time to procrastinate or plan work. My question is: How much work will you get done in that 20 to 25 minutes that could be spent in worship? My guess, if you are in the student center, is probably not much at all.

Some of us pick and choose the chapels we'll attend. That too is troubling. In a year or two we will be calling the congregations we serve to fight this consumerist impulse towards voluntarism in North America. We will be better pastors if we can master that very impulse in ourselves and simply make a commitment to go to chapel--every time chapel is offered.

I simply want to encourage and challenge the CTS community, faculty, staff and students, to use chapel time for its intended purpose: worshipping out God together. Part of our seminary training is learning to find balance between piety and academics, our drive to work and our need to worship. Commit to chapel and see if you don't notice the difference as you adjust your priorities and begin enter fully into a worshipping community.

If you don't like how chapel is done feel free to contact Dr. Kelderman, or better yet come out to a chapel planning committee meeting and offer input as to how we can make it better. Come, now is the time to worship.

Sacred Realty

SemEye for the Evangelical Guy examines capitalism at its finest in Israel

by No One At All, Contributing Editor

For countless generations war has battered the Middle East and a little spit of “Holy Land” has been soaked in blood and pierced by mortar fragments. The battle to control this region is fought with strong words and pointed weapons and proclamations of peace are more likely to be met with cynical eye rolls than anything approximating real hope. Now, finally, someone seems to be offering a solution to preserve this sacred space: sell it off!



Holy Land Parcels has decided that if Israelis and Palestinians can't share the land they don't deserve to have it at all. In light of this plots of land are now available to anyone who has ever wanted to own a little patch of sacred soil for themselves. A mere \$35 will get you your very own deed to a single square inch of top-quality Galilean topsoil overlooking the Sea of Gennsaret. This tiny space is, presumably, zoned for residence in the world's tiniest studio apartment and comes with an assortment of grass blades. More expensive units may include a pebble while discount plots are available for the humble pilgrim who willing to live adjacent to a busy ant colony.

“Now you can own a symbolic plot of land in the Holy Land as your personal biblical heritage,” Holy Land Parcels’ brochure proclaims, which “will reinforce your ties with the land of the Bible.” Yes, indeed, the land the God of Israel claimed for his own can now be bought and held privately by you and you alone. Surely this is what we Reformed Christians mean when we espouse the reclamation of “every square inch” of creation for Christ?

Your very own inch of the *terra sancta* is waiting for you at www.holyland-parcels.co.il.

Each week SemEye strives to bring you the best of the worst in Christian merchandising. Do you have an idea for SemEye? Email us at letters@kerux.org.