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# Bound Together

By Meg Jenista, Contributing Editor

It may not have been the Good Friday Agreement or the Camp David Accord but October 29, 2007 still qualifies as a hallmark date for peace, diplomacy and an optimistic hope of reunification. Student Senate President John Lee, Treasurer Dirk Van Eyk, and I traveled to Holland, MI, where we met with our colleagues from the Student Council at Western Theological Seminary. The meeting broke both ice and ground for these two seminary student bodies.

Western Theological Seminary is a training ground for would-be pastors in the Reformed Church of America. Much like our seminary, WTS is deeply rooted in a particular denominational identity while also seeking to provide a hospitable seminary experience for those outside their particular tradition. Not surprisingly, then, the symmetry of conversations regarding community, diversity, spiritual life and academia hit home to members of both seminary populations.

Despite these commonalities, this meeting was a first in both recent and remembered history. Two years ago the idea of joining forces, or at least sharing ideas with our contemporaries at Western Theological Seminary, was suggested. After failed attempts on both sides, the ice was finally broken over pizza on October 29, 2007. A few wheels were greased and future plans have since been put in motion. For example, we will be inviting members of WTS student body to lead us in chapel worship this Spring. We expect the offer will be returned. What about academic conferences and town hall meetings? A simple e-mail would invite both schools to participate in cross-denominational conversation. Why not sponsor a joint social event or service project in the future? (I would personally love to see a lighthearted quiz bowl featuring members of faculty from both institutions!)

Seeing as the Executive Committees of both schools got on so well together, we began wondering what it might be like if our student bodies began to associate more freely with one another. We invite you all to wonder along with us. And if students at the Christian Reformed Church's flagship seminary begin to get to know students from the Reformed Church in America's flagship seminary, we began wondering what it might be like if our collegiality moved beyond academia into the broader lives of these two, separate denominations. Is reconciliation, unity even, a possibility?

150 years ago, the Christian Reformed Church broke away from the Reformed Church in America. It was something many of us commemorated this summer but, really, ought division ever to be considered a celebratory event? As children of the categorically guarded *Aufscheidung* church in the Netherlands, the ties that held us together with the Reformed Church in America were always and at best tenuous. In 1857 suspicion of the Reformed Church's capitulation to American, Christian culture, most notably in the

singing of hymns (horrors!), created an unbridgeable gulf between the two immigrant communities. When we departed we called it secession, they called it schism; at any rate, we all called the whole thing off. Later rifts over lodge membership, Christian day-school education and women in office further isolated these two denominations from one another.

Now the question lies before us: are the reasons for our parting of the ways 150 years ago still cogent? Still, consider all that has happened in the intervening years to make hypothetical reunification a logistical nightmare: 150 years of Synodical decisions times two! Denominations are like aircraft carriers – stopping dead in the water or turning on an aquatic dime are delusions. Certainly, lovers of church polity blanch at the thought of trying to combine forces from the top down. Then there is that sticky wicket of a prayer offered up by Christ:

*“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”*

What in the world can that roaring idealist be on about? Well, at least this: two institutions, bound together by Christ, ought to be combining efforts in social justice and world relief, as the CRCNA and RCA have begun to do. Two denominations, bound together by theological ancestry, ought not duplicate efforts in foreign and home missions, as recently agreed upon by boards of these agencies in the CRCNA and RCA. Two churches, bound together by doctrinal and confessional agreement, ought to be willing to engage in a little pulpit exchange every now and again. Two seminary student bodies, preparing for the joys and challenges of denominational leadership within the next 20 years, ought to start talking to one another and two seminary student councils, faced with the daunting task of building community at distinct but uncannily similar institutions, ought to be willing to break the ice over a few slices of pizza.

## On Martyrdom and History

By Nate Van Denend, Contributing Editor

Franz Jagerstatter, an Austrian Roman Catholic, was killed by the Nazis in 1943 for refusing to join the Nazi army. The Roman Catholic Church beatified him on October 26. He was a poor man with limited education. His friends and neighbors, even his bishop tried to dissuade him from his refusal to associate with the Nazis. Considered mad by some for refusing compromise, he put flesh on the words of discipleship, "Take up your cross and follow me." He died a martyr.

Reformation Day was a little over a month ago. This day is a Protestant substitution for All Saints Day, the ghost of which still lingers every time a Protestant participates in the rituals of All Hallows Eve. Arguably this substitution was a necessary one. The saints had become demigods in some people's minds, powerful and more accessible than the perceived distant One True God. So in the name of reforming the church and making God once again accessible to the people, we replaced this practice of remembering the saints with a practice of remembering our own roots and the reasons for our protest.

The substitution is imperfect. The reformers do not represent the breadth and depth of Christian experience. They are only a few individuals in a whole cloud of witnesses. The Protestant cloud of witnesses is like Swiss cheese. It contains huge gaps between Paul and Augustine and again between Augustine and Calvin and yet again between Calvin and Edwards. Important as they are, their stories are not enough to replace the stories of the thousands of others who are left out.

This brings up another point: the substitution represents a change not only in *who* is being remembered but *how* they are remembered. We remember the theology and the theologians of the reformation. We do not take very much time remembering the martyrs of the reformation...or any martyrs beyond Stephen in Acts. Martyrdom is a story, a story which can embolden and deepen faith. Martyrdom is the ultimate human act of incarnation - putting flesh on the words of Christ. In not taking the time to remember the stories of men and women who lived and died in the name of Christ, we take the risk of forgetting ourselves how to live and die in the name of Christ. So I submit for your memory Franz Jagerstatter. He was a peasant, he was stubborn, he was a Christian, and he died as one.

# Why Christians are Environmentalists

By Brian Bork, Contributing Editor

**Psalm 104**

**Colossians 1.15-23**

Based on a sermon delivered on Creation Awareness Sunday, at Covenant CRC, Edmonton, July 2007.

Poetry may not be the voguish literary genre that I wish it was, but those few who give it the time it deserves know well the descriptive power it contains. Though the Systematics may blanch at the suggestion, the subject of theology is often so hazy and mysterious that it seems the perfect topic for the obscurantist sensibility of a poet. Poets may prize brevity and metaphor, but that isn't to say that their work lacks any breadth or depth of meaning, or that it is unable to sound the depth of truth found in the mathematically precise and assiduous observations of Aquinas or Calvin. Even a writer as turgid as St. Paul knew this to be the case, and that's why he begins his letter to the Colossian church with a poem, detailing the relationship between creator and creation.

I can't say much about the poetic practices of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, though I'm fairly certain they didn't have poetry slams or the like. They probably were attuned to the musical qualities of poetry, though, and I like to think that Paul's poem was sung on Sunday mornings. If that's the case, then this may be one of the first protest songs ever written. By quoting these words, our little bowlegged Apostle is taking a stand against the might of Rome, shaking his skinny fist at Caesar. Each one of the salvos that Paul sends off toward Rome here stands as a direct rebuttal to what people thought about their commander-in-chief. In essence, Paul is substituting Christ in the place of a bunch of assertions that the Romans made about Caesar. For the Romans, Caesar was the alpha-male, the pinnacle of humanity; he was deserving of the kind of accolades that people ascribe to God. Paul has no interest in joining in the litany of praise toward Caesar; he knows that to do so would be to the detriment of the believers he is writing to in Colossae, because it would compromise their faith in the supremacy of Christ. It would cause them to place their ultimate trust in Caesar. This, as we all know, constitutes heresy. So Paul quotes a poem here that tells his audience who Jesus really is, to combat this heresy, to tell his audience that they don't need to conform to the ways of the world, because they have a connection to something that is so much greater than Caesar's tenuous clutch at power.

So what about us? Most of us haven't pledged allegiance to any Roman emperors, and the thought of Caesar is probably more likely to remind us of bad pizza than imperialism. This poem isn't archaic, though – it's part of our living, holy scripture – and it continues to speak to us, remaining relevant to our situation today.

We find ourselves in a unique place in history – human activity has always had an effect on creation, but with the advent of industrial technology and ideology, our influence is now unsurpassed. Regrettably, this unsurpassed effect on creation often comes in a negative way. We are profoundly intelligent creatures, capable of amazing feats of engineering and accomplishment. But we are also profoundly destructive creatures, capable of ransacking our surroundings and vandalizing the planet.

Oil spills, deforestation, smog, and contaminated water supplies weren't really high on the list of Paul's worries. If Paul ever tried to raise the environmental consciousness of one of the early churches, that letter has been lost. Most likely, Paul didn't write anything like that. He seems more interested in telling people about the true nature of Christ, as if he's not as interested in their ecological sensibility as much as he is in their theological sensibility. Paul is more concerned with good theology because he knows that once people have a good idea of who Christ is, then the rest follows. Good theology is verdant soil; from it sprouts good ethics and good living.

And it's this nurturing theology that is needed here, today, flung so chronologically and geographically far from the outskirts of dusty Colossae. It's needed in the boardrooms and executive suites of big business, right down the corridors of corporate power – those who run the factories and the refineries and the industry. But it's also needed in our back yards, on driveways, and crackling along our power grids. Who Christ is has profound relevance to how we relate to creation.

Our loyalties aren't compromised by the Roman Empire anymore, but that doesn't mean that our lives aren't troubled by empires of our own making. Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat have written a wonderful commentary on this part of Colossians, in which they identify our current empire: the Empire of Global Consumerism. The lineaments of power in this Empire are ideological; there are no Caesars, but there are ideas that are totalitarian and controlling in much the same way.

The culture of Global Consumerism is one that prizes economic growth over environmental preservation. It values the disposable over the permanent. It trumpets the virtues of the expansion of industry, while sweeping environmental devastation under the rug. In the Empire of Global Consumerism, creation has little to no value in and of itself; instead, the value assigned to it is proportional to the amount of money we can make by using (abusing) it. We consume, we produce, and we spend. These things in and of themselves are not inherently bad, but it is no secret that over the past century, they have wreaked havoc on our beleaguered planet.

The Empire of Global Consumerism is tyrannical, too, in that it holds our imaginations captive. Our ingenuity and creativity have been severely limited by the constant bombardment of advertising and ubiquitous corporate logos. 1<sup>st</sup> Century Romans were familiar with a similar form of visual effrontery: pictures of Caesar were everywhere, on frescoes and currency. The images stood as a constant reminder to people of whose

empire they were a part of, and to whom their allegiance was due. It's not much different today, is it? Consumerist thinking and consumerist imagery are everywhere. Try to picture your life without them. What would that be like? How would our lives look if we weren't confronted with the logos of late capitalism? These logos, this ideology, limit our imagination to the point where we willingly participate in the desecration of creation. Polls show that we are occasionally aghast at our behavior, that we want to be part of the solution to our environmental troubles, yet the statistics show otherwise. We live in bigger houses than ever before. We drive impractically enormous cars for impractical reasons. We eat counterfeit food grown in a fog of noxious chemicals and in weary soil.

The jeremiads in the secular environmental movement has long lambasted Christians for this kind of behavior. That so much environmental desecration occurs in parts of the world where the majority of people profess to believe the Bible is unthinkable to these folks. Their criticism is just; we need to hear it. We have Al Gore and David Suzuki to remind us of these things, but it's not the purpose of this sermon to position their words as gospel truth. Instead I, like Paul, need to bring you the *real* Gospel truth.

Paul's poem here is a poem of liberation. Paul's not just using clever language or fantastic imagery to describe Jesus here; he's telling the truth about Christ in order that we may be set free from the empires and ideologies which shackle our thinking. This is why Paul starts with describing Jesus as the firstborn over all creation. This is not a title that means that Jesus is merely the first in a list of things that God created. To interpret it this way would make Jesus a creature, just like everything else. This view is mistaken, because it is not in keeping with how the expression "firstborn" has been used throughout the Old Testament. In Psalm 89, for instance, God says that the king of Israel will be the "first born," the "most exalted of the kings of the earth." Here, "first born" is a synonym for primacy, an exalted figure, not just exalted in a limited way, but over all the earth.

When we realize that Jesus is the firstborn over all creation, we see creation in the context of Christ. He precipitates creation. He is the context of creation. He is the ruler over all creation. When we realize this, we cannot truly understand creation without recognizing Christ; creation abstracted from Christ is a diminished thing indeed. Without the reminder from Paul of Christ's primacy and supremacy over creation, the world quickly becomes something that we use and use up for our own desires. Our imaginations get caught up in the consumerist way of thinking, and we willingly pillage the world for what we think we need.

Paul goes deeper. Yes, Jesus is the firstborn and sovereign of creation, but it doesn't stop there. Jesus is not the aloof and absentee landlord of creation; creation is not Jesus' little fiefdom, worked by others while he is away. Paul tells us that Jesus is intimately involved in the very act of creating. Verse 16 tells us that by Christ's authority and power, all things were created. And verse 17 adds a qualification: in Christ, *all things hold together*. Creation is not then a one-time occurrence. Jesus didn't just give us creation so that we may use it as we wish until it runs down or wastes away. No, Jesus is involved in creation all the time and everywhere - creation is in perpetual motion. Christ's creative work is

also Christ's sustaining work, and Christ's providential work. As the writer of the 104<sup>th</sup> Psalm tells us, all the world is *renewed* by the act of creation.

To truly hear Paul's words here is to realize that the act of world-making and the act of world-sustaining is holy work. Regeneration and resurrection happen in creation because Jesus chooses to be an active participant in the ongoing life of the world. This is a blessed, wondrous thing. What joy comes from knowing that our God cares for our planet, and is involved in its life, down to the smallest detail.

The joy is dampened, though, when we remember that we haven't always been the most faithful witness to the creating and sustaining work of Christ. The secular environmentalists offer many good reasons why we need to change our behavior: If we keep treating the environment the way we do, we are being bad stewards. We are living unsustainably. We are leaving a trashed planet behind for our grandchildren. These are all good reasons to be an environmentalist.

Paul provides us with a much more pressing reason why we must take care of creation. By ransacking and abusing creation, we are thwarting the creative and sustaining work of Christ. Things are hard to hold together when we're actively tearing them apart. By mistreating the earth, we are essentially saying that we don't care much for God's efforts to renew creation. We are pushing back against such renewal. We are refusing the abundance and blessings of God's active, ongoing creation. This goes beyond bad stewardship. This goes beyond unsustainable living. This is worse than leaving a trashed planet for our grandchildren. This is blasphemy.

This can leave us feeling intense guilt, and we identify precisely with what Paul means when he talks about our alienation from God. Our reckless interaction with the planet leaves us alienated from creation, and to be alienated from that which is created is to be alienated from its creator.

Thankfully, Paul doesn't stop the poem here. The wondrous job description in Paul's poem has another important point to consider: Jesus is the great reconciler. The great peace maker.

Paul speaks of the wondrous reconciliation that God brings us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When we acknowledge this sacrifice, we are yanked out of the old way of thinking about our relationship to creation. The consumerist mind-set – the exploitation and abuse of creation – these things cannot cohabitate with the knowledge that Christ has begun his work of reconciliation. Our imaginations are set free – we are able to see the world as Christ does. We are able to know the world in love, because that's the way Jesus sees the world.

You see, we don't think about the lovability of the world very much in Reformed circles. We're big on the fall. We're big on total depravity. We know the world is warped, and we eagerly await that glad morning where God will make all things new. And this is correct,

for the most part – the world is warped, misshapen and fallen. But that doesn't mean that the world isn't lovable.

John 3.16 tells us that God loved *the world* so much that he sent Jesus on the divine rescue mission. Got that? God loved *the world*. Not the world as it was, before the fall. Not the world as it will be. He loves the world as it is, wounded and battered. And it was this profound love that caused God to empty himself into the person of Christ, in order to save the world.

It's apparent then that the Gospel has ramifications for the world in its entirety. The reconciliation brought by the gospel is not only between God and humanity, but between all things under heaven and earth. It is pandemic reconciliation. Verses 20 and 23 make this point especially clear. There is not one square inch of creation that isn't affected by the great restoration project started by Christ.

In verse 20, Paul lets us in on the driving force behind this restoration project, this project of reconciliation. The driving force is peace, a peace that invades creation through the blood shed by Jesus on the cross. When we read that word “peace,” we have to remember that it is being described by Paul the former Pharisee, the guru of the ways of the Jewish people. That means that this isn't the kind of “peace” that merely means the absence of violence. It isn't the “peace” of foreign policy, which is little more than a dubious and tenuous security ensured by the point of a bayonet. It is a peace of repentance, a peace that replaces enmity with harmony. It is *shalom*. Shalom implies wholeness, abundance, fruitfulness, well-being. This is what the blood of Jesus does for the entire creation – all things under heaven, says Paul. It brings about shalom.

If Caesar was central to the ideology of the Roman Empire, and consumption to the Empire of Global Consumerism, than shalom is at the very core of the Empire of Jesus Christ the King. And we are heralds of this shalom to the world; like Paul, we proclaim it to every creature under heaven. The shalom of Christ is all-encompassing. It covers the sin that we commit when we abuse creation. It frees our imagination to be able to see how we can do things differently. It repairs the damage that we've inflicted on creation.

This is where ecology starts. This is why Christians are environmentalists. Shalom. The shalom of Christ renews our lives and provides us with the awareness and opportunity to participate in the renewal of creation.

*Kerux will be featuring student sermons throughout the coming year. Please submit yours to [letters@kerux.org](mailto:letters@kerux.org).*

## Elegy for a Saint

*SemEye for the Evangelical Guy*

By No One at All

In light of Mr. Van Denend's call to recognize saints, Ms. Jenista's cries for catholic unity within the church, and Mr. Bork's scathing critique of the Empire of Global Consumerism in this Kerux edition, it seemed only appropriate that we offer for your consideration this fitting tribute to the life and death of a true hero of the Christian faith.

Saint Sebastian lived in the shadow cast over all Rome by the throne of Diocletian. A captain of the Praetorian Guard, Sebastian encouraged Christian martyrs-to-be through the dark nights before their execution, and many who came to beg the captives under his guard to apostatize were actually converted themselves.

Eventually Sebastian brought his local prefect to Christ and all Christian captives in the region were released. For his betrayal, a royally annoyed Diocletian ordered Sebastian "...to be led to the field and there to be bounden to a stake for to be shot at. And the archers shot at him till he was as full of arrows as an urchin is full of pricks."

Even this brutal perforation, however, failed to stop Sebastian's evangelism. He was found stuffed with arrows but still alive and from his hospital bed restored a blind girl's sight. Sebastian's final act was to drag himself to the doorway of the hospital and taunt Diocletian as he passed by, earning himself a second death sentence, this time by beating.

This is only a brief account of a story that has touched millions and inspired countless tributes. Sebastian is patron saint of soldiers, athletes, the gay community, and Rio de Janeiro. Even more impressive, a saint has truly made it big when his or her story finds a home in the popular culture, as Sebastian's has in literature (Flannery O'Connor's *Everything that Rises Must Coverge* and George Orwell's *1984*) on television (in multiple episodes of *The Simpsons*) and in music (videos for the Cranberries' "Zombie" and REM's "Losing My Religion" depict his plight). What else could possibly be done to honor such a life? Read on, dear friends...

Behold! Still upright, unharmed and alive as ever a plush figurine was, Saint Sebastian now stands watch over a new flock of faithful followers: the seamsters and seamstresses. Yes, it's true: available now, for the first time, is the Saint Sebastian pin cushion. Replete with brightly colored pins (the better to capture the gaily decorated fletches of the Roman



Legion) and a beatific expression of peace this is the perfect gift for the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Voodoo practitioner in your family! And while Sebastian's fiery orange hair may not be historical it certainly matches the martyr's rash refusal to kowtow to the forces of oppression. What suburban housewife bent over her Singer couldn't use a flash of defiance now and then?

Rush out to your local sewing supply shop and then straight home again, because the Saint Sebastian pincushion is only available online. Get yours for just \$12.95 at <http://www.philosophersguild.com/>



*Each week SemEye strives to bring you the best of the worst in evangelical merchandising. Have an idea for SemEye? Submit it to [letters@kerux.org](mailto:letters@kerux.org).*

# Belly

By The Crooked Saint

Study close my dear beloved  
For the word come down the mountain  
Gathers the moss upon which we should feed.

I've been drinking Blood since morning  
I've been feasting Flesh with the Family  
Oh the Ghost is wont to cure the soul.  
(Get your medicine now. He's going to call the roll)

Through the Covenant and Chaos  
There is One who dares to guard us  
Fasten your lips upon the Breast and see.

Time to put your eyes on children  
I've got something that cures vision:  
"The glory of God is the human fully alive"  
(My brothers and sisters it's time for us to thrive)

...alright you got my attention on the Sunday morning  
...alright you got my attention (that Friday was a killer)  
...and I'm running as fast I can  
...But there aint no stench coming from that grave!  
...There aint no stench coming from that grave!

## Letters

### To Better Know a Neighborhood

I want to thank Brian Bork for his little neighborhood tour in the last issue of Kerux. I saddens my heart to know that most CTS students never get past the chaos of 28 street and the craziness of the East Beltline.

Grand Rapids is beautiful and has much to offer if you are courageous enough to leave the car at home and eat somewhere other than Applebees or Burger King.

Maybe we could start a Friday evening club that visits different neighborhoods and discovers new things about them?

Space is about more than mere profitability. What the eye eats affects the formation of the soul.

Maybe the CTS community should go to Gaia some Friday this quarter!

Dave Salverda

### Candidacy

Qualifying persons who wish to be candidates in 2008 for ordained CRC ministry should request application procedures by February 1, 2008. For further information, please email Karlene Werner at [kaw5@calvinseminary.edu](mailto:kaw5@calvinseminary.edu)

*Letters to Kerux are always welcome and accepted at [letters@kerux.org](mailto:letters@kerux.org). Please keep all responses under 250 words.*