

## From the Kerux Staff

### An Introduction to Kerux

by Nate Van Denend

Welcome on behalf of the *Kerux* staff to another academic year at Calvin Theological Seminary. The *Kerux* is the student newspaper for the seminary community. We carry articles ranging from News to Opinion to Informed Reflection. We are interested in articles and writers. If something strikes you as good or even as a little off, we are interested having you write about it. We hope the *Kerux* can become a forum not only for reporting on the events taking place in the Calvin Seminary community but also reporting the thoughts and pulse of this community in the form of reflection, feature, humor and opinion. The audience of *Kerux* stretches beyond our local seminary community to the greater CRC community via the pastors and others who have passed through the doors of the seminary.

This year *Kerux* is being co-edited by Kristin Palacios and Nate Van Denend. During the first quarter, Kristin will be the main editorial contact while Nate is in Seattle, WA participating in the Clinical Pastoral Education program at Swedish Medical Center. Issues of the *Kerux* will usually appear on a regular basis but during the fall quarter will be less frequent.

For this first issue we were interested in articles pertaining to summer internships or other ministry experiences. Within this issue you can read Kristin Palacios' article on her Cross-Cultural Internship in California, Nick Bierma's epistle from Iowa, and Anthony Sytsma's article about prison ministry. We have also included a poem about preaching. Finally, we have a review by Mic Altena of the 1996 movie release *Hard Eight*. Perhaps these thought provoking articles will provoke your own thoughts. The theme for the next issue will be alternative worship experiences. Have you worshiped in a foreign place or with a different denomination? What was that experience like? We'd like to know. Lastly, if you are interested in joining the *Kerux* staff please contact Kristin or Nate via email.

Blessings,  
Kerux Staff  
NVD

### ESSAY

## Heat, Smoke and God

### What I Learned from My Summer in California

by Kristin Palacios

I spent 5 weeks of my summer at Granite Springs Church in a suburb of Sacramento, CA. It was hot, often over 110 degrees. It was smoky, with forest fires all around the state. And it was filled with people skittish about institutional religion.

As part of my Cross-Cultural Internship, I was responsible to lead a small group study. Along with my fellow intern, Josh Wallish (2<sup>nd</sup>-year, MDIV), I led what we called "The Question Seminar." Our goal? To address the basic questions of Christianity. The people who showed up for the small group were mixed. Some had been

members of the church for many years. Others had only recently started attending. But what I was most surprised to find were the many different ideas people had about God.

During one evening, we were discussing whether Christ is the only way to God. And what I heard coming from the small group were things like “I believe Jesus is the only way *for me* to get to God, but for other people, there might be another way.” Or “Christianity is too individualistic for non-Westerners who live in societies that value community. Personal salvation doesn’t register with them.” Another person said, “My sister is very religious and a good person, so I don’t think I could tell her that her religion is wrong unless it has Christ.”

These are issues most of us have struggled with. If we have any sense of compassion, we don’t usually find ourselves wishing people would go to hell. We might say something along these lines, but we don’t really mean it. (A few possible exceptions include dictators, child molesters and used-car salesmen.) Again, if we have any common human decency, we hope that everyone finds their way to God. But do they?

My point is this: Some of the individuals I met in that California church were skittish about anything resembling institutional religion. They were okay with visiting church, and a few were even members. But when pressed, they had no interest in actually believing basic Christian doctrines. When God didn’t look and behave just as they wanted, they had no desire to follow him.

This got me to thinking. It’s not just one small group in a hot, smoky California that struggles to let God be God. It is common in our churches today to emphasize God as imminent. But we forget that he is also transcendent. We decide that God must be this, or God must be that. We say, “God doesn’t really have much to say about this decision I am making.” We rationalize that certain things we do aren’t so bad after all. Or we think, “God is compassionate, just like me. That must mean that the people I like will be in heaven, and those who annoy me will end up in hell.”

Calvin puts it this way: “...in seeking God, miserable men do not rise above themselves as they should, but measure him by the yardstick of their own carnal stupidity, and neglect sound investigation ... they are worshiping not God but a figment and a dream of their own heart” (*Institutes* Book I.4.1). What I learned from my internship this summer was not only that universalism was popular in my small group; I was also stretched to see the ways that I, like my small group, have made God too small in my mind. They might be skittish about institutional religion, but am I too skittish about letting anyone but myself run my life?

Are you?

## ESSAY

# Getting My Feet Wet

## Reflections on a Congregational Internship

by **Nick Bierma**

Nick, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be a summer intern in Austinville, Iowa, set apart by Don Byker to fulfill a contract promised beforehand through his seminary mandate. To Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, MI who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks every time I think of you, as you are a people that long to be pure, a people filled with the grace of God, a people God has used to form me into the servant I have now become. I pray that any of you awaiting a summer internship would know that God has good things planned for you. Do not be anxious brothers and sisters, for our God is a faithful God, and through this experience you will grow into more Christ-like men and women as children of God.

I appeal to you to look to the coming experience with much anticipation, for through it you will learn the things of God by faith, hope, and love. The Almighty is eager to grow you through His Spirit.

I want you to know the things I have seen and experienced as an intern in the harsh lands of Eastern Iowa.

I had been anticipating my first internship for two months. Austinville, IA, a town of 65 people with a small church of 100 faithful attendees was where God wanted me to “get my feet wet.” I had no idea the literal interpretation God had in store for me.

I arrived in the aftermath of a devastating F5 tornado that swept away hundreds of homes and took 8 souls after only 50 seconds of terror. As I drove through the town of Parkersburg (8 miles east of Austinville) I was witness to the awesome power of God and the frailty of human life. It was nothing short of a very literal miracle that more people were not killed.

Next the floods came. If my feet were not yet wet, they were now soaked by the floodwaters that hit Austinville CRC. They came the morning I was to preach my first sermon. Suddenly the message I had prepared on comfort was not only something I felt called to preach to the community, but the message was invariably for all of *us*. In short order God had made me one of *them*. We worked *together*, prayed *together* and came before God in worship... together. It was a beautiful experience to be a part of a community in such an intimate way, and I felt more loved than I have ever experienced by a single community. It was a tremendous honor to be ushered into home after home eating the best meals they could offer and treating me as though I could do no wrong. God showed me what divine hospitality was through Austinville CRC.

Now about the preaching of God’s Holy Word: this was the single most terrifying thing I anticipated. Before I began, I knew I would preach some 20+ times, twice every Sunday. I had 2 ½ sermons in my “barrel,” and as a result I was scrapping the bottom of that barrel before I had even begun. Every week I was to perform the awesome task of preparing a message. It was at these times that my faith grew by leaps and bounds. God was there, of that I want you to be certain. As naïve a preacher as I am, I do know that God is the Source from whom *all* blessings flow, sermons included. It was beautiful to type away and look back at the finished product to see threads that flowed through the message that I had not intended to be there. It was not me who wrote those sermons; it was God (minus the typos). As a result my faith grew tremendously.

I have been blessed more richly than I could have imagined through this internship. I can say I am a better man, a more disciplined disciple, better able to live God’s call each day. God has this wonderful tendency to surpass our expectations; it is His way of speaking ... to *us*.

I want you to be excited for the great things God has in store for you fellow brothers and sisters. Do not be anxious about your futures or about your internships. God *will* provide. May peace of God be with us, and the full grace of our Beautiful Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

## ESSAY

# The Gospel for Inmates

## The Joys of Jail Ministry

by Anthony Sytsma

“Do you think God would forgive *me*?” This was the question Jim, an inmate at Kent County Jail, asked me after I taught about salvation and forgiveness through Jesus our Lord. I can think of very few questions more beautiful. These are the kinds of questions I often get while I do ministry in Kent County Jail. I’ll never forget that day when we prayed together for Jim to accept Jesus.

I have been leading Madison Square Church’s jail ministry team for about two years now. We go in to a pod, a lobby surrounded by jail cells. A guard calls the inmates, and those who want to join us for a service come. We gather around in chairs and introduce ourselves. Some of the inmates are friendly, and some do not speak. Some look well-kept while others are hard to look at. Some seem upbeat while others are trying to hide deep pain.

We usually start the service with a worship song. Some sing along, and others just listen and think. Then comes a teaching, sermon or Bible study. It is quite different from a normal sermon. Sometimes in the middle of preaching they will ask you a question, often very off-topic.

After the preaching we offer to pray with each inmate one-on-one. This is my favorite part. The music continues to play. While some inmates would rather not talk, they listen to the music and hopefully think about God.

During this one-on-one time, inmates tell me about life in jail. Some want to debate about God. Others wonder whether or not a Christian can lose their salvation. At times, an inmate will burst into tears before they can even get a word out. There have been those who confess their crimes, such as murdering a friend or stabbing a wife. When both parents are in jail, they worry about their children. Always, they ask for you to pray for their families and for their upcoming court dates. We talk, we listen, we show care and we always pray. Sometimes, by God's grace, an inmate will accept Christ as Savior.

This is a great home mission field that is right in our backyards. As seminarians, you could start up a jail ministry team at your church. Jesus expects and wants us as his sheep to visit those in prison (Matthew 25), but it is our privilege to do so. There are opportunities to lead worship, play instruments, preach, do pastoral care, and do evangelism. In our "politically correct" culture it's amazing that there are still some places like jail where people are glad to hear about God's truth. Many of the inmates are overjoyed just to have us there with them. Some of them are already brothers and sisters in Christ who love the fellowship and encouragement we bring.

For those who want to be involved but do not want to actually go into the jail, you can give financially, write letters to inmates, or teach school classes or skill classes. (I think there is even a knitting class.) There are also opportunities to form mentoring relationships with inmates and continue to meet once the inmates are released from jail. It is especially important to be hospitable to newly released inmates visiting your church or coming back to your church.

It might sound very scary or intimidating to go into the jail. And I won't lie. Once in a while it can be intimidating, and sometimes it's just plain difficult to hear their painful stories. But these are real people. They are suffering. Sure they are guilty of crimes, some of them horrible to think of. But they are sinners just like us. We are no more deserving of God's grace than them.

For more information, visit Prison Fellowship's website at [www.pfm.org](http://www.pfm.org). For a local website with jail ministry resources, see [www.rjcmichigan.org](http://www.rjcmichigan.org). The organization I work with in Kent County Jail is Forgotten Man Ministries, and more information can be found at [www.forgottenman.org](http://www.forgottenman.org). And feel free to ask me any further questions you might have ([asytsma0@calvinseminary.edu](mailto:asytsma0@calvinseminary.edu)). Thank you.

## POETRY

# Beat Preacher

by Anonymous

Why do they keep telling us how to preach and where to preach and what forms of preaching work and don't work? Tell me a form Mr. Professor man, and I will break away from it. Yes, I will study it for a time but then I will go free-verse.

They keep telling us what a sermon is and I am tired. I am tired and the message is tired. I just want to go to the hilltops like the prophets of old and just rip and rip. The hills are where poetry and prose mix and no one knows which is which. Let the people who study you worry about what form you use. Make them have to come up with an entire new form, named after you. You. You just worry about preaching.

Maybe that is what we need, not another generation of form-heavy preachers, but a generation of beat preachers who see through it all and just want the pure form, free-verse preaching. Preaching what's on your heart, that thing beating in your chest to the very beat of God's heart which beats in all our chests.

I want to preach the kind of sermon that I would only preach if no one was watching me, the kind that makes me pace around the apartment all night, the kind that I would only talk about at coffee shops, the kind I can only preach into a microphone with a cigarette in one hand and a cup of bitter coffee in the other, the kind that stirs my own soul, that I know will stir other souls and then they will mix.

Four page three page two page one.

Two page three page four page, none.

## FEATURE

# Go And Sin No More

A Good Friday Story in *Hard Eight*

by Mic Altana

Tucked inside Paul Thomas Anderson's 1996 *Hard Eight* is a poignant illustration of the Good Friday story. As the opening credits close, we find a disheveled John Finnegan (played by John Reilly) huddled against the cold pavement along a truck stop diner. He is offered a cup of coffee and cigarette by a stranger named Sydney. Sydney (Philip Baker Hall) befriends John and eventually helps him pay his outstanding debts through casino gambling.

Two years later we meet the pseudo-father/son pair in a Las Vegas casino. John falls in love with a cocktail waitress, the sweet Clementine (Gwyneth Paltrow) and marries her in a roadside wedding chapel. Clementine, however, succumbs to the temptation to return to her old life of fast cash in exchange for sex in cheap motel rooms. When a client refuses to pay, John beats the man unconscious and holds him hostage. John entangles his street-savvy friend Jimmy in the crisis. Jimmy (Samuel L. Jackson) provides a gun before fleeing the hostage scene. John calls for Sydney's assistance, and when Sydney arrives, he quickly urges his friends to leave the motel room to avoid the harsh legal ramifications of their actions. As Sydney escorts John and Clementine to safety, he reassures them of his complete financial care for them, "I'll get you more as you need it – as much as I have, as much as you'll need. Understand? As much money as I have."

Sydney's selfless act is sharply contrasted in the following scene which occurs three days later: Jimmy demands \$10,000 from Sydney to conceal his knowledge of Sydney's cold-blooded murder of John's father in Atlantic City a decade ago. Jimmy screams, "So you think you can just walk through this life ... without being punished for it?" Sydney murders Jimmy, rationalizing his actions with the idea that it is better to preserve John and Clementine's perception of him than to shatter the new life of forgiveness and grace they have learned from Sydney.

Anderson surrounds *Hard Eight* with the story of Christ's birth. The sound of distant Christmas carols can be heard as Sydney and John drink their first cup of coffee together in the opening scene a truck stop; it is Christmastime. When the movie fast forwards two years, it is Christmastime again. The traditional Christmas carol "Silent Night" can be heard as Sydney and Clementine drink *their* first cup of coffee in Las Vegas. And as the ending credits begin, Aimee Mann sings, "It's Christmas again, December is here / What did you wish for what did you fear / Look at your behavior looking for a savior." Between these proclamations of a Savior is where *Hard Eight* takes place.

Sydney has received complete forgiveness for his transgressions through the death of a messiah. *Hard Eight's* messiah is John's father, the one whom Sydney murdered. Writer and director Paul Thomas Anderson powerfully illustrates the extremely personal nature of our sins – we alone are responsible for Christ's death; our sins caused Christ to suffer. But through Christ's victory over death believers claim complete forgiveness.

When the Messiah was raised to life three days after his death, believers responded by dedicating their lives to the sharing of the risen Christ's love and mercy. Although Sydney gives into the temptation to murder Jimmy, Sydney shares his resurrection forgiveness by helping John get back on his feet and by showing dignity and respect to the prostitute Clementine. Sydney in essence proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ, "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Sydney helps John realize forgiveness for his transgression of holding Clementine's client hostage by showing him a way out. He helps Clementine realize her forgiveness for her transgression of a life of prostitution by showing her wholeness in marriage to John. Sydney, John and Clementine have been pardoned from their broken lives into new Spirit filled lives, just as Christ offers us and the woman caught in adultery in John 8 pardon: "...Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said to her, 'Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.'"