

## From the Kerux Staff

### Merry Christmas and Happy New Year

Merry Christmas from the *Kerux* staff. As the snow falls and the anticipation for two weeks off builds, we ask that you take the time to experience anew the mystery of Emmanuel. In this issue, a new writer, Cori Cypret, reminds us to proclaim this mystery through a stance of loving offensiveness. Along these lines, we report on the “Disruptive Preaching Seminar” hosted by Sean Baker and include another article by a new writer, Aaron Gonzalez, about taking a stand from the pulpit. On a softer note, Chelsey Harmon wishes farewell to Pat Zandstra whose work in setting up the FFM program is only now beginning to bear fruit. We conclude with an heart-felt reflection from John Huyser about an unexpected blessing in the midst of Alzheimer’s disease. As a postscript, we have a quick reminder from the denomination: “Future Candidates, submit your stuff!”

Blessings,  
*Kerux* Staff  
NVD

### ESSAY

## Saving Christmas

The stance of “loving offense”

by Cori Cypret

“I saved Christmas!” This rather odd declaration was uttered by a woman at my Bible study last week. She went on to tell a story about how she had done something in an effort to profess the true meaning of this season. And ... it started me thinking. Does Christmas need saving? I thought the whole point of Christmas was that we needed the saving. Why would it need to be saved? What does it need to be saved from?

This Christmas season brings into stark realization the path this country, and I am afraid, the world, has wandered down. Everywhere I turn, I am bombarded with commercials wishing me a “Happy Holidays” or the wonderfully stale salutation of “Season’s Greetings.” This last weekend, I went to breakfast at a not-so-local pancake establishment. After paying for my scrumptious flapjacks, I apparently said something really offensive to the cashier—I had the guts to wish her a “Merry Christmas!” I know, I know ... how could I do such a thing in our current climate of political correctness and religious freedom? I could tell that she was not very pleased with my attempt to shove my beliefs down her throat. How should I handle her apparent displeasure? I thought that this was the Christmas season!

I know that I may sound somewhat old-fashioned by this. But, is it so wrong to want to wish people a “Merry Christmas?” It seems that we have reached a point on the path where it is okay for all religious beliefs to be expressed openly, except for the only one that truly matters—the truth of Christianity. This country was founded upon religious freedom, or so I am told. Our forefathers wanted to ensure that *all* religious beliefs could be freely expressed without the fear of persecution. Many men and women have fought and died to ensure that. I myself would fight to ensure that everyone has the right to believe whatever he or she wanted. God loves them enough to allow them to be wrong, and so should I.

In this country's quest to be free from religious persecution, it seems that we still have religious persecution. It is no longer politically correct to wish someone a "Merry Christmas" or to display a nativity scene expressing the real "Reason for the Season." This has become so "wrong" that now a group has gone the extra mile to show it. This last week, the Freedom from Religion Foundation placed an anti-religion plaque near the nativity scene at Washington's State Capitol Building. It reads:

"There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only one natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds."

Even though I think this declaration is appalling, they had the right to believe and publicly profess what they chose. We should be thankful that they can express their beliefs openly.

But, should I, as a God-fearing Christian, sit back and allow non-believers to usurp the meaning of this holiday? Should I allow them to say that Christ's birth has no significance? Is it more important to make sure that Muslims are recognized, that the winter solstice is observed for its significance, or that Hanukkah and Kwanzaa are the real "Reason for the Season"? Schools have even begun canceling Christmas assemblies for fear they will insult someone. Christmas trees have been renamed "Holiday Trees." Children no longer get two weeks of Christmas break but instead have a "Holiday Break."

I look up from my computer screen now and see my daughter's nativity scene placed so gingerly on the bookcase. Every figure, even the animals, are carefully displayed to be looking at a little baby laying in a straw covered feeding trough. At nine, she knows that the time between Thanksgiving to shortly after New Year's Day is when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. (I will confess that we had some decorations put out in the middle of October.) In fact, she knows that we do not need a particular season to celebrate, but we do it all year round. I do not want her growing up thinking that this season is not special. I do not want her to think that she cannot openly celebrate God's unexplainable love for us because we do not want to offend anyone.

But offend we must. The gospel is offensive and it should be. Christ told us to go out into the world and offend it by telling it the good news. My wishing a Merry Christmas to a cashier should be offensive if she does not know the true meaning of Christmas. We should be honored that the Freedom from Religion Foundation was so offended that they had to let the world know with a plaque. We should be offending people with our efforts to make Christ known. I am still not too sure I'm comfortable with the idea of having to "Save Christmas." But it appears that's exactly what we must do. Let us offend, not with the number on our credit card bills, but with words and deeds that declare the truth of this season.

So what does it mean to "offend"? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives two general definitions I feel serve as a good guide: 1) to cause difficulty, discomfort, dislike, anger, or vexation; and 2) to cause pain to, to cause to feel resentment usually by violation of what is proper or fitting. Though these both may seem awful ways for Christians to act toward other human beings, if done with the proper intent, the first definition is what we should evoke with the Gospel. The Gospel is offensive to those who do not believe. It causes difficulty, dislike, and many times leads to anger. I will admit, before I was saved, I was very angry with the words in the Bible. I was especially angry at those labeling me a sinner, telling me that no matter how good I was, if I didn't accept God's gift of redemption, I was going to hell. I completely understand why people take offense to Jesus' words.

But how do we approach non-believers? I think that we need to take a stance of loving offense. We do not need to approach the world, screaming threats of eternal damnation if the hearer does not immediately repent. Nor do we need to snub them, ignore them or physically threaten death if they don't repent. We need to love them. Jesus did not tell us to cause people injury and pain or to violate what is proper or fitting. He told us to love our neighbors *and* our enemies. Pray for them. Help them. *Show* them that the Christian life is much better than their alternative. They need to see what Jesus has to offer. Yes, they need to be offended. Without offense, they will not see the need to change. We need to offend lovingly, because we care about the soul which is in danger.

So, how will *you* offend someone this Christmas season? What will *you* do to save Christmas?

## NEWS

# Current Preachers Disrupt Future Preachers

Calvin Seminary hosts “Investigative Reading for Disrupting Preaching Seminar”

by Nate Van Denend

Rev. Brian Ochsner and Rev. Paul DeVries of Brookside CRC met with Calvin Seminary students and professors on Wednesday, December 3 to discuss a recent sermon series they preached entitled, “Think It Through.” In this series, they tackled some of the pressing social issues of our day. This meeting was the first of the Disruptive Preaching series. According to Sean Baker, series organizer, “Investigative Reading for Disruptive Preaching is a lunchtime seminar designed to explore the what and the how of preaching in a politically-charged context.” The seminar is sponsored by CRWRC.

The specific topic for this discussion was immigration. However, the presentation and discussion afterward tended to pertain more to the meta-question of how to preach about controversial topics from the pulpit. Ochsner and DeVries developed several guidelines for such preaching. Their main thesis was that the preacher should make “theological statements” rather than “political statements” from the pulpit. The distinction between the two was critical. DeVries stated that often preachers approach contentious issues from a political perspective first and then try to find Scripture passages that fit their particular political point of view. Thus, the politics drive the theology rather than the theology driving the politics. As a correction to this tendency, DeVries suggested that we go to the Scriptures first.

The method of going to the Scriptures first was described by Ochsner. He stated, “We did not want to give answers. We refused to take positions on issues. We wanted to model the way to think about these issues theologically. Thus, we would pick passages which tended to support opposing sides of an issue and preach from both of them.”

DeVries went on to describe in further detail how the sermons were preached. He urged preachers to use biblical, theologically correct language rather than the politically loaded language of our day. He stated that the sermons should challenge rather than comfort saying, “Don’t preach to the bias of the congregation.” But, lest preachers preach themselves out of a job, he offered some practical advice: “You earn the right to be a prophetic preacher by being the people’s pastor. You do not inherit the right because of your position.” He added, “Preach against your own biases; challenge yourself before you challenge others.” Finally, DeVries brought up the importance of involving the church elders in this process. After all, they have the responsibility for the preaching of the Word.

After these opening remarks there was an opportunity for some discussion. There were several themes that came out of the discussion. One of these themes was brought into focus by Prof. Avila. He stated that our choosing of the text implies a political perspective. Thus, the simple fact that the preacher is going to the Scripture first, does not mean that that preacher is able to check her or his political baggage at the door. One is reminded of CRC churches preaching sermons on Exodus, while migrating from inner-city Chicago to the suburbs “for the sake of property values.” Such would be a textual sermon that misses the much greater issue of racial reconciliation.

A second theme was brought up by several students. The preacher needs to take a stand from the pulpit. These students questioned the wisdom of refusing to take sides on these contentious issues. They stated that in the church you need to face the individuals involved. You need to pick a course of action. You need to take a side from the pulpit. Ochsner and DeVries defended their approach in response to these questions. They stated that they found their congregants to be weak in the area of being able to think biblically and theologically about issues. Thus, they thought their role as pastors in their particular situation was to help the flock learn how to think rather than telling the flock what to think.

The meeting was concluded in prayer. Future seminars are planned for January.

## ESSAY

# Preach with a Prophetic Voice

Taking a stand in a sermon

by Aaron Gonzalez

Someone once said to me that, when he preaches on controversial matters, he doesn't tell his congregation what to believe or do. Instead, he just preaches from every text which addresses the issue by stating only "what the text says." He claimed that this alone is enough to compel individuals to act or change. Though I agree that Scripture by itself holds the power to convict and compel change, I believe that the preacher holds a crucial responsibility to exhort with conviction. As for this approach of always being neutral, I believe it is not founded on Scripture, but on the church's recent interactions with the world.

Without a doubt, many congregations and individuals have suffered abuse from the authority of pastors and churches. Some heartbreaking instances clearly show why many have such a deep resentment. However, the individualism of the world has also played a part. To the world, truth is relative. "No one has the right to impose their beliefs on you" is what the world says. Therefore, these bad experiences (regardless of their actual frequency) and an increasingly individualistic society have resulted in the heralding of "dogmatism" and "close-mindedness" as token character flaws of the church and church leaders.

Accordingly, these allegations (justified or not) have been so great in number and force that the church has been left with an uneasiness of exercising some of its key functions. Consider this: When we confront someone over a certain sin or sinful habit, don't we *feel* more comfortable confronting them over issues that society itself sees as "sinful"? Don't we feel more confident telling someone, "Stop shooting up drugs!" than "Stop drinking beer!" when both can be equally harmful? Or how about confronting someone on sex? What *feels* easier to do: rebuke someone for premarital sex or for unprotected sex? Undoubtedly, every Christian has run into some sort of crisis in which social education and Christian obligation clash.

Thus, a key question every preacher must ask is, "Am I adapting with the times, or are the times adapting me?" Do I think a method of neutral preaching is a reaction to our current situation? I suspect so. The idea that "if people only knew, they wouldn't do such horrible things" sounds a little naïve to me. Maybe I'm a lot worse than everybody else, but there are plenty of times when I knowingly do something wrong and don't give a hoot. There are times when I hear how "sin is bad" and "it makes Jesus cry," and I still feel alright. But then there are times when the preacher spells out what it means to "love your neighbor" and "take up your cross." There are times when the preacher speaks their understanding of the text, and I sense prophetic inspiration. There are times when the preacher's words of rebuke are God's words of rebuke to me. Maybe I am a lot worse than everybody else, or maybe these things can help others too. I am all for the prevention of abuse and the proper use of authority, but when a preacher is caught between the proper exhortation of Scripture and avoiding congregational offense through neutrality, proper exhortation must not be neglected. Anything else and we are just swapping hypothetical offense and abuse for a very serious offense and abuse against the Word of God.

Don't get me wrong. I am not advocating extreme opinion-oriented sermons or that sermons should never be neutral. What I am claiming is that there will be times when God calls preachers to play a prophetic role and push for change or—heaven forbid—"tell people how to live their lives." Hear the words of Martin Luther King Jr. still speaking to us today: "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."

Have we held back on what the Holy Spirit has said "Speak!?" Have we earnestly sought him for guidance on such crucial matters? If he called us, how far would we follow?

## ESSAY

# Thank you, Pat Zandstra

## A Farewell Wish to an Influential Member of Calvin Theological Seminary

by Chelsey Harmon

We are a community who takes for granted the numerous people God uses to guide, educate, encourage and sustain us. One such person in this community that deserves our thankfulness is Pat Zandstra. The following are just a few words of thanks and memories that model the beautiful ways God blessed us (and will continue to bless us) through Pat.

Even before some of us were in Seminary, Pat encouraged us to keep it in the picture. Pat's words were a big part of the reason why we ended up here. And when we did come to Calvin as students, how wonderful it was to share that time with her!

Pat's physical presence has blessed the seminary's campus. Her vibrant wardrobe of colors and designs delighted our eyes when the stark white of winter closed in and reminded us how big the world truly is. The orbs hanging in her office added warmth and imagination to any conversation. But even more lovely is Pat's smile and the love and truth visible in her eyes.

When Pat spoke with you, you knew she was truly listening. She cared enough to remember even the smallest details of conversations. More than once, members of this community have been touched by her loving-kindness in the smallest of comments by the microwaves at lunchtime. Pat's attention to the details of our lives will be sorely missed.

And also missed will be the spiritual direction she brings from her experience, training and, most importantly, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Pat opened up the world of spiritual disciplines for some of us, showing us how Christ and the Spirit freed us, not to be enslaved by a new set of rules but to connect with the person God truly shaped us to be. She encouraged us in what she already saw as God's gifts in us, urging us to continue on the journey of exploration in our spiritual lives. They have been greatly enriched.

Pat's refreshing world-view has blessed our community as it looks to be a better equipped, formational community for all types of ministry. When Pat wanted to know how a program was working, she didn't settle with a survey on the internet, but instead took the time to talk personally with students, asking their opinions and ideas, adding a personal dimension that many of us were inclined to work with. We felt listened to and respected. And even during these interviews, especially the interviews with graduating students, Pat spoke words of insight and encouraged us as we stepped out into the next stage of ministry and life.

On top of this personal interaction, Pat took care with our FFM assignments, reading them carefully, emailing us personal responses, and even checking in on us during our internships. Even when we didn't think our own FFM leaders read them, and even when no one else looked in on us, Pat took our words of reflection to heart and asked us how she could better pray for us. For some of us, Pat welcomed us and continued to make us feel like CTS was our home more than any other representative of the institution.

Pat was a selfless giver in this community. She gave out of goodness that truly could only come from God. We thank her in such a small way with our words. But we also thank her with our prayers; we ask God to bless her now, to be with her, to guide her, and to continue to use her as a kingdom builder. And we pray for the CTS community, that with Pat's departure we will not lose the vision that her presence here has helped cast.

We will miss you so much!

Compiled by Chelsey Harmon, with contribution from Kristin Kuzera Palacios, Erin Marshalek, David Van Berkel, Meg Jenista and many others.

## REFLECTION

# A Little Bit of Heaven on Earth

Grace in the midst of Alzheimer's Disease

by John Huyser

I awoke at 5:30 Tuesday morning to the pager going off. I was asked to visit with a patient who was very confused. She was 99 years old. She was determined it was time to leave for church. She awoke singing a hymn loudly in her thickly Dutch brogue. The nurse went out of her way to read a prayer pamphlet the patient had brought with her. After that the patient was still determined to go to church. The nurse said, "The patient wanted to leave for church so much, I thought it might help to bring church to her. So I paged you."

When I arrived a few minutes later, I introduced myself. Instead of seeming 99 years old, she spoke as if she were a teenager. She spoke fondly of her Christian Reformed Church. She called me Dominee. She shared all the details of what the plans were for the day. Her mother had already cooked the small roast on Saturday because you don't do that sort of thing on Sunday. She shared the exact time when her father said to be ready for church, not just for one service but for two. She said she couldn't wait to get to church and would never get caught being late. Suddenly, she fell back soundly asleep with a smile on her face.

Alzheimer's has a cruel way of returning its victims back to their memories. On more than one occasion, I have spoken with patients who are reliving a horrific event over and over in their minds. This gives them an experience of terror that doesn't end for days on end. When I was in high school, my grandfather relived such a moment—an armed robbery at a truck stop in Iowa. Over and over again he would relive the moment. This peaceful man sometimes got violent to the point where he had to be restrained as he tried to defend himself from a robbery that never ended. At times when it came to God's sovereignty over grandpa's Alzheimer's, I sometimes wondered if God was really in control.

But here 20 years later was something different. Here I saw the Spirit of God turn the horrid disease of Alzheimer's into a fool. This morning at 5:45am on December 2, 2008, if the devil is involved in sickness and diseases, he was humiliated. Instead of reliving her most horrid moment over and over again, God showed his power over disease by altering its cruel handiwork. Here God allowed a dear woman at 99 years of age the blessing of reliving a time of happiness over and over again, those fondest memories of going to her Christian Reformed Church twice on Sunday, worshiping God and singing Dutch Psalms next to parents and siblings. This patient has been given a gift not many of us receive: the opportunity to experience our future in heaven while still living this earthly life, praising God with heart and voice forevermore.

## ANNOUNCEMENT

# Future Candidates: Please Read

Qualifying persons who wish to be candidates in 2009 for ordained CRC ministry should request application procedures by January 30, 2009.

For further information, please email Karlene Werner at [kaw5@calvinseminary.edu](mailto:kaw5@calvinseminary.edu) or write her at Calvin Theological Seminary, 3233 Burton Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546.