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THE BIG PICTURE

ISSUE 15 | THE KIRBY LAING CENTRE

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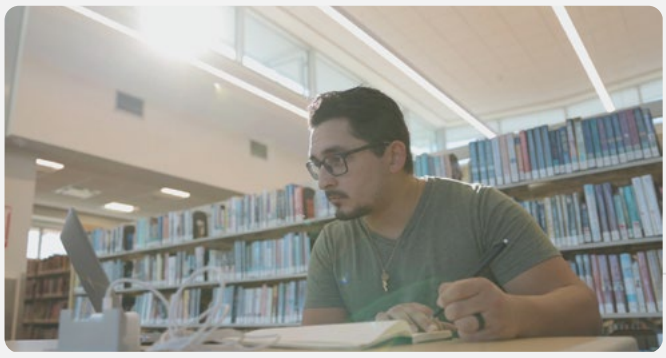

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The Big Picture seeks to: (1) Educate, inform and inspire readers about public theology, (2) Ground our work in Scripture, (3) Embody the big-picture vision of the gospel with creativity, (4) Connect with good practice wherever it is found, and (5) Build community locally and globally with our friends and partners.

Please be aware that the articles that we choose to publish have not been selected because they reflect an official KLC position or the views of the editors. Our aims above encourage deep discussion of a plurality of views, across traditions, within the broad boundaries of the gospel. We celebrate difference without division.

Issue 15: Calvin Seerveld, The Kirby Laing Centre, 2025

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COVER ARTWORK

Modular Aesthetics (for Calvin Seerveld) by Peter S. Smith. Accomplished printmaker Peter S. Smith was a personal friend of Calvin Seerveld's. Peter writes for us in this issue and gave permission for us to use this beautiful woodcut portrait of Cal for our cover.

kirbylaingcentre.co.uk

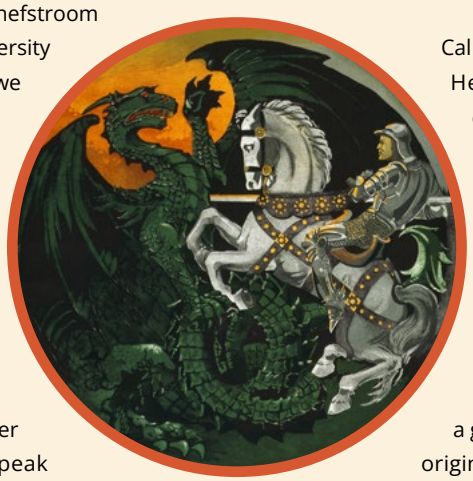
A Knight of Faith

THE GIFT OF CALVIN SEERVELD

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

In his *Fear and Trembling* Søren Kierkegaard has a fascinating description of the knight of faith. What strikes me is his embodied, human nature, encapsulated in the phrase that "He is solid through and through."[1] This seems to me an apt description of Cal. He exhibited remarkable integrity and was, as we might say, the real deal.

I first met Cal at a conference at Potchefstroom University in South Africa, now the University of the North-West. With a few friends, we had launched a movement in South Africa called "Christian Worldview Network" which quickly gained traction and a national network of Christian artists had also developed. Some friends had connected me to academics at Potchefstroom and that was the beginning of my lifelong friendship with Elaine Botha, then Professor of Philosophy. I still remember how impressed I was to hear her speak and how after talking to her later she sent me off to buy Al Wolter's *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Eerdmans, 1985, 2005) at a local bookstore. This marked my entre into the Kuyperian tradition, which I appropriated as an evangelical.



I came up with the idea of us writing *Christians and the Arts in South Africa: A Manifesto*, and Potchefstroom hosted a conference related to this with Cal in attendance. Cal was wonderfully and generously helpful in our fledgling efforts and in 1993 the *Manifesto* was published.[2] It was Elaine who told me that if I wanted to be a Christian scholar then I needed to do some serious work in philosophy, advice for which I remain very, very grateful, and thus I ended up spending a year at the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) in Toronto, where Cal taught aesthetics.

Cal was an academic through and through. He embodied the sort of academic expertise that I think of as the best of European scholarship. He spent time in Europe on a Fulbright scholarship and spoke movingly of the profound effect on him of translating Romans from the Greek into German. While in Europe he had exposure to Karl Barth's lectures. He was fluent in multiple languages and also developed a great love of exegesis, working with the original languages of the Bible. This is the kind of academic rigour and formation that we need to recover today.

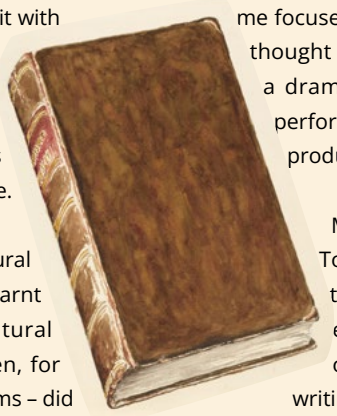
Christian faith nested deep in Cal's innermost being and in true Kuyperian fashion yielded a Reformed Christian world-and-life vision. He preferred Kuyper's *levens-en-wereld beschouwing* over "worldview" because the former overtly includes how we live. Aesthetics is the philosophy of art and this was Cal's primary area of expertise. He appropriated the

1 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), 32.

2 https://kirbylaingcentre.co.uk/arts/za-arts-manifesto/

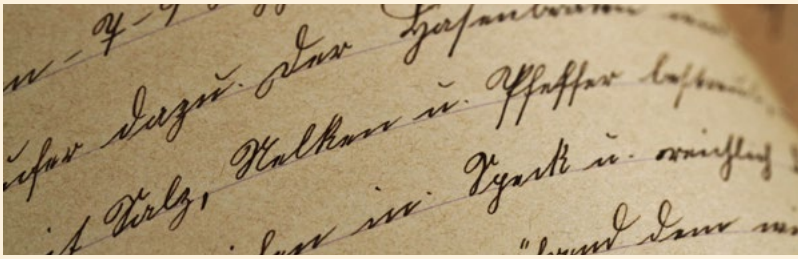
Dutch Reformational philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd and Dirk Vollenhoven and this provided the academic scaffolding on the basis of which he did his Christian analysis. One of the important insights of this philosophy is its attempt to be *non-reductive*, i.e. resisting the myriad attempts to reduce life to biology or chemistry or mathematics, etc. This finds expression in its identification of fifteen modal aspects in which every part of the creation operates.

The aesthetic is one of these fifteen modal aspects so that imagination or what Cal called allusivity is an integral part of all of life. Whereas an artwork is dominated by this imaginative aspect, every entity – including us human beings – functions in the aesthetic mode and this needs to be attended to. Take a book, for example. A book is not an artwork but it functions in the aesthetic mode and if this is not attended to or is distorted it diminishes the book. As we have all experienced, there are some books that are so ugly and unattractive that they never call to you to take them off the shelf and read them, however great the content. And then there are other books where the cover, the design and the font fit with and enhance the content and call to you, as it were, to pick them up and enjoy them, however challenging they are. The aesthetic pervades all of our lives and artists help us attend to this indispensable dimension of life.



Cal's aesthetics attended closely to cultural analysis often with refreshing results. I learnt from him to avoid determinism in cultural development. He taught me that the pen, for example – ubiquitous now in its plastic forms – did not have to develop as it has done. Many of us have envelopes full of colourful stamps, notes, inscriptions in books, etc., from Cal, in his typical handwriting with his fountain pen.

Cal both protected his time and was very generous with it. At ICS it was well known that only a select few had Cal's home phone number. Not long before his death he sent us a photo of himself in his office which he refers to as *his place*, surrounded by his books and wrestling with the ideas that come to us down through the ages. At the same time Cal was exceptionally generous with his time and insights as so many of us experienced. His aesthetics was no detached, ivory-tower reflection on art, but one that immersed itself in the art of the present and the past, both Christian and non.



I cannot think of Cal apart from his wife Inès. Her quiet, supportive spirit wonderfully complemented Cal, and together they were hospitable in their unpretentious house north of Toronto. Inès made muffins full of fresh fruit and she would invariably send me home with a bag of them.

Cal was a churchman through and through. He loved to preach and invariably he produced his own, unique translation of Bible passages, often accompanied by liturgies, songs he composed and images. Until the end he kept working on the Bible. In one of the last emails some of us received from him he wrote: "The *tough stuff from the Bible* project is keeping me focused and alive." Cal loved OT wisdom literature and thought that it needed to be performed. He developed a dramatic script for the Song of Songs, which was performed multiple times, and later in life oversaw live productions of Ecclesiastes.

Many of Cal's books were self-published by his Toronto Tuppence Press. I think this was related to his poetic style that he consciously developed early in his academic training. While this worked orally I am less persuaded that it worked well in writing. While doing my PhD I edited a collection of his writings, published as *In the Fields of the Lord*, a play on his name Seerveld. This confronted one directly with his style and it was a challenge! You can see and order many of his books here: seerveld.com/tuppence.

In his life and legacy Cal yielded us many gifts. In our fast age we do need to stop, give thanks, reflect, and receive his gifts and translate them into the present. In my experience his insights were often penetrating and shifted the direction of one's research. We especially need a new generation of aestheticians to receive the baton from Cal and from figures like Hans Rookmaaker. There are doctorates waiting to be done!

Craig Bartholomew is the Director of KLC.

NIGEL GOODWIN

To me, Cal was both a friend and a fine human being.

I believe that God created human *beings*, not human *doings*. In fact in Christ we are called to be human *becomings* – becoming like Christ.

Calvin was a thoughtful creative for whom God was of central importance. Many have written and will no doubt continue to write about his full and extraordinary life. I want to thank *The Big Picture* and KLC for allowing me to share my thoughts of Calvin as both friend and, as I observed, encourager of hundreds of fellow travellers on their journey of being and becoming fully Christian and fully Artist with no dichotomy.

Mine are but a few brush strokes on the large and very diverse and wonderful canvas that was Professor Calvin Seerveld.

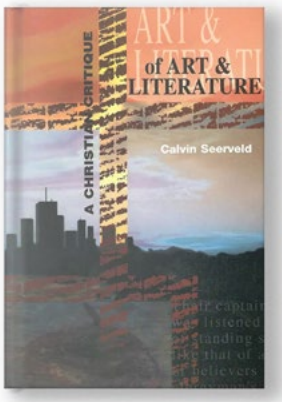
Walking with Calvin was a truly unique experience. We walked together in several different countries as well as cultures. I saw in Cal a man who listened at a very deep and thoughtful level; equally I saw a man who looked deeply and saw deeply. When you were with him, he was always totally present with you. That is to say he was both patient and kind. He seemed to me to understand the question behind the question behind the question, often before you got there. You knew that you were in a safe place with him and could ask anything.

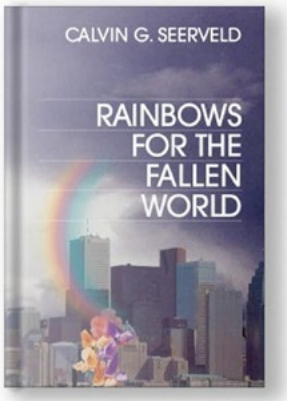
William Blake in his *Auguries of Innocence* says, "We are led to believe a lie, when we see not through the eye." What we see, we all see differently. We all hear and we hear differently. Together, we both see and hear more of what is really there.

Calvin saw not only with but through. He heard not only with but through. He listened deeply and he looked deeply. Such was his response to people and by people to his lectures. All of his work, maybe, most especially in *Rainbows for the Fallen World*, conveys this deep truth. I believe that Cal was on the same wavelength as the poet John Keats who famously said, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

Cal never seemed in a hurry. He was generous to a fault with his time for others. He could see the designer in the design, the author in the book, what C. S. Lewis calls, the deeper magic. To both see and know the glorious beauty of true truth. Cal believed that even difficult truth is beautiful. He called for aesthetic obedience, encouraging artists to seek out the best practices and to use authentic materials in the process of making.

Cal used time wisely and creatively. He observed what was truly there at a level that would challenge most viewers and listeners. Always present with you, giving you more than the precious gift of time but also the richer gift of himself.





Comfortable in his own being, he made even the most insecure or timid feel safe in his presence. He was so rooted and grounded in faith in the Judaeo-Christian God who is there, that I never saw him fazed or shaken by the extreme or extravagant expressions often offered dogmatically in the name of Christianity.

I first met Cal in Toronto, Canada in the late 1970s. We were in Patmos Gallery enjoying looking at artworks together. Another time was the Greenbelt Arts Festival held every year in the U.K. He was quietly present in the rough and tumble of conversation that covered the multiplicity and diversity of the arts. Greenbelt has become a very broad stage offering a variety of arts and performances. I'm not saying that Cal enjoyed all that he saw and heard. What I do know is that he loved being part of the event.

Cal was always an enthusiastic encourager of artists in all the creative disciplines. When he took a journey, and he did a great deal of travelling, encouraging arts groups in Europe and elsewhere, he travelled extensively but noticeably frugally. My wife Gillie observed on several occasions a small backpack that was all he chose to bring with him. Taking quite literally the scripture that encourages the disciples of Jesus – Matthew 10:10 to Mark 6:8-9 – to take minimal baggage with you on your pilgrimage.

Cal was a modest dresser. Often when far from home he trusted Matthew 6:27-33 – "consider the lilies of the field" – they were enough for Calvin. My observation of Calvin was that image was of little importance to him. It was substance, content and story that mattered. His was an inner beauty of a calm and quiet spirit.

Cal was a devotee of Herman Dooyeweerd who was both a legal scholar as well as a philosopher. He is probably best known for his development of Reformational philosophy. This built upon the work of Abraham Kuyper, himself the founder of the Free University of Amsterdam. Others will, I feel certain, have expanded upon these influences on Cal.

Let me return to the man, to his humanity as a human being, faithfully and wonderfully made in the image of his maker. He believed that his calling and gifting, wherever it led him, was best shared in the public square rather than the Christian subculture where he would be honoured by those who were his recipients. NB Matthew 10:10.

Gillie and I were privileged to be together with Calvin on a number of occasions where artists came together from various

regions across Spain. Jim and Joyce Phillips were instrumental in gathering artists together in Madrid and Barcelona and other places. This they did for many years where they became good and personal friends of Calvin. They sent me this reflection with permission to include with my thoughts.

Jim says they had a treasured conversation about the work of the Artist William Hogarth when they made a visit to Calvin's home in 2023. Jim says, "We became acquainted with Cal at the 1992 Greenbelt arts festival and were immediately captivated by his artistry to paint descriptive word pictures in the mind, particularly through inventive compound adjectives and sentence structures that cause readers to slow down and chew the words thoroughly before moving on." Calvin then participated in six gatherings in Spain that Jim and Joyce helped organise from 1995 to 2010 leaving a deep imprint on all who attended. He was intensely profound, weaving the older and newer Testament scriptures and their context with a broad perspective of the arts. He challenged us to "take seriously the embedded life of God's people in the sociopolitical culture of our day." At the same time, he was ever so down to earth, encouraging artists of every genre, every level of accomplishment, listening intently and gently prodding them to think deeper and wider while delighting in the *joie de vivre*.

Mime artist Carlos Martinez beautifully described the sentiment we have all experienced in knowing Cal: "In his lectures and in one-on-one conversations I discovered the power of the fragile, the delicacy of wisdom and the beauty of ingenuity. These are three paradoxes that reflect the essence of his life. A life dedicated to others. It is an honour for me to have been one of the many beneficiaries of his enormous generosity."

Another friend was the late, well-known and established ceramicist Joan Cots, himself a friend of Miro and Picasso. He often enjoyed long and deep discussions with Cal. Calvin encouraged Joan in his artistry and especially enjoyed the fact that Joan gathered the children of his village in the lower Pyrenees to meet with him at his studio every Saturday and to enjoy under his watchful eye playing with and creating *objet d'art* as they excitedly engaged the various textures and tactile nature of clay. Playfulness and the joy of making were I believe a great part of Cal's joy as well as integrity.

Special to the leadership of the Spanish arts group were Professor David Estrada of Barcelona university with his wife, author Frances Luttikhuizen. Frances was best known for the work that she did, which was vast, on the Spanish author Cervantes. To enjoy conversations with these leaders was such an incredible privilege.

One of my happiest memories with Cal was walking and chatting together about his work on the wisdom literature, in particular the Song of Solomon. He was so excited about the idea of making a musical/dramatic work from the wisdom literature. One of his great loves was poetry, being something of a poet himself. I can't remember whether it was in Spain or elsewhere but on one particular occasion a number of us came together to do a dramatic reading of his work. This was deeply moving. It's no exaggeration to say that Calvin loved and embraced the arts in his personal life as well as in his calling and ministry.

Calvin's humanity was in my opinion amazingly balanced. He did not separate his academic thought from the Greek rational and the Hebrew gut. If I may be permitted a Nigelism: "When the head and the heart are working from the gut for the glory of God – watch out World." Has not our Lord called us to be holistic in our approach to life to become fully human?

Marleen Hengelaar Rookmaaker, founder and creator of ArtWay told me: "Calvin was a lovely, caring man who listened deeply. He helped me with the first two years of my dissertation and gave me books and corresponded with me. He was a dedicated man." Marleen added that Calvin met up with her father Professor Hans Rookmaaker on one of his visits to Chicago.

The Calvin Seerveld that I knew and have been privileged to write a few words about was I believe, a remarkable human being who gave himself generously and unselfishly to enable fellow pilgrims to both find and follow their callings.

For your friendship, and so much more I say THANK YOU Cal. We really miss you.

Nigel Goodwin trained and worked in theatre before entering a ministry to those in media, arts and entertainment. With his wife Gillie he founded and directed The Arts Centre Group, enabling thousands globally both to find and follow their callings as artists. Now nominally retired, he and Gillie live in Devon.

AESTHETIC OBEDIENCE

Gert Swart, Calvin Seerveld and *The Peace Tree* (1991)

KLC ARTS FELLOWSHIP

In "The Necessity of Christian Public Artistry" (2000), Calvin Seerveld wrote that "artistry, amateur or professional, must be conceived and produced, performed and contexted with a poignant neighbourly love."[1] Later, he added that such artistry must "recognize and share imaginatively the suffering of the world neighbours God gave us, never to rest in educated irony, and to move onward step by step in hope doing what is just. Of the three things Scripture says remain – faith, hope and love – the most human of these is hope."[2] He then turned to three public artworks that he believed fulfilled this calling: *Cathedral of Suffering* (1994) by Britt Wikström, *The Peace Tree* (1991) by Gert Swart and friends and *Sarah* (1956) by Georges Rouault.

More than two years before the birth of what Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with great hope, would name "the Rainbow Nation," a multi-racial group of artist-volunteers built the towering, hope-filled *Peace Tree*, from colourfully painted tyres. All the project materials were donated – by local (white-owned) businesses. Over the Christmas period, it stood, to mixed public delight and disdain, in a place of political and cultural power: the main square of Pietermaritzburg in South Africa, the provincial capital of what is now KwaZulu Natal but was then Natal.

It was a gift offered to the city during a terrible period in South Africa's history.

There was hope in the fact that Nelson Mandela, who had been released from prison in February 1990, was now president of the ANC, and was leading negotiations with President F.W. de Klerk to end apartheid and establish a multiracial government. But in 1991 the achievement of this goal was by no means certain and political tension and violence among rival groups was virulent everywhere, with violence in Natal, to cite Seerveld, "among the worst for trouble spots in the crying beloved country."[3] Against this furore, *The Peace Tree* was a determined collaborative call, uttered not in words but through the materials from which it was made, to turn "swords into ploughshares" (Isa 2:4) – during the 1980s, tyres, such as those from which *The Peace Tree* was constructed, had been used in a barbaric method of extrajudicial torture and execution enacted in South Africa's black townships. It was known as "necklacing." People accused of collaborating with the apartheid government would have their chest and arms encased in a gasoline-soaked tyre which would be set alight.

How did Seerveld become aware of *The Peace Tree*?

Gert Swart: I first met Calvin Seerveld in 1992, when he was a guest speaker at a conference in Potchefstroom University in the Transvaal (now Northwest Province) of South Africa. The conference was optimistically called "Africa Beyond Liberation: Reconciliation, Reformation

1 Calvin Seerveld, "The Necessity of Christian Public Artistry," in *Redemptive Art in Society*, ed. John H. Kok (Dordt College Press, 2014), 1.
2 Seerveld, "Necessity," 24.
3 Seerveld, "Necessity," 25. This alludes to Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948).

The Peace Tree, 1991, by Gert Swart and friends, mixed media including scaffolding, wire, tyres and paint, Pietermaritzburg. Photo: Izak de Villiers.

Laying out colourfully painted tyres in the Pietermaritzburg city centre site where *The Peace Tree* will be built. Photo: Zak Benjamin.

and Development" and Seerveld's address was titled "Necessary Art in Africa: A Christian Perspective." I had been interested in his ideas about art and aesthetics since the publication of *Rainbows for the Fallen World* in 1980 and was honoured to show him slides of *The Peace Tree*. Seerveld asked for copies of the slides, and I heard later that he had referred to them in one or more talks. A few years later, when I was preparing the catalogue for the 1997 exhibition "Contemplation: A Body of Work by Gert Swart" at Pietermaritzburg's Tatham Art Gallery, I asked him to write a short reflection on *The Peace Tree*. He did so, and this was precious to me. Although I consider *The Peace Tree* to be one of the most important works of art I've had a hand in making, it has not been much studied or written about, although reviews, some positive, others negative, appeared in the local press.[4]

Before we examine Seerveld's words, what led you to advocate for *The Peace Tree's* creation?

GS: *The Peace Tree* was a crucial project for me during an explosive period when everyone was on edge no matter your race group. From an early age, I had struggled with my position and privilege as a white South African living in a regime where so many people were living under harsh oppression. By 1983, I had already cut short my fine arts training in Durban for ideological reasons and while working full time as an artist had been active as the founding member of the Community Arts Workshop in Durban. We would have 250 students pass through our sessions each week, the majority of whom were disenfranchised black students. In 1990 – my wife and I had now moved to Pietermaritzburg – I ran a sculpture group at Midlands Arts and Crafts Society and started reaching out to other race groups involved in the arts including members of the Community Arts Project, Sawubona Youth Trust, and Christian Outreach. The highlight of our collaboration was the preparation and installation of *The Peace Tree*. Seerveld would later write that:

> *The Peace Tree* is great artistry with breath-taking relevance. Its workshop, people-friendly feel, quietly shared – without pointing fingers – humbled the memorials to conquest and victory which otherwise fill Pietermaritzburg's main square. Gert Swart and fellow artists gaily painted tyres and hung them up to convert necklaces of death into festive decorations which herald the coming South Africa where all things can become new. *The Peace Tree* shows startling metaphoric ingenuity within an idiom known to ordinary people, and its lustre breathes the love of Christ which forgives, beckoning neighbours to joy in their belonging together.[5]

Seerveld makes a significant point here about *The Peace Tree* as a kind of counter-monument, because it is precisely not advocating for hegemonic cultural pride or superiority. Nor is it accusatory. It stands for the promise of something new and unprecedented, just as Christmas does. This is interesting because an important urgency, for Seerveld, especially in the context of any new approach to nation building, was a "critique of monuments" as these were predominantly conceived.[6]

Themba Sokhulu, Mbuso Cele and Gert Swart positioning tyres at the top of *The Peace Tree*. Photo: Zak Benjamin.

GS: The other sculptures he was likely referencing were the Statue of Queen Victoria (1887) in front of (what is now) the KwaZulu Natal Legislature Building – Pietermaritzburg was long referred to as "the last outpost of the British Empire" due to its deep colonial roots – and the nearby Anglo-Boer War Memorial (1908). It is also

4 While we were researching this essay, Bethany G. Meyer, an intern at the Tatham Art Gallery, assisted us by unearthing a wonderful scrapbook with press cuttings relating to *The Peace Tree* project. With kind permission from the Tatham, these may be viewed on Gert Swart's website under the "Portfolio/The Peace Tree" tabs.

5 Calvin Seerveld, "The Peace Tree", in *Contemplation, A Body of Work by Gert Swart* (1997), 22.

6 "We need a critique of monuments": a comment made by Seerveld in 1969. See Johan Snyman, "Suffering in High and Low Relief: War Memorials and the Moral Imperative," *Pledges of Jubilee: Essays on the Arts and Culture, in Honor of Calvin G. Seerveld*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995, 179.

worth adding that *The Peace Tree* stood in the grounds of the Tatham Art Gallery. The building the gallery occupies was once the Supreme Court; in 1996 it would be declared a national monument. Not surprisingly, white people generally chose to ignore our tree, but black people approached us, saying how pleased they were to have their struggle for freedom represented in the city centre for the first time.

It wasn't easy getting this symbol of hope erected in that very visible city centre location. Indeed, you were prepared to be civically disobedient to achieve your ends. This aligns with Seerveld's words in *Rainbows for the Fallen World*: "I believe passionately in Jesus Christ as the Lord of disobedient modern life, and I believe that my Lord wants us as his people to be busy in the birth of a culture – in daily, long-range cultural obedience – as an ordained way to spread the Good News of his Rule."[7]

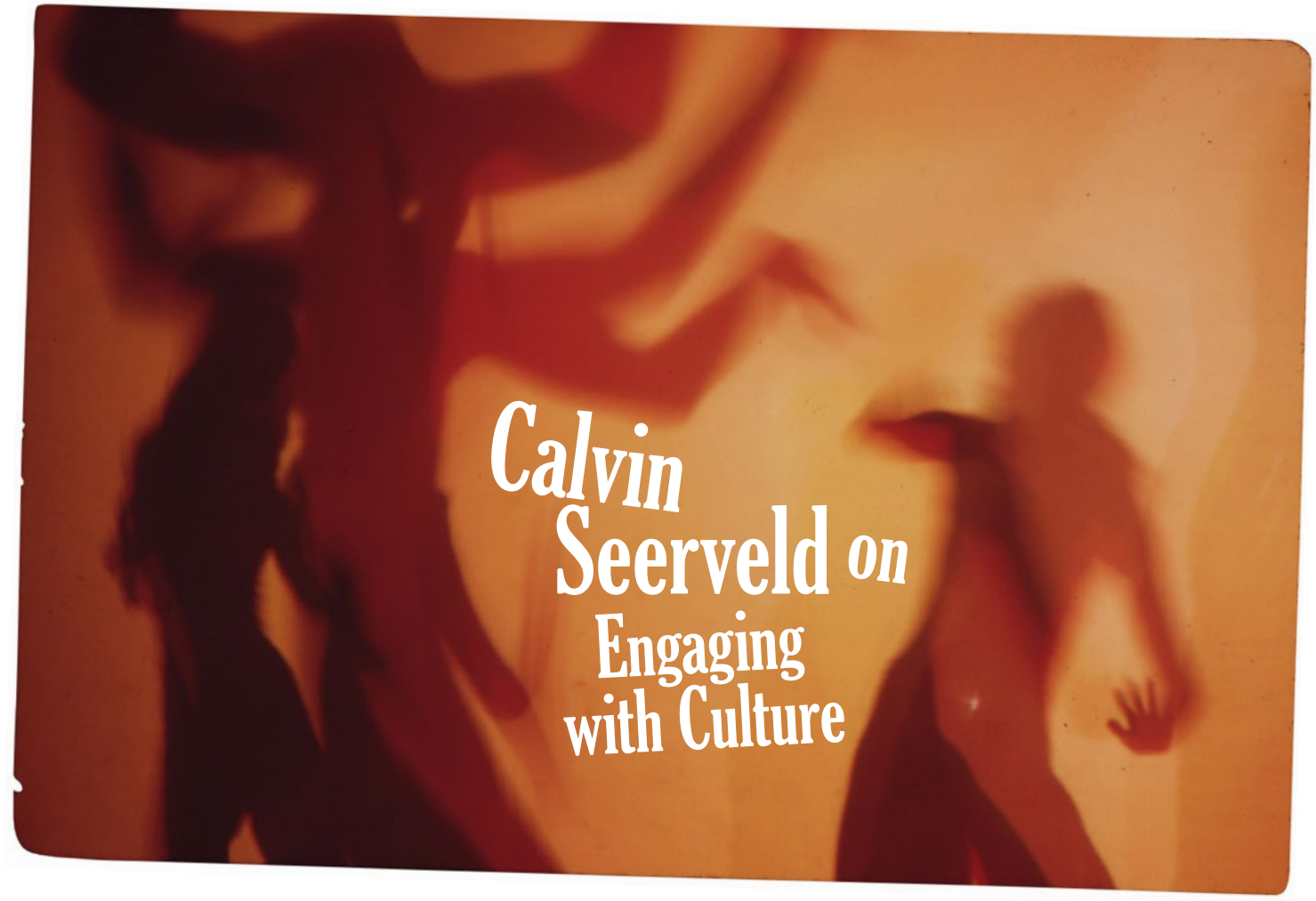
GS: Yes, that's true. When we first approached the Tatham, we shared that we would create the sculpture from old tyres but didn't refer to their political significance. Nor did we mention the sculpture's intended scale of around six metres in height. But word got out. While we were painting the tyres at the Community Arts Project premises in an old Lutheran church, the Tatham's Educational Officer informed us that the project could no longer go ahead on the Tatham grounds. Instead, we had been given permission to erect the "Christmas tree" in the parking lot of the Solly Kramer Bottle Store (a liquor outlet!) further down the road. We refused this shift in location and threatened to erect our tree with or without permission in the Tatham grounds. This led to an urgent boardroom meeting with the Tatham management and an Alderman from the city council. We were well represented by members from the different arts organizations involved. Later, an urgent city council meeting was held where "our" Alderman presented our case with a few of us also in attendance. After much debate, we were given the official go-ahead, and the council instructed the treasury to take out a R1 million indemnity policy.

But I'd like to add that aesthetic and cultural obedience relates not only to valuing works of art in terms of their creation and installation, but also in terms of their documentation, whether visual or textual, so that their impact can go far beyond the context of their physical display. For instance, if my friend, the artist Zak Benjamin, hadn't had the presence of mind to photograph the installation of the tree, Seerveld would never have seen images of it and would not have been able to write what he did about it. And we would probably not be discussing it here.

Authored by Jorella Andrews and Gert Swart with Walter Hayn. Images remastered by Laurel Weeks. Gert Swart is a South African sculptor. See his website gertswart.com for details of his work and gertswart.com/the-peace-tree for further documentation about The Peace Tree.

7 Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World, Aesthetic life and artistic task* [1980] (Toronto Tuppence Press, 2005), 48.

A group portrait in front of the completed *Peace Tree*, December 1991, Pietermaritzburg. L to R: Kobus Moolman (Educational Officer, Tatham Art Gallery), Mbuso Cele (Community Arts Project), Gert Swart, and Themba Sokhulu from Sawubona Youth Trust. Photo: Zak Benjamin.



Calvin Seerveld on Engaging with Culture

ALASTAIR REID

Buried in the middle of the final chapter of *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* are several pages of pure Seerveldian gold.[1] In them Seerveld outlines the purpose and posture of literary criticism – though, as his examples make clear, his thoughts apply to engagement with cultural products more generally. When it comes to cultural engagement, many Christians today tend to one of two responses. Some rush to identify cultural products as "good" or "bad," "Christian" or "non-Christian," and extol or denounce them. This sometimes looks like pietistic retreat and other times like culture-warring triumphalism – both driven by a cocktail of fears and desires for purity, victory and safety. Others instinctively want to affirm cultural trends and products, seeing in them God's common grace at work. But out of a desire for relevance and a fear of being dismissed as "hidebound," it may be that Christian discernment goes by the wayside. Seerveld seeks to offer us something better: bread rather than stones for those who are hungry (123) and cups of cold water for those who are thirsty (129). His advice steers the challenging middle course that combines both rigorous commitment to Christian principles, godly character and Christ himself, and also sympathetic openness to the artistic skills and longing hearts of those who paint, compose and write.

What Cultural Engagement Isn't

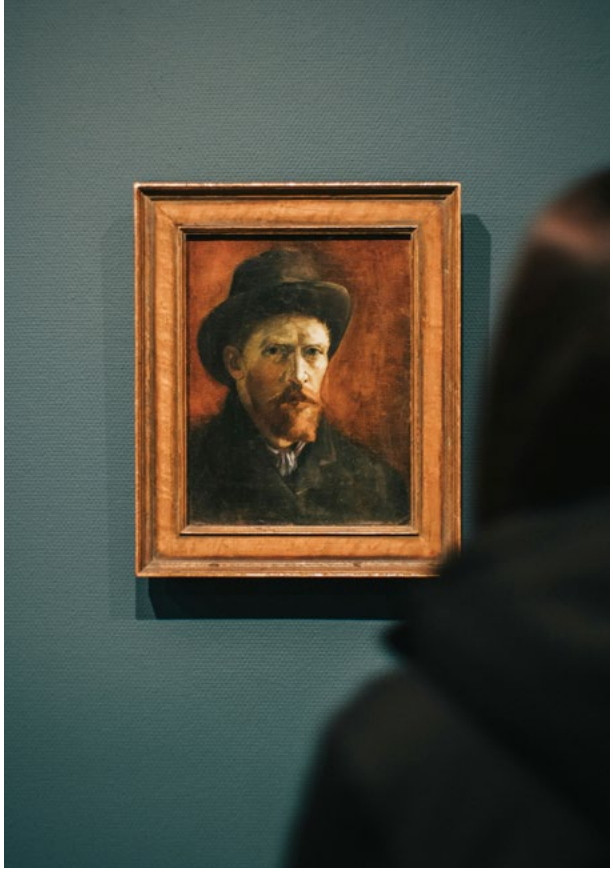
Seerveld identifies three wrong turns that Christians can take when engaging with literature and the arts. First, some critics wrongly conflate a cultural product and the biography of its creator. While Seerveld does not deny that this is sometimes obliquely relevant, he warns us of the risk of reading into a cultural product so that we can write it off. It is superficial to reject or embrace Sally Rooney's novels on the basis of her politics, or Taylor Swift's music on the basis of her multi-million-dollar lifestyle. As Seerveld writes, "Judging the heart of an author is not part of Christian literary criticism" (122).

Second, many Christians too quickly equate the moral content of an artistic product with whether it is "Christian" or not – what Ted Turnau calls the "Ew-Yuck" response. While

1 Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature*, Revised Edition (Toronto Tuppence Press, 1995), 121-29. All page numbers in this article refer to this work.

there is an important biblical injunction, for example, to "flee sexual immorality," Seerveld points out that the Bible *itself* is a book which includes "sex and adultery" (122). The vital question is *how* such themes are treated and whether they lead us towards or away from Christ. For example, is adultery portrayed as the path to freedom, or as the complicated, painful and destructive thing it usually is? Seerveld is not calling for propaganda, as if the arts are *really* moral tracts for ethical instruction. Rather, as interpretations of reality, the arts must deal sympathetically with the glories and horrors of human life in all their complexity. He points to the portrayal of adultery in Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope* as suffused with "Christian gentleness and sorrow and horror and forgiveness" (122). As such, while the film rating system might be helpful – especially for parents – we can't assume that Disney is harmless while Tarantino must be avoided.

Third, Seerveld warns against a head-hunting, "gotcha" mentality that shuts engagement down, rather than opens it up. Such engagement tends to tell you more about the critic than what is being critiqued, for it fails to sympathetically explore the artwork or novel. This is not to say that cultural engagement cannot be critically pointed and morally discerning, but that to qualify as cultural engagement it must *engage with culture*, seeking to bring illumination rather than to score points. As Seerveld asks, is the literary critic seeking to "hand over the author's scalp" or "the author's opened book"? The best cultural analysis should lead one to read or watch with greater skill, appreciation and wisdom, rather than with pre-judged rejection or ridicule.



What Cultural Engagement Is

Instead, Seerveld lays out three dimensions of a Christian approach to cultural engagement. The first is *aesthetic explication*. By this Seerveld means the patient and skilled exploration and explanation of the art product itself. This is the process of "getting to know" the symphony or movie, recognising its structure, themes, and ideas and sensing its atmosphere and tone. This means exploring the unique visual

Wellcome Collection (Rawpixel)

style of Wes Anderson films, the pacing and characterisation of Marilynne Robinson's novels, or the tonal language and instrumentation of Debussy.

Second, Seerveld moves to *aesthetical evaluation*. This involves discerning and judging the quality, cogency and power of an artwork. Does the film or novel treat their subject in a way that is appropriate, subtly complex, richly vivid and original? And does it communicate such insights into reality in a way that is relevant, worthwhile and emotionally resonant? This might mean, for example, exploring why Rachmaninov's second symphony seems much more emotionally engaging than his first; or musing about the scale and communicative power of a Mark Rothko or Oscar Murillo; or evaluating the subtlety of Spielberg's presentation of themes such as truth, justice and patriotism in *Bridge of Spies*.

Third, Seerveld seeks *religious interpretation*. Seerveld stands within the neo-Calvinist tradition in seeing a fundamental direction of the heart – either towards or away from God in Jesus Christ – as animating everything we do. And so, for him, art is worship, driven by a religious spirit in devotion to some god or other (128). This is not a return to the simplistic judgement of art as "good" or "bad" that we rejected earlier. Rather, it encourages a sensitive engagement with the wrestling of human hearts in their complex engagement with reality, mindful of both the powers of darkness and the generous Spirit of God who "turns up in unlikely places sometimes" (129). For example, in considering the spiritual and religious dimensions of work we could compare Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Van Gogh's *The Sower*. Miller critiques the American dream, revealing its shadow side in the reality of failure and the collapse of Willy's sense of significance – yet Miller struggles to offer hope. Van Gogh's *The Sower*, by contrast, also deals with the drudgery of work, depicting the hardworking farmer at the close of the day. Yet he seems to affirm the dignity of such work, even conferring a halo upon this lowly labourer in the yellow disc of the setting sun. While neither spells out their religious perspective, both cultural products contain rich material for exploring questions of meaning, spirituality and religious direction.

A stage production of *Death of a Salesman* (Wikimedia)

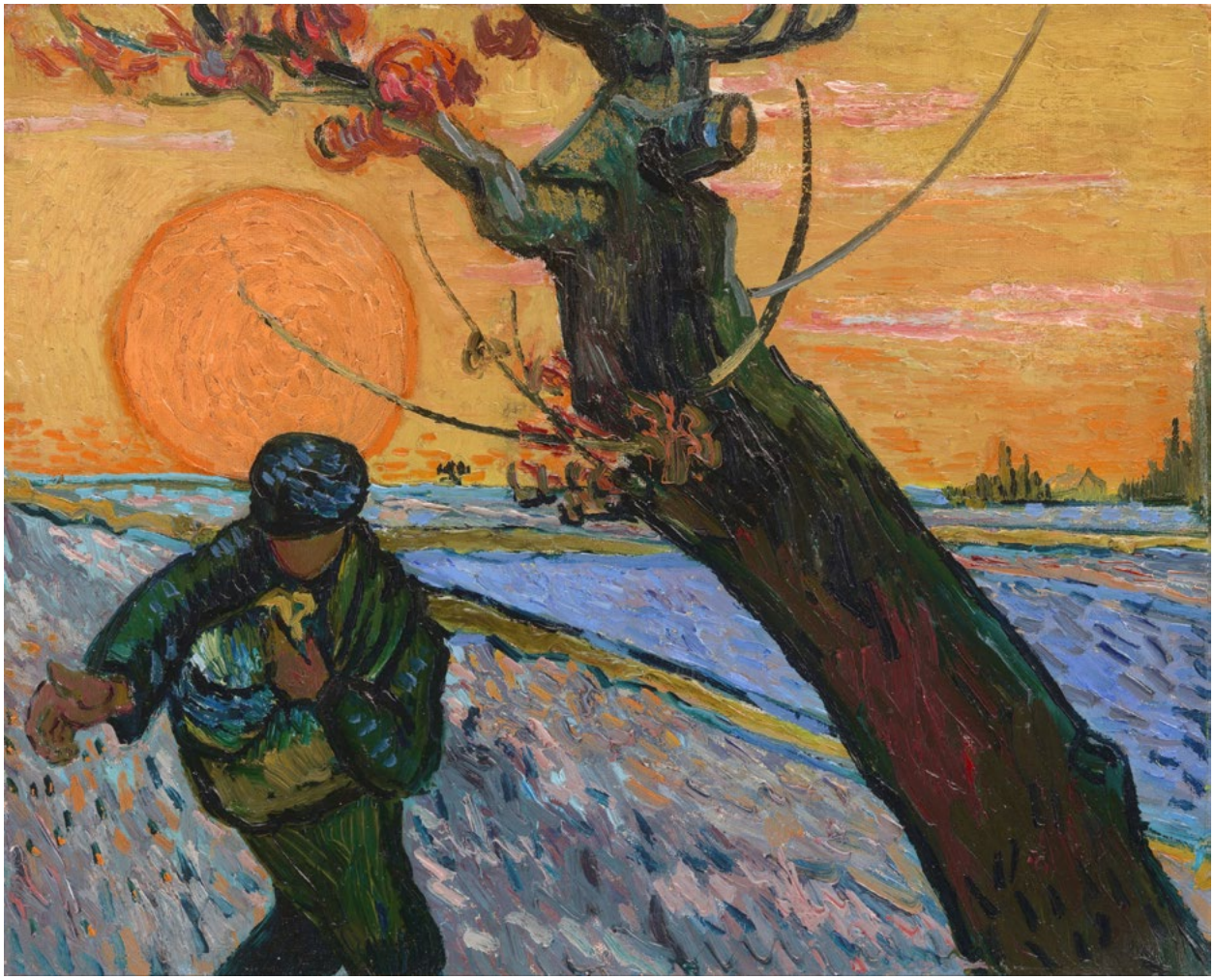
Conclusion

While Seerveld's advice is clarifying and wise, perhaps what stands out above all is the seriousness with which he takes the task of cultural critique. This is no game, but a service to the church that requires patience, discipline and competence. At one point he states his expectation that the Christian critic will "master all the extant work" of the author under consideration, before proceeding to critique (128)! But this level of commitment is necessary because cultural criticism is a teaching office discharged before the face of God and for the service of each "little one" who believes in the Lord. As such, the critic operates knowing that they will be judged by God – Seerveld mentions James 3:1 – even as they, through their critique, seek to anticipate, with fairness and accuracy, God's own judgment (123, 129-30).

And perhaps it is this seriousness that is most salutary in our contemporary moment. With this perspective we can no longer hastily label artworks and songs as good or bad, dismissing or co-opting them to suit our cultural agendas. Instead, Seerveld raises the bar for a sympathetic yet incisive cultural engagement. As he writes of his guidelines, imitating the form of a recipe: "Warning! Poison if taken externally! For best results mix in the milk of human kindness and a little imagination" (127).

Alistair Reid is a DPhil student at the University of Oxford. His research focuses on theology and aesthetics in the neo-Calvinist tradition.

Above: Images from or inspired by films (from Public Domain Pictures, Scout Collins, VectorPortal, Wikimedia). Below: Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower III* (1888, edited)



SEERVELD'S NEIGHBOURLY AESTHETICS

ADRIENNE DENGERINK CHAPLIN

On 13 September 2025, a wide range of people streamed into the Christian Reformed Church in the Willowdale neighbourhood of Toronto to honour a beloved family member, friend, colleague and mentor. It was a memorable event, bringing together individuals from many different circles and periods of Calvin Seerveld's life.

The reflection below is adapted from my short eulogy during the service and from my introduction to his book *Redemptive Art in Society*.[1]

The last time I saw Calvin Seerveld was at his Toronto home in November 2022. He had not been well for some time, and I had not wanted to miss the opportunity to thank him in person for all that he had meant to me. We had a simple meal in front of the open fire in his den, and I could not have wished for a better farewell.

The visit took place shortly after the relaxation of Covid travel restrictions and was part of a trip by me and our daughter to meet up with old friends from the time we lived there between 1999 and 2007. Our family had moved to Canada from the UK when I and my husband took up positions in philosophical aesthetics and political theory, respectively, at the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) in Toronto, a graduate school specialising in interdisciplinary philosophy. By some extraordinary coincidence – or providence – both of us stepped into positions previously held by our own mentors in the early 1980s, in my case, Calvin Seerveld, who had officially retired in 1995. I say "officially" because he remained very active in writing and speaking, as well as preaching, until the very end.

I had first come to ICS in the early 1980s as a philosophy student from the Free University of Amsterdam, founded by Abraham Kuyper in 1888 as a seat of Christian scholarship and learning. And although by the time I enrolled the university had become predominantly secular, the philosophy faculty still included many outstanding Christian scholars. But there was nobody at that time who specialised in aesthetics. I took various courses with other institutions and lecturers – including the late art historians Hans Rookmaaker and Graham Birtwistle (Birtwistle passed away very recently) but none of them were working on the more specifically *philosophical* questions I was interested in and wanted to explore from an intentionally Christian perspective.

It was this lacuna that led me to ICS in Toronto and to spend the last year of my master's studies working under Seerveld's tutelage. That year was deeply formative. Seerveld provided me with a broad philosophical framework to think about art

1 Calvin Seerveld, *Redemptive Art in Society,* ed. John H. Kok, Sioux Center (IA: Dordt College Press, 2014).

and the reality of an aesthetic dimension of life in general, and I have worked with that broad outline, both explicitly and implicitly, ever since.

Seerveld also introduced me to lesser-known philosophers of art such as Susanne K. Langer, whom he recognised as having made significant advances in the field. Indeed, what had started that year as a thesis on Heidegger's views of art changed midway into a thesis and, many years later, a PhD and book, on Langer.

Another happy bonus of that year, admittedly, was meeting my future British husband Jonathan Chaplin, and it was Seerveld who preached at our wedding ceremony in the Netherlands in 1983.

Seerveld's overarching framework for his philosophical aesthetics was shaped profoundly by the Reformational philosophy of the Free University of Amsterdam, as developed especially by Herman Dooyeweerd and Dirk Vollenhoven. In 1953 he enrolled there as a PhD student and, five years later, successfully defended his dissertation.

A central feature of this framework is the conviction that everything that exists functions in multiple ways – physically, socially, politically, ecologically, economically and, yes, aesthetically – and can be viewed from multiple angles. Although Dooyeweerd and Seerveld differed on what constitutes the defining characteristic of "the aesthetic aspect",

both affirmed that all created reality possesses, among other aspects, an aesthetic dimension.

While for Dooyeweerd the hallmark of the aesthetic aspect, in line with classical aesthetics, is "beautiful harmony," for Seerveld it is marked by imagination, nuance, play and style. Whenever an object, action or event stands out as being strikingly imaginative, nuanced, playful or stylish, it can be called "aesthetic" or, as Seerveld prefers, "allusive".

The aesthetic aspect is broader than art but foundational to it. While every human act or object possesses a latent aesthetic dimension, when this dimension is given particular focus and disciplined training, a transition occurs from implicit day-to-day aesthetic engagement to informed artistic understanding and intentional cultivation.

These themes were first raised in Seerveld's earlier works – *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (1968) and *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (1980) – and further developed in the talks and essays collected in *Normative Aesthetics* and *Redemptive Art in Society*, two of the six volumes of essays and talks by Seerveld, edited by the late John Kok in 2014.

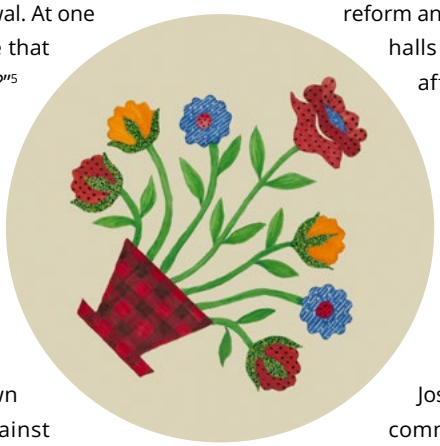
A professional artist, he says, is "a master craftsman or woman whose amateur love for the trade has been honed with consummate skill."[2] And while such skill entails mastery of an art form's particular craft (*techné*), it must always display a distinctly allusive quality – nuanced, playful, imaginative, and suggestive – if it is to qualify as *art*.[3]

For Seerveld, art is not a luxury or mere decoration but part of the very infrastructure of a healthy society – just as vital as its economy, transport or media. As he writes, "With a vital artistic infrastructure priming its inhabitants' imaginativity, a society can dress its wounds and clothe what might otherwise

2 Seerveld, *Redemptive Art in Society*, 59.
3 Seerveld, *Redemptive Art in Society*, 264.

become naked technocratic deeds."[4] To neglect the arts, therefore, is to invite trouble – a prophetic warning as much as a philosophical one.

One of the most memorable essays in *Redemptive Art in Society* began as a lecture given in South Africa in 1992, during a time of intense social change. Its title, "Necessary Art in Africa: A Christian Perspective," already suggests Seerveld's conviction that art is indispensable to societal renewal. At one point he asks, "What would art look like that liberates, reconciles, reforms, and edifies?"[5] His answer resounds both as a warning to the West and a hope for Africa. "In my country," he laments, "on Friday nights youth die by the thousands culturally at the movies, and ten thousands are stunted with their weekend videos."[6]



To counter this cultural malnutrition, Seerveld calls for a strong, home-grown artistic vitality. "The best defence against attractive superficiality in the arts," he says, "is a tough, home-bred imaginative fibre."[7] Art, he likes to say, is like the minerals or fibre in our food – often unnoticed until the lack is felt. Wholesome bread, whether describing the theatrical, musical or poetic, becomes for him a recurring image of the redemptive role of art in human life.

Seerveld reminds us that, before the 1800s, most art and music were woven into the fabric of daily life – decorated pottery, homemade quilts, folk songs, lullabies – without much conscious awareness of their distinctly artistic nature. In addition, much art served the needs of patrons or institutions, notably the church or royal courts. Over time, however, "artisanry emerged from being enveloped in cultic or utilitarian activities and became recognized as a talented service in its own artistic right."[8] This newly gained autonomy in the modern world, however, should not isolate art from everyday life but reconnect it on a new and equal footing. Seerveld is acutely aware of the elitism that can accompany the institutional world of art, yet he insists that it is not intrinsic to it. The Christian challenge, he suggests, is not to reject art institutions but to reform and repurpose them. Galleries and concert halls should be accessible, welcoming and affordable gathering places, open to all regardless of wealth, rank or expertise.[9]

Perhaps unusually for an academic of his time, Seerveld has a particular passion for art on the streets – murals, public sculptures, street theatre and so on. He frequently celebrates the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, as well as the Black community artists behind Chicago's *Wall of Respect*, all of whom, each in their own allusive style, gave, as he said, "a voice to the downtrodden."[10] For Seerveld, redemptive art is art that heeds Jesus' call to care for the poor and the marginalised. This emphasis on art as a form of neighbourly service sets his view apart from theories that regard art chiefly as a vehicle for personal self-expression, as well as from theologies of beauty that treat art primarily as a means of ascending from the physical and material to a higher, "spiritual" realm.

Recent years have seen a major surge of interest in the arts by theologians and a rapid growth of publications, conferences and course studies in theological aesthetics or theology of the arts. Many reputable theology departments now offer dedicated streams or specialisations focusing on the arts. In this broad field of contemporary theology of art, Seerveld's voice and those of other Reformed thinkers such as Rookmaaker have remained somewhat on the margins. One reason is that thinkers in this tradition, even while explicitly working from a Christian framework, do not classify their work as *theology* but as art history or philosophical aesthetics, rooted in the Reformed tradition. This often led to different foci of research, choices of interlocutors and types of discourse, as well as different kinds of publication and readership.[11]

While theologians study works of art primarily with a view to how they can illuminate and interpret biblical narratives

4 Seerveld, *Redemptive Art in Society*, 139.
5 Seerveld, *Redemptive Art in Society*, 134.
6 Seerveld, *Redemptive Art in Society*, 143.
7 Seerveld, *Redemptive Art in Society*, 143.

8 Seerveld, *Redemptive Art in Society*, 11.
9 Seerveld, *Redemptive Art in Society*, 8.
10 Seerveld, *Redemptive Art in Society*, 17, 70, 134, 249.
11 See also Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin and Peter S. Smith, "The Reformed Tradition," in Stephen M. Garrett and Imogen Adkins, eds., *T&T Clark Companion to Theology and the Arts* (London: T&T Clark, 2025), 251-266.

or theological themes, Reformed philosophers of art typically examine the nature and role of the arts *as such*, whatever their subject matter or symbolic potential. They are interested in the processes of production and reception of the arts, their place and roles in society and the ways they contribute to human flourishing and the common good. One philosopher who has done pioneering work in art's role in society is Seerveld's former doctoral student Lambert Zuidervaart.

For Zuidervaart, the arts are vital to a healthy democratic society. Drawing on Kuyper's notion of *sphere sovereignty*, he calls for freeing art from any "financial bondage" to controlling sponsors by means of nurturing a robust civic infrastructure that can buffer it from both political and market pressures. In turn, by fostering open, critical dialogue on shared human concerns, the arts can hold both spheres to account. On this basis, Zuidervaart argues for the need for public funding for the arts, warning that without it society risks further subjection to the disempowering forces of the global market.[12]

Despite their marginal position within the field of theological aesthetics, several Reformed thinkers have shaped the outlook of many individual Christian artists and arts organisations. Rookmaaker, for one, profoundly impacted many young Christian artists in the 1960s and 70s, both in the Netherlands and abroad. He inspired one of the first Christian art groups in the UK – the London-based Arts Centre Group, led by Nigel Goodwin – and later influenced a similar initiative in Brazil.

Likewise, Seerveld's radical and imaginative conception of art resonated strongly with practising Christian artists across North America and beyond. He delivered memorable lectures at the Greenbelt Arts Festival in the UK, the Christian Artists' Seminars in the Netherlands, and various arts gatherings in Spain, Greece and elsewhere, where his presence often made a lasting impact. He also played a formative role in the development of *Morphē Arts*, a British organisation that supports young arts professionals seeking to work with integrity in the contemporary art world. He would have been delighted to see the studios they recently opened in downtown London.

In my experience, for many practising Christian artists, Seerveld's notion of *allusivity* – of playful, open-ended imaginativity – rings truer to their own experience of *making* art than do theological accounts centred around notions of beauty and transcendence. His legacy lies not only in his writings but in his personal encouragement to many Christian artists who struggled to find recognition and a sense of purpose in their faith communities. His vision of art as a neighbourly allusive service, woven into the fabric of ordinary life, continues to challenge both theologians and artists to think and work differently.

For many of us who were shaped by his teaching and presence, Seerveld modelled what it means to engage the arts faithfully, with strong biblical roots and intellectual rigour. His influence endures wherever artists seek to serve God and neighbour through their artistic craft, bearing witness – sometimes quietly, sometimes boldly – to the redemptive possibilities of art in a broken world.

Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin taught philosophical aesthetics at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto between 1999 and 2007 and is the author of Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts *(IVP, 1999) and* The Philosophy of Susanne Langer: Embodied Meaning in Logic, Art and Feeling *(Bloomsbury, 2019).*

12 Lambert Zuidervaart, *Art in Public: Politics, Economics, and a Democratic Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

A Man Seriously at Play

ROGER HENDERSON

Calvin Seerveld wanted, like the kid down the street, not just to read or talk, but to play. His was a very involving, engaging serious type of fun. If a man or woman was ever said to be a very "biblical person," you might well have wondered what was meant by this – but you would probably assume it pertained to what he or she believed. In the case of Seerveld, it pertains to something more and other than the expected. Calvin had a strange strong longing, or itch to be caught up in a fellowship-full dance with the divine Word, world of human breathers, and the earthy creation of God. He knew the soil of the good creation could bring forth wholesome sustenance for the people. Unlike the typical scholar it was not just the things he wanted to say that were important to him – although his words were extremely important – but also what he knew God wanted living breathing men and women to sense and encounter, namely the manifold living poetic vehicles of God's love and instruction. Seerveld sought "fellowship" with both the Author and the reader of God's word. His unusual, and unusually disciplined engagement with Scripture moved him deeply, carried him broadly, set him firmly on uncommon paths and places. He breathed words in and out with ease and with his own ever unusual and unfamiliar cadences, rhythms and maybe even meanings. When he translated or told a biblical story, it was one he was dwelling inside of.

After reading a few paragraphs of something Cal wrote, a talented English-major friend of mine called him a demagogue; I would have taken offence at this but soon realised Cal's words had such explosive poetic potency and extraordinary presence that they had simply overwhelmed my friend; they put him out of control under this heavy flow of oxygen-rich prose; he could not manage the engagement.

Calvin was a seriously playful man. He actively participated in what Owen Barfield, in *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (1928), described as the birth process of new words. Where do words come from? Where does art come from? Where does poetic language come from? While most of us just borrow words, using ones we have heard and picked up somewhere from somebody else, Cal was a verbal midwife – especially in his

translation work. He had the ability to indwell language, and when Seerveld did this, words bubbled up out of his heart – with freshness and the strangeness of an otherworldly beauty. Reading him could become an aesthetic encounter, an engagement carrying you into undiscovered country. A significant part of Cal's life experience as a scholar and writer grew out of his own prophetically tinged aesthetic experience – which is why my friend took him to be "not quite of this world." It could appear so to the careless observer – one who did not know how to imagine what he had not seen before – or could hear only what he had heard before, hesitating to ingest unfamiliar words and sentences. Seerveld carried himself when he spoke publicly as one himself carried by the very words he was voicing, especially scriptural words and sentences from the Hebrew, of which he was a nimble translator.

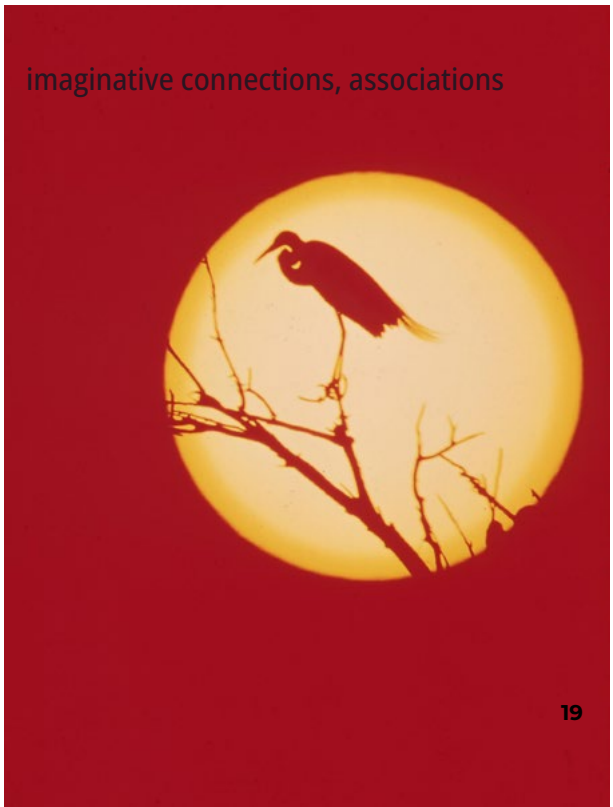
In his extraordinary translation and other work, Seerveld was a verbal artist. A key element of the aesthetic sphere of life, according to Cal, was play or playfulness. The Latin word for play is *ludens*, and has various derivatives – such as "ludic," an adjective meaning "spontaneous or playful behaviour," and "ludicrous" which can mean "sportive or laughable." As part of artistry, play involves finding imaginative connections, associations – one thing pointing to many others or being suggestive of another. This Seerveld thinks brings out the most primary characteristic of the aesthetic sphere and experience, namely, "allusivity" or "allusiveness". That word in turn is derived from the late Latin *allusio*, a derivative of *alludere* which again means "to play". So the artistic sphere of life involves the play or playfulness of making things and connections.

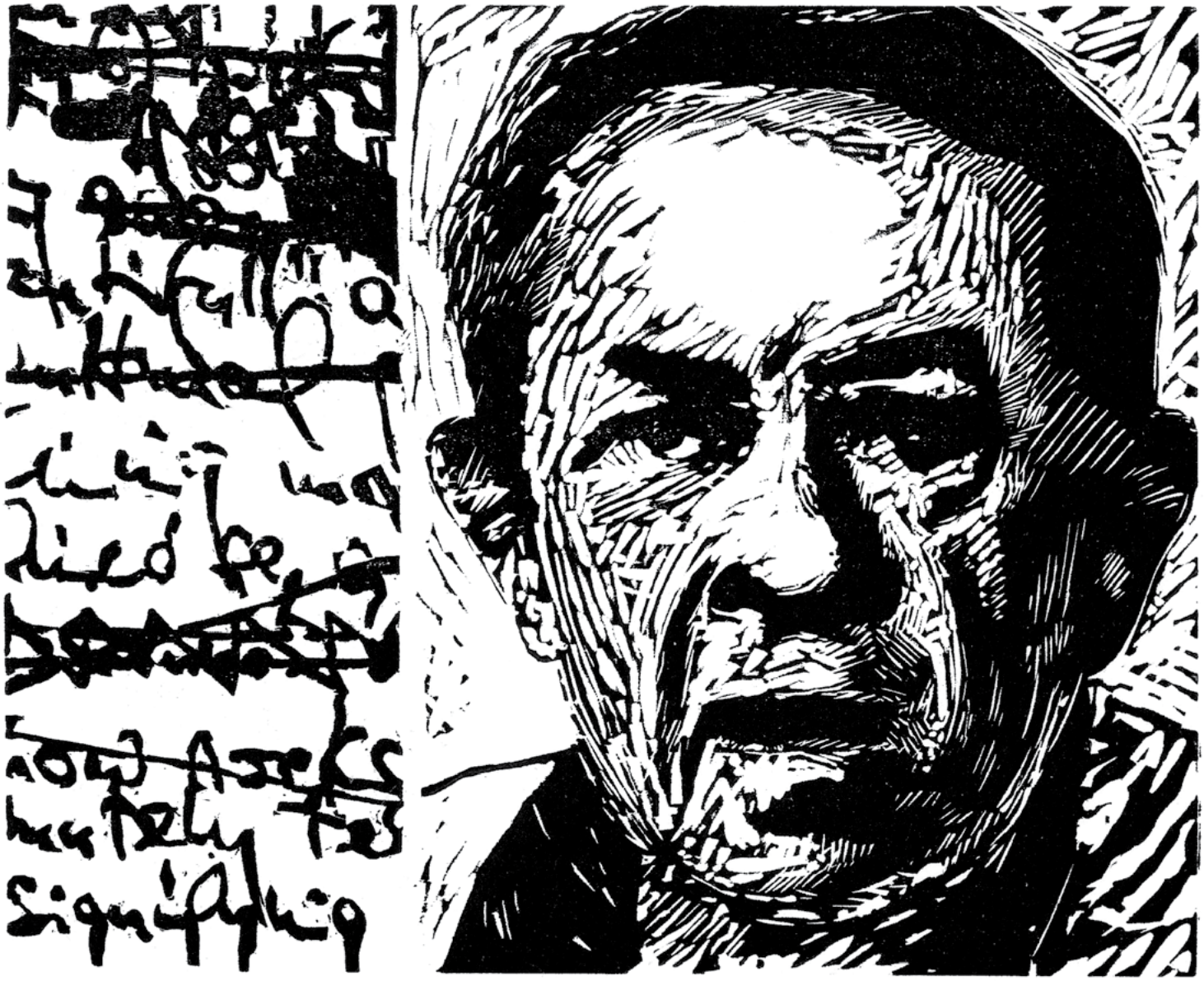
In one of Seerveld's courses he formulated twenty-six different characteristics of play. Play involves things like improvisation, exploration, openness, fun, imagination, creativity, resourcefulness, carefree-ness. Play often occurs without knowing or having a predetermined goal or end. It is often surprising, internally directed, expressive, self-generated, unpredictable. And yet it is highly disclosive, even explosive. In aesthetic experience connections of all kinds are discovered, disclosed, and opened up to the hearer or viewer so that in what is done, portrayed, played, or experienced, all sorts of things may come out – even unfamiliar features of very familiar things.

It should be clear from what has been said that the aesthetic sphere is not limited to art but is a feature of life itself – a mode of existence. It is often a way of doing things, and not merely some one kind of activity. This is meant to affirm Calvin's philosophical claim about the character of the reality God created: the aesthetic is one of its irreducible, indissoluble, unavoidable spheres, and it was Seerveld's life work to help us better engage and understand it. This meant that all of his other work – and even his own house and how he lived – was meant to be alive to this dimension and style of lived action.

Cal was always inviting us, his readers and listeners to "taste and see," that the words of God were good – wholesome food (Ps 34). He worked hard to engage and educate his students and especially the many artists he supported and encouraged in their aesthetic task of artistry. Luther made what became a famous distinction between being a "theologian of glory and a theologian of the cross." In his teaching, preaching and translating, Calvin Seerveld was a theologian of both – one who never lost sight of either the rainbows or the storms of life. This he did while reminding us again and again of our own calling to unfold the wonder-filled dimension of life known as the aesthetic.

Roger D. Henderson holds a doctorate from the Free University in Amsterdam and has taught in both Iowa and the Netherlands. He lives in Berkeley, California.





Peter S. Smith, *Modular Aesthetics (for Calvin Seerveld)*

A Tribute to Calvin Seerveld

PETER S. SMITH

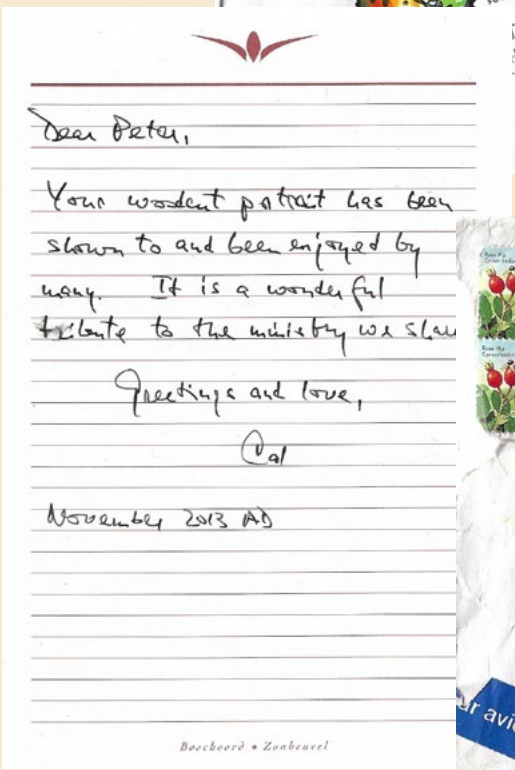
Whilst in Athens with Cal in 2004, we discussed portraiture and he mentioned that he imagined his portrait as a woodcut. The woodcut "Modular Aesthetics (for Calvin Seerveld)" was the result. I added a small panel on the left with a facsimile of a fragment from one of his handwritten manuscripts. He often chose to use this woodcut on publications, rather than a photograph. We were together in Athens because Cal had invited sculptor Britt Wikström, art historian Dirk van den Berg and myself to help judge an international young artists competition organised by the Hellenistic Scripture Union.

I have been looking through two A4 box files filled with Cal's articles, messages, and envelopes with stamps in a decorative arrangement. I first read Cal's work in 1969, but his letters date back to 1982 when first we met. Often we met in London but also once in Toronto. At the annual Christian Artists International Conference in the Netherlands, Cal lectured and I taught drawing and printmaking workshops. Whilst visiting Madrid, we enjoyed authentic Flamenco at Las Carboneras.

Thank you, Cal, for your gift of friendship and wise counsel.

Peter Smith's paintings and prints are exhibited in the UK and overseas, with works in collections including the Ashmolean Oxford, the Fitzwilliam Cambridge, Tate Britain, the British Museum and the Manchester University SWE Archive. Peter has a studio at the St Bride Foundation, Bride Lane, London, where he teaches wood engraving. In September 2006, Piquant Editions published a book about his printmaking called, The Way I See It, *for which Calvin Seerveld wrote the introductory essay.*

Above: Group photos from Greece in 2004. Below: A note from Calvin Seerveld thanking Peter for the woodcut portrait, and two of Cal's famous envelopes.



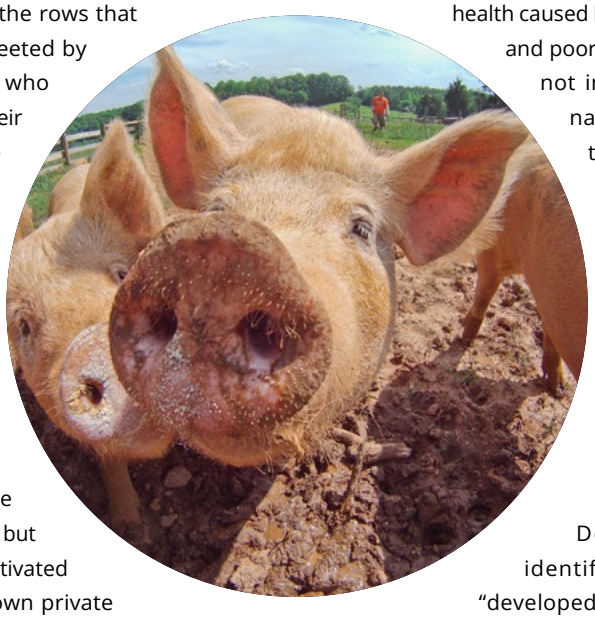
Our Place, Our Land

COMMUNITY FARMS AS SHARED HOME

MATTHEW N. WILLIAMS

Every Monday morning is the same: I look across Larne Lough and thank God for this place. I turn back to the car and get my 3-year-old into his wellies. He darts to the greenhouse and prises the lid off the barrel of chicken feed. His little sister toddles behind as my wife sets about watering the young fruit and vegetable plants, soon to be planted out.

Again, I feel waves of gratitude as I begin the farm rounds – a "mundane" task that is my favourite part of the week. We feed the chickens and collect their eggs; we open the polytunnel and turn on the taps, watering the rows that aren't irrigated. Finally we're greeted by the cacophony of hungry pigs, who cover my legs in mud as I pour their pellets into the trough – a melee of wheat, soya and snouts.



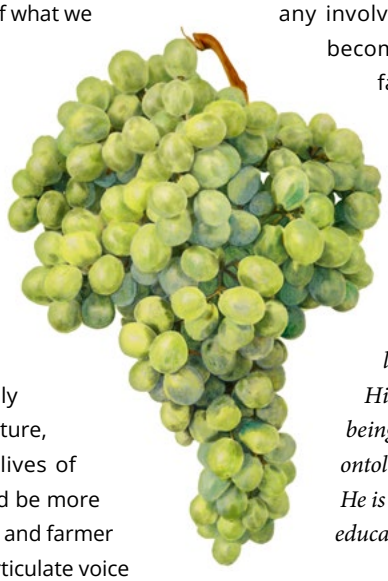
Wherever we end up as a family in the future (and we have no plans to be anywhere else), these mornings will always figure in our memories of home. It constitutes home not just because it's a place we love (which it is) or because it's the place where we live (which it isn't), but because it's land that we have cultivated together. And it's not just our own private space; Jubilee Farm is a kind of "third place," owned collectively by more than 150 people, led by staff and a board and visited by hundreds since its establishment in 2019. Of course, there is far more non-human than human life on these 13.5 acres whose habitats we care for. The Latin word *habitatio* can equally be translated as "residence," which gets closer to the truth that this is a shared home.

Community farms like Jubilee are shared homes for all kinds of living things that provide far more than nice family activities. They help restore the connection of people to land, animals and sources of food, a connection frequently lost in Western industrialisation and the modern existence it has led to. Serious consequences have followed for mental and physical health caused by indoor, screen-based lifestyles and poor diets. Besides, when people are not intimately acquainted with the natural ecosystems constituting their local place it is not surprising that environmentally harmful patterns of life follow. Likewise, when people are ignorant of the true cost attached to food production or what happens along the supply chains from which we consume, economic exploitation more easily goes unnoticed.

Despite the hubristic self-identification of some nations as "developed", we have a lot to learn from subsistence farming cultures such as we find in Malawi, a country whose producers are at the wrong end of the global value chain. Economic development is of course needed and the grinding poverty experienced by many Malawians is

unenviable. But with the 85% or so of the population who grow their own food, a connection to the land (often through many generations) is retained. This is not only healthy but in certain ways closer to the biblical ideal than much of what we find in the West.

The chiTumbuka term "munda" – meaning both "garden" and "farm" – should cause us to reconsider how we imagine the Garden of Eden. Perhaps it wasn't just an idyll within which to luxuriate or tend minimally during leisurely strolls; perhaps it required some cultivation, some work. If the story of Scripture from Genesis onwards actually places agriculture at the heart of human culture, the disappearance of farming from the lives of millions under the guise of "progress" could be more tragic than most of us think. Kentucky writer and farmer Wendell Berry is the most prominent and articulate voice lamenting this aspect of Western development, particularly as it has played out in the loss of American small-scale farming communities. To reverse such macro-level change and set up everyone with a smallholding is neither realistic nor sufficient as a solution. Yet if we take seriously the fact that we are made to relate to the land and benefit hugely when so connected, any involvement in agriculture or even gardening becomes an important life choice. Community farms give us one generally accessible way to make this connection again as part of the restored humanity that the Kingdom represents. They give us the chance to cultivate shared home as an anticipation of ultimate Home.



Dr Matt Williams is a theologian who lives with his family in Whitehead, Co. Antrim. His various teaching and research combines being Christ-centred and holistic (from Johannine ontology to relational agriculture and agrarianism). He is starting an organisation focused on farm-based education.

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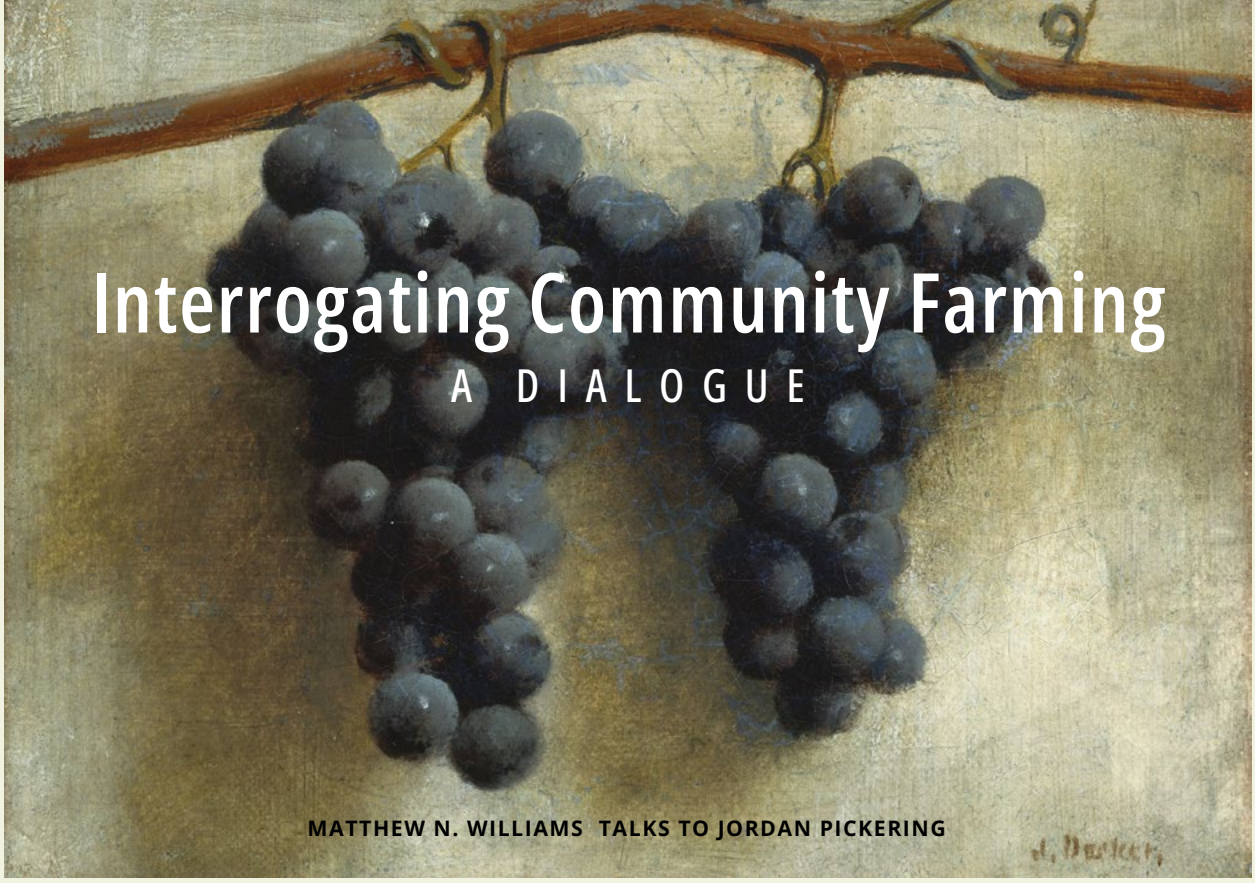

Interrogating Community Farming

A DIALOGUE

MATTHEW N. WILLIAMS TALKS TO JORDAN PICKERING

Jordan Pickering (JP): The community farm is a beautiful idea. Rolling pastureland, fragrant blossoms, ripening fruit on drooping branches, heads of grain maturing in the fields – these are some of my favourite laptop backgrounds. While the idea is beautiful, the realities of life seem to me to challenge the viability of such places. Land – especially fertile land – is a very sought-after and expensive commodity. Is there any chance that we can replicate places like Jubilee Farm for most of the world's population? And if we could imagine our cities breaking up and each of us dispersing to small holdings of our own, could our world support us all trying to live this ideal?

Matt Williams (MNW): There is certainly a danger of romanticising agriculture and the "pastoral" ideal. Community farms cannot survive as pleasant family hangouts; they require hard physical graft as well as complex administration to make them thrive. But this model is made more accessible by it being easier to buy or rent land co-operatively than individually and many countries have mechanisms to help people do this. With increased pressure on public and private landowners to contribute to ecological restoration, land may even be allocated to such projects free of charge. On the other hand, we should really be asking about how sustainable industrial agriculture and unfettered urbanisation really are.

Although the currently prevailing food system produces huge volumes, that does not make it viable in the long-term (a third of this food is wasted anyway). Topsoil is being degraded or eroded at an alarming rate and biodiversity loss is accelerating, damaging the ecosystem that farming depends on. Vulnerability to disease, climactic factors and supply-chain issues actually increases with large-scale, single-commodity agriculture. Smaller-scale, mixed systems based on agroecological principles and connected to local markets are more sustainable and less wasteful.[1]

As for the huge growth in cities, this is part of the same systemic problem. Wendell Berry[2] points out that the unsustainability of the industrialised farming paradigm is ignored as urban areas outgrow the capacity of their rural environs to feed them. Of course, there is no sign of this trend reversing any time soon and we should welcome environmentally responsible innovations that make industrial agriculture more productive. I am not saying that community farms are the only solution for everyone everywhere, but they play an important role in forging connections between people and the land that are vital for wellbeing. They also keep alive an ideal that is closer to our originally created natures and can encourage wider systemic change (however slowly!).

JP: For many Christians, Eden is central to our worldview and there is a lot we can learn about our relationship to place from the early chapters of Genesis. In my own studies of Genesis, I came across an older view that farming lies behind some of these stories (such as Cain and Abel representing a grower and a pastoralist), but also some more recent pushback. Carol Meyers points out that the plants that Israel would have associated with farming, like the olive tree, aren't mentioned in connection with Eden, that the humans are "keepers not cultivators," and that the garden has an entrance that can be guarded – more like a royal or temple garden.[3]

1 For more on industrial agriculture and the alternatives, see https://sallux.eu/bookstore/Relational-Vision-for-Agriculture.html.

2 https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1991/02/out-your-car-your-horse/309159/

3 Carol L. Meyers, 2013. *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press), 69-70.

John Walton also understands Eden to be sacred space rather than cultivated space, and he draws attention to the many connections to Israel's temple. Even the kind of work the humans are given (to "guard and serve") is a word pair that describes priestly service of the tabernacle.[4]

So, I've come to see Eden not so much as land to be worked, but more as the environment God prepared for divine-human relationship, and perhaps more a picture of heaven than earth.

In contrast, modern farms are not exactly the idyll that Eden was or that Jubilee Farm seems to be. They are more likely to be green deserts, where only our food may flourish and where full life is forbidden.

MNW: Yes, how we understand Eden is important for how we understand the "priestly" relationship between God, people and the land. It's also true that there is some ambiguity in the creation account over the relationship between human activity (2:5) and the earth's food production (1:11-12, 29-30), with no clear mention of orchards or groves. But with that said, the idea of a royal or temple garden is a little misleading and I'd argue that farming describes an aspect of the original human mandate.[5]

The first thing to notice is that the creation account makes no absolute distinction between "spiritual" and "material" activity. God initially seems to create using words or "spirit" alone (Gen 1) but is then portrayed as doing material work to be rested from (2:2-3). This is different to simply bringing something into being; man is physically fashioned and the garden planted (2:8). This horticultural language shapes the material occupation in which people are mandated to participate (2:5, 15). Later in Torah we get a deeper sense of how priestly and agricultural work are intertwined: in Leviticus 25, sacrifice and farming are equally part of Israel's sacred vocation, festivals are enmeshed with the agricultural calendar and agriculture follows a sacred rhythm (not to mention the fact that Levites are farmers too – see v. 34!).

So, even if the idea of a royal or temple garden has some resonances with Genesis 1-2, Eden nevertheless facilitates a positive picture of humanity's mandate. Growth of plants depends on what man does with the soil (2:5) and the deliberately chosen phrase "subdue the earth" (1:28) helps us understand this as work that meets some natural resistance. To "subdue" is more akin to shaping, pruning or planting than abusive exploitation. This kind of cultivation had to move beyond the bounds of Eden to fulfil the other part of the mandate, to "fill" the earth, with the likely implication being an *expansion* of the garden, staying in God's presence rather than exiting it.

Of course, it's hard to imagine what farming would have looked like before the fall and curse that came with it (3:17). But it's fair to say that we're talking about something more like the agroecological paradigm of harmonious interdependence than the "green deserts" that result from a common human

4 See Numbers 3:7–8; 8:26 and 18:5–6 (John H. Walton, "A Historical Adam: Archetypal Creation View," in *Four Views on the Historical Adam* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013], 95).

5 For a fuller account of this perspective, see Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

tendency to dominate and exploit for maximal gain. Such an industrial paradigm is unsustainable and it excludes the vast majority from agricultural involvement, an impoverishment rather than progress.

JP: The modern world is increasingly technology-driven and urban. Especially for Christians, how important is farming *really*? What is lost if we *don't* venture out into the fields once in a while?

And if it is so important, what about those who have little choice but to live in built-up, urban environments? Are they at risk of living an impoverished Christianity? What is your advice for them?

MNW: It has always been a challenge for Christians to respond to cultural development in a way that embraces what's good and rejects what's bad. We all benefit from technological innovation in all kinds of ways and much human progress flourishes within the unique dynamism of city life. But as the price of, for example, screen and online dependence begins to emerge, so must we see that leaving behind agrarian life is extremely costly.

As we experienced from its absence under Covid lockdowns, there is an increasing body of evidence about the mental and physical health benefits of nature exposure.[6] More specifically, the therapeutic use of agriculture (through care/social farming or "green prescribing")[7] is increasing. The tragedy is that there are many without access to green spaces and leafy suburbs, and even rural dwellers can live lives of precious little contact with the earth. It sounds dramatic to see this as *impoverished*, but worldly existence falls short of God's design for human flourishing in all kinds of other ways too (not least in the use of warfare to address conflict). Generally, the fact that Christians suffer as a result of post-fall, pre-eschaton evil is not a sign of impoverished Christianity but impoverished humanity in which we all partake as we move towards the redemption of creation (Rom 8). A renewed, life-giving relationship to the land is a key part of this (Rev 22:1-2).

That leaves us the question of how we should practically respond to the situation. At a systemic, policy level, we should support whatever measures we can to make small-town and rural life more attractive (including the improvement of urban-country transport links). Increased public support can also improve scope for – and access to – green spaces and community gardens or farms. As church bodies too, we can set aside land for conservation or cultivation that increases biodiversity (as per the Irish Catholic bishops)[8] or start up small-scale projects in community areas or individual homes.

It is amazing how transformative it is to have even minimal involvement in growing plants or raising animals. This is part of our God-given mandate, and our relationship with non-human creation is a key aspect of the reconciliation of all things achieved by Christ on the cross (Col 1:15-20) and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Agriculture does not replace practices of prayer, Scripture reading or evangelism but is at the heart of a life that underpins, responds to and actually enhances our engagement with these practices. It all constitutes love for God and others as we cultivate common home on the journey homeward.[9]

Dr Matt Williams is a theologian who lives with his family in Whitehead, Co. Antrim. His various teaching and research combines being Christ-centred and holistic (from Johannine ontology to relational agriculture and agrarianism). He is starting an organisation focused on farm-based education.

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6 https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5939107801595904

7 https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/news/green-social-prescribing-schemes-could-save-nhs-millions

8 https://www.catholicbishops.ie/laudato-si/returning-to-nature/

9 For a reading of Scripture as a narrative about home, see Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *The Home of God: A Brief Story of Everything* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022).

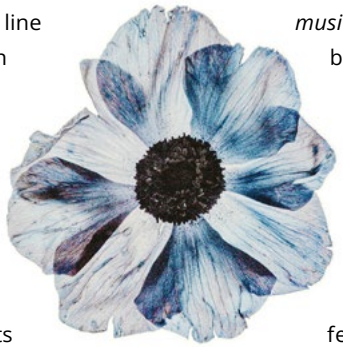
Aino von Boehm, *Punaisia Lehtiä III* (1930 - 1939)

ARTISANAL MUSIC WITH A PROPHETIC TWIST

MARY VANHOOZER

I love to craft melodies rooted in European folk and early music traditions. I enjoy it so much that it has become a routine way to spend free time. To paraphrase Rat in the *Wind in the Willows*, I like to "simply mess about in notes." In more recent years, however, this pastime has slowly grown into a serious vocation. Why do I feel called to write, arrange and record melodies? This reflection is my attempt to answer the question and to explain my "messing about."

There is a lovely little line found in a Provençal noël written by the 17th century poet and musician Nicolas Saboly: "We sing a little song on the pipe and drum to keep our spirits up along the road." This noël reimagines and recontextualises the story of the nativity: baby Jesus is born into a 17th century southern French village. The line is sung by one of the characters who, with other villagers, is making her pilgrimage to see the baby Jesus and offer him her humble gifts.[1] This line resonates with me: much of life feels like it's happening at a walking pace. Occasionally something momentous or dramatic occurs: birth, graduation, marriage, a new job, a terminal illness or a death in the family. These events invite extreme ranges of emotion: wonder, joy, anxiety, fear, grief and longing. There is much music written in response to these experiences, music that explores and expresses the highs and lows of the human condition. But I wonder about all the other days, months – sometimes years – that are not lived in the extremes, the highs and lows, but rather somewhere in the middle: the flatlands of the everyday. What does music for the everyday sound like?



We sing a little song on the pipe and drum to keep our spirits up along the road. There is a certain testing that can happen along the road, in the everyday part of living: monotony can wear us down; feelings of discouragement can linger over unresolved situations or unanswered questions. Everyday life can feel so exhausting that we yearn for a break, a holiday, a change of pace or scenery. A little tune may help pass the time, lift the spirits, or enliven the tired body: music not simply to be listened to, but music that prompts a mood reset. The little tune is like a soundtrack to which a more hopeful story may unfold; it's a melody that invites listeners to marvel in gratitude at the beauty of simple gifts all around us – or simply a tune to whistle while you work. These melodies are written for everyday use. I propose we call this kind of music *artisanal music*. Each melody is crafted with care to reflect beauty *and* to serve a function.

If I am feeling low, I oftentimes listen to *artisanal music*: whether active or calm, these melodies often reflect a deep joy and contentedness at their core. Having spent some time breathing in the fresh air of the musical atmosphere, I return to our world feeling refreshed – the way I often feel after stepping outside to bask in the sunlight and smell the rejuvenating scents wafting from my herb garden. (For an example of one of my artisanal melodies, listen to *Snow on Snow*).

Is *artisanal music* escapist? Do my tunes offer musical worlds into which we may enter to run away from the monotony, discouragement or fatigue that burdens us in this one? The tagline for my creative music is "for the child in each of us." Am I merely providing a space for tired adults to ignore adult problems and shrug off responsibilities? Am I encouraging adults to binge on fantasy, fiction, and distract themselves

1 To learn more about this Provençal tradition, see Sylvie Vanhoozer, *The Art of Living in Season: A Year of Reflections for Everyday Saints* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2025).

in easy-going, self-forgetfulness? Do these gentle, dance-like tunes provide just more fairytales for children, or do these simple melodies point towards something true?

This past summer I attended a folk music festival for traditional French dancing. *Le Son Continu* is a yearly festival, attracting thousands of dancers, musicians and luthiers from around the world. Dozens of booths display things for sale: musical instruments, CDs, sheet music and food. The festival is scattered throughout a forested area which surrounds a castle (which doubles as a giant locker room for musical instruments). In the front and back of the castle there are two large main stages for dancers, and throughout the grounds there are four additional dancing stages. About 20,000 people attended, during which time I heard French, English, Spanish, German, Italian and Swedish spoken. Though we didn't always understand one another's language this did not stop us from playing music and dancing together, day and night. When I first stepped into the festival grounds I was overcome with a sense of childlike wonder and excitement: it seemed magical to hear snatches of music in the forest coming from every direction, to see people laughing and dancing together. I overheard someone next to me observe to a friend, "I don't know if there is a heaven, but if there is, it's going to be like this."

We sing a little song on the pipe and drum to keep our spirits up along the road. There is joy and ease in many of my artisanal melodies, and even in the ones that reflect more of a lamenting or sorrowful note, there remains an element of brightness or hopefulness in the harmonies. Jesus says, "Look, I am making everything new." For those who watch and wait, small glimpses of this new reality may be seen even in the present moment: wherever there is reconciliation, healing, forgiveness, repentance – we see glimpses of a new creation.

One of my favourite lines from the Nicene Creed is: "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." I like this translation because "looking for" implies an active searching: waiting for new life does not mean passively waiting for things to change or get better. It means remaining awake and attentive to signs that a new creation is growing in our midst – in our own hearts. When I write melodies, this is one way in which I anticipate the life of the world to come. The melodies themselves, the harmonic and rhythmic motion, anticipate a new creation by offering small glimpses of the joy and freedom we will feel on that first new day. Perhaps in this light, these melodies may be described as prophetic. Reminding each other of what Christ is doing and has promised to do is to speak the spirit of truth and to encourage one another.[2] "We all have the privilege and responsibility of being prophetic voices, not merely a voice *of* our age that simply mirrors culture back to itself, but a voice *to* our age, that presents Christ."[3]

The day I flew back home from *Le Son Continu*, I came across this line in Matthew Z. Capps' *Drawn by Beauty*: "The gospel … is divine hospitality. In Christ, we are invited into the circle of trinitarian reciprocal delight, as it were, to both peer into with awe and participate in praise."[4] I couldn't help but think of the many circle of players I had been invited to join over the past few days and the circle dances I had been pulled into by eager

2 Hebrews 3:13

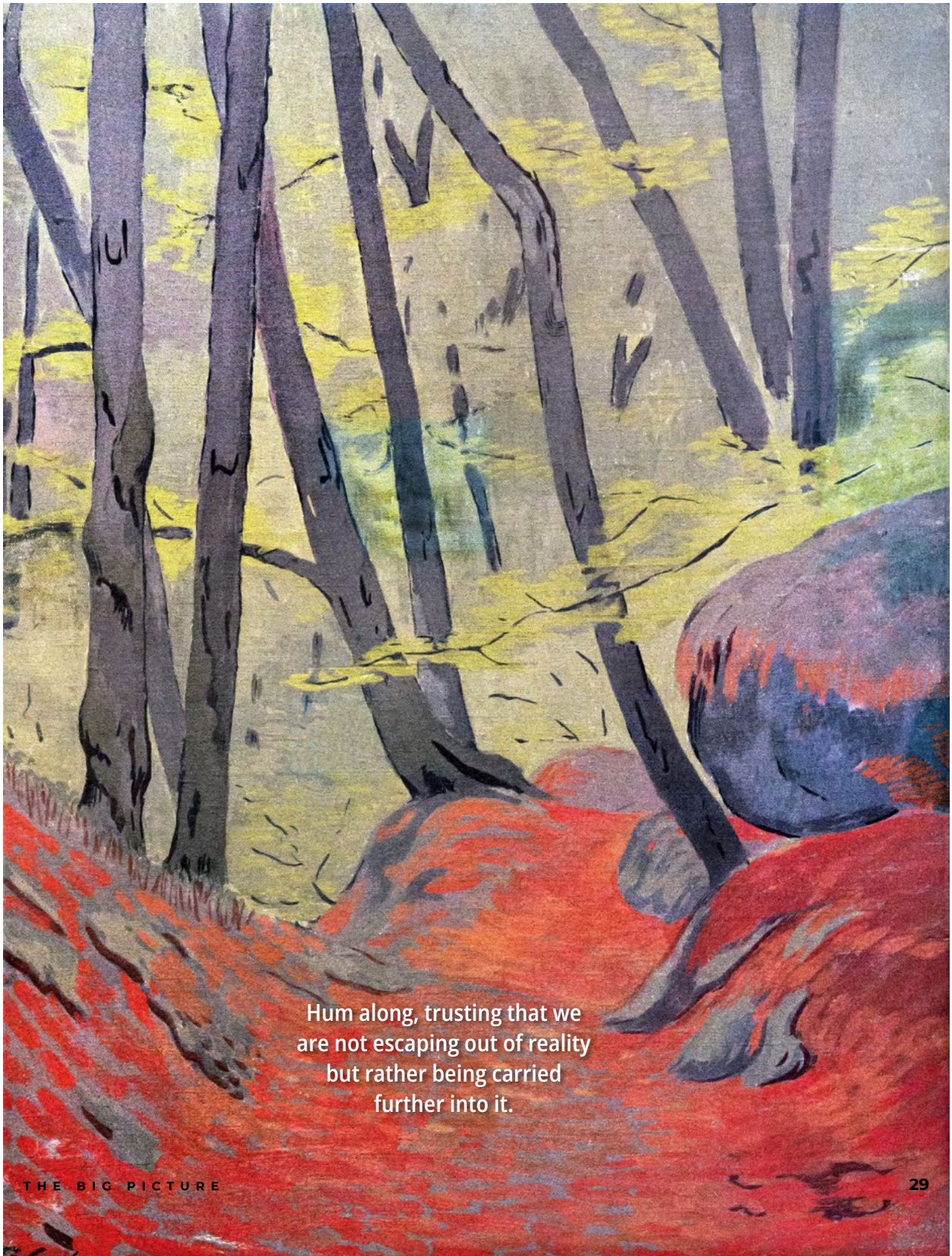
3 Kevin Vanhoozer, "Prophetic Spirit" (TEDS chapel sermon, Sept. 10, 2025).

4 Matthew Z. Capps, *Drawn by Beauty: Awe and Wonder in the Christian Life* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2025), 121-122.

hands. I am grateful for those tangible, human experiences my imagination can use to then envision some future day when we will all participate in a glorious dance, with the Lord of the Dance leading the procession, each one of us bursting with joyful and celebratory music making, singing and playing of musical instruments.

It is important to express how we feel. We play a little tune on pipe and drum to keep up the spirits because everyday life is not easy. It is also important to remember that how we sometimes feel when we face difficult situations does not always accurately reflect the reality of Christ's coming kingdom. So, as we make our pilgrimage to meet Jesus let us not forget to play a tune on the pipe and drum, and hum along, trusting that we are not escaping out of reality but rather being carried further into it.

Multi-instrumentalist Mary Vanhoozer grew up in Edinburgh, Scotland. Bard and Ceilidh, *her one-woman recording ensemble, is rooted in historical and folk traditions, creating a sound world into which the child in each of us in invited to rest, marvel and give thanks to our Creator.*



Music for Saints & Sojourners

SARA OSBORNE

October witnessed the release of Andrew Peterson's *A Liturgy, A Legacy, and the Songs of Rich Mullins (Live)*, a remake of Christian singer-songwriter Rich Mullins's album *A Liturgy, A Legacy, and a Ragamuffin Band*. Rich died in a tragic car accident nearly thirty years ago, but his short life and music career caused a veritable cascade of transformation still reaching into the present – its impact yet growing.

This autumn it grew in my own home. From our early college years, my husband and I have appreciated Andrew Peterson's storytelling through song – music largely shaped by the art of Rich Mullins. Every December, our family gathers, either in an auditorium within driving distance or in our living room with a livestream, to listen to Peterson's "Behold the Lamb of God," a stirring retelling of the story of Scripture leading up the birth of Christ. When Peterson announced a Kickstarter project for the Rich Mullins tribute album, my husband and I recorded the date on our calendar. The day of its release found us driving in our car, listening to songs of profound beauty on our way to get new tires. I think Rich would have understood that seemingly incongruous experience: he was a poet of the truest kind. Biographer James Bryan Smith writes,

Rich Mullins and band members of Zion

> When Rich looked at something as mundane as an evening on the plains – a part of America most drivers loathe – he saw angels ascending and descending on Jacob's ladder. He saw the glory of God in a bright orange sunset. He felt the thunder of a storm and the fury in a pheasant's wings, and all of it together was calling out the name of God.[1]

Songs like "Cry the Name," "Calling Out Your Name," and "Land of My Sojourn" bear witness to Rich's – and Peterson's, by extension – wrestling with the calling of being a Christian planted in the midst of the already-not yet kingdom. The same eyes that saw God's intimate care and breathtaking beauty in the mundane also witnessed the pain and suffering of his people. Rich knew the brokenness of the present but believed in the restoration of all things:

1 James Bryan Smith, *Rich Mullins: An Arrow Pointing to Heaven* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023), 86.

And the countryside was pocked
With all of those mail pouch posters
Thrown up on the rotting sideboards of
These rundown stables like the one that Christ was born in
When the old world started dying
And the new world started coming on
And I'll sing his song, and I'll sing his song
In the land of my sojourn.[2]

As I listened to this song on my way to work last week, a morning news headline about the demands of AI infrastructure played in my mind.[3] While technology giants take over swaths of rural land to build "windowless buildings the size of multiple football fields where businesses store and process information," some capitalize on the real-estate boom. Others worry about rising costs of housing and childcare, wondering what will happen if (when) the bubble bursts and jobs disappear. Neighbours are concerned about the upheaval of a community: "We were a town where everybody knew everybody … now I know nobody," one resident remarked.[4]

I wondered if this northwest Oregon town, now emerging as an enormous data-centre hub, would soon follow the pattern of human consumption and be "pocked" with deserted buildings and devastated land, similar to the "rotting sideboards of rundown stables" in Rich's song, "stables like the one that Christ was born in." Rich was adept at pointing out the lopsided gift of God's grace: we have nothing to give, yet the light of Christ invades our darkness – and even overcomes it.

This song echoes with the prophetic mark of all good art: it situates truth within the context of the human condition. We long for a home we were made for – we yearn to find our *place*. Yet despite our best efforts, this place – and our placemaking in it – is pockmarked by the effects of sin. Mullins knew this truth well, but like the psalmist, he does not end with desperation:

The immigrant's children see their brightest dreams shattered
Here on the New Jersey shoreline in the
Greed and glitter of those high-tech casinos
But some mendicants wander off into a cathedral
And they stoop in the silence
And there their prayers are still whispered
And I'll sing their song, and I'll sing their song
In the land of my sojourn.[5]

This December, my family will once again huddle around a screen to listen to the timeless truths of the story of Scripture sung through Andrew Peterson's "Behold the Lamb of God." We will celebrate Jesus, Son of the Living God, who condescended to birth in a rundown stable amidst a world pockmarked by brokenness. We will listen to words sung by the mouths of fellow saints and remember that while "the old world started dying … the new world started coming on." And while we strive to live out kingdom life here in our places on earth, we will remember that Rich Mullins *is* beholding the Lamb. One day we will "sing [Christ's] song" together and be sojourners no more.

Sara Osborne is Assistant Professor of English and Director of Classical Education at the College of the Ozarks. She is also an Associate Fellow of KLC.

2 From "Land of My Sojourn," Track no. 12 on *Rich Mullins, A Liturgy, A Legacy, and a Ragamuffin Band*, Reunion Records, 1993.
3 David Uberti, "What Happened When Small-Town America Became Data Center, U.S.A.," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/us-news/what-happened-when-small-town-america-became-data-center-u-s-a-410f25e9.
4 Uberti, "When Small-Town America Became Data Center, U.S.A."
5 Mullins, "Land of My Sojourn."

THE ROLE OF TARIFFS IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON TRUMPIAN POLICY AND THE ETHICS OF RECIPROCAL TARIFFS

ANDREW HENLEY

This article is a summary of the debate held at the annual conference of the Association for Christian Economics, held at Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, 11th July 2025.
Contributing authors: Esmond Birnie (Ulster University), Gordon Menzies (University of Technology Sydney), Rowlando Morgan (Full Circle Economics), Michael Pollitt (University of Cambridge), John Struthers (University of West of Scotland), Robert Tatum (University of North Carolina at Asheville).

Since the spring of 2025, the issue which consumed most column inches of commentary in the world of finance and economics was the resurgence of tariffs as an instrument of international trade policy. Like the proverbial stick of seaside candy, most academic economists have written through them the words "I believe in tariff-free international trade". This was true until 2nd April 2025 when the recently inaugurated 47th President of the United States tore up this creedal economic doctrine, by announcing sweeping "reciprocal" tariffs on nearly all US trading partners. "Reciprocal" in this case meant aligned to the size of imbalances in trade of goods.

In this short article our aim is to explore the background and logic to this sudden reversal in the direction of travel of international trading arrangements since the end of the Second World War, and to reflect from a Christian perspective on the emerging new language and ethics of trade relations and their implications for the United States and its trading partners, rich and poor, across the globe.

Why is free trade (that is, trade without tariff and non-tariff barriers) creedal to many economists? Perhaps it is because its purpose is to extend the trading nexus and so increase the opportunity to engage in valuable and purposeful economic relationships. Established economic theory teaches that nations, even the poorest, are very likely to be specialising in trade based on comparative advantage (that is, the activity in which they are relatively most efficient, even if they have no absolute efficiency advantage). Conventional wisdom asserts that to trade, especially if based on comparative advantage, increases opportunity and therefore leads to positive-sum economic gains at the global level. At the very least no country should end up any worse off. However, such gains, which might be thought of as "love at a distance," will become smaller and harder to realise, the greater the distance between trading partners. Trade at a distance raises pollution – a stewardship concern for Christians. It also erodes those particularities of time and place which Christians might consider a creational gift. The resources of creation are many and diverse, and, in the context of God's stewardship mandate given to humankind, it seems reasonable to infer that God is "pro-trade." From time to time, emerging economies have used the so-called "infant industry argument" to justify trade protection from larger, more efficient, rich countries. Indeed, newly industrialising Germany and the USA used this justification in the late 19th century to protect against cheaper imports from Britain. What is so unusual in the current circumstances is that it is the richest, largest economy arguing for protection from trade originating in some of the poorest areas of the world.

But this perspective ignores potential bilateral imbalances. International trade inevitably involves the global redistribution of economic rewards. Some commentators suggest that, after China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) system in 2001, United States manufacturing declined substantially. This caused the loss of well-paid, traditionally secure jobs, especially in southern "red" states. Costly welfare support programmes are needed to address the resulting poverty. In comparison to other advanced economies, such as Australia and the UK,

which experienced steady de-industrialisation from the 1980s onwards, before Chinese WTO accession, the process of adjustment in the USA has been sharper. Adjustment costs are more difficult to mitigate because of a weaker social welfare system. Support for free trade also ignores any perceived loss of national identity, worth or security that may result from the erosion of economic self-sufficiency. The alternative is a world in which tariffs become a blunt instrument of diplomacy, and where second-order effects appear to be ignored.

Set in this context, President Trump's tariff announcements and subsequent re-negotiations might be seen as a regional redistribution policy and represent a "second best" response to alleged or apparent trade injustice in which China has appropriated wealth at the expense of the USA. Some commentators acknowledge that the USA has a justifiable position here, arguing that China may be guilty of exploiting significantly lower labour standards and the use of massive internal subsidies which support exporting industries and distort the terms of trade. US tariff receipts have tripled since the start of the year. Trump's language has some Christian resonance, particularly for his evangelical base – he speaks of "unfairness," of a need for "reciprocity," and announces a "liberation day." But from a transactional perspective, growing tariff receipts are merely financing tax cuts for the wealthy, and not providing sufficiently increased support for former employees in manufacturing. Many economists take a strong view that the US trade deficit is directly linked to domestic fiscal irresponsibility. Good fiscal stewardship and a concern for economic victims, extending across generations (Prov 13:22), ought to require more from policy, beyond just the single lever of tariffs. The language of liberation is applied by Christians to sin and debt. Can tariffs liberate the American economy from its fiscal indebtedness? This indebtedness will fall heavily on future generations who will have fewer resources to meet their own needs, as they become responsible for making interest payments on long-term government debt instruments.

President Trump's supporters and administration members have used similar rhetoric and appealed selectively to a biblical mandate. An ethical justification for reciprocity based on application of the Golden Rule of Matthew 7:12 is promulgated by Deputy Assistant Sebastian Gorka, who claims a British theological education and is familiar to BBC News Channel viewers. Vice-President J.D. Vance's appeal to a particular interpretation of the Augustinian/Thomistic order of love also illustrates well a level of confused thinking here. Can a Christian ethical perspective support the moral case for giving preference to one's immediate family, neighbours and country, while playing down the impact of American economic policy on others around the globe? Is there a cultural and moral case, as J.D. Vance has appeared to argue, for giving preference to the fortunes of the white American working class? Does reciprocity require a strictly bilateral focus in which the US aims to achieve balanced trade flows with each nation in isolation? These have emerged as critical questions and therefore ones to which Christians need to have clear responses. Trump's policies pose a conundrum for conservative Christians elsewhere in the world who may be supportive of some of his social policies but morally concerned by a retreat towards economic isolationism.

This shift in American trade policy was sudden and not predicted, at least by financial markets whose preliminary

judgement was harshly negative. To the rest of the world American policy has appeared erratic, even chaotic, and morally unbounded. It appears at variance with the well-established rules-based system of the WTO. However, a deeper and longer exploration of Trumpian narrative shows that his concern to "right past wrongs," particularly with China, has gestated over a period of several years. This is set in the wider context of emerging political scepticism, especially in the USA, about globalization as a "liberal" economic project. We ought not to have been so surprised.

Notwithstanding the changing global pattern of industrialisation, trade patterns still conform heavily to the so-called gravity model. Thus, it is geographically neighbouring countries who are most heavily impacted by tariffs – in this case Mexico and Canada. In the poorest parts of the world such as in Africa, tariffs have been used to protect the development of returns to scale in strategically important local industries. They have also been used to encourage export diversification to end over-reliance on single agricultural crops or mineral mining. As already noted this "infant industry" justification for protectionism has a long history.

The most vulnerable countries in Africa contribute very little to the overall US trade deficit. Their citizens do not hold American government debt. Arguably on moral and ethical grounds they deserve the most attention and support for economic development. Reciprocity in their case appears far from fair and just and merely increases the difficulties they already face in accessing global value chains. The geopolitical implications of this could run strongly counter to the long-term interests of the USA. Theologians and economists should redouble their efforts to develop a thoughtful biblical perspective on the moral imperative to support rather than hinder the development of these poorest and most disadvantaged nations.

What about the redistributive impact of tariffs within the United States? A strong case can be made for asserting that tariffs on traded goods are regressive – in other words they hit those on the lowest incomes hardest, because the poor in America spend a higher proportion of their incomes on imported foodstuffs and clothing, and less on services (leisure, hospitality, etc.). These impacts will be painful and do not seem fair. They also appear counter-intuitive from a political perspective, since they may further exacerbate the sense that working class America has of being "left behind." Given Trump's alignment with evangelicals, they risk reputational damage to and disillusionment with American Christendom. There might be a Christian case for the careful use of tariffs for the purposes of addressing fiscal imbalance and redressing unfairness, but President Trump's present approach appears unlikely to meet this case.

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Andrew Henley is Emeritus Professor of Entrepreneurship and Economics at Cardiff University. He is a long-standing member and former officer of the Association for Christian Economics, and has written extensively on economics and Christian ethics.

Discipleship Means Migration

J. DAVID STARK

In the beginning, the creator gave humanity a commission that included exercising wise rule over the world on the creator's behalf. This commission's wording in Genesis 1:28 has long been interpreted as legitimating human exploitation of the natural world. But in Genesis 2:15, Adam's task is to "serve and tend" the garden in which the Lord places him (cf., Gen 2:5).[1] In this context, the "dominion mandate" aims not at creation's exploitation but its cultivation, at enabling it to become a better version of itself.[2] Alongside this task, however, the creator commissions humanity to "fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). This mandate requires movement; it requires migration.[3]

Yet humanity's misbehavior soon causes a global disaster that kills most living things (cf., Gen 6:9–9:17). And almost as soon as the world emerges from this disaster, humanity again resists the creator's commission (Gen 11:4). Who precisely the builders of the tower are in Genesis 11:2–4 is debated.[4] But "all the earth" (Gen 11:1) has the same language, and the "one people" with "one language" are Babel's builders (Gen 11:5–6; cf., Gen 11:1) who experience divine judgment (Gen 11:7–9). So, Gen 11:1–2 implicates either the earth's whole human population or a portion of this population that then implicates the remainder.

Rather than continue their migration (see Gen 11:2a), the misbehaving image bearers plan to taunt the creator. Their resistance merits an edifice, "a city with its top in the heavens" (Gen 11:4). This edifice will glorify the builders; it will project and immortalize their "name" (Gen 11:4). It will allow them to avoid dispersion "upon the face of all of the earth" (Gen 11:4).

The creator does not take kindly to this defiance. He disrupts the builders' plans. But with his punitive disruption, he mixes the blessing of strongly incentivizing humanity's migration "upon the face of all of the earth" (Gen 11:8).[5] Thereafter, the creator also calls Abram to migrate from Ur of the Chaldeans and become a means for blessing "all of the families of the earth" (Gen 12:3b; see also Gen 11:27–

Frank Weston Benson, *Geese Drifting Down* (1929)

1 Translations are mine; HB quotations accord with ***BHS***.

2 See also Romans 8:18–23; Richard Bauckham, ***Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*** (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011).

3 Cf., John Mark Hicks, "Resisting Babel: A Polemic Against Imperial Power," in ***Reading for Unity in Genesis 1:1–11:9***, ed. Daniel B. Oden and J. David Stark (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming).

4 E.g., see Claus Westermann, ***Genesis 1–11***, trans. John J. Scullion, CC (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 544.

5 Cf., Jeff W. Childers, "'In the Guise of Wrath Did He Give the Riches of His Beneficence': The Drama of Divine Pedagogy in Early Syrian Interpretations of Genesis 11:1–9," in ***Reading for Unity in Genesis 1:1–11:9***, ed. Daniel B. Oden and J. David Stark (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming).

12:3a).[6] And both Abram and this blessing to him become most fruitful in his descendant, Jesus of Nazareth (Gal 3:15–22; cf., Gen 1:28).

This Jesus carries through humanity's original mandate, and he carries it through so thoroughly that he begins healing the wounds creation suffered at the hands of his forebears (e.g., John 19:5, 14; 20:15; 1 Cor 15:12–28).[7] As from the first, however, humanity's commission requires migration. So, before Jesus is even born, he migrates to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1–7). Before he is properly out of infancy, his arrival prompts the magi's migration to honor him (Matt 2:1–12). Thereafter, his family migrates to Egypt (Matt 2:13–15) and finally back to Nazareth (Matt 2:19–23) so that he becomes associated with this place and, thus, Jesus *of Nazareth*.

But when Jesus describes his manner of life as an adult, what does he say? "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the heaven will settle down, but the Son of Man has nowhere that he might lay his head" (Matt 8:20 // Luke 9:58).[8] Nor does he leave off migrating even in his death.

The Gospels variously recount Jesus's migration to the place of his crucifixion (Matt 27:31–32; Mark 15:20–21; Luke 23:26–32; John 19:17). And the author of Hebrews refers to this same event when noting how Jesus "suffered outside the gate" (13:12). Neither in the Gospels nor in Hebrews is this migration simply a scene to be got through on the way to the cross. Instead, Jesus's migration to the cross is the form into which the author of Hebrews casts the whole of Christian discipleship (cf., Heb 5:7–10; 8:7; 11:6, 14; 12:3–11, 17).

Jesus "suffered outside the gate. So," continues the author of Hebrews, "*let us be going out to him*, outside of the camp, bearing his disgrace" (13:13).[9] And why might this "going out" be appropriate? It is appropriate because humanity remains commissioned to migration (cf., Heb 12:12–13). Or as the author of Hebrews puts it, because "we do not have here a city that remains, but we are searching for the city that is coming" (13:13). The coming city is the "heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb 11:22). It cannot be shaken (Heb 12:25–28), but neither does it foolishly strive for ever-so-pious immobility with "its top in the heavens" (Gen 11:4). Instead, this city (and mountain and kingdom; Heb 12:22, 28) is "coming," which means it too is in motion. Its motion is just a drawing forward to the present.[10]

On the way to this city, Jesus's followers have a powerful reminder of the character of their journey in the Eucharistic fellowship that binds them together as one body who "all partake from the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). Eucharistic fellowship continues and adapts the Passover celebration (cf. Mark 14:12–25; 1 Cor 5:7). So, this bread remains "the bread of affliction because you came out from the land of Egypt in haste" (Deut 16:3; cf. Exod 12:11). But Jesus's followers not only hasten to migrate *out of* bondage and immaturity (cf., Eph 4:11–16). They also hasten to press forward *into* discipleship, growth and maturity.

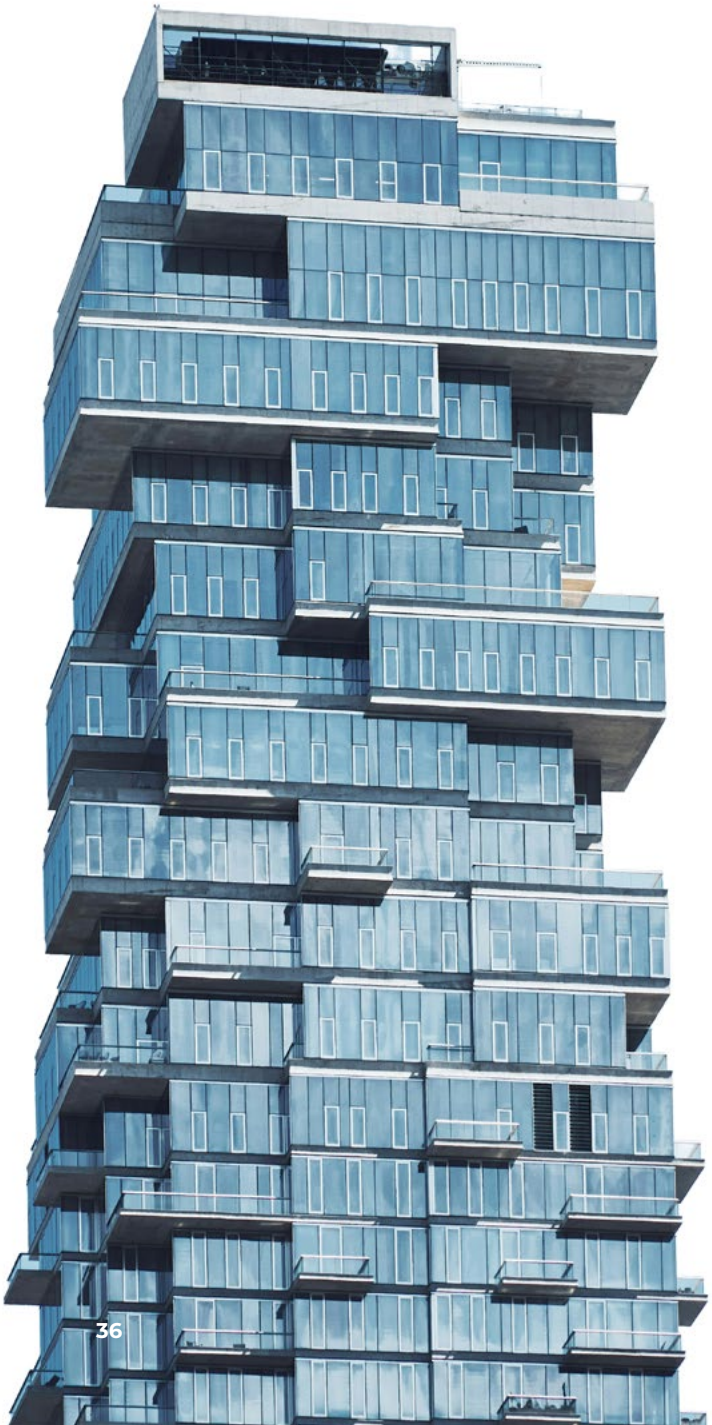
6 On this phrase, see J. David Stark, "To Your Seed I Will Give …: The Land(s) Promised to Abraham in Genesis and Second Temple Judaism," *BBR* 30.1 (2020): 3–4, n4.

7 See also J. David Stark, "Imag(in)ing Adam and the Messiah in a Hermeneutics of Unity," in *Reading for Unity in Genesis 1:1–11:9*, ed. Daniel B. Oden and J. David Stark (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming).

8 Greek NT quotations accord with NA[28].

9 Present subjunctives portray actions as ongoing, or "from within," rather than "from outside" as do aorist subjunctives. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 498–99.

10 BDAG, s.v. "μέλλω."



In this way, the "bread of [past] affliction" is also the "unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor 5:8). By sharing in it, Jesus's followers turn their backs on towering piles of foolish babble (and Babel; cf., Gen 11:1–9). They turn away from insincerities and lies, whether big or small, uncivil or civil. They look toward Jesus, the embodiment of the truth (John 8:12–59; 14:1–7) and the one who faithfully begins, does and finishes delivering on humanity's migratory mandate (Heb 12:2; cf., Heb 13:15–19). And from him, they find fresh strength by which – in continuing to search about for the coming city – they may not become weary or disheartened (Heb 12:3).

In sum, the creator's original mandate for humanity includes and requires migration. Jesus fulfills this mandate in his own migration(s) and so beckons his followers to do the same. Accepting this call may require physical migration, sometimes to unexpected places or in ways that transgress established spatial norms (cf., Mark 10:13–16; John 3:8; Acts 1:8; 5:17–42). But it always requires moving away from falsehoods – however convenient, comfortable or concealed those falsehoods may be. And it requires unflagging persistence in coming to grips with oneself, others and the world. In this very coming to grips, however, Jesus's followers themselves can never remain unmoved. They are seeking the coming world by following his light as the truth, and he "wanted the entire life of the faithful to be one of penitence" (cf., Matt 4:17; 7:3–5; John 1:9).[11]

So, Jesus and his followers undertake this migration in a special way. But the mandate to "fill the earth" comes to humanity's first parents. And the Babel narrative illustrates how it is not only nice, well-behaved image bearers whom the creator spreads across his world. Instead, he deliberately disperses throughout the world even those who actively resist his express desires. Doing so directly counters the tower-builders' resistance to their own migration – "let us build … lest we should be scattered" (Gen 11:4). But it also counters similar building projects that seek to turn Babel's falseness into truth by unduly resisting others' migration – "let us build … lest [*they*] should be scattered." For either kind of resistance curtails the movement to which humanity finds itself commissioned and persists in attempting to spread over the world not the blessing of cultivation and cultural variety but their own homogeneously uniform power and "name" (Gen 11:4, 6).

J. David Stark is Professor of Biblical Studies and the Winnie and Cecil May Jr. Biblical Research Fellow at Faulkner University and a Senior Research Fellow at the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge. For more from David, see jdavidstark.com.

11 Martin Luther, "[The 95 Theses or] Disputation for Clarifying the Power of Indulgences," in *The Roots of Reform*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert, Annotated Luther 1 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 34.

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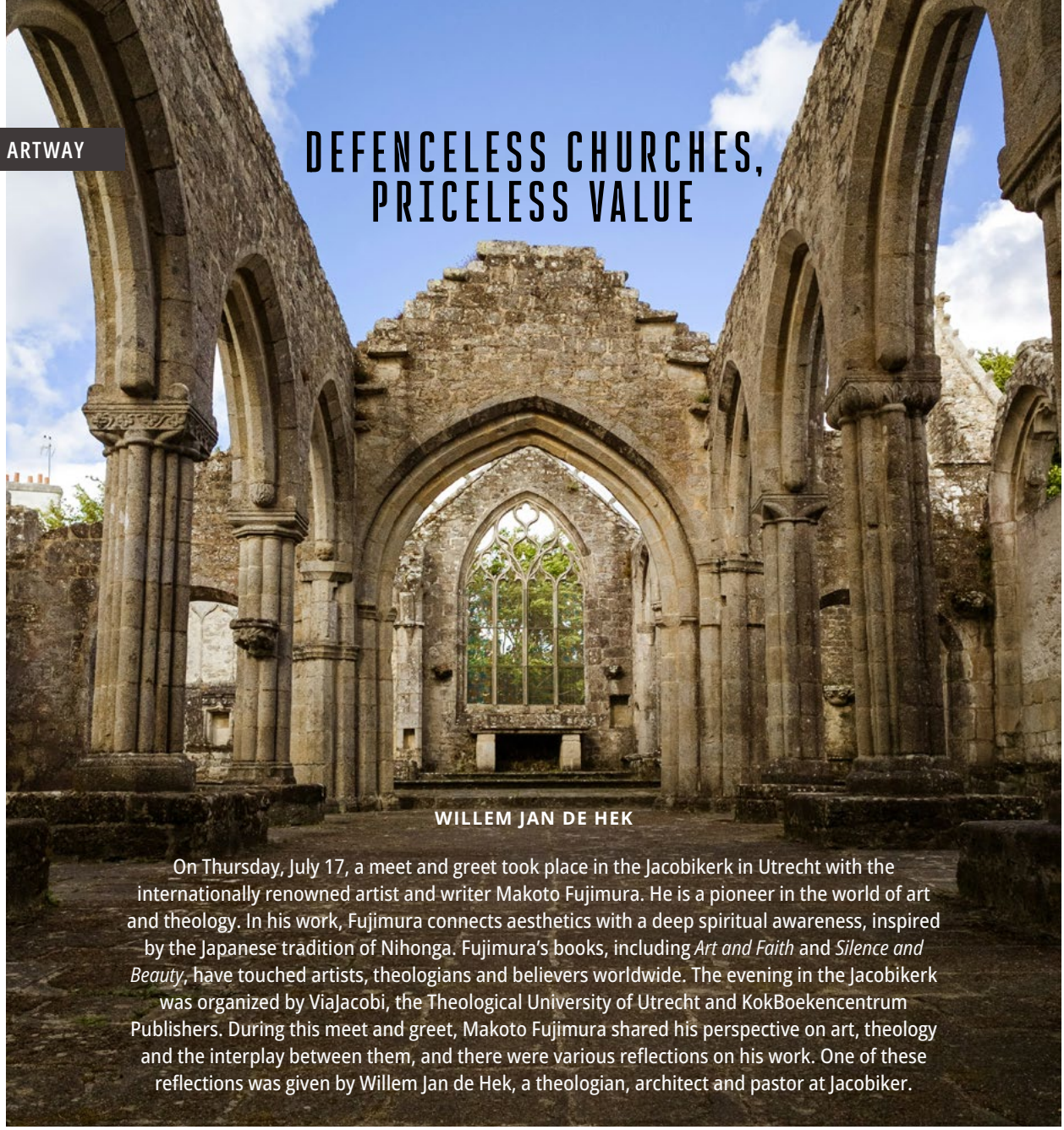
DEFENCELESS CHURCHES, PRICELESS VALUE



WILLEM JAN DE HEK

On Thursday, July 17, a meet and greet took place in the Jacobikerk in Utrecht with the internationally renowned artist and writer Makoto Fujimura. He is a pioneer in the world of art and theology. In his work, Fujimura connects aesthetics with a deep spiritual awareness, inspired by the Japanese tradition of Nihonga. Fujimura's books, including *Art and Faith* and *Silence and Beauty*, have touched artists, theologians and believers worldwide. The evening in the Jacobikerk was organized by ViaJacobi, the Theological University of Utrecht and KokBoekencentrum Publishers. During this meet and greet, Makoto Fujimura shared his perspective on art, theology and the interplay between them, and there were various reflections on his work. One of these reflections was given by Willem Jan de Hek, a theologian, architect and pastor at Jacobiker.

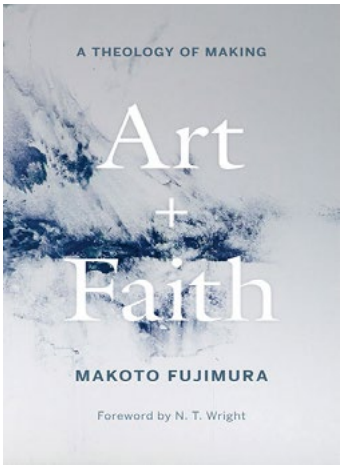
"Everything of worth is defenceless," a Dutch poet once wrote.[1] Some things are simply priceless. And hence, we should treat them with care. I often think of this when it comes to our church buildings. "They're just stones," some people say. But imagine a world where all those beautiful churches were turned into bowling alleys or shopping malls or even worse. The idea is terrible. And only then do we realise how precious those stones really are. Church buildings carry a value that goes far beyond bricks and mortar. But what is that value, exactly? Well, to explore this, we can turn to the work of Fujimura. Because he shows that the value of some things lies precisely in their vulnerability. In his book *Art and Faith*, Fujimura connects the Christian faith with the ideas of mercy and beauty. He explores the role of the arts, including architecture. In a sense, every believer is an artist – called to create. How? By offering an artistic response to the brokenness around us. At least two connected ways lie before us: the path of mercy and the path of beauty – not solitary roads, but ones that often meet and move together. I want to briefly explore both of them.

Mercy

Fujimura sees mercy as a central theme in the arts. He connects it to his own creative work. Art can be a powerful way to express compassion and empathy, especially in times of pain and imperfection. Take the example of Kintsugi, the practice of repairing broken pottery with gold or silver. Whereas the cracks remain visible, and are even highlighted, the damage becomes part of the beauty. And I think it is not too hard to apply this idea to

1 "Alles van waarde is weerloos" from *The Very Old One Sings*, by Lucebert. Weerloos means "defenceless, helpless, or powerless."

church buildings. Yes, they are vulnerable and there are cracks, but, "Everything of worth is defenceless." And yes, maybe they even bear some scars. But could we, with creative imagination, find a way forward? How might those golden lines become visible in the architecture of our churches? Is that possible? To make healing visible?



Let me give one example. How can our church buildings *through their architecture* reflect the diaconal care that they often offer to people in need? Think of food banks that operate inside our churches, or street ministry in the big cities. Let's make it visible. Let the building itself show what the church is doing. Sometimes this can be simple and even on a small scale. Last year, in the Jacobikerk, we opened a neighbourhood pantry along the street; a little cabinet that church members and neighbours work together to keep stocked with food, toiletries and other essentials. And soon, we'll be adding flower boxes to the church's exterior as well – as signs of mercy. We have something to offer.

Beauty

But there's more. Alongside mercy, Fujimura also speaks of beauty, which is a powerful and transformative force. Beauty isn't something merely aesthetic – it's also spiritual and ethical. Real beauty touches us deeply. It can help us see the world with new eyes, from a more hopeful and transcendent perspective. Beauty reflects the creative work of God. And so, mercy and beauty always go hand in hand in the arts.

But is that also true in church? I might be wrong, but I get the sense that in many Protestant churches, we've developed the path of mercy far better than the path of beauty. That's understandable, especially considering the history of the Reformation. The Jacobikerk itself witnessed iconoclasm. Protestantism emphasises simplicity and the preaching of the Word. But do we risk throwing out beauty along the way? I think that would be a real loss, because beauty has the power to open another reality. Good architecture can also express meaning. It speaks a different kind of language. Buildings evoke feelings and reflect values. And so, architecture is like a mirror of the human soul and culture. It can show our deepest hopes – or challenge them.

Actually, I think that's a big responsibility for churches. Church buildings can inspire someone passing by. It can spark a moment of joy. It can point to the hope we carry. And that alone is reason enough to give more space to beauty in the life of the church. Especially now, in a world where so much is online, our buildings can offer something powerful and tangible in public space.

Anticipation

So, back to the beginning: what is the value of our church buildings? It is about mercy and about beauty. But I think there's a third value: And that is *anticipation*. Because the best is yet to come!

In *Art and Faith*, Fujimura tells an inspiring story. It's a kind of modern parable about the meaning of vulnerable-but-valuable places – like our churches. A father takes his child to the beach. The child builds a sandcastle, knowing it will soon be washed away by the tide. And the father – who is an architect – watches with love and admiration. Many years later, the grown-up child discovers that his father had built a real castle, inspired by that sandcastle at the beach from long ago! What's this story about? It shows that our creativity and efforts are temporary. The tide will come. Things fade.

So, are our church buildings "just stones" after all? Will they fade as well? Fujimura's answer is "no"! Even if everything is eventually washed away, our efforts still matter. Even a sandcastle – though temporary – reflects the heart of a creator. That creative act has value in itself, because it joins in God's ongoing work of creation. God works through us. He even works through our architecture. And in our fragile acts of building and shaping, we already catch a glimpse of how things will one day be.

And so: "Everything of worth is defenceless." That's true. But in church we know that defencelessness is not the end. In the church, we know Christ – who went through death, in all vulnerability, but also rose again. Our church buildings speak of him. His body broken and his blood shed. But also: new life through death. Reconciliation. Eternal hope. And even stones can tell that story.

Willem Jan de Hek works as a pastor in the Jacobikerk in Utrecht and for ViaJacobi. He is also a part-time architect and is pursuing doctoral research at the Protestant Theological University on the experience of the sacred in the public domain.

Advent at Home

JULIE CANLIS, LAUREN MULFORD, MICHAEL WAGENMAN

We asked several members of our community to share some of their Advent practices that enable them and their families to enter into this rich season in the Church Calendar. Here are three of their responses.

JULIE CANLIS

One of the most ancient paths that the Early Church developed for us to live out being in Christ is the Church Calendar - the "liturgical year" with its rhythmic cycle of Advent, Christmastide, Epiphany, Lent, Eastertide, Pentecost, Ordinary Time and all the other mini celebrations that bring us deeper into the humanity of Jesus. Jesus' lived life gives us a natural shape for our discipleship: descent and ascent, death and resurrection, loss and gain. It has been given to us precisely for this purpose. Our whole life is to be "in Christ" and lived in the sphere of his love, but this needs flesh and bone, just as Jesus was given skin.

Advent is one of the murkiest Christian traditions because it was originally attached to a different feast: Epiphany. And Epiphany, at least in its origins, didn't have to do with the three kings but with Jesus' baptism and our own. This early history is important only in order that we understand the *baptismal* character of Advent – as that celebrating not the birth of the baby Jesus, but the birth of humanity. For the early church, there is a direct correspondence between the life of Jesus and the life of humanity: what happens to the head happens to the body. And so in Christ's baptism, all of humanity is taken under the waters, cleansed, renewed, reborn. As Leo the Great says, "In adoring the birth of our Savior, we find we are celebrating the commencement of our own life. For the birth of Christ is the source of life for Christian folk, and the birthday of the Head is the birthday of the body. So with Him, we are born in this Nativity."[1] We may find it strange that the early church was not having a "happy birthday baby Jesus" party when they thought about his origins, but they saw their connection to the life of Christ mystically – as involving *them*. They celebrated their own birth in the birth of the one who began the new creation in his own person.

For the history buffs, you might be saying "wait a minute – Advent is about celebrating Christ's return!" This is what it eventually came to be, after about 1000 years, but that was only after one of the Popes

1 Leo the Great, Sermon 26.2 (25 December 450) in *Leo the Great: Letters & Sermons* NPNF 2/12.

moved the beginning of the Church Year to Christmas Day. Suddenly, Advent – that season of praying and fasting leading up to Christmas/Epiphany – was now the *end* of the year, rather than the beginning of it. The church has done a good job with pivoting and adding yet another dimension of meaning to Advent, but I am trying to focus on the very earliest origins of this season.

For myself and my family, I have discovered that an Advent wreath is a wonderful way to mark time, with focused prayers of anticipation, in an otherwise breathlessly fast season. I also find the Orthodox church's rhythm of fasting up through Advent is a way to "pray with my body," and that when Christmas arrives, not only does my heart – but my body rejoices! (This usually means going off alcohol, meat, etc.). When my children were young, we set up a Nativity set on the kitchen table, and every night the figures of Mary on a donkey, Joseph, the animals, shepherds, and angels slowly made their journey through the house to arrive on Christmas morning. (Of course this happened during the night, and my husband and I had to place a rock under our pillow to remind ourselves to move the characters – lest the children wake up the next morning devastated!) We also add a dragon who begins to pursue Mary and Joseph, to honor the "first nativity" tale in Revelation. This adds to the drama, and hopefully allows them to understand the deeper resonances that emerge from this story. And of course, the three kings did not arrive until Epiphany (which is the date that the West has assigned to the kings).

Now that my children are in university, I send all four of them care packages for St Nicholas Day – which means that they get to introduce their roommates and friends to the tradition of St Nicholas, for they have now graduated to *being* St Nicholas for others. These things may seem silly, but they form the backbone of a season which honors both the divine *and* human (and cultural, and familial) elements of celebration.

The early church discovered that, in the words of Chesterton, "only when they made a holy day for God did they find they had made a holiday for men."[2] Whenever we celebrate God, we discover that we are also celebrating ourselves – because God now refuses to be known, or celebrated without us. The Church Calendar is an invitation for us – it is the lived drama of being in Christ. We think the church calendar is about time – but it is not, it is about becoming. It is anthropology, not chronology. It allows us to walk into our baptism. Because of who Jesus is, his story doesn't remain stuck on a timeline but now is connected to all of us, embracing us, redefining us. Because of baptism, we have been plunged into the church calendar, and it is now our calendar. It is now our story because we are *in* the One whose story it is.

Julie Canlis is a theologian and author. She is the Liturgical Director for Trinity Church (Wenatchee, WA), teaches at Whitworth University, runs a non-profit organisation, Godspeed, and is an Associate Fellow of the KLC.

LAUREN MULFORD

Christmas is my favorite. I enjoy preparing for Christmas in a way that de-emphasizes Santa and greed while maintaining the *magic* of the season by setting this season apart from the rest of the year. The magic of Christmas is that God became man. We anticipate his arrival with Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. That should be the clothing of all Christians all year long and especially during Advent. My desire is to model that for my children.

I do my best to engage each child (eight in all) in a Christ-centric, love-wrapped holiday adventure that establishes that something different is happening. I don't think we have ever successfully gone through a season following an Advent calendar properly and perfectly. Often the children would rather play video games or watch cartoons. I don't fault them for this. It means my job is to engage them in a way that they prefer liturgy over everyday monotony. Challenge accepted.

2 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Bodley Head, 1957), 107.

Candles. Candles are the trick. And hot cocoa. The way I have been able to successfully gain my children's interest in liturgy over cartoons is candles and hot cocoa. My Advent candleholder has a Nativity scene, Advent candles, and a Christ candle. Whoever behaves the best for our Advent devotional gets to blow out the candle afterwards. They love that!

I asked my children what they remembered and what they enjoyed from past Advents. Micah, 14, says that he loved learning the story and hearing why I chose each song. I stood in front of my family holding my newborn. Each child had the song sheet I made that indicated what each candle was named and a song associated with it. I would talk briefly about why that song was special. And then we'd sing. Lucas, 8, and Zoë, 10, love the different color candles. We lit each candle every Sunday of Advent and then would guess which candle represented what and why it might mean that. We discussed which stories in the Bible pointed to Jesus that displayed hope in a future Savior, such as Hannah's song or Mary's Magnificat, as well as the Lord's prophecy of Eve crushing the serpent and verses of the church's anticipation of the second coming. Saoirse, 6, says she has no memory of doing anything like what I described. Ok. Maybe I wasn't as amazing as I thought I was. Repetition helps with retention. Hopefully it'll stick this year.

In addition to the Advent candleholder and my own Advent song set, I have the *Jesus Storybook Bible Advent* book, a 1983 paper Advent Nativity scene from Tomie dePaola (it's very pretty), and (my friend) Bette Dickinson's *Making Room in Advent* (IVP) book and card set. We adapt each to reinforce the Advent story. Sometimes we do the story a little every evening and sometimes we do the entire week in one sitting. This year, I am filling the entire month with activities in hopes that the longing they feel will be realized in Christ. After all, as C. S. Lewis noted, if we experience a longing that this world simply cannot satisfy, we were probably made for another world. I want my children to find that other world in Christ.

Lauren Mulford is a seminary student at Union Theological College and lives in Michigan, USA, with her husband and eight children. She volunteers with Kirby Laing Centre as the postgraduate administrator, and with her local church, leading studies and clubs.

MICHAEL WAGENMAN

Advent surprises me every year. My mental focus on the new academic year's Fall semester is startled by Advent. And even though my church follows the liturgical year, I'm never fully prepared to hear Israel's prophets or John the Baptist in those Advent lectionary readings.

This means that like the Christmas shopper on December 23rd, I'm often scrambling at the last minute to figure out what I'm going to do to observe Advent. This year, I've settled on the resource provided by Canada's New Leaf Network (newleafnetwork.ca).

This year's resource is "The Coming Light: The Hopeful Presence of Jesus in Advent." Their daily email meditations sound right for me at this time in my life. "The light is coming" encourages me in the long northern nights at this time of year. And the "hopeful presence of Jesus" reminds me of Abraham Kuyper's insistence that human life is not only good but also possible through God's *common* grace to all of creation.

The Wagenman children are adults now and off making their way in the world. This Advent, our long nights at home will also be filled with puzzles. We recently found a unique Advent calendar: each day reveals a small jigsaw puzzle.

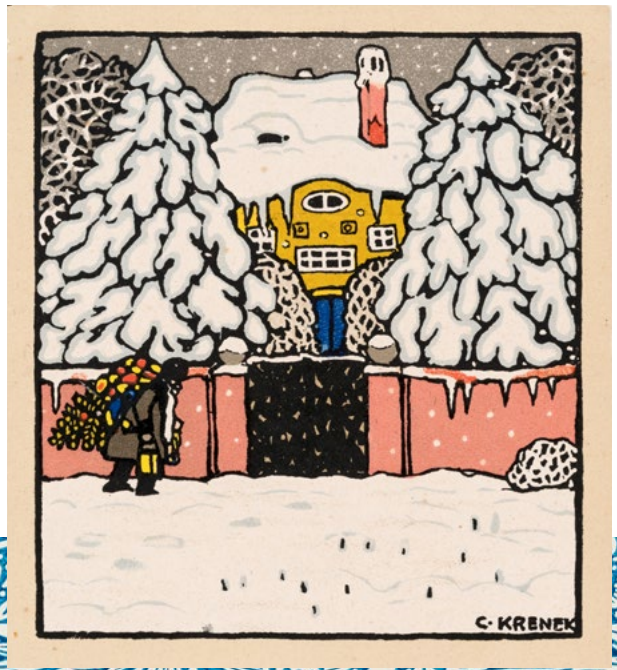
In many ways, this year's Advent devotions – daily email readings and puzzles – fit the times we're living through. War and torture abroad, unemployment and food insecurity at home – there is an overabundance of suffering, a famine of compassion. Each of us is presented with a dark puzzle of why the world is the way it is.

The late Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall speaks to times like this:

> Upon entering a dark and uncertain place, one's first reaction is to flee. … But there is a more courageous way of reacting to the dark place. It is to find, somehow, the will to stay there; to wait in the dark, as it were, until one's eyes are a little accustomed to it; to feel one's way about, take a few steps. Perhaps one will stumble and fall. On the other hand, after some initial awkwardness, it may grow less frightening. There may even be some light to be discerned – there, in the dark! Christians ought not to be surprised if such were the case, since they hold the faith of a light which shines in the darkness and may be seen *only* from within that darkness.[3]

Rev Dr Michael Wagenman is Senior Research Fellow and Director of PhD studies at KLC.

3 Douglas John Hall, *The Canada Crisis: A Christian Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1980), 43-44.



FROM THE MILL

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

As this edition of *TBP* goes to print we are well into Advent and that great feast of Christmas approaches.

In my own research I am finishing off volume two of my ambitious series, Old Testament Origins and the Question of God, titled *Moses and the Victory of Yahweh*. In this series I am having a look at what happens to study of the Old Testament if we take God and divine action seriously. To many readers this may sound obvious but a legacy of the enlightenment and modernity is that such an approach is largely taboo in mainstream Old Testament studies.

One thing that has struck me is that whereas in the Pentateuch we constantly find references to God speaking, it is rare to find this in the New Testament. Of course, in the New Testament God speaks in and through Christ, and this Advent we wait again to welcome the Word made flesh. In his rich three volume commentary on Matthew, which I highly recommend, Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis reflects on this phenomenon in relation to the Transfiguration narrative in Matthew 17:1-7. He says of Matthew 17:5 that "The Father's speech here and at 3:17 is almost identical. Once again we hear the only thing that the Father is ever recorded as saying in the New Testament: 'This is my beloved Son.' For Jesus is the only thing the Father ever has to say to us."[1] Of course the Father says a bit more, like "listen to him", but the point is well taken. This Advent we are invited again to attend to the Christ event, to marvel at the open heaven, and to listen to him.

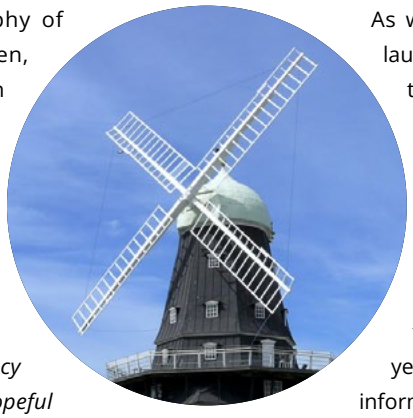
The Chesterton Mill in Cambridge has been a marvellous place to have our office. The architect did superb work in repurposing the Mill property for a whole range of small and larger enterprises. We are the only academic outfit based there, in the oasis of calm and peace that is the Chesterton Mill. Reader should note that with Otto now part time as he prepares to begin his doctoral studies, and with me living in March, some 30 miles outside of Cambridge, from the end of February we will be placing our office in storage while we wait for a very generous bequest to come through and begin discussions among our trustees about the possibility of the Director relocating to or near Cambridge. We are in good shape but it is simply not good use of our funds to rent an office which we are not using regularly. Because we were born during the pandemic, we became virtual and global overnight but need to become deeply embedded in Cambridge itself. For this to happen it is important that the Director live in or near Cambridge so that he can easily attend events, meet with people, entertain, etc.

However, do not think that we have not made good use of our office. When Otto was full time he worked from there, I often have meetings there, it was the base for our conference in 2024, and very recently we hosted a wonderful event called

1 Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, volume 2. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 555.

"Philosophy in Full Colour" in partnership with our friends at Thinking Faith Network.

During the 20th century and on into our own time there has been a truly remarkable renaissance of Christian philosophy, and in the continental tradition a major development has been the Reformational philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd, Dirk Vollenhoven, Calvin Seerveld – celebrated in this edition of *TBP* – and many others. For some time now there has been a need for an up-to-date introduction to Dooyeweerd's philosophy, and the main reason for our gathering was to celebrate the publication of the English translation of Maarten Verkerk, Gerrit Glas and Suzan Sierksma-Agteres's, *The Intellectual Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977): A Hopeful Philosophy for Our Time* (Amsterdam University Press, 2025). Courtesy of Thinking Faith Network's generous sponsorship we were able to host a marvellous afternoon and evening mini-conference in the common room at the Chesterton Mill. The event was very well attended with virtual input from people around the world, rich input was provided by the speakers and we had live music and a great buffet style meal. Do look out for the announcement of the recordings in one of our weekly newsletters.



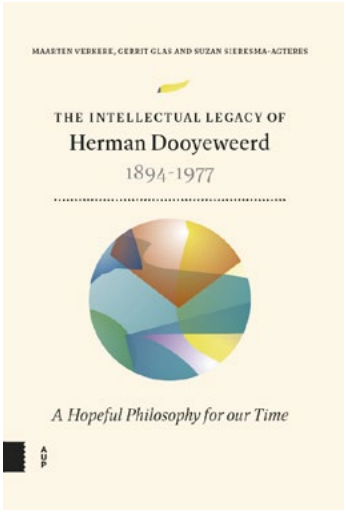
Several of our Dutch colleagues joined us for the event, making it very special indeed. We also marked the publication of the English version of Roel Kuiper's *The Antirevolutionary: Life and Works of Groen van Prinsterer* (1801-1876). Groen is an important figure in his own right and also an important influence on Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. I interviewed Roel about the book, a fascinating conversation.

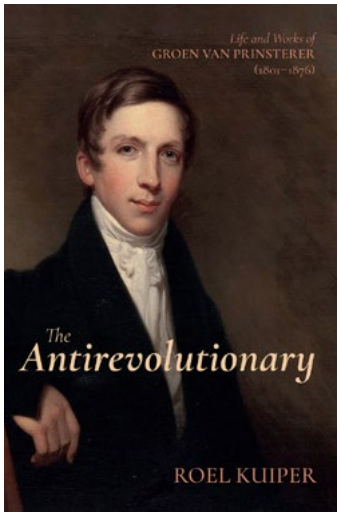
In January KLC turns 5! A great deal has been achieved in this time and recently at Society of Biblical Literature in Boston our Scripture Collective hosted four seminars and an amazing Annual Meal, booked to capacity at 90 people. Our Missional Hub also recently hosted a consultation in Toronto with some 36 people in attendance, organised and hosted by Cas Monaco.

As we celebrate our fifth birthday we are launching a fundraising campaign to increase the number of small, monthly donors towards our work. We covet your prayers, support and partnership in our work, and, if you are not already, we invite you to consider becoming one of our monthly – however small – donors. Such support provides an important baseline for our work as we move into the next five years of our first decade. You can find all the information you need on our website.

Wishing you and your families a blessed Christmas and Christ-filled 2026.

Craig Bartholomew is the Director of KLC.



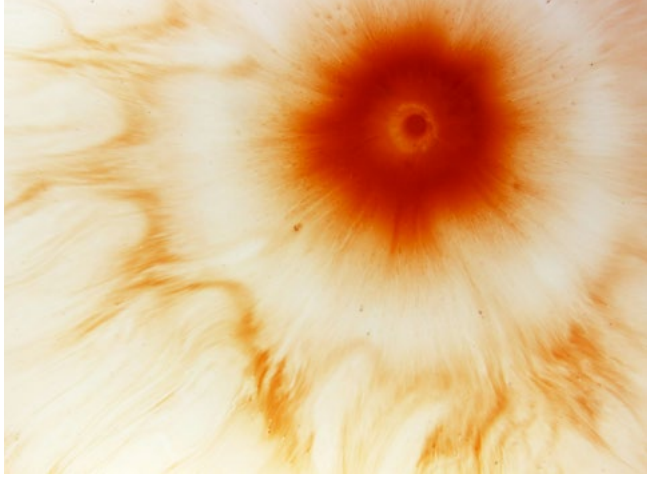


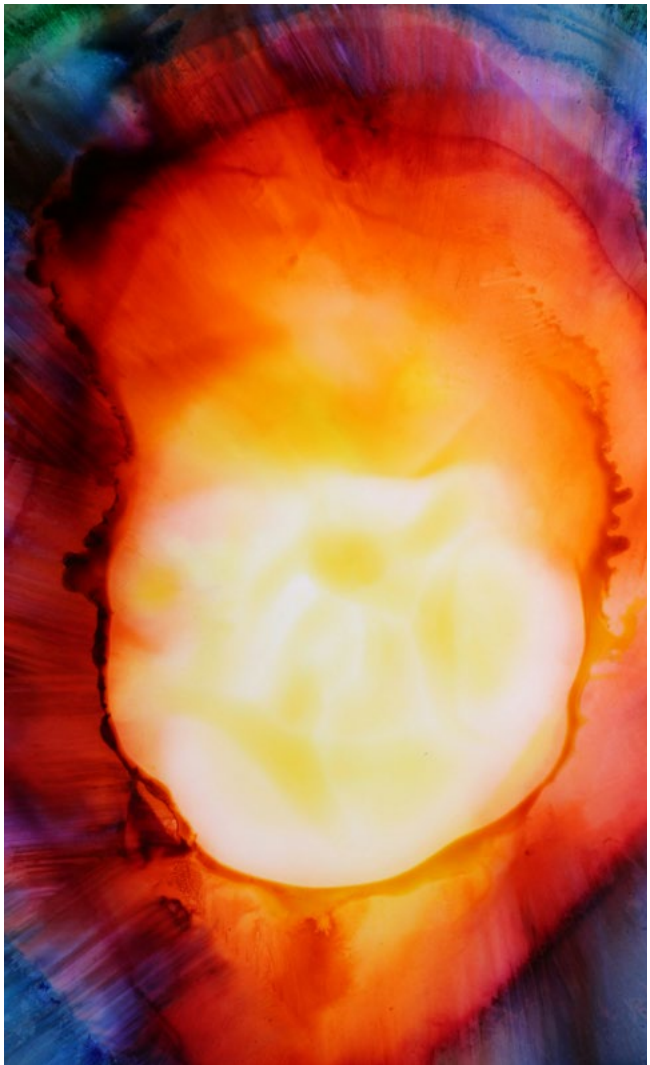
LET IN THE LIGHT

LAUREL WEEKS

Let in the light
Those little things which delight
Smell of grass
Lake like glass
Warm sunbeams
Dew that gleams
Gentle breeze
Sturdy trees
Let in the light
Gentle reprieve in your plight
Dancing leaves
Spider weaves
Quiet snow
Clear rainbow
Coarse pinecone
Smooth creek stone
Let in the light
Vivid dawn
Mist withdrawn
Crisp cold air
Moonlight fair
Chatting birds
Whispered words
They tell you – *Reclaim your sight*
Let in the light – Forsaking fright
Soar like a kite
Sing to the night –
'til darkness learns that right makes might
Let in the light

Laurel works as a project manager for a health and wellness company in the United States.





What are you Worth?

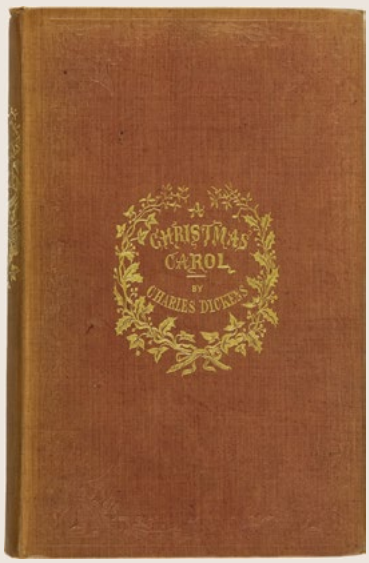
DICKENS'S *A CHRISTMAS CAROL*

JORDAN PICKERING

When someone asks, "What are you worth?" we know that they're asking after the cash value of all one's personal assets. It says a lot about our world that we should connect human value to material accumulation, that we should celebrate our most egregious wealth extractors as though they're winning at life.

Maybe like me you've formed an opinion of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* based on holiday TV movies and Disney animations. In the retellings, it's usually the story of a miserly man who needed a good dose of Christmas spirit to teach him to be less stingy and to learn to love tinsel and turkey and Tiny Tim. Reading the actual book makes me think that Dickens saw something of the Spirit who is really at work in Christmas,[1] and the regular glimpses of the generous, wasteful, redemptive Spirit of God make this book an unexpected pleasure to read and reread.

Scrooge made his fortune with his now deceased business partner, Jacob Marley, and he is uncompromising in his efforts to retain what he has won. He doesn't believe in days off or paying more than the minimum or extra lumps of coal for the heating stove. And he certainly doesn't believe in Christmas, rebuffing his only relative's dinner invite with a tirade on the humbug of the whole thing. When charity collectors cross his threshold on Christmas Eve to take donations for the less fortunate, he indignantly tells them that he refuses to make idle people merry, and that his financial support of the prisons and workhouses is plenty of provision for the social welfare of the poor. When the aghast charity folk protest that many people would rather die than having to enter such institutions, Scrooge answers, "If they would rather die, they had better do it and decrease the surplus population."



Despite his wealth, Scrooge's home is consistent with his attitude to the rest of life. It's cold, it's dark, it's empty, and his miserable supper of gruel never varies – not even on such a night as this. Readying himself for bed, his life is interrupted by a chilling intrusion, first from the ghost of his former associate Marley, and then three more spirits. Marley bemoans that in death he is cursed to roam the earth seeing what he refused to see in life. Scrooge's shocked response echoes the many who measure goodness on a balance sheet, exclaiming, "But you were always a good man of business, Jacob!"

> "Business!" cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

Three phantom teachers accompany Scrooge on a tour through his past,

1 He was a major celebrity in his day, but is now remembered alongside his many flaws, not least trying to have his wife committed to an asylum to cover up his affair with a younger woman.

present and future in a bid to secure his welfare – his *reclamation*, as the first spirit calls it.

The Ghost of Christmas Past confronts him with his early poverty, with the experience of being abandoned at school for the holidays by a family unable to care for him, and at his inability as a young man to set aside the security of wealth even for the one he loved – a reminder that even the worst of us are often *malformed* rather than inhuman.

The Ghost of Christmas Present shows him the consequences of his choice to love money and reputation over people, especially for the household of Bob Cratchit, his assistant. Scrooge is given a window into the Christmas festivities of this family and realises that he knows nothing of his employee's life, that he hasn't cared enough to know that Bob is throttled by poverty, that he has an ailing son for whom he is unable to provide the necessary care.

That Scrooge must undergo a conversion is foreshadowed in a remark of this Tiny Tim, as reported by his father upon their return from church. Mrs Cratchit asks if Tim behaved himself, and Bob reports that he was good as gold. He adds,

> "He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see."

It is, of course, Scrooge who must learn to see and walk.

When Scrooge is struck with concern for the dwindling fortunes of their son, he demands of the spirit, "Tell me if Tiny Tim will live!" The spirit tells him that he will not.

"No, no," said Scrooge. "Oh, no, kind Spirit! say he will be spared."

"If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, none other of my race," returned the Ghost, "will find him here. What then? If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

Scrooge is mortified at hearing his own words said back at him, and the spirit continues to heap woe on those who claim to know what and where the true surplus is, and who deserves to live and who should die. "Oh God!" the spirit continues, "to hear the Insect on the leaf pronouncing on the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust!"

He is visited finally by a terrible voiceless spectre who shows him a vision of the future. They happen across some businessmen, peers to Scrooge and men whose approval he so desired, remarking on the passing of an unnamed man. Scrooge is startled by their disinterest in this man's fate. He is then taken to the quarters of rag-and-bone people who admit to having stripped this man's corpse before burial, revealing meagre possessions that to Scrooge seem familiar. Suspecting the dead man might be him, he asks the spirit with greater desperation now to show him anyone who feels some emotion about this death, and the best that can be found is a couple who are relieved that this unmerciful man died before he could foreclose on their debt, buying them enough time to repay it.

His final stop is the graveyard where the spectre points him to a plaque that Scrooge now fears must be his own. He begins pleading with the ghost to give him an opportunity to change his fate, but it only points to him and back to the grave. Then he awakes.[2]

If you know the story, Scrooge is a new man, and finding it to be Christmas morning and not too late, he sets about changing each of the scenes he was shown. He sends the Cratchits the prize turkey in the butcher's window, and he attends his nephew's dinner after all. At work the next day he gives Bob a raise, indicating not just a lesson about Christmas spirit but the intention to live the remainder of the year by the spirit with which he was confronted.

The contrast between the old Scrooge – miserly, cheerless and certain that the less productive were merely a drain on the world – and the new Scrooge – generous, festive and concerned for the good of all – is a joyful picture of what

2 The excellent BBC film version has him not just *facing* his grave but re-entering the waking world by falling through it.

redirected lives (and loves) might do to a cold world. This in itself is a testament to the Christian mission to live an eternal life even in our temporal frame and so to bring life to the world around us. But it even echoes the Christian imperative that genuine change entails a passage *via the grave* into a resurrected life, a total exchange of old patterns and distorted wants for the life of Christ.

And what of the "surplus population"? Scrooge celebrates the idea that a "functioning member of society" is one who generates, profits, accumulates – even though resource accumulation and exploitation are so often virtually synonymous. Though the poor may be more humane and do more to create good society, "good men of business" are trained to see people as a resource or, worse, as a "surplus" drain on resources. In such a world, Christmas is a shopping holiday.

The true Spirit of Christmas rightly represents Scrooge's antithesis, however, because this is both the season of the richest of all becoming incarnate in the lowest of estates, and it's a celebration of the exuberant wastefulness of our God. God is in the business of showing mercy, showering grace, giving abundantly and sharing surplus. The true Spirit of Christmas would have us stop climbing our ladders to nowhere and rather step down into the world of the other. This Spirit gives no worth to the storing up of excess and calls us rather to share what we have in service of a better world.

> Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew ... Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

Dr Jordan Pickering is an Associate Fellow and the Director of Media at the Kirby Laing Centre.

A blessed Christmas and a fruitful new year from KLC!

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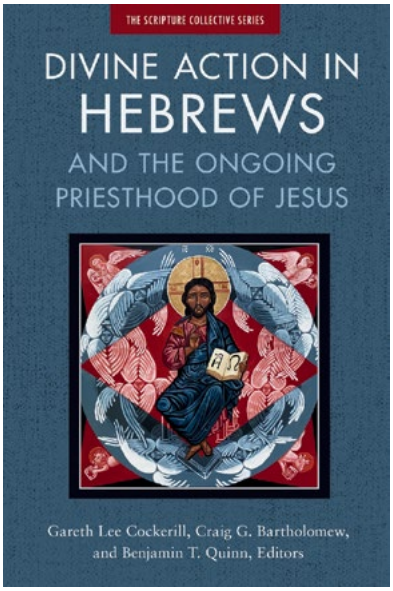

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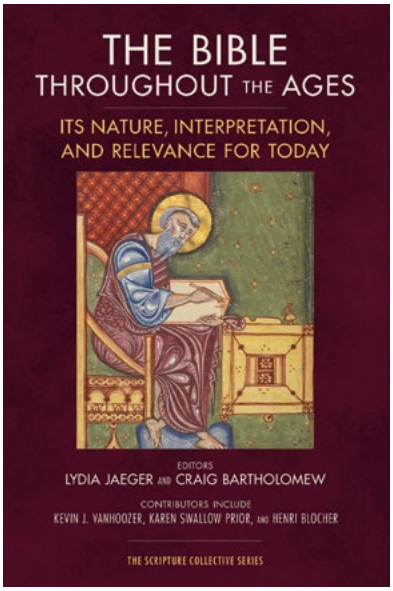

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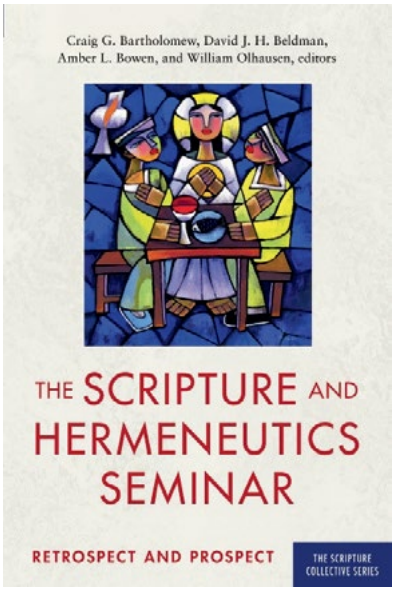

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