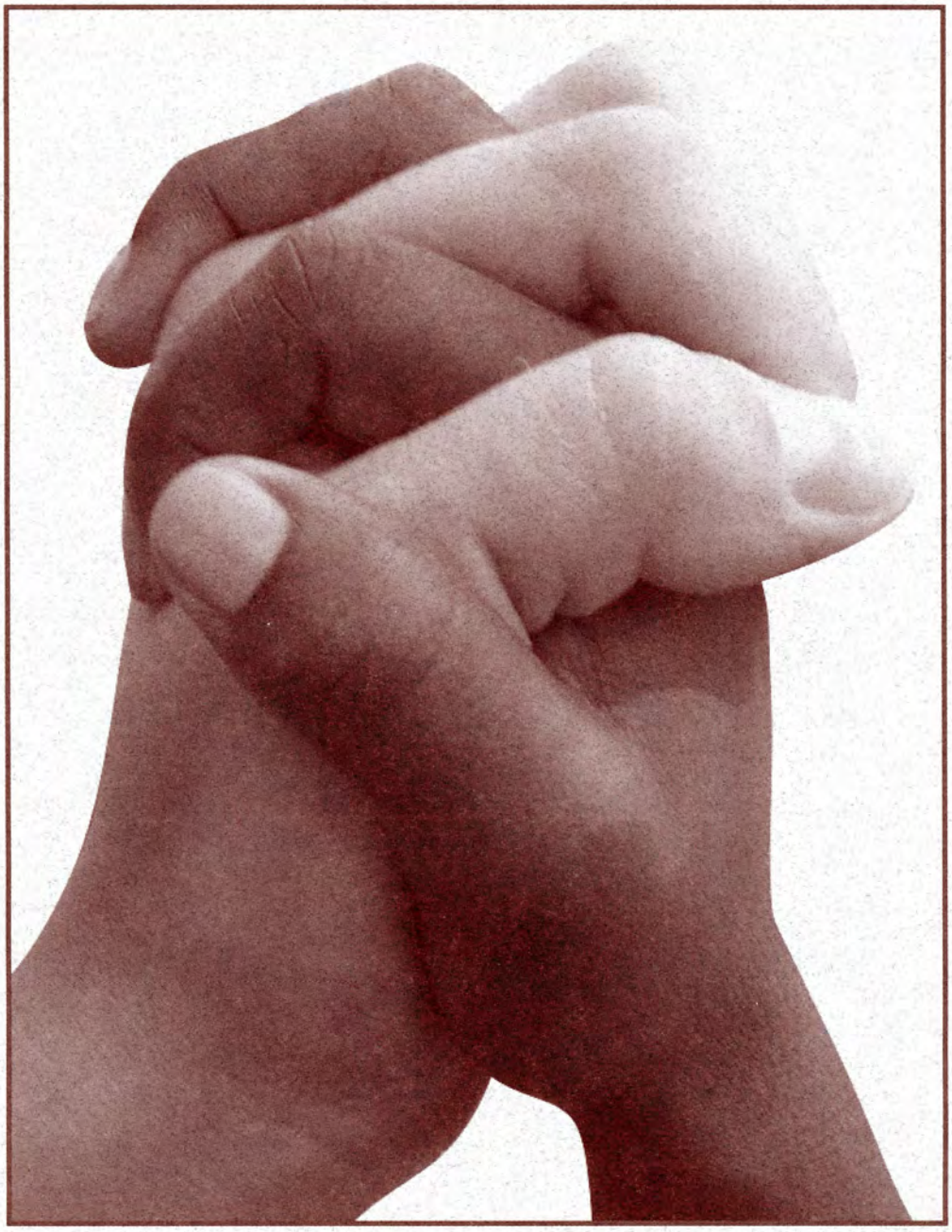
A forum for Christian school educators

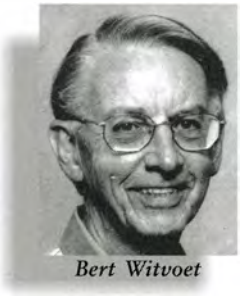
Christian Educators Journal

Volume 47 No.4 April 2008



Racial Harmony Reflects God's Tri-Unity

Editorial


Bert Witvoet

Racial Diversity: A Mixed Blessing

This issue is about racial diversity and racial harmony, a subject that for some of us has appeared on the horizon later in life. As far as I am concerned, they are issues that had no resonance in my earlier life. I grew up in a racially and ethnically homogenous society. I am talking about a medium-size town in mid-twentieth The Netherlands. Actually, I grew up in a Frisian environment, which represented less than a million people. Thus our life was securely restricted to the familiar sounds and sights of a group of Caucasians who called their mother "Mem" and their father "Heit." We lived in the greatest land on earth: Frieslân, if you believe the "national" anthem.

Little did we suspect that the world would soon become a global village and that populations would move around enough to destroy the cozy little world of like-minded, like-speaking and like-looking people. (Some years ago I saw a cartoon in a Dutch paper that pictured a mosque that had come to a town neighboring mine. An imam shouted from a minaret: "Frieslân boppe," (Friesland on top!) the equivalent of a line in the German national anthem: "Deutschland über alles." The cartoon was a clever play on the strangeness of a Muslim worship center in a small provincial area known for its churches.)

The Global Village phenomenon is putting many of us to the test. It no longer helps to think too narrowly about your own group — to nurture an us-versus-them mentality. The "them" just moved into the house next door, and the "us" is scattered all over the globe. A number of personal experiences shattered the uniformity of my life: the invasion of my country by German armies in 1940, the liberation and "friendly" invasion by Canadian troops, our immigration to Canada in 1950, travels to foreign countries made possible by flying across oceans, and the influx into North America of all kinds of nationalities. These kinds of experiences have resulted in a cultural, religious, linguistic mosaic that makes our society the patchwork that it is. Racial diversity and harmony is no longer a theoretical issue — it is a challenge that all of us face.

Integration versus segregation

Some of us are beginning to see racial diversity as a desirable characteristic. We like to talk about the rainbow characteristic of humanity. Our grandchildren sing: yellow, black and white...." We eagerly look forward to enabling our Christian schools to break out of the mold of ethnic and racial homogeneity so that we can experience what we know the new earth will bring about. Not that a greater racial diversity will produce peace on earth. We must not become too starry-eyed about that prospect. In fact, the more we experience racial diversity, the more problems we will encounter.

Just last week, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) voted narrowly to allow the opening of the first Afro-centrist school in the city. Black parents had complained about the fact that the public school fits only the few, and those few are not black. The drop-out rate among black high school students in the city is 40 percent. But not all black parents think that isolating their children from the surrounding society is a good thing. They talk about the struggle under Dr. Martin Luther King against segregation. "Martin Luther King wanted all children to succeed based on their character, not on the color of their skin," wrote one mother, who put the emphasis for success not on schooling but on parenting. "Black mothers should examine their lifestyles with regard to issues of drugs, gangs, early pregnancy and multiple pregnancies and absent fathers," she added in her article in a newspaper. But how can a public system that does not want to base morality on religious values even be helpful in such a difficult cultural milieu?

Network required

Christian schools emphasize the working together of Christian families, Christian community and Christian school. It takes an all-around effort to bring a young person to maturity. The Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools states the purpose of Christian education as follows: "The primary goal of the Christian day school consists in helping each student to grow into an independent person so that each can serve God according to his Word, is able and willing to employ all talents to the honor of God for the well-being of fellow creatures in every area of life." This lofty goal requires a network of support.

Christian schools are well equipped to help black parents, and parents of all races, achieve success in bringing their children to maturity. But not all children of all parents can be accomodated by Christian schools. In another statement from the Ontario Alliance, we read the following about "the child": "The primary institutions for the care of children and youth are the home, the church and the school.... The family *nurtures* the child ... the church *calls* each person to a commitment to the true worship of God ... the school *instructs* the child in preparation for a life of service in society." When these various components — nurture, calling and instruction — are in place, all children, no matter what their racial or ethnic background, have a very good opportunity to succeed.

That's not to say that differences in cultural milieus don't matter. As a columnist in favor of an Afro-centrist experiment pointed out: "Let the [black] children learn the story of the emperor Shaka, and glean the same lessons they might from a simi-

larly deep study of Napoleon." In response, a letter writer wrote somewhat sarcastically: "To really inspire young minds, teachers should also be sure to mention that the Shakas were cannibals." Ouch! Would it help if I pointed out that my Frisan forebears were cannibals, too, in the hoary days of ancient history? Besides, was Napoleon such a paragon of peace and justice?

Balanced approach

Racial harmony requires a high degree of spiritual maturity. And it requires a great deal of honesty on our part. I am sure that there are recesses in my mind that contain elements of racism, or should I say, ideas about cultural superiority? We often take our cues for success from secular Western ideas about intellect, wealth, status and looks. On the other hand, we can easily overstate those flaws in a rage of political correctness. We all nurture stereotypes about each other: whites versus blacks; blacks versus whites. We should at times lighten up and laugh about them.

Here is what another parent wrote in what has been a fascinating discussion about Afro-centrist schools:

"I've never attempted to teach my nine-year-old son that blacks are different from whites. And I've never attempted to teach him that they are the same. I hoped that by not fetishizing racial differences I might passively teach him to judge a man not by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character. And that worked for a while. At my son's racially mixed school the children laughed and played together. And I foolishly dreamed that in a generation we might learn to put humanism before tribalism.

"But in recent years, the Toronto District School Board has undermined this sublime understanding, first by mandatory anti-racism classes and now by an overt declaration that 'blacks are different from others and require a distinct school.' It's depressing to watch Dr. Martin Luther King's dream fade in favor of this shiny, expensive golden calf."

Open schools

For the sake of our Christian schools, I hope there will be greater racial and ethnic differences, because it's through actual contact with each other, that we learn to look beyond the stereotypes to the person we interact with. As long as we stay away from engineering the mix by artificially creating diversity, our schools should be open to all students that meet the criteria of belonging to a Christian family, a Christian church or community. Exceptions can be made for some that don't qualify, as long as the parents or guardians promise to uphold the aims of the school.

Let me slightly alter the comment from one parent. Instead of dreaming that "in a generation we might learn to put humanism before tribalism," we could say that we dream of learning to put Christ and his new humanity before tribalism.

BW

Prayer request

Pam and Charles Adams, both professors at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa, were in a serious car accident February 17. Pam is one of our panelists for the column "Panel Dot Edu"; Charles writes an occasional article. They both suffered acute head injuries. The latest update (March 2) tells us that Pam has regained consciousness and is slowly recovering. Charles is still in a coma but is breathing on his own. Please pray for a full recovery for Pam and Charles Adams. Readers can keep track of their progress by visiting the following website: www.caringbridge.org/visit/charliepamadams.

Christian Educators Journal

Published four times a year:
October, December, February, April

Reprint Policy:
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Racism, Revelation and Recipes:
Towards Christian Inter-cultural Communities

by Shiao Chong

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In 1960, in New Orleans, Ruby Nell Bridges, a six-year-old African-American girl, was the first person of color in the United States to attend, by federal law, an all-white school. Writing as an adult, Bridges recalled how federal US marshals had to escort her and her mother to school in order to protect them from a white mob protesting in front of the school (*Guideposts* magazine, March 2000). The mob was screaming at them. One of the protesters even had a black doll in a coffin. And for most of that school year, Ruby was a class of one, as none of the parents wanted their children in the same class with her. Only one lady among the all-white teaching faculty was willing to defy racism and be Ruby's teacher. Mrs. Henry, as Ruby calls her, became a life-long friend until this very day. Thanks to their courage, racially integrated schools in the US are the norm today.

Reverse racism?

Fast forward to 2008 in Toronto. The Toronto Public School Board debated about the proposal of introducing Afro-centric schools as an alternative program within the public school system. Afro-centric schools are schools with Afro-centric curriculum and ethos rather than Euro-centric ones. Proponents argue that such schools will have a positive effect on African-American children who suffer from the regular public school atmosphere because of systemic racism in society. Critics of the plan argue that it will, ironically, encourage segregation and racism, good intentions notwithstanding. Regardless of on which side you fall in this debate, the point is: issues of race and racism are never far from schools and education. Even after 48 years since Ruby Bridges walked through the front doors of William Frantz elementary school, we are still debating and dealing with the effects of racism and how to best dismantle it.

Even Christian schools

Racism, alas, is not far from Christian schools either. In 1965, the Board of Timothy Christian Elementary School in Cicero, Illinois, ruled that black children would not be allowed to attend the school. The Board's rationale was to protect these children from the criticism and violence of the conservative, all-white Cicero community. Despite protests from many in the community, including the Cicero Town Council, the Timothy school board stood by its decision. Three black families filed a lawsuit in US District Court, and won. The board's actions were judged to be discriminatory. However, the board did not budge. Eventually, in the early 1970s, the school sold its Cicero facilities and moved to Elmhurst.

> "Racism, alas, is not far from Christian schools."

Such stories remind us that it is easy for Christians, and Christian schools, to conform to society's patterns. In the spirit of trying to help us be transformed by renewing our minds through God's revealed Word, I will propose a biblical-theological perspective on racism and diversity before proposing a "recipe" for creating an interculturally inclusive community. Hence, my title: racism, revelation and recipes.

Lately I prefer using the term "inter-cultural" in order to differentiate from the politically-laden and, somewhat controversial, "multi-cultural." Furthermore, I wish to stress the intermingling, interaction and unity among the different cultures rather than simply the co-existence of multiple cultures. "Inter-cultural" also has the added benefit of including inter-racial or inter-cultural persons — people born of inter-racial and inter-cultural marriages, who are often neglected in discussions on diversity and racism, yet these people are increasing in numbers.

A biblical-theological perspective

1. Diversity, in and of itself, is a God-created good that reflects the unity (one-ness) and diversity (three-ness) of the Triune God.

Christian theologians have argued that the doctrine of the Trinity — God as one in being and three in person — can serve as a model for human society and community. God's oneness calls us to unity while his three-ness affirms our diversity and uniqueness. God's handiwork, his creation, also reflects this unity in diversity. The incredibly rich diversity of uniquely individual creatures — of plants, animals, rocks and trees — are all created, united and held together in Christ (Colossians 1:15-17). Even humanity was created with the diversity of male and female.

It must be stressed, then, that creational diversity is never a diversity of division — it is not differences that divide — but rather a diversity of unity — differences that are united in relationship to each other in love and obedience to God the creator. Thus, difference and diversity, in and of itself, is a created gift from God that reflects part of God's own nature. And the unity that Christ brings through his redemptive work is not a new unity but the restoration and

renewal of a unity that was already there at the beginning of creation — a unity that, alas, was disrupted by sin.

2. Ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, in and of itself, is not evil or sinful; rather it fulfills a purpose in God's plan for humanity.

Among all of creation's diversity, human cultural diversity — ethnic and linguistic difference — is also part of God's good creation. Sometimes Christians view cultural diversity as part of the fallen world, as a curse. The biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) is often used to justify such a negative view.

A closer reading, however, suggests that God's confusion of "tongues" or languages at Babel was not a curse but more a tool of God's grace. The central sin of Babel is not simply pride in trying to unify the world, even though that is implied. Rather, the Babel builders' sin is trying to define their corporate identity apart from God. To "make a name" (v. 4) for oneself means more than just becoming famous. Names in the Old Testament, and in the Bible in general, are supposed to capture the object's essence or character; you are what your name is, so to speak. So, making a name here also means they are trying to define who they are apart from God.

This "self-naming project" is linked to both their unification project and their building project — "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (v. 4 NIV). There's evidence to suggest that this story was composed with a glance towards the Babylonian empire. The land of Shinar (v. 2) is connected to Babylon. And the word "babel" in the Babylonian language means "gate of god." Thus, the name or identity that the Babel builders seek for themselves is to be "the gate of god," a heaven on earth. They desired to make their own perfect society by means of technology (verse 3) and architecture (verse 4) and, by implication, through political and religious means, similar to Babylon's empire building (an allusion that would not be lost on ancient Israelites) symbolized by Babylon's ziggurat towers that purport to be gateways to the gods. But "babel" in Hebrew is "confusion" or even, "folly." So Genesis mocks the Babylonians: they think they are building heaven on earth, but, in reality, they are confused and foolish.

Therefore, God's confusion of them is a means to prevent them from such foolish idolatrous identity-making projects as rejection of God's naming and identity giving. God's intervention and creation of diverse languages actually forced them to fulfill God's original command in Gen. 1:28 to "fill the earth and subdue it," something which these Babel builders were afraid to do. They were afraid of being "scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth," a phrase repeated three times (verses 4-9).

Human cultural and linguistic diversity, then, fulfills a redemptive purpose in God's plan, and is not a curse.

3. Diversity is distorted by the fall into sin, turning into a systemic ideological idolatry that breaks down community.

Racism, therefore, is a sin. But why, then, is human cultural and ethnic diversity often a source of division and even violence to each other? Human sin and rebellion have distorted the good creational diversity that God created. In Reformed philosophy, there is a concept of structure and direction. (See Albert Wolters' *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview,* Eerdmans, 1985, 49-52, 72-73.) Structure is the order of creation, what makes it the thing that it is. Anything in creation, however, can be directed either in obedience to God or misdirected in disobedience to God. Therefore, we can speak of structural diversity *and* directional diversity. Structural diversity is the diversity in creation — hence, human diversity (gender, ethnicity) is structural, is part of God's good creation. Directional diversity is the diversity of sin or redemption — hence, fallen human cultural diversity is often misdirected toward serving an idol that takes the place of God in the center of that culture. Such idolatries are always embodied in ideologies or worldviews that become systemic in a culture or a given community.

Thus, the fall has brought about directional diversity. Because of the fall, humanity tends to put asunder what God has joined together — God's diversified unity is constantly being torn apart by fallen humans into either division, fragmentation or disintegration (individualism, pluralism, relativism) or uniformity, fusion or homogeneity (collectivism, fascism, absolutism).

(Continued on page 27)

Purposeful Integration:
Lessons from Boston

by Erik Ellefsen and Timothy Wiens

Erik Ellefsen is principal of Chicago Christian High School and Timothy Wiens is principal of Boston Trinity Academy.

Every January, schools around the country scramble to plan events, hold essay contests, and re-work curriculum in an attempt to celebrate diversity during Black History Month. These attempts are usually planned last minute, forced into the schedule, and have more to do with having fun than truly experiencing the deep riches of a minority culture and perspective in the United States.

Like so many other initiatives in schools, programmatic diversity falls short while, on the other hand, systematic integration works. Schools that try to create patchwork programs have little impact on the broad experience, knowledge, and understandings of students. Such programs fail to bring about the desired returns of tolerance, acceptance, and empathy. However, systematic integration of students brings about the desired effects because of the nature of living, working, and being together in similar pursuits.

This was clarified by the United States Supreme Court over 50 years ago in the famous *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. In May of 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren stated: "We come, then, to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does.... We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment." [1]

This landmark case set off a wave of protest and reform throughout American public education. The reforms included integrating neighborhood schools, providing cross-city busing, and offering specialized programs — programs like Massachusetts' METCO, and the integration programs in Kentucky and Washington that were recently found to be reverse discrimination. On the other hand, the protests included blocking school doors, white movement away from areas of minority growth, and the development of private schools known as "segregation schools." Each of these reforms and protests posed great challenges to the constitutional concept of public education by states and local communities.

No real progress

Despite 50 years of reforms, the problem of inequality still exists and the lack of integration is clear. The achievement gap between minority students and white students in the United States has grown because of complex issues such as poverty, peer pressure, inadequate school resources, low-quality teaching, and family issues.[2] Minority students lack the co-curricular and accelerated offerings that their peers in majority white schools receive. And college acceptance and success amongst minority students continues to decrease.

In a recent summary of the Seattle and Louisville case, policy analysts Amy Wells and Erica Frankenberg state: "Despite the best efforts of caring educators, most segregated black schools were severely compromised by larger structures, which denied them the resources, stability, support, social networks, and status needed to give their students access to the best colleges and jobs. Today, although the blatant Jim Crow laws have been eradicated, there is strong evidence that the broader context of racial inequality in housing, labor, health care, and education — what sociologists call 'structural inequality' — has a Jim Crow-like effect on public schools, ensuring that they remain separate and unequal...."[3]

The challenge of integration

Educational research has shown many positive effects of integrated schools on both majority and minority populations. For example, white students noted being "different," having less fear of and more comfort with minorities, and displayed greater empathy and insight toward others due to their experience in integrated schools. Likewise, minority students expressed less intimidation in a predominantly white society and felt more comfortable competing with white adults.[4]

The research also shows the real difficulty of integrating students. Sociologist Jonathan Ogbu spent much of his latter years researching this struggle in Shaker Heights, Ohio. Within a diverse and well-to-do community and school system, the black and white student divide was more reflective of society at large than the local community. Author Irvin Hunt calls this "innocent self-segregation" in which "students naturally segregate themselves."[5]

Even with this shift in American public education, Christian schools have not responded with the same vigor to bring about racial integration through education. There are many Christian schools for minority students in urban settings and there are many traditional and primarily white Christian schools in the suburbs. However, there are few Christian schools truly dedicated to the integration of students and the promotion of greater racial and ethnic harmony.

During my time of research and study, I (Eric Ellefsen) have come across one clear

example of a Christian school that takes a systematic approach to integration. Boston Trinity Academy (BTA) is a school that was established with the purpose of integrating students from various races, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds. The specific vision with which this school was founded makes it a unique model for other Christian communities that desire to bring about lasting integration.

A new approach

The founding of BTA, an independent Christian middle and high school located in the heart of Boston, Massachusetts, was an intentional and purposeful event. In 2000, leaders in business, education, and church met to discuss the founding of an evangelical Christian school for the city of Boston. No evangelical high school existed within Boston city limits.

Two primary issues were foundational in the design and mission of the Academy. First, BTA was to be a Christian school of excellence. It was believed that too often Christian schools performed the perfunctory duty of providing education without the academic excellence and rigor necessary to prepare students for the best colleges and universities worldwide. As a result, the founders set out to establish a solid pre-college and college preparatory curriculum. In the high school, students would be required to take four years of biblical studies, history, and English, with the minimum requirements of three years of a world language, science, and mathematics. Likewise, all students would be required to take a minimum of four Advanced Placement courses to meet graduation requirements.

This meant that students would be taught the greatest literature from the Western tradition as well as from diverse traditions and perspectives. They would be challenged to take advanced mathematics courses such as AP Calculus AB and BC. They would fulfill requirements in physics, chemistry, and biology; and they would learn foundational elements of Christian theology, apologetics, and write a senior thesis to be defended in front of a panel of collegiate and university professors.

True diversity

The founders had an ideal that set them apart from others who started independent and Christian schools. Although other schools have implemented similar curriculums, rarely was such a curriculum created and effectively implemented in an urban school with a widely diverse student body. The second foundational tenet of Boston Trinity Academy's mission, therefore, was to construct a school of true diversity, serving students from Boston's inner city as well as its surrounding neighborhoods. It was to be a school that would meet the needs of business people living downtown who wanted their children in a school of academic excellence as well as the needs of students from low-income and often under-represented races and ethnicities. Boston Trinity Academy was not to be a school for the rich or the poor. Rather, it was to be a school for all — a school that served a student body diverse in every respect.

As the Academy was founded, it was clear to all that the mission and vision of such as school would not be easy to fulfill. However, with the support of the founders and a strong faculty and administrative team, the Academy has not only survived with the mission in tact, it has thrived and built upon that mission. Today, 200 students in grades 6-12 attend the Academy, with an ultimate goal of reaching an enrollment of 350 students. Basing their approach on small-school research, BTA believes it will impact lives more significantly if it intentionally implements its vision for this size population. BTA has been able to thrive, sending 100% of its students to the best colleges and universities, including Brandeis, Duke, Dartmouth, Johns Hopkins, McGill, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Texas, to name a few.

In the 2008-09 school year, over $1 million in scholarship aid will be given to students who would not otherwise be able to afford attending a rigorous independent Christian school. This aid enables the Academy to truly meet its mission of serving a diverse student body in an institution marked by academic rigor.

BTA provides some clear lessons on how to bring about systematic integration. First, the task must be part of the mission of the organization. Second, academic rigor and Christian distinctiveness provide a unity of purpose and work. Third, the school has clearly embraced diversity as a positive influence in the life of all students.

A missional approach

First and foremost, the mission of BTA drives its work. Everything that is undertaken is focused upon fulfilling the mission. The founding mission was and continues to be:

"BTA is to educate students on the basis of a Christian worldview and to promote high academic achievement and character development founded on the love of Jesus

Christ. Boston Trinity Academy actively recruits a student body that reflects Boston's richly diverse communities and is committed to the proposition that a strong faith culture and a demanding academic program can unite a student body with social, economic, and racial differences. In partnership with parents and the community, the Academy seeks to produce graduates distinguished by their intellect, integrity, service, and moral vision."[6]

There are some key points to this mission statement, but what makes this a living mission is that it is focused and purposeful. The Academy has specifically set forth a commitment to actively recruit students to reflect Boston's diversity. This commitment to reflect the make-up of a city allows BTA to be systematically diverse in order to promote integration.

Unity through rigor and uniqueness

Second, BTA chose to unify students through an academic program that is clearly rigorous, but specifically focused on the development of a Christian worldview based on Christian orthodoxy. Not only are students required to take a strong liberal arts program as described above, each student will also take a minimum of four Advanced Placement courses by graduation. The culmination of this academic program is the writing and presentation of the senior thesis on a cultural issue with a Christian response. Seniors finish their academic careers by working in an internship in order to learn how to integrate Christian faith and individual talents and abilities with career options.

Without this distinct rigor and uniqueness, the diversity would cause dissonance rather than unity. Because of the expected stress and intensity, students are expected to work together and use each other's strengths to succeed. Also, the focus on a clear Christian worldview provides students with the opportunity to discuss their understandings of Scripture, theology, content knowledge, and culture to develop greater clarity of God's world and their place in it.

Diversity as a strength

Third, BTA has fully embraced diversity as a positive influence in school life. Research shows that "all children carry the culture of their communities and families in their schools."[7] Because of the traditional nature of most schools, student diversity is often overlooked as a tool in building unity and promoting integration. However, BTA has recognized ethnic and gender diversity along with race.

BTA embraces its unique student body by celebrating culture throughout the life of the school. Chapel is a great example of the integration of a common faith, traditional Christian heritage, and culturally sensitive worship. The leaders of the school have specifically chosen to focus on Christian orthodoxy to integrate unique styles of worship to provide students an opportunity to worship Christ in ways that may be unusual to them. Another example is the yearly Culture Festival where students bring food from their cultural background to share at a feast with the entire student body and faculty. Along with this feast, students organize entertainment from the various cultures such as Latin Dance, Korean Break Dancing, and Jamaican music.

Likewise, BTA has chosen to embrace gender differences. Core classes, including science, history, literature, and biblical studies, are divided according to gender. This separation allows the school to embrace research on gender differences in learning, thus maximizing student learning and promoting student uniqueness. Chapel has also occasionally been divided to address specific gender concerns. And "Advisory" is a time each week when students meet with a faculty member of like gender to discuss academic, spiritual, and social issues. This gender focus has allowed the school to promote diversity to promote student self-image and achievement more effectively.

Christian schools and educators have been slow to develop systematic responses to the inequality of segregation. However, public school districts have taken the lead to use educational integration as a tool to bring about greater equality and opportunity for minorities in the United States. Whether the reforms have been successful or not, the public sector has been proactive in attempting to develop solutions to this great social dilemma.

If Christian schools desire to have a systemic impact on American society, Boston Trinity Academy provides a model for action.

Endnotes

[1] http://www.watson.org/~lisa/blackhistory/early-civilrights/brown.html Retrieved February 14, 2008.

[2] Romney, P. (Summer 2003). *Independent school 62:4*. "Closing the achievement gap? 5 questions every school should ask."

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[4] Wells, A., et.al... (September 2005). *Teachers college record 107:9*. "Tackling racial segregation one policy at a time: Why school desegregation only went so far."

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[6] www.bostontrinity.org Retrieved February 21, 2008.

[7] Arrington, E., Hall, D., & Stevenson, H. (Summer 2003). *Independent school 62:4*. "The success of African-American students in independent schools."

Teaching Ethnic American Literature in a Christian High School

By Tony VanderArk

Tony Vander Ark(tvanderark@hollandchristian.org) teaches English at Holland Christian High School in Holland, Michigan.

At some point every semester, in one form or another, the question comes up: *Why do we have to take* this *class?* It's a fair question for students to ask about any required course, certainly, and a question any good teacher should be ready to answer. But in the case of my course — Ethnic American Literature — I always wonder if the question reveals something deeper than the typical student gripe about another course they "*have* to take." Some students may wonder why the material we cover in this course wasn't covered the year before in their sophomore-year American Literature survey course (another fair question, worth discussing). But others ask the question for a different reason, one that cuts to the heart of my own thinking about why I *teach* the course. What I sense these students are really wondering is this: Why do *we* — as Americans, yes, but *white* Americans — need to take *this* course?

Whether they ask it out loud or not, I start answering this question on Day Two of the class. We start by reviewing together why we read literature at all, and why every school in America requires several years of English class: Literature can strengthen their facility with language, can stretch their understanding of the world, can sharpen their ability to analyze and to argue, to investigate and to imagine. But these arguments for reading *Hamlet* or *Huck Finn* are, in my view, also wonderful arguments for reading a poem by Langston Hughes or a short story by Sherman Alexie, and I want to make this point before any other. Students should be reading ethnic American literature for the same reasons they should be reading any great literature.

Knowing the other

But there are, in my view, several other good reasons to make this literature a part of the curriculum in Christian schools, not least of all those Christian schools marked by very little diversity in the student body (or the teachers' lounge). Many Christian schools in America today (including my own) are struggling to achieve greater diversity, in some cases after teaching several generations of a remarkably homogeneous student body; such schools recognize that the sense of community we rightly value does not reflect as well as it might the diversity of our neighborhoods or our nation, not to mention the multi-national, multi-lingual gathering of God's people that we read about in Revelation. One compelling reason to read ethnic American literature, then, is simply this: to get to know our neighbors better (a step that's surely a prerequisite to loving them). Henry David Thoreau once wrote that "the greatest compliment...ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer." Reading literature written by ethnic minorities in the United States is one way for those of us who know little of their lives to attend to their stories and to listen to what they may have to say to us.

Biblical truths

Those stories can also help students understand some of the foundational truths — including Creation, Fall, and Redemption — that Christian schools are trying to teach. To be sure, much of ethnic American literature speaks to the reality of sin: no student can read Frederick Douglass's account of slavery or view a postcard photograph of an Indiana lynching without grappling a bit more seriously with the reality of individual as well as structural sin. Douglass's portrayal of both individual slaveholders and the pervasive pro-slavery ideology of the time, for instance, rivals Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in dramatizing what Douglass calls "the fatal poison of irresponsible power."[1] But ethnic American literature can also make more vivid the meaning of redemption, of restored relationships, of *shalom*, if only by highlighting its obverse so forcefully. And much of this literature upholds a vision of human dignity and worth and an ethic of justice and reconciliation that resonates powerfully with (and frequently invokes) a Christian worldview.

Useful preparation

There are other good reasons to make multicultural literature a part of the Christian school curriculum, including some that are more pragmatic than philosophical. Such studies might, for instance, help students prepare for college (since most colleges today make multiculturalism a prominent part of both the curriculum and campus life) and, perhaps, even for college-entrance

exams. When my students took the ACT last year, for example, they had to answer a question about a Langston Hughes poem we had just recently discussed. To put the point more broadly, a basic level of "cultural literacy" (to use the phrase made famous two decades ago by E. D. Hirsch) today requires some knowledge of multicultural writers and texts.[2] At the same time, American corporations increasingly want employees who can work in diverse environments and respond to cultural differences in thoughtful, informed ways. Particularly in Christian schools like my own, where all but a few students are white, we do students a disservice, I believe, if we do not ask them at least to think seriously about issues of diversity before they head out into the wider worlds of college or workplace.

Cultural task

Yet the most powerful arguments for teaching ethnic American literature in Christian schools are, in my view, rooted in the calling we follow to be transformers of culture — and to shape students who will make that calling their own. I was struck recently by the titles of three essay collections by the Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, because they capture so nicely three of our highest goals as Christian schools: *Educating for Life, Educating for Responsible Action,* and *Educating for Shalom.* In the last of those books, Wolterstorff points to what he calls "the central question to which we [as Christian educators] must address ourselves: how can we cultivate in students the disposition to work and pray for shalom, savoring its presence and mourning its absence?" More specifically, he goes on to ask, "How can we cultivate in them the disposition to act justly and to struggle against injustice?" Wolterstorff suggests several ways to shape the character of students to make them empathetic seekers of justice, but he notes that one of the most effective ways is "by presenting ... the human faces and the human voices of suffering" — something that ethnic American literature seems supremely well-suited to do. Although reading literature certainly has its limits as a means of cultivating empathy for the other (some of which I'll speak to below), my hope is that it may help students take a step in the right direction, a step toward loving their neighbors as much as they love themselves, a step toward a lifetime of seeking justice.

A harder question

Although I feel passionate about *why* I'm teaching this course, the question of *how* to teach it remains for me an open — and at times deeply challenging — question. One dilemma was noted above: should ethnic American literature be taught as part of the American literature survey (at the risk of presenting it always as "marginal" to the mainstream), or as a separate course (at the risk of "segregating" it altogether)? Another uncertainty stems from the nature of the literature itself. Native American creation stories or trickster tales, for instance — lacking clear origins, authorship, or even written texts, and deeply rooted in particular cultures and worldviews — cannot be taught in the same way one might teach a Shakespeare sonnet or a Hemingway short story. But these are questions more about theory than practice. Questions about practice, on the other hand, — questions about what actually happens in the classroom — concern me much more. In short, what I care about most is how students respond to this course, and it's their responses over the past few years that have highlighted several unique challenges in teaching ethnic American literature in a Christian high school.

Simplistic attitudes

I think one such challenge comes, oddly enough, from the fact that many of my students are sincere Christians who interpret much of life with the lens of ethics and morality. These students are eager to do what's right, and they are often deeply upset by the realities of racism we encounter in some of the course material. Their responses, however, sometimes fail to acknowledge the complexities and contradictions of the situations — or the people — we read about; they want a picture of human nature that's black and white, good guys and bad guys, and a version of sin that's more about individual wrongdoing than the messy reality of structural sin. As for solutions to the problem of injustice, these students are eager to embrace "color-blindness" as the answer to any residual racial conflict in our society, even as they are eager to think of such conflict largely as a thing of the past, as something their parents' generation dealt with but their own generation has "put behind them." (They also, not surprisingly, prefer the ringing eloquence of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech to the more biting Christian critique of King's later speeches on poverty and war.) While I genuinely appreciate the sincere faith and good-hearted enthusiasm that such students bring to my class, I also want to complicate and deepen their thinking about these issues, to help them recognize the ways that sin has muddied our thinking about race and ethnicity and continues to trip us up in our struggle for shalom.

Active resistance

There are other students, of course, who don't bring any enthusiasm at all to class, who never get past seeing the course as a graduation requirement and the course themes as something they can dispense with on exam day along with their notes. But

equally troubling to me are those students — at least a few each semester — who actively *resist* the course, who make it clear by their actions and attitudes (if not their words) that they have no interest in thinking seriously about the lives of others, if that thinking might somehow implicate or complicate their own lives. Other teachers of multicultural courses and social scientists have encountered and explored similar attitudes.[3] They have noted that students who feel such resistance often enact it through "challenges to the teacher's authority, challenges as to the relevance of the course, silence, absenteeism, and other behaviors demonstrating an unwillingness to learn" — all of which I have encountered, on occasion, in my own teaching of multicultural literature.

Although only a handful of students each year show such resistance to the course, I take their feelings very seriously, recognizing that their response reflects an attitude that some other less vocal students (and many Americans today) share: a deep defensiveness, even anger, when issues of race or inequality are raised, and a sense that those voicing such issues are "making something out of nothing" or dredging up past wrongs for present gain. Again, my hope is that encountering "the human faces and the human voices" of multicultural literature might encourage these students to put aside some of their defensiveness, might break through their walls of resistance. But I also recognize that neither a teacher nor a text can force such students to open their eyes to those faces, or their ears to those voices, if they choose to keep them closed.

Minority problems

One more group of students has given me pause in teaching Ethnic American Literature in a predominantly white high school, and that is the small number of students who are *not* white. In my own school, when I do have a minority student in class, he or she is usually the *only* minority in class. This situation at times inhibits white students in terms of what they will say in class discussions, and that more often puts the minority student in a potentially difficult position. Recently, one Asian-American student talked with me privately about how she and some other minority students felt uncomfortable even taking a course with the title "Ethnic American Literature," as if the course itself turned a spotlight on them when they often simply wanted to blend in or disappear. Another student described the pain she felt sitting in my class (even in an altogether "polite" discussion) next to students who had said terribly racist things to her years earlier — things that they, it's worth noting, would probably not remember saying, but which she remembered quite vividly. To be sure, students might feel some of the same things in Physics or Phys Ed class, and I don't think that every minority student in my class feels the same awkwardness or anxiety. On the contrary, some seem quite comfortable speaking in class about race issues in general or about their own sense of racial identity. Furthermore, the white students in my class rarely if ever say anything that is intended to exclude or alienate minority students. But daily indignities, intended or not — the ignorant and hurtful remark, the look that says, "give us the minority point of view" — certainly put an added burden on the shoulders of students who are sometimes seen by classmates as representative "ethnic Americans."

> "One compelling reason to read ethnic American literature, then, is simply this: to get to know your neighbor better."

That particular burden is, I've come to realize, difficult for many of the white students in my class to understand or appreciate fully. It would also be difficult for many of the minority students to explain it fully, I'm sure — and, of course, it isn't their responsibility to do so.

A difficult challenge

When I first proposed the course I'm now teaching, I believed that reading ethnic American literature might enable my students to bridge those gaps, to follow the famous advice of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird:* "If you just learn a single trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it." While I still love Atticus' lesson, I've come to see his simple "trick" as far more complicated than I once believed — not only for high school students, many of whom are still trying to figure out their *own* feelings and their own place in the world, but also for many of the adults around them. I've realized, in a broader sense, that the work of "transforming" this particular aspect of our culture will take a lot more than stories and poems, that literature can't replace the hard work of breaking down the barriers that still divide us in our schools, our neighborhoods, our communities, even our churches.

But stories and poems *do* have a place, I'm convinced, in equipping students (and all of us) to do that hard work. It's no accident that Jesus used stories to communi-

dent that Jesus used stories to communicate the meaning of God's kingdom to his disciples; if Christian schools are serious about preparing students for service in that kingdom, then one of the ways they do so should be to teach the stories of ethnic American literature.

Planting seeds

I always end my course with an essay exam that includes an opportunity for students to reflect on the course as a whole. And as I read those essays, I take notes on what I want to do differently the next time I teach the course, what readings or writing assignments or test questions I should re-think and revise. But I also think again about how I can come closer in this course to reaching those lofty goals Wolterstorff outlines — how I can "cultivate in students the disposition to work and pray for shalom," how I can "cultivate in them the disposition to act justly and to struggle against injustice." I haven't yet come up with the final answer to that question, and I'm sure I never will; but it helps to remember that *cultivation* requires *seeds*, and at the very least my course is planting seeds in students' minds and hearts. Once in a while I even see evidence in those exam essays of some seeds taking root:

"This semester I found myself asking questions that I would have never thought of before.... [T]his class makes my brains go crazy...."

"The whole unit on _____ was extremely thought provoking for me and continues to be today.... Everywhere I go. I just keep thinking of these things we talked about...."

"We are only a small part of a million-piece puzzle and I get upset when my classmates think that we're the main photo and the rest of the world is the border."

When I read such reflections, I'm reminded again why I teach this course, and I'm reassured that at least some of what I want my students to "keep thinking" about will remain with them, even if only as seeds, long after they finish high school. While "planting seeds" may not be enough of an answer for students' perennial question —"Why do we have to take *this* class?" — it's enough to keep me teaching it.

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"Literature can't replace the hard work of breaking down the barriers that still divide us...."

Endnotes:

[1] Douglass, ch. 6, par. 2.

[2] Hirsch popularized the phrase especially in two books, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987) and *A Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (1988). The two books (along with Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*) emphasized the importance of a traditional core knowledge base and a "back to basics" approach to education that many critics saw as an attack on multiculturalism; one typical rejoinder was a volume entitled *Multi-Cultural Literacy: Opening the American Mind* (Graywolf Press, 1988).

[3] For a few good examples of such explorations, see Beach; Ruzich; Higginbotham. For the quotation that follows, see Ruzich 300.

Re-Reading the Genocidal Narratives in the Bible

by Peter Schuurman

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There is an ancient Jewish commentary that says when Pharaoh and his soldiers were in their death throes among the reeds of the Red Sea, the angels in heaven were lamenting. Apparently the hosts of heaven cry out when any of God's creatures are injured and wasted — even when they are members of a rival religion.

This is a curious addition to our normal reading of the text. Usually we are so pleased to see the poor Hebrew slaves freed from their bondage and oppression that we do not give a second thought to the Egyptian villains. But in the light of Jesus' teaching to "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us," are we not compelled to consider the life and health of every creature on the planet — even if they are of an alternative religious persuasion?

The more you read some of the early narratives in the Old Testament, the more uncomfortable it gets. Not only are villains slain by the sword; hosts of women, children, and animals get slaughtered as well. The worst part of it is such atrocities seem to be commanded by God.

Take Deuteronomy 7:1,2, for one example, a passage that describes Hebrews preparing to enter Canaan. It reads: "When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations.... Then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them; show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them ... smash their sacred stones ... burn their idols in the fire." The people of God are commanded to totally destroy their neighbors. "Show no mercy," they are told, a direct contradiction to not only the "love mercy" part of Micah 6:8, but also the "do justice" and "walk humbly with your God" parts.

Think of the familiar story in every children's Bible — the battle of Jericho. Would you read to your children before they go to sleep for the night the text of Joshua 6:21 where it says: "They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it — men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys"? Actually, your kids will probably sleep fine. They seem to be able to accommodate these things somehow. But can you?

> "Make no treaty with them, show them no mercy"

God of genocide?

Here is the question I want to explore a little today: how do we reconcile the God of love and self-sacrifice we know in Jesus Christ with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who requires his people to annihilate not just military installations but masses of civilians as well? How do we see these texts in the light of current debates on inter-religious dialogue and politics? If Christians want to be quick to point out the horrible jihads prescribed in the Quran, they ought to first get a handle on the holy wars prescribed in the Bible.

One more example. In I Samuel 15:3 the priest Samuel gives Saul these instructions: "Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys." And then after, when Saul failed to raze the community to the ground, Samuel says in verse 18: "[the LORD] sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out.' Why did you not obey the LORD?"

This is not any ordinary ethnic cleansing. The Amalekites are being massacred for their faith, not their nationality (although the two were inseparable at the time). This happens not long after the Israelites are given the commandment "Thou shalt not kill."

Does this not grind against everything you know to be true about your Christian faith? How can this be integrated into our understanding of Christian inter-faith relations? Or should it?

We could just skip over these texts and hope students don't wake up to the contradiction and ask difficult questions. But you can't hide the texts. I taught World Religions at a public university and one student wrote a paper coming to this conclusion: "Genocide is defined as the mass extermination of human beings, especially of a particular race or nation. Certainly the passages above would seem to represent such an act of genocide." Many of these students, reading through the Old Testament, were absolutely revolted by the literature. They see God commanding a Holocaust, a Rwanda, or a Bosnia. They see what they cynically have believed for years: religion legitimating a crime against humanity.

When acclaimed Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann was asked how he would preach on passages such as these, he replied quite simply by saying, "I

wouldn't." In a recent interview he said, "I can't get away from the fact that the text shows God as being saturated with violence."

Engaging the texts of terror

I want to examine a few commentaries on the subject that try to ease the extreme tension these texts raise for many students of the Bible. I personally do not see any clear-cut way to connect these texts of terror with the call to justice of the prophets, or more deeply yet, the self-sacrificing neighbor love of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, I will pursue what some theologians have said — theologians who consider the Bible to be the trustworthy, inspired Word of God. You will notice that some thinkers describe these texts as entirely consistent with the rest of the Bible. Others see them as inconsistent with the main thrust of the Bible and requiring significant contextualization. Each offers a different window into this complex interpretive landscape.

Let us begin with Craig Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen in their book *The Drama of Scripture*. They would consider there to be more consistency between these passages and the life of Jesus than we first realize. This is due to two things: first of all, our cultural position today, with its high degree of tolerance for immorality and unbelief; and, secondly, the Hebrews' cultural position, in the context of horrible wickedness and idolatry and the Hebrews' calling to be holy. Say Bartholomew and Goheen:

The behavior of the Canaanites reaches such deep depravity that judgment, when it does come at the hands of the Israelites, is long overdue.... It is thus in the context of the whole struggle with heathenism that we are to see this terrible call to drive out the heathen nations.... Today it is hard for us to take idolatry and its dangers this seriously. But a key to understanding the command to clear Canaan of the Canaanites is to recall God's holiness and to be reminded of just how much is at stake in the Israelites' remaining faithful to the LORD. (78, 84)

In this view, the divine diagnosis of the cancer of sin requires radical surgery. There was no other way to settle the land. Like Hiroshima, perhaps, the killing spree serves a greater end.

> "We could just skip over these texts and hope students don't wake up to the contradiction."

Ida Glasner, in her book *The Bible and Other Faiths* takes a similar position. She says the backdrop of these terrible texts was a brutally barbaric culture with child sacrifice, sacred prostitution, snake worship — it was despicably crude. Additionally, she tries to soften the passages by pointing out that the Israelites did not commit wholesale slaughter. Destruction was only carried out in cities and in a limited amount of territory. Israel did accept simple surrender (Joshua 2,9-10:19), and Joshua 8:33 shows there were aliens living among God's people, so they must have been more lenient than the texts let on. Still, like Bartholomew and Goheen, the issue is fundamentally about Israel's call to be a holy nation, and God's judgment and holiness "demands the destruction of the unholy." (104)

Rodney Stark in his book *Discovering God* (Harper, 2007) goes one step further than Glasner to soften the horror. He says Judges 1:21, 27-36 and Joshua 13:2 show there was a long list of cities the Israelites never conquered. In fact, "the best of the archaeologically informed historians now believe that the Jews did not conquer Israel after their long stay in the wilderness, but settled peacefully."

This raises an obvious problem. Doesn't this undercut the trustworthiness of the Bible? Stark says no. There are enough passages to support the archeological evidence, and, besides, what is important is not historical accuracy but the story of the Jewish discovery of Yahweh. This certainly eases the tensions, but why even *suggest* a genocidal conquest? And can we be selective in our choice of texts regarding the settling of Canaan?

Canonical pluralism

Although it is true that our generation is soft on sin and allergic to anything that smells of judgment, asserting the holiness of God does not resolve the issue. Genocide — especially the wholesale slaughter of children — seems unpardonable, not to mention unjustifiable. Brian Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, for example, strike out on a different course in their book *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be* (IVP, 1995).

They start off by challenging the reader: "Many Christians, of course, are taught very early that one should never articulate one's discomfort with, much less objection to, a biblical text. No matter what we think of the passage in question, we are to simply suppress our honest response and submit to the text as authoritative. But this is quite literally impossible. It is analogous to the desire for the good old days before the crisis of postmodernity. Once you become aware, however, through actual engagement with the text of Scripture, of problems with the text, you can't simply fall back on a naïve assertion of biblical authority... [and]

remain in the relative safety of well-entrenched 'orthodox' theological abstractions. But the Bible often shatters what we take to be orthodoxy...." (176)

Walsh and Middleton go on to suggest what they call "canonical pluralism." Using Walter Brueggemann and Phyllis Trible, they state that the Bible contains a "strange undisciplined inclusiveness" — that is, it has both Israel's grand story but also "stories and voices from the margins that do not sit well in the metanarrative." The Bible has uncensored accounts of victims of its own dominant story — accounts which are a "dissenting, counter-experience to Israel's credo." These accounts "keep the story open" and function as an "inner-biblical critique" of a triumphalistic reading. There is "implicit plot conflict or tension" that cries out for resolution. In this way, the Bible is "not a self-enclosed book of theoretical ideas but a covenantal text which calls for our response to the God revealed therein." It is a "drama requiring our enactment" or improvisation.

In other words, when we encounter texts that challenge the overwhelming ethical thrust of the Bible, we must see them as crying out for prophetic response in our own lives. We must, as a people who know of exile, suffering and God's rescue, empathize with the victims and demonstrate compassion in our own lived response to the text.

This perspective honestly acknowledges the serious problem we have in these texts and provides a reading that honors the suffering love of God. The difficulty with Walsh and Middleton's view is that it calls into question the biblical tradition. If the gruesome acts of the early Israelites call for our compassionate response, how come it's not in the text? Are we embracing a canon within the canon, like "red-letter Christians" who interpret the rest of the Bible through the texts they consider paramount? Are all texts, then, equally the word of God?

The Christological principle

In the book *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Zondervan, 2003) C.S. Cowles says that there is indeed a canon within the canon and that is nothing less than Jesus Christ. We have to see all Scripture through the new thing that God does in Christ. Jesus supersedes what Moses and Joshua said in their day. We can see a spiritual truth in the Torah — that we must do spiritual warfare with evil in order to enter the promised land of God — but not literal truth for application today. God progressively reveals himself in the Bible, lisping his will to us according to our ability. Moses and Joshua "tell the truth as they understood it," (39) but the full picture of God is in Jesus Christ.

> "There is simply no hospitality in our world without violence."

The difficulty here deepens the difficulty with Walsh and Middleton's work. In *Show Them No Mercy* other theologians respond to Coles, saying that Jesus accepted the Old Testament as God's Word — he said not even a jot or tittle can be subtracted from it. Can we pit Scripture against Scripture? And if Jesus is so meek and mild, why does he tear a strip off the Pharisees, clear the temple with a whip, and then in Revelation 19 we see, among other violent events, a rider on a white horse named the "Word of God" with a sharp sword coming out of his mouth which he uses to strike down all the nations? The apocalypse shows armies are killed by the sword and people are thrown into a lake of fire. It sounds a lot like Joshua.

The critics of Cowles remind us that we should not be incredulous that God commanded the Canaanites be killed. We should stand amazed that by his grace anyone is allowed to live. But are we not back where we started: a picture of God as a vicious tyrant? The question comes back: Is the God of Joshua the same as the God of Jesus? Cowles ends up leaning towards the territory of ancient Marcion — deepening the gap between testaments. Marcion of Sinope, Turkey (ca. 110-160) was a Christian theologian who was excommunicated by the church as a heretic because he rejected the whole Hebrew Bible and most of the New Testament. He said the God of the Hebrew Bible was a lesser creator god who had created the earth but was the source of evil. He compared this righteous and wrathful God with a second God of the Gospel who is only love and mercy and who was revealed by Jesus. His canon consisted of eleven books: his own version of the Gospel of Luke, and ten of Paul's epistles.

God's long road to hospitality

It has been said that the postmodern turn increases our awareness of violence and suffering in the world and heightens our attention to victims. Is there a way to address these concerns and maintain some continuity in the narrative of Scripture? Hans Boersma's book *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Baker, 2004) offers one possibility. Boersma reminds us that we are talking about the doctrine of election and why God chooses some for life and some for death. "The question of di-

vine violence is one that I believe cannot be avoided," he says. "There is simply no hospitality in our world without violence."

The best way to navigate this question, he says, is to understand the concept of "preferential hospitality"— another way of saying God has a preferential option for the poor. He picks the wandering Aramean, Abraham, as his vehicle through whom he will win back his creation. This selection chooses some for the sake of all — it's election for the sake of a mission that embraces all nations. (84)

"Our postmodern eyes," says Boersma, "are perhaps trained to see the violence of the cross more clearly than its hospitality." And likewise with Israel's atrocities. The choosing of Israel is the choosing of a nation of slaves — a poor, oppressed group of people for the sake of the world. Hospitality for all nations will not be fully realized until the end of time when the resurrection becomes effective for all creation.

There are no special favors in this. "God's preferential hospitality towards the poor means that Israel can never use her election to claim some kind of absolute and inviolable status with God," reminds Boersma. "Israel is not beyond divine punishment and even abandonment."

To be sure, the cross of Jesus Christ does reveal the hospitality of God in a way never seen earlier in the Bible. God's embrace is expressed more openly and extended more universally than ever before. There is indeed some "progressive revelation" over time that makes God's character more clear to the world. Furthermore, after Christ's resurrection God elects a church made from all nations rather than just one nation, Israel. In this light, genocide can nevermore be justified as the calling of the church.

Boersma does not wrap up all the loose ends, though. He does not explain away the slaughter of children but leaves the matter in the realm of judgment on sin and the protection of monotheism. "Why violence at all?" he asks. "Is the violence really worth it?" He answers his own question by saying rational reflection will never satisfy. Violence intrudes our own minds and hearts. It is impossible to achieve 100 % pure hospitality.

He concludes: "It is only the light of the pure hospitality awaiting us that can deal with the darkness of all violence and inhospitality that we now experience. In the end it is less a matter of rationally justifying than of having the courage to live with the violence that accompanies hospitality. The courage to denote particular actions — God's choice of Israel and his involvement in the cross — as hospitality awaits future eschatological justification."(95)

> "He does not explain away the slaughter of children."

Ultimately, this view does not satisfy all our questions about suffering, violence, and its victims. It does see continuity in the character and revelation of God, however, and that gives us a way forward theologically. What is significant is that Boersma focuses on preferential hospitality as the heart of God and the violence as a necessary part of it, rather than just as necessary to his holiness or justice. The seeds of the love of Christ are sewn more clearly in Boersma's view.

Another way to approach the issue is to say the juridical (legal court) analogy — that this is a matter of sin and punishment — is conditioned by a medical (hospital) analogy — the healing of the nations and all creation. The requirements of God's holiness are set alongside the requirements of God's hospitality and left in tension until the last days.

All of the writers examined here have contributed to our understanding of the texts. God's holiness, Israel's mercy, the diversity of the canon, the centrality of Christ, and God's preferential hospitality — all these concepts help bring meaning to otherwise deeply troubling texts. The discussion above offers some starting points for faithfully engaging the text and even pursuing some application for our lives today. We need to continually re-read the Bible and have it challenge us.

I will always remember the words that Phyllis Trible provided in a discussion of these texts. She said that like Jacob and the angel, you sometimes have to wrestle with a text until it blesses you. With some texts, the struggle is intense and prolonged.

Grade Inflation: An Exaggerated Response to Exaggerated Grades

by Jim Rauwerda

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Education morphs. The chalkboard becomes the dry-erase board, the slate becomes the computer, and phonics becomes whole language and reverts to phonics again. Another trend that seems to have entered our educational system is grade inflation.

To begin with, grade inflation is a bad word. It's like death. We don't always want to confront something so unpleasant as "being dead" head on, so we change the term: passed away, fallen asleep, is deceased. I like the expression "...went to see the Lord." Note, however, that not all "bad" words are interchangeable. If someone asked, "How did Rick do on his test?" and I replied, "He went to see the Lord," (meaning he had fallen asleep during the test), I suspect that my answer might be accurate and a form of miscommunication at the same time.

Thus, we should perhaps change the term for that naughty grade inflation — something that would make it more digestible. With a little thought, we could probably come up with a page full of wonderful synonyms, such as *appreciated evaluation*, *rank compensation*, *achievement value*, and so forth. Personally, I'm gravitating toward "assessment contradiction," but I'm open to suggestions and can be persuaded otherwise.

There. That was easy. Now it doesn't sound like the teacher is needlessly making Marcie sound as if she received a higher grade than she deserved. No, there is merely a contradiction between the assessment and the achievement. While she earned a "B," her assessment contradiction garners her an "A." Congratulations. Now we are making progress!

Palatable contradictions

Since such contradictions occur everywhere, we need not feel bad. Taxes are sometimes called gifts, and failure is often called opportunity. To quote a witty email on such paradoxes and contradictions, "We have more degrees but less sense; more knowledge, but less judgment; more experts, yet more problems; more medicine, but less wellness." I'm not so sure that life's contradictions are as problematic as they seem to be, but the point is contradiction is everywhere. If misery loves company, then so does "assessment contradiction."

Now that we have accurately defined the problem and put it in context, we will be able to discuss the matter without recoil. Still, this is a bit tricky — especially when a student does well, but does not achieve perfection — like the one who deserves an "A-" or (gasp) a "B." The assessment contradiction allows such a student to receive an "A." It sounds a bit like grade inflation, but it's much more palatable — like butter on toast. It's still toast — it just tastes better with a pat of lard.

I can hear the teacher say at parent-teacher conferences, "Although Jackson got seven wrong on the fifty point test, his assessment contradiction grade is an 'A'." I imagine the glassy-eyed parents sitting motionless until they hear the word "A." Then, they breathe and everything is as dandy as a donut.

Consider inflation

Yet there is more to this problem than terminology, and changing a few words doesn't change the problem. Thus, we must attack the paradigm that created this issue in the first place. As daunting as this is, it is not impossible. We must roll up our sleeves and consider this contradiction.

One place to look is in the world of economics, specifically monetary inflation. In the United States there are groups of people who have used inflation as a reason to eliminate the penny. They say it is worthless. They say it costs more than a penny to mint a penny, and, therefore, it is not cost-effective. Perhaps those groups have a point, and perhaps educators could learn from such solutions.

With that in mind, educators might consider eliminating the "D" grade. Some would contend that it is a worthless grade — only one notch better than failure itself. Some would say that awarding such a grade is not assessing, but damaging the self-esteem of the student. This, of course, is a valid point and the "D" obviously becomes a candidate for deletion.

To compensate for the loss of the "D" at the bottom of the scale, perhaps we could add a grade at the top. While there are many directions we could go — like an "O" for outstanding or an "S" for super, or even altering all of the letters in the scale — I propose we do something radical: we revive the obsolete letter "eth," and place it one notch higher than an "A."

Valuable addition

(For those who are not orthographists or who weren't literate in the 1100s, eth [pronounced "eth"] is symbolized by "ð" and makes the *th* sound in *bother*. Eth was part of the Old English "alphabet" along with Þ, Æ, and some other irrelevant letters that don't appear in modern typescript. Yes, "ð" was ironically eliminated over time, just as the "D" could possibly be eliminated from the grading scale.)

This pastiche usage is not without precedence. "ð" was at one time a functional English letter, and there is no reason it cannot be revived. Indeed, letters have come and gone. Updating the letters of the grad-

ing scale could be seen as just the latest revival in a long line of letter and grade development.

Of course, revivals like this take place in many diverse arenas, including fashion, language, and music. Bellbottoms made a comeback, but the recent version didn't look exactly like the vintage edition. Art movements come and go, often placing the prefix *neo* before the movement, such as neo-impressionism and neo-Gothic. Similarly, the letter "Δ" need not have the same qualities as it did in the days of olde; it only needs to be a symbol that serves the lofty purpose of surmounting the grading scale. We could call it *neo-eth*, but that might over-complicate the matter.

Happy outcome

These changes are only modifications to the current scale, and they are not meant to replace something that is already successful. Educators are all too familiar with modifying. Sometimes we modify our schedule, sometimes we modify our assignments, and sometimes we even modify our grades. With so much experience in modification, a slight alteration in the grading scale, then, shouldn't be overly traumatic.

Armed with a new vocabulary and a few tweaks to the letter grades, the student who got seven wrong on the fifty point test might actually earn an A, or even an A+. It makes sense. The assessment contradiction would mean he or she in fact merely failed to achieve a "Δ," which maxes out the scale. The fact that the "Δ" looks strangely like a "D-" and rhymes with *death* is merely a coincidence. Really.

I've Got a Dream:
A Tale of Haggis, Hip-Hop, and Hypocrisy

by Jan Kaarsvlam

Jan Kaarsvlam has taken a job teaching second-grade media studies, aesthetics, and principles and techniques in shoebox diorama construction at Sully Christian School in Sully, Iowa. He is also leading several of his colleagues in approaching Principal Krogstad with plans for building a new "super-school" complete with helipad, hidden labyrinthine passages, and a tar-and-feathering pit for naughty students.

Starting a high school boys' bagpipe brigade has always been a dream o' mine," said a misty-eyed Ed McGonigal, the school janitor, as he leaned on his mop outside Zelda Roberts' classroom. "The sound o' the pipes brings me back to the Highlands of me youth."

Zelda winced imperceptibly. It wasn't that she disliked bagpipe music; it was just that she preferred to listen to it from a mile or two away. And however lovely good bagpipe music might be, the sounds that would emanate from the pipes of amateur pipers might be hideous indeed. As she was framing a reply, Karen Newton, one of the eight percent of African-American students at Bedlam, walked by, with hip-hop blaring from her Ipod headphones.

Zelda held up one hand to stop her. Karen sighed heavily and popped out one earphone so she could hear. "Yeah?" she said.

"You know the rules," replied Zelda. "The school day has started. No Ipods or cell phones."

Karen rolled her eyes as she turned off the device and wound the headphones around it. As she dropped it into her pocket, Ed said to Zelda, "So tomorrow after school, I meet with six boys who signed up and we begin lessons. I thought I'd either start them out with 'The Bonny Braes o' Dunarghlae' or 'Amazing Grace.'"

Karen looked suddenly interested. She smiled sweetly and asked, "What are you talking about, Mr. McGonigal?" In the instant that Ed's mouth opened to begin a reply, Zelda could see precisely where this conversation was going. Unfortunately, as in the moments when she was teaching and could see the wind pushing the door toward a loud slam, she could not speak quickly enough to warn Ed.

"Well, me bonny lass, I was jest tellin' Ms. Roberts here that Mr. Vanderhaar has approved me Bagpipin' Club."

"Interesting," said Karen with a gleam of mischief. "I would think the school board wouldn't allow such a thing."

Ed looked confused, but Zelda pursed her lips so tightly she seemed on the verge of sucking her face outside in. Ed said, "It's a wee bit o' harmless fun. Why would the school board object?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Karen, "maybe because it involves boys crossdressing. And of course its ethnic background makes it highly exclusionary. Plus, I understand that bagpipes are popular among wiccan priestesses."

Ed was flabbergasted. His lips moved, but no sound came out.

Zelda explained. "Karen is upset because she and some of her friends tried to start a hip-hop club...."

"A Christian hip-hop club," Karen interjected.

"... right, a Christian hip-hop club, and Mr. VanderHaar denied her request."

"He said that it would lead to boys wearing their pants too low, so we couldn't do it. And now I find out he is letting you have a club for boys in skirts?"

A look of concern washed across Ed's ruddy face. "If it upsets ye, lassie, we could wear tartan sweat pants." Zelda snorted.

"That's not the point. Last week in chapel, Mr. Cloudmaker talked about how God loves diversity. Well, apparently, God loves the diversity of your bagpipe culture, Mr. McGonigal, more than he loves the diversity of my hip-hop culture." Karen was starting to sound angry.

"Ach, Lassie, I dinna want to hurt yuir feelin's. Can ye tell me though, what exactly is this hip-hopperin' ye keep talkin' about."

"Are you for real, man? Hip-hop is the music of my generation. It's honest, it's true, it's intricate...."

"It's filthy and misogynistic," said Zelda dismissively.

"Have you ever listened to it?" Karen demanded. "It's not all like that. There are Christian hip-hop artists. Sure there are some bad ones too, but there's bad bagpipe music as well." On *that* Zelda at last found herself in full agreement with Karen, who continued, "If wiccan witches use the bagpipes in ceremonies, we don't throw out bagpipes period. But if some hip-hopper says something bad, suddenly Mr. VanderHaar says we can't have a club. That's a double-standard, Ms. Roberts, and you know it."

At just that moment, Bedlam's chief commanding officer appeared around the corner. He saw Karen's hurt face, the still pursed lips of Zelda, and a gleam of anger in the eyes of Ed, so he asked what was going on. McGonigal laid a thick hand on his principal's shoulder.

"Ach, Mr. Vanderhaar, ye acted precipitously in shootin' down this here lassie's club just because some hip-hopperin' blackguard makes a bad choice of language. That's as ridiculous as if ye banned me bagpipe club just because some witches and warlocks danced around some clarty auld firkin to the tune o' some perfidious pagan piper. Ye should be ashamed, sir. Ashamed."

Vanderhaar harrumphed and rolled his eyes. "McGonigal, I don't understand a word you said, but I told you if this bagpipe club was any trouble, it would all be over. Well, it's over." Mr.

McGonigal's hand fell limply from Vanderhaar's shoulder. The principal turned his attention to Karen. "And Miss Newton, stop trying to make this a race thing. It's not. I just don't like staring at some guy's underwear. Period." With that, he spun on his heel and was gone.

Zelda looked smugly from Karen Newton to Mr. McGonigal.

"I hope yer happy now," McGonigal said to Karen. "Me dream, she's disappearing like the morning mists above Loch Lomond, burnt away by the heat of yer bloody temper. 'Scuse me, I've got to be goin'. 'Tis toilets I've got to be scrubbin' noo."

Karen sighed, then looked at the still smug face of Ms. Roberts. As she turned to leave, she said, "Thanks so much for your support, Ms. Roberts."

Slowly, Zelda's still pursed face turned to a smile as she contemplated the sounds of silence. ℭ

Query

Anticipated Difficulties

Tena Siebenga-Valstar serves as Education Administrator at Fort McMurray Christian School, Alberta. We encourage teachers and principals to submit questions for this column, even if they think they know the answer. Send your questions to Dr. Tena Siebenga-Valstar, 168 Windsor Dr., Fort McMurray, Alta, T9H 4R2, or email her at tvalstar@telus.net.

The toughest moments

Question #1

I am from Trinity Christian College. My question is "What do you think is the hardest thing that a Christian teacher will have to deal with during his or her career?" I'm looking forward to your response! Thanks!

Response:

In reflecting on this question I reviewed my years of experience in Christian education. At this point I believe that the hardest thing a Christian teacher must do is continually focus on the goal of Christian Education. The goal of Christian education reflects our goal in life. Ultimately our goal in life, as summed up in two Christian confessions, is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever, remembering that we are not our own but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ (Westminster shorter confession, Heidelberg catechism). When our eyes begin to focus on something or someone other than Jesus, we often lose our way. Far too often the focus is on ourselves and on the recognition we think we deserve.

Dealing with students and their behaviors, while providing a program so each of them can develop and learn to their full potential constitutes an ongoing challenge. God's word says, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." Each child is created in God's image and is filled with potential. God will also give us the grace and wisdom to provide for the children. We are not alone. God promises to be with us (Psalm 16: 5 – 11).

We may have professional or personality differences with our colleagues. That, too, can create difficulties. There are times when it appears to be a battle of wills among the staff. In the context of being transformed by the renewing of our mind to determine the will of God, Paul says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you" (Romans 12:6).

There may be disagreements with administrative decisions or with board or society policy. God's word again gives us a directive. "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as people who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Hebrews 13:17). Again in Romans 13:1 we read, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

Sometimes we may have to overcome challenges with parents or with the parent body of our school. Effective communication (James 1) is essential as well as the realization that we all have the potential to be forgiven sinners. Jesus teaches us how to get along. "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all our sin"(1 John 1:7).

We live in the "in between time," the time between Christ's first and his second coming. We live in a sinful world, but with the promise that Christ has crushed the Serpent's head. Things are not perfect; yet, God's word calls us to press on to the ultimate goal. God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, works in us and through us. We can count on him. At his second coming all things will be made new. We are here to live obediently, to erect signposts to the ultimate reign of Christ's kingdom. "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21: 3-5).

Avoid embarrassment

Question #2:

Even in a general education classroom, not all students can complete a paper-and-pen test alone. Some need extra help and are taken out of the classroom to take the test. But the negative aspect of this procedure is that all the other students know why the student is being taken out of the classroom at that time and begin to have second thoughts about him and his abilities. Are there any other ways that teachers can help their students without having their peers look down on them?

Response:

Your question implies that the number of students who need this special accommodation is limited in number. As teachers become more aware of the many learning challenges prevalent in

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our classroom, they continually have to make accommodations to serve the students in the classroom. Since teachers and parents really want every child to succeed, we have to provide all the help necessary for that to occur.

Most, if not all, Christian schools, recognize in their foundational statements that children are created in the image of God with their own unique talents and gifts. Along with this comes the promise that these differences and unique ways of learning will be accommodated. Sometimes our words speak louder than our actions. Sometimes we hear that all children should be treated equally, but we actually treat students equally when we make provisions for their differences. In doing so we need to provide varied opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning. Teachers also have to promote a loving and accepting environment where the gifts of all students are recognized. Far too often the academic gifts are considered superior to the gift of loving our fellow classmates, having the ability to express oneself in the arts, achieving physical feats, promoting unity in the classroom or being able to speak many languages. When a teacher models honoring students for their various gifts, students often follow the lead.

I believe it is necessary to get to know each of the students and the way in which they learn in order to help them showcase the fullest extent of their knowledge. As educators look at learning styles, they realize that students not only have to be taught in multiple but they must also be given opportunity to respond to that learning in many ways. Tests are only one way, and pen and paper tests are only one way. Some students may have to do their test on a computer while another may have to take it orally using a voice recording. Another may have the questions read by someone and make use of a scribe. Some students may only do part of the test. Very often when a teacher approaches me saying that a student did poorly on a test, I ask, "But does he know the content? What other indicators or evidence do you have that the student understands what is being taught?"

Teachers at the school with which I am presently associated make all kinds of accommodations for students. The result is that students are not stigmatized as being different. Various methods of assessment and accommodations are used, and together these provide a picture of how well the student is learning. Currently teachers are designing units that focus on essential questions and use various ways to determine summative assessment. These may include the following: performance tasks (the students will perform a certain skill), presentations (the student presents material he or she learned in the form of book talks, reports, power point, video, etc.), graphic organizers, semantic maps or word webs, games, art work, and journal writing. Rubrics are often used to evaluate the student work. Rubrics allow the student to know what is expected in order to achieve the standard.

In summary, an environment of loving acceptance of students' special gifts as well as an atmosphere that nurtures and supports all students will provide students with the confidence necessary for their growth. Varied methods of presentation and assessment will also serve to enhance the learning styles of all the students in the classroom.

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Do Christian Schools Struggle With Racism?

Al Boerema (ajb37@calvin.edu) associate professor of education at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich., asked the panel to address the issue of racism. He wrote: "Talk about this difficult topic from the point of view of structural racism and racial ideology. We can think of structural racism as the system of practices, policies, and cultural expressions that reinforce inequities. Racial ideology, according to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in *Racism without Racists* (2006), is defined as "the racially based frameworks used ... to explain and justify or challenge the racial status quo" (p. 9). With those two concepts in mind, are there ways in which Christian schools struggle with racism?

February 4, 2008

Tony Kamphuis started the discussion: This topic is a timely one for those of us in Ontario. Last fall we had a general election in which one party supported funding for faith-based schooling options. The party that opposed them played a very effective game of conjuring up some concerns about different racial groups, especially our Muslim neighbors, while proclaiming their support for inclusive — read "identical" — education for all. Of course this would be a good, safe, secular option for any except the fully funded Catholic schools. Just last week, the Toronto District School Board voted to develop an "afro-centric" school to address the high dropout rate and low levels of accomplishment in certain population groups. Separation, but not inequality, is their stated goal, although that seems to be a tricky line for fallen human beings to negotiate. So what about our Christian schools? I think we should be wary of pulling on the mea culpa mantle of collective guilt that admitting to structural racism so often degenerates into. That being said, we are participants in this broader culture, and the doors of the school have not proven impermeable to misguided ideologies like consumerism and sexism, so I don't know why we wouldn't find racism inside as well as outside. In fact, not even the staff room door has proven an effective filter!

But here is our "ace." We have a higher standard to which we aspire. If particular evidence of racism is pointed out, we have a solid foundation from which to address it. Christianity is a bright light by which we can operate to cut out the blight of racism, even if it means cutting into ourselves, and even if it means cutting very near to our heart! Is there racism in Christian schools? Not by virtue of their very nature. So if we see it (not imagine it, not assume its presence, but see it) let's cut it out with boldness and deftness — and in love, no matter how tough that love may need to be.

Tony

February 8, 2008

New Panel member Christian Altena continued: While I've recognized the ugly face of bigotry wherever I've lived, my move to Chicago in 2002 revealed a side of this problem that I had previously not seen or had failed to acknowledge — that being the persistent, generational mistrust, hostility, and segregation between the races. Like many cities of its size and history, Chicago has had a very troubled past with regard to race relations. That legacy can still be keenly felt as one talks to neighbors about the impact of "blockbusting" (the practice of real estate agents raising the specter in white neighborhoods of approaching and inexorable "change" and profiting greatly as the whites fled to the suburbs), as one simply drives around the city, and, most sadly, the lingering effects can still be clearly observed in the schools.

The 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision may have struck down legal segregation in the United States; however, today we most certainly experience de facto segregation. Many of the Chicago public schools provide clear examples of this; and sadly, I think it can also be seen in some of our area's Christian schools.

Since the 1950s, the migration of the Dutch and Reformed in Chicago has largely radiated out from the what are now solidly black and Hispanic Chicago neighborhoods nearer downtown, to what are now partly mixed older suburbs ringing the city limits, to the largely white and affluent white-collar "exurbs." The Christian schools of this region naturally followed that migration, and the impulse to continue this movement is still alive.

As a result, my school (located in the suburb of Palos Heights since 1963) calls itself Chicago Christian School only because of its ancient historical roots in the city. Despite our name, we as a community have very little to do with the city and its diversity.

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The movement of these Dutch and Reformed schools has been logical in that they were simply trying to remain faithful to their community as that community grew and changed. However, that community has spread itself out significantly, and as a result their commitment to the Christian School has waned as they considered the quality and opportunities provided by suburban public schools, the cost of tuition, and the daily commute. All this is to say that increasingly we find ourselves reaching out beyond our traditional base, and from what I've seen, we haven't always done this well. We do have that "higher standard" that Tony mentions, but my fear is that our historic ethnic and denominational homogeneity (and frankly, pride: "not Dutch, not much...") could be a significant hindrance. Have we been primarily motivated to reach outside our traditional community because of a desire to meet that higher standard, or is it a matter more expedient?

The impact of these social, economic and geographic trends challenge and hinder us because, literally and figuratively, the "old neighborhood" has changed dramatically while our understanding of our role within it has not. So, over the years, I've noticed that my students have had trouble empathizing with other cultures, because they don't go to school with children of other cultures. They bristle at affirmative action because they rarely encounter individuals from backgrounds of extreme disadvantage. They even ask why we don't have "White History Month."

Al's question imagines the possibility of Christian schools being racist. The very thought stings the conscience. I'm reminded of Dr. Martin Luther King's quotation from 1963 about eleven o'clock Sunday morning being the most segregated hour in the United States. Certainly, there is no better place for racial reconciliation to be promoted and lived than within the Christian community. How well, though, are our Christian schools poised to take the lead on issues of racial reconciliation, especially in as tight-knit an ethnic community as our own? Blessings to you all.

Christian

February 16, 2008

Pam Adams joins the discussion: Welcome, Christian, and hello to all. I currently live in a community that has been ethnically and racially homogeneous for many years but is changing with the influx of Mexican immigrants. However, the Christian schools do not reflect this change in ethnic background. We have a long way to go in order to integrate our local churches and Christian schools. Much of this is because Christian education is expensive. Isn't this really the reason for the lack of ethnic diversity? I am not saying that racism is not a factor. As Tony says, we are guilty of the whole range of other sins so we should not be surprised by the racism we find. I do believe we miss a lot from our lack of diversity and believe we should not be satisfied with just expunging the racism, but we also need to make efforts to be more inclusive. I believe that would please our Lord.

Pam Adams

February 19, 2008

Tony responds: Hello again. When there were race riots in L.A. several years ago, I remember saying to teachers in the public system, "You must be frustrated in that you have no grounding for your message that this race-based violence is a bad thing. With a school dedicated to tolerance and relativism, you really don't have any leg to stand on when you say: 'This shouldn't be!'" In that sense I think Christian schools have a big advantage. We can say why it is wrong to discriminate against others — they, too, are made in God's image and he loves them!

BUT...I don't want too easily to overlook the log in our own eye. Around here, I come across Christian schools that hesitate to include Catholics or Eastern Orthodox believers. A biblical worldview isn't such a dainty affair that any little threat could smash it! And a biblical worldview is a great platform for breaking through cultural differences to proclaim the great wonder that we have in common: the recognition that God loves us and wants to include us!

Tony

February 21, 2008

Jolene Velthuizen adds: Hello! Good to discuss with you all again. The issue of segregation bothers me as well. Many of our churches are quite segregated at Sunday gatherings, and our Christian schools follow the same path. Even if our schools desire to be more inclusive and reflect the variety of God's people, the obstacles of culture, one's own traditions as well as tuition are difficult to maneuver. I agree with Pam's statement that making efforts to be more inclusive would please our God. I believe that God's people are beautiful in their variety and that the church — particularly the church of all communities — should reflect his inclusiveness, love, and creativity with such variety.

So, how, practically, can we stretch ourselves to be more inclusive? How can we be reflective of our practices and systems

so as to cut out racism? Building relationships with people different from oneself is one of the best ways to stretch and reflect. The following ideas aren't easy, but they are a beginning.

Hire a diverse staff. Our school is located in a county where the mix of Navajo, Caucasian, Hispanic, and many others including Asian, and Palestinian, is very evident. And yet the administration struggles to find and hire staff that reflects the diversity of our area and the diversity of our student body. I am glad that we do try, and we do struggle. I hope a staff with different backgrounds and different colors will help a school staff view its own practices through clearer lenses that may expose some discriminatory practices and systems.

Expand service learning. We can broaden our students' views of the world by encouraging them to have real experiences and build real relationships with people whose background is different from their own. Service and volunteer opportunities may be able to teach students more about God's diverse world than we are able to teach in our classrooms. I put my vote in for long-term experiences such as weekly volunteer hours for at least a year. Short-term mission trips can be eye-opening as well, but we need to be careful in preparation and training. (Articles and ideas for good mission trip training can be found at Calvin College professor Kurt Verbeek's website: http://www.calvin.edu/academic/sociology/staff/kurt.htm).

Reflect on daily practice. At times our own comfortable habits are hurting others. In a classroom of mixed races, I pray that the teacher is careful to call on students from all colors and equally encourage their work. Issues associated with race are as often related to ethnicity, culture and tradition as they are with skin color. Teachers come with tendencies towards cultural preferences which are revealed in our actions. Just as we must take care to be equal and fair in the face of gender assumptions, so we must tread with care, holding our own perceptions of different races in critical view.

Be the diversity. This idea is not always possible in its most radical sense, but I'll throw it out there anyways. While attending Calvin College in Michigan, I had the opportunity to visit and join many churches: some with one race and tradition that fit my own comfort zone, some of mixed ethnicities, and others of predominantly one race that was not my own. One day, sitting in a church full of people of my own color, I was feeling frustrated at the lack of diversity. God's variety of people was not well represented! Then I realized that, if I wanted to see change in this particular church, I would be making other people — from another color — do the hard work of joining this church and adding to its diversity. Instead, if I want to see change, should I not be the change? When I moved to New Mexico, I decided to be that change. I joined a small church on the reservation with predominantly Navajo members — a race and tradition different from my own. It's been four years, and I love that church. The experience comes with its unique set of challenges, but I am so glad to share my life with such wonderful people and learn so much from this congregation. I believe it helps me in my teaching as much as in my personal life.

Jolene

February 27, 2008

Tim Leugs adds: Hello everyone, and thanks for responding. Your perspectives reflect a lot of passion regarding a topic which we *should* feel passionate about — recognizing the image of God reflected through the uniqueness of race. Just as Jolene writes, issues such as the cultural tradition and the high cost of tuition are in themselves socioeconomic, cultural, and historical barriers leading to rather homogeneous classes of mostly upper middle class white families. We are called to reflect "God's variety" to all people, but pragmatics often interferes with the standards to which we are called. "How do we even start reaching out?" may be asked; and it is a valid point that we as schools need to work to answer. Although it is difficult, we as schools may need to learn how to help all of our constituents to recognize *imago dei* in others, regardless of race. And with that perspective, we may repent of our past failures and work in the present to live out God's perspective, not our own.

Tim

The panel consists of:

Pam Adams (padams@dordt.edu), professor of education at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa.
Christian Altena (caltena@swchristian.org) teaches history at Chicago Christian High School in Palos Heights, Illiana.
Tony Kamphuis (TonyKamp@aol.com), executive director of the Niagara Association for Christian Education, Smithville, Ont.
Tim Leugs (tleugs@legacycs.org) a fifth-grade teacher at Legacy Christian School, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
Jolene Velthuizen (jvelthuizen@rcsnm.org) a second-grade teacher at Rehoboth Christian School in Northwest New Mexico.

(Continued from page 4)

Racism partakes of this brokenness in the polarization of uniformity (only those like us) and division (those not like us). This pathology, therefore, breaks down human community.

Race is an artificial, pseudo-scientific category used to describe people who share biologically transmitted traits that are defined as socially significant. Although it is commonly believed to be a scientific "fact," there is actually no scientific evidence to support the categorization of humanity into biological "races." Scientists have calculated that the average genetic difference between two randomly chosen individuals is 0.2% of all the genes. But the physical traits we use to distinguish one race from another, like skin, eye color and nose width, are determined by about only 0.01% of our genes, and they adapt rapidly to various environmental factors (quoted in *No Partiality: The Idolatry of Race and the New Humanity* by Douglas R. Sharp, footnote 31, p. 121). Hence, it is pseudo-scientific.

But what is even more important is that these rather insignificant physical traits are given *social* significance by the ideology. The physical "racial" traits only have *social* significance because we *give* them significance; they are artificial. We have been accustomed to think that these physical differences amount to some moral and social difference — such as intelligence, goodness, beauty, and honesty. Such thinking is rooted in a distorted ideology, not in creation. Because this idolatrous ideology is systemic in our culture, it has affected all of us.

In systemic racism, a racist ideology is embodied in the policies, practices, norms and symbols of social institutions, organizations, communities and cultures. A racist ideology embodied in the educational, political, legal, economic, cultural and religious institutions tends to shape a whole community of people. Racism is not explicitly taught; rather, we are caught in its web. We encounter systemic racist images in popular movies, TV, and advertising; these strongly affect our imaginations. There are systemic racist practices that shape our behaviors — in hiring practices, for example. There are still ideological arguments that perpetuate racism albeit in different new incarnations, such as anti-immigration laws.

> "Race is an artificial, pseudo-scientific category used to describe people."

I don't have space here to argue or document all the various aspects and manifestations of systemic racism. The point here is that racism is not simply an individual behavior and attitude problem. It is bigger, wider and deeper than that: it is a systemic sin.

4. God's mission of reconciliation includes reconciliation of people to each other, including racial reconciliation.

Distorted diversity is being re*medied* in Christ Jesus. Already in the Old Testament, God's redemption plan includes blessing "all the nations" through Abraham (Gen. 18:18, 26:4), and making his house "a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:7). Ethnic identity is always subordinate to spiritual identity.

This is why Jesus quoted from Isaiah 56 in the cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:15-19). The tables of the moneychangers and animal sellers were actually located in the part of the temple that is called, "The Court of the Gentiles." This is the only place in the temple into which the Gentiles were allowed. Non-Jews, even Gentile god-fearers — those who converted to Judaism but did not get circumcised to take on Jewish identity — cannot go any further than this section. They were not allowed to enter the "Court of Women" and the "Court of Israel." Thus, turning the court of Gentiles from a worship space into a religious commercial zone is an instance of institutional racism that enraged Jesus to the point of violent action.

God's heart for racial reconciliation is also seen in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12). At Pentecost, God equipped a mono-cultural group of disciples to do cross-cultural outreach in order to establish a multi-cultural church. Jewish pilgrims who came from all over the Roman Empire to Jerusalem for Pentecost knew either Aramaic (the language of the Synagogues) or Greek (the commercial language of the Roman empire) or both. There is, therefore, no logistical need for the "tongues" — the speaking of different languages. But there is great symbolic need because of the fact that the regional native tongues were never used in the religious services of their local synagogues. God uses those different native tongues — hitherto never used in religious worship — to affirm and bless these languages and cultures as vehicles of his revelation and praise. Thus, the first Christian outreach event after Jesus' ascension was an inter-cultural, cross-cultural outreach. Or, if you wish, the first post-resurrection Christian mega-worship service was a multi-lingual one! One can even argue from this that God's default church is an inter-cultural church, not a mono-cultural one.

5. The church, or the Christian commu-

nity, is God's strategic vehicle for embodying, proclaiming and promoting God's reconciliation of all things, including racial reconciliation.

Being united in Christ through faith does not mean that ethnic and cultural differences will be erased. Rather, ethnic and other categories (economic, gender, age) are no longer definitive of our identities. Galatians 3:28 — "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NIV) — is not a call to erase ethnic, class and gender diversity in an ontological or absolute sense. Rather, it is a call to break down any existing barriers and inequalities between them. Bible scholars have shown that Galatians is not primarily about soteriology — how are we saved? — but about ecclesiology — how are we to be church? (See Gordon D. Fee, "Male and Female in the New Creation" in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, IVP 2002, pp. 172-185) The issue of salvation by faith, not by works, helps equate all the different people groups and makes them one new community in Christ Jesus.

And this new Christian community, the Church, is not a place for any kind of social barriers. Why? Because the church and Christian communities, including Christian schools, are God's primary vehicle for his reconciliation mission, which as we have seen, includes reconciling people to each other. We need to embody this one-ness in Christ Jesus.

6. Reconciliation of all things will be fulfilled only at Christ's second coming with the new heaven and new earth.

Christians, individually and corporately, work towards that reality as God's agents of transformation, with hope and humility. Only God can bring about the full restoration and reconciliation of diversity in unity. This keeps us Christians humble as we go about being faithful and obedient in being agents of reconciliation for God, knowing that our efforts, though they will not bring heaven on earth, do, by God's grace, further the coming of the Kingdom.

But God also promises that full restoration will happen. This frees us and encourages us to be bold, creative, and even take risks, knowing that the new creation does not depend on our successes or failures. We are called to be faithful agents, not agents who sit on our hands. William Wilberforce (1759-1833), a politician and social reformer who abolished the slave trade in the British Empire, once wrote, "Let [a Christian] remember that his chief business while on earth is not to meditate, but to act" (from his *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians*, 1797; reprint SCM Press 1958, p. 103).

A biblical recipe

So, how do we work towards becoming a community that helps rather than hinders God's reconciliation project? Is there a recipe that we can follow to create an inter-cultural Christian community in our churches or our schools? I propose a recipe drawn from two biblical sources.

The early church in Acts 15 faced cultural tensions as its cultural diversity grew. The Antioch church was an inter-cultural church with Jewish and Gentile members. Pressure came from Judean Christians towards the Gentiles to adopt Jewish ways, Jewish culture and Jewish rituals, namely circumcision. In other words, unless Gentile Christians became Jewish, they could not be saved. The Jerusalem Council, convened to resolve the matter, came to a most remarkable conclusion. Instead of choosing to either assimilate Gentile Christians into Jewish culture (then the dominant culture among Christians) or segregate Gentile and Jewish Christians (have separate local churches), the Jerusalem Council chose the inter-cultural way — the Gentiles can be Christians while remaining in their Gentile culture, even as Jewish Christians retained some of their Jewish traditions, and both fellowship in the same churches. But the inter-cultural way does not mean, "everything goes" in terms of cultural expressions. All human cultures are simultaneously good and broken. The apostles laid down three guidelines for cultural expressions, which I summarize, for our purposes, as follows:

Avoid idolatry and destroying gospel witness; (abstain from food offered to idols — v. 20, 29). Any cultural practice that is idolatrous or connected to idolatry, should be either rejected or reformed. For example, Chinese Christians have to be careful with Chinese New Year celebratory traditions that are often tied to a materialistic worldview. Similarly, North American Christians have to discern how our consumerist culture has distorted our celebrations of Christmas. Since racism is part of our culture's systemic idolatries, Christians need to recognize, repent and reject racism.

Avoid breaking God's (moral) laws; (abstain from sexual immorality – v. 20, 29). Christians must reject any cultural practice that is explicitly sinful, breaking God's laws.

Avoid overly offensive behavior to other cultures (abstain from eating strangled animals and blood – v. 20, 29). Christians who love each other should respect each other's boundaries, while at the same time, be as gracious and forgiving as possible. Different cultures may have different practices that are deemed as overly offensive. For instance, one should never point with one's feet nor pat someone on the head when relating to a Thai. These are incredibly offensive and insulting in the Thai culture. Pointing with your feet or patting the head is neither sinful nor idolatrous. But, out of love and respect to a Thai brother or sister, we should abstain from it in their presence. Conversely, if the Thai is a Christian, he or she should learn to be gracious and forgiving of such cultural faux pas, particularly when it is done innocently.

Obviously, it takes time as well as trial and error in cross-cultural relationships to build such inter-cultural bonds that fulfill this "recipe." But these three guidelines can serve as starting points. This is one half of the recipe I am recommending. The other half of the recipe is derived from the Old Testament prophet Micah.

Old Testament half

In Micah 6:8, the prophet lays out the

basic spirituality that God requires of us: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (NRSV). These can act as three good guidelines in engaging cross-cultural relationships.

Each of us needs to be **humble** enough to learn from another culture, to receive the gift of the stranger. Often, members of cultural minorities assume a posture of humility and learning. But this posture should be normative for all Christians to each other. Specifically, our spiritual walk with God should nurture our humility. The nearer we draw to God, the better we see ourselves — our sins, our faults, our gifts and our limitations. Such God-grown humility will serve us well when interacting with people from different cultures.

An unconditional **love** that places the interests of others above one's own interest is a necessary requirement in creating a community that welcomes diversity. If all parties show loving kindness to each other, any racist or discriminatory practices or behaviors should disappear.

But, sometimes, discrimination exists in structures or systems, beyond individual behaviors and attitudes. This is where **justice** comes into play. Justice works towards building God's shalom in structures and institutions. A Christian inter-cultural community must intentionally do justice to reform or maintain structures that are just for all its members, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or class.

In summary then, here is my biblical recipe for creating an inter-cultural community:

Recognize and reject the systemic sin of racism. Combine the following three ingredients: idolatry avoidance, sin avoidance, and offense avoidance. Blend all these into a community. Then add healthy doses of humility, love and justice into the mixture. Mix well. Oh, and don't forget to pour in a huge amount of prayer. Of course, start making friends with strangers from different cultures.

Wait on God and see what wonders he will bring about.

By Nature Honest, By Experience Wise

(A quotation from Alexander Pope)

It was the year 1991. I was among four Canadian educators who had been invited by the government of South Africa to visit that country in the wake of the release from prison of Nelson Mandele, the well-known anti-Apartheid activist, who later was to become the president of South Africa. The government of South Africa wanted to show the world that things were changing for the better in South Africa. Hence, the invitation to visit at the government's expense.

We interviewed many people of many political and racial stripes, among whom were parliamentarians, citizens, religious leaders and educational leaders. One person we interviewed stands out in my mind, even today. It was Rev. Dr. Johan Heyns, a leading theologian in one of the white Reformed churches in South Africa. He graciously invited us into his study and talked freely with us about the problem of racial discrimination in the white churches.

Dr. Heyns told us that he used to support the idea of separate development also in the churches. He grew up with the notion that it was foolish to mix racial groups. There was nothing wrong with insisting on separate worship services. That's what he had learned, and that's what he believed. No amount of theoretical discussion would change his mind. And then he decided to visit The Netherlands, where he did some post-doctoral work at the Free University of Amsterdam.

Spending a considerable amount of time in The Netherlands meant that he would attend worship services in Reformed churches in Amsterdam. One time, the service he attended included a celebration of the Lord's Supper. Dr. Heyns lined up with other worshipers as they approached the Lord's Table, and he found himself sitting down next to a black worshiper. Together they partook of the bread and wine and celebrated the unity they had in the Body of Christ. It was then that the scales fell of Johan's eyes. He realized at that very moment that the practice of separate development was a lie and that Apartheid was an evil that divided even Christians.

From then on, Dr. Heyns championed the cause of reconciliation between the races and spoke out boldly against Apartheid. He paid a steep price for that courageous stand. A year or so after we interviewed him, he was assassinated in the very study in which we had interviewed him. The assassin, though never caught, was thought to have been a right-wing Afrikaner who hated his anti-Apartheid stance.

I tell this story because it points out that it takes the experience of bringing people of various races together in work or worship to bring down the walls of racism. Those who grow up in families and churches that rationalize separate development will hardly ever change their minds because of a well-argued position that may be thoroughly scriptural and inspired by the Holy Spirit. I have often thought that had I been brought up in South Africa, I probably would have supported the racism of Apartheid. It's not until you look another person in the eye and see the image of God reflected in that person's face, especially if you're honest and seek to do God's will here on earth, that the walls of racism will crumble.

A humbling thought, isn't it?

Book Reviews

Reinder Van Til and Gordon Olson, editors, *Thin Ice: Coming of Age in Grand Rapids*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2007, 28 stories, 381 pages. Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele

Many readers of CEJ, whether residing in Grand Rapids now or living elsewhere, have experienced what the title suggests: you have come of age in Grand Rapids. This collection of 28 essays should provide a good occasion for reflection about how the city has shaped your life and how your experiences compare with those of the writers. But more significantly, the collection gives us all an occasion to reflect on the whole industry of memoirs, autobiographies, stories of one's past.

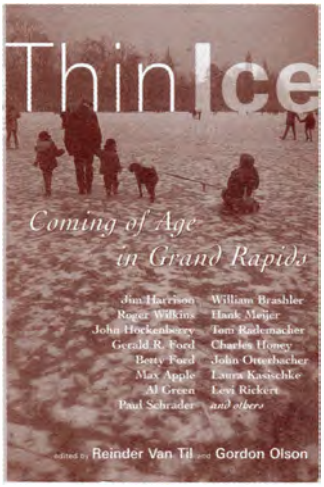
A recent essay by Joseph Bottum, editor of FIRST THINGS, provides a theology of sorts about memoirs, "The Judgment of Memory" (March, 2008, pp. 28-36). It is good to have some of Bottum's questions about the genre of memoirs in mind as one reads a collection such as this. The issue of the reliability of memory is at stake — as Augustine said so well: "(Memory) is like a vast and subterranean shrine. Who has ever reached the bottom of it?" John Thompson, for example, discovered that he could traverse in a mere fifteen minutes what was in his youth a huge world (128). Is the essay self-serving? How does the writer wish the reader to perceive him or her? Does the piece escape "the ennui that infects all highly stylized human activities, a prose that takes the form of revelation more often than it actually reveals anything"? (33-34) Is it true that every sentence with the word "I" in it is a self-justifying, self-conscious statement, as Bottum says? What Bottum urges is that the story be carried forward, to completion, so that true meanings may emerge. He reminds us that we all need to find a place outside time from which to see time. And that all acts of all lives will some day come under judgment.

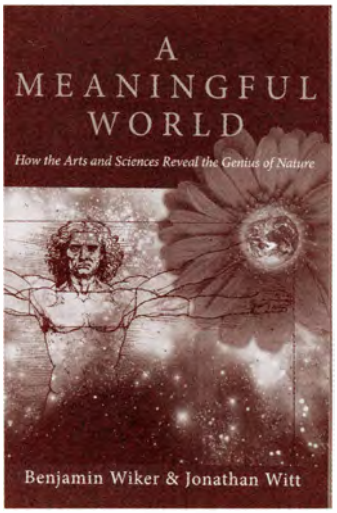
How does *Thin Ice* fare when viewed against this theology of memoirs? Understandably, many of the conventions of such writing come into play, and many of the authors do fail to carry the story forward — they write as adults, remember — and fail to relate the life of their adolescence to the trajectory of their adult lives. Having said all that, this collection will stimulate the memories of those who have grown up in Grand Rapids and enlarge their understanding of the city which shaped and defined them.

Thirteen of the essays were written for this collection. The writers do not uniformly praise the city. Betty Ford is one writer who claims she had "…a sunny childhood and a wonderful girlhood." Many of the writers react negatively to their religious training — especially sabbatarianism. Several dig deeply into the days of the founding of the city early in the 19th century. A number of them rankle at the implied dictum, "Stick to your own kind," not realizing that poverty, language problems, and cultural identity are inherent in the immigrant experience.

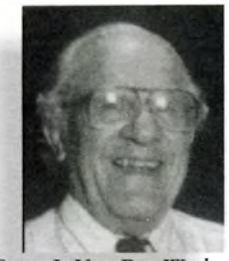
The essays I found most poignant are the ones written by Indians, Jews, blacks, and the final one, by Bich Minh Nguyen, "The Good Immigrant Student," a Vietnam refugee. All these have understandable grudges against a city dominated by white Europeans. One winces at the pain of ethnic prejudice. John Hockenberry's "A Farewell to Arms," stands out for describing, in abundant detail, and with great courage, a year in a hospital learning how to cope as a paraplegic. And I found the first essay, "Potawatomies on Waterloo Street," a disturbing one. Several young Indians were chosen by a Baptist minister to attend a white man's college. When they return, they are rejected both by their tribes — and by the whites. They have no choice but to live out their lives among the tribe into which they were born.

There are enough of such tales to furnish food for mirth as well as wisdom. The writing is uniformly excellent — a tribute to the editors as well as the writers. And their helpful introduction enhances the reading experience.





Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt, *A Meaningful World: How the Arts and Sciences Reveal the Genius of Nature.* Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press. 2006, 252 pages. Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele (Calvin College, Emeritus)



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Teachers and students of both the arts — literature, music, and the rest — and scientists will find this book a very useful resource as they help to prepare their students for the world they will encounter as they enter adulthood. The ideological environment students will inherit contrast sharply — especially if they are attending religion-based schools — with the assumptions on which their present education is based. The academic high priests of our time — though their number may be relatively small — have been very effective in launching the notion that nature has appeared wholly as a result of "a chain of accidents reaching back to the first three minutes," that it has no design or purpose, is devoid of meaning, that words do not name anything real (Derrida), and that we flail around meaninglessly in a world best described as nihilistic.

The book will fortify teachers and students alike. The authors — each one working within his discipline — take an aesthetic delight in their world: the arts, the sciences, every aspect of creation. Their delight derives from their response to the elegance, to the symmetry, to the genius of nature — both in Shakespeare, for example, but also in the life of the cell.

The purpose of the book is to refute the materialist reductionism of agnostic scientists who probe deeper and deeper into nature in order to demonstrate that the ultimate particle they disclose is material, and is reality itself. Quite perversely, they squeeze the life out of nature as they reduce biology to chemistry and physics. As the saying goes, whale hunters lost nothing of the whale but the whale itself. These folk murder as they dissect. Freud reduces Hamlet to struggles for power and to sexual drives, ignoring the wealth of wisdom available to a serious reader. Woody Allen directs movies which use getting lost in the parking lot of a mall as a metaphor for life, and Steven Weinberg, writing in a plane at 30,000 feet, observes, "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless." (23)

Not so, argue our authors. These agnostics are purblind. They need to get around a bit, look, rather than avert their gaze from the awe-inspiring world around them. Wiker and Witt are not sentimental neophytes. They know literature, and they know the sciences. After an opening chapter defining the term meaningfull, they give us two chapters on Shakespeare, demonstrating by careful workmanship the genius of Shakespeare as it comes to expression in Hamlet and The Tempest.

These two essays are jewels in their own right, but they have a point to make. Shakespeare's dramas are not a mere juxtaposition of letters that a monkey might put out. (Incidentally, an experiment has indeed been carried out, with a battery of four monkeys in a cage to see what would come of their encounter with this technology. If malicious students had done to the computers what the monkeys did to them, they would have been incarcerated and tried for malicious destruction of property. Writing plays, it seems, is not what monkeys do). Shakespeare reflects the genius that is present in all of creation.

The next chapters take us into mathematics and science. Euclid, a genius himself, laid out the genius of geometry, demonstrating patterns, order, symmetry, and elegance of spatial relationships. And how about that Periodic Table? It denotes not merely a haphazard array of different materials. In its present form, the Table shows an orderly sequence of ascending complexity and variety. Any serious student should thrill to that discovery. We next get a chapter on anthropism — the astounding ways in which our world was made ready for all that flourishes here, and especially man. All the physical constituents are here to permit life at an astounding array of complexity. This is man's home; it was made for him, and he was made to explore and understand it. And we get a chapter on the various elements, and how they relate to each other in a meaningful array. The pages on water, for example, (183-189) read like poetry.

We get the payoff in the last chapters. The authors meet their opponents on their own ground — in the minuscule world of the cell. The cell, however, is not merely a conglomeration of bits and pieces of protein and amino acids. The cell is alive; it functions, it maintains and reproduces itself. What is more important, it relates to other cells, in a context of purposeful processes that carry out the program for it — even the humblest organism. The point is that the cell is part of an organism, a living entity — cows, eagles, turtles. Even the eye is not an isolated entity. It is the instrument of vision, but the whole organism is involved in the act of seeing. The authors call for a renewal of attention to living things as they actually feed, sleep, mate — and, in the case of human beings, the culmination of life on our planet, to act out the amazing things they were designed to do: love, play, worship, study science. To deny all this is to deny the meaning of human activity — including the study of science. To see the whole as more than the sum of its parts is to diminish the role of randomness — even of DNA and the genes. What stands in the way of a recognition of a nature whose genius carries the unmistakable imprint of a designer? The answer is quite obvious. It is idolatry, and human pride, that cause this spiritual myopia and prevent these folk from coming into their own — a reward that will occur only in a posture of humility. Teaching our students humility in the face of our amazing universe will, of course, eventually help them stand taller as they claim their humanity. They can learn no more important lesson.

Susan O'Carroll Drake, *180 Devotions for Teachers: Morning Meetings with Jesus*. Valley Forge, Pa.,: Judson Press. 2008. 270 pages. Paper, $16.00. Phone: 1- (800) 458-3766. (Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele, Calvin College (Retired)

This collection of devotions — one for each day of a normal school year — was assembled by a gutsy teacher who deals day in and day out with problems that arise in the contemporary public school classroom. You name it, she has experienced it first-hand. She needs to be alert to gang paraphernalia — in clothing, codes in written work, secret signals. She has removed nine guns from nine students during the course of a school year. She has dealt with a student who had been booted out of his home and had spent his night in a dumpster. Interruptions during the course of a class period are routine. She has taught in a classroom where the students have a history of jettisoning teachers as quickly as they arrive.

The author's grandmother, still alive, taught in a one-room schoolhouse where the teacher was always right and the students were assigned maintenance duties. That era has disappeared. The contemporary teacher faces poverty, overcrowding, violence, lack of resources, broken families, lack of parental involvement. But for still teaching many students a lot, Drake was named Colorado's Outstanding Teacher of the Year.

Her devotional essays follow a pattern. A real-life vignette lays out a seasonally appropriate problem. A Bible passage is recommended. Next, we get directed to the wisdom of Jesus, the master teacher, and how he responded to analogous situations in his teaching ministry (the many interruptions, for example). Drake next elaborates on the "Verse de Jour," and concludes with a brief prayer. For example, the supplies she has been promised for a DNA project — tape, staples, photocopies — have not arrived. The project is less than successful. And at night she reads a newspaper story blaming teachers for the high dropout rates and poor student performance. Paul's injunction (Philippians 4:8) to think about positive qualities — nobility, purity, loveliness, excellence — gives her a new perspective and resolve for the next day.

True, sometimes surprises occur. Instead of urging two urchins on in a fight, two students intervene and stop the brawl. They also offer to clean up the blood — though that needs special handling nowadays. Such events are causes for gratitude. Other episodes concern insensitive administrators, problem students, poisonous gossip and rumors, disappointment with colleagues. Drake finds Biblical wisdom to deal with such episodes. Although some times the analogies between the practical problems and sacred language is a bit of a stretch, the effort is a noble one. The author reminds us that, although the Bible is not a hands-on book, and is to be used with discernment in its application, it is, in fact, intended to give insight and provide wisdom. The essays can strengthen the commitment and encourage the hearts of teachers as they perform the often unheralded task of teaching the generations just over the horizon.