

The Embarrassment of Riches

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As I gaze around me at this welcome crowd of witnesses, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty and administrative colleagues, distinguished guests, alumni and students, friends and family, and as I think about this occasion — which I scarcely would have considered possible a year ago — I feel a sense of joy and excitement as together we embark upon a new administration, a new stage, in the life of Calvin College. When I proposed the theme of these inaugural activities — “Keeping Faith: Embracing the Tensions in Christian Higher Education” — there were numerous objections to the use of the word “tensions” in the context of a celebration. But, in keeping with Dr. Mouw’s message last evening on the “Maturity Mandate,” I prefer to use these events, and the opportunity for reflection they offer, to do something more than mark an important transition in the history of Calvin College.

I want to challenge the Calvin community to build and maintain the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual courage required to keep faith with the best elements of Calvin’s distinctive history. I believe that this will require a willingness to embrace the tensions in Christian higher education, to take risks, and to make sacrifices. We must heed the words Henry Stob said a generation ago; a “mind of safety” will not be adequate for a mature Calvin College.

The challenge I want to propose grows out of my personal philosophy of life, my operational worldview. This philosophy, this worldview, has come into clearer focus over the past decade, in large part because of my experiences in the Middle East and my encounters with the parables of Jesus seen from the perspective of the Middle Eastern peasants who first heard them. Out of these experiences and encounters have emerged a “theology of risk-taking” and a mode of living that I believe can be useful for understanding and dealing with the tensions inherent in the current stage of Calvin’s history. My theology of risk-taking also helps to explain why I agreed to accept the presidency of the college.

My theology is rooted in the life of Jesus and the message of his parables. Jesus apparently began his training as a rabbi at the customary age of twelve and mastered the Jewish scriptures and traditions. And, contrary to the common perception that he was a teller of simple stories, he was, in fact, an amazingly sophisticated metaphorical theologian — in complete command of the idiom of first-century oral tradition. He was recognized as an authoritative teacher in his first reported public discourses. His lessons were couched in the metaphors and images used in the theological debates of his day, but he used them to shock and challenge the religious establishment. And, as important as the contents of Jesus’ parables are, their form and structure may be even more important for conveying the essence of his message about the kingdom of God. Time after time he compared the kingdom of God to a character in a story. These stories were not ordinary, predictable morality tales — but stories with twists and turns that his audience must have found bizarre. They were based on unorthodox premises, they violated polite manners and important social mores. They had surprise endings, or in some cases, like the parable of the Father and the Two Lost Sons, the endings were missing entirely, leaving it to the hearers to supply their own responses to the open issues.

James Breech, noted scholar of biblical narrative, maintained that the pattern of the parables, the meaning conveyed by their structure, is the essence of Jesus’ message. He was saying, in effect, that citizens of the kingdom of God are people who live like the characters in his stories. That is, they willingly live with the bizarre twists and turns of life, the surprising or unknown endings. They are free to call into question the conventions of the world around them and reject the norms and practices of Pharisaic society. This liberated way of living allows those of us who follow Jesus, in fact entices us, to take risks for the kingdom, to sacrifice our need for certainty and security.¹ I try to live this way. In fact, that is why I was open to the call to become president of Calvin College, even though I wasn’t looking for

a new job, and this job didn't fit my immediate plans. Yet, here we are today. And, upon reflection, I am struck by the number of Calvin alumni and faculty I have met in key places in this country and around the world who are doing exciting work in God's kingdom because they also try to live this way.

So, why should I and other Calvin alumni and faculty attempt to live as if in parables, accepting the tensions of uncertainty and unknown endings? I believe that the courage to live this way is drawn from the reality captured in the radical, existentialist opening question and answer of the sixteenth-century Heidelberg Catechism. The question asks, "What is your *only* comfort in life and in death?" The radical word here is "only." The question is not, "What is your *primary* comfort" or "What is your *most important* comfort" or "What is your comfort of *last resort*?" It asks, "What is your *only* comfort," the only one you need, the only real comfort there is. And you know the answer, perhaps even by heart: "My only comfort is that I am not my own — but belong, body and soul, in life and in death — to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." This seemingly modern question, with its historic Christian response, recognizes that we have and need only one firm reference point. And with that one firm reference point we are free to live as real-life characters in Jesus' parables.

Which brings us back to the inaugural theme: keeping faith by embracing the tensions in Christian higher education. I believe that keeping faith with the best of Calvin's history means always reforming and always improving the education, the scholarship, the art, and the service of the college. It means being prepared to adapt to the rapidly changing world in which we live and work and in which our students must function in the twenty-first century. To keep faith with Calvin's history, to live up to the promise of Calvin's childhood and adolescence, we must have intellectual, emotional, and spiritual courage, the willingness to take risks and make sacrifices. We not only must deal with the tensions, we must *embrace* them.

Embrace is an action one does not ordinarily associate with tensions. The very word *tension* makes many people, well, tense. It tightens muscles. It produces emotional stress. We usually think of avoiding, eliminating, or resolving tensions to relieve our anxieties about them and the need to expend mental energy on them. And Christians do struggle with the tensions caused by brokenness and sin in our lives and in our world.

However, many tensions are beneficial, even necessary; tensions that are built into creation itself. There is the finely tuned tension of a violin string that makes beautiful music possible. Or the "antagonistic muscles" that operate in tension in our bodies so that we can stand up, walk about, or move our arms. Or the carefully designed tensions that hold this building together. The Constitution of the United States was crafted with the tension of checks and balances. St. Augustine grappled creatively with tensions inherent in the gospel — God's love and God's judgment — and living simultaneously as a citizen of this world and as a citizen of the kingdom of God. John Calvin wrestled fruitfully with the tension between free will and human responsibility on the one hand and divine sovereignty and providence on the other. Calvinists, it has long been said, pray as if everything depends on God and work as if everything depends on them. Abraham Kuyper struggled productively with the tension between common grace and the antithesis.

We, individually and as a community, have learned to cope with a variety of tensions; at times we do a good job of balancing them. I want to lay down the challenge today, however, that we go even further and deeper, to build and maintain the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual courage to embrace the tensions in Christian higher education generally and at Calvin College in particular. The challenge is that we must capitalize on the strengths, creativity, and motivations for thought and action inherent in the interplay among these tensions. We should be "maximalists," seeking the benefits of the interplay or even integration, while avoiding the snares at the polar extremes.

Those of us who are inheritors of the culture and Reformed tradition that was transplanted to North America from the Netherlands are well accustomed to the tensions of which I will speak today. I take my title for this address, "The Embarrassment of Riches," from a masterwork of the same name by Harvard historian Simon Schama. In *The Embarrassment of Riches* Schama illustrates in great detail how tension

fostered the rise of the Dutch Golden Age of the seventeenth century. He describes how this small Calvinistic country became the wealthiest on earth and the “arbiter of the world” by embracing the unresolved dilemma, the enduring tension, between being wealthy and being moral. He concludes that it was the wrestling with the dilemma, the embracing, if you will, of this tension that produced an era of flourishing art and education, republican government, tolerance, and public works projects of unprecedented scale.

Schama identifies what he terms “the moral geography of the Dutch mind” in this tension-packed passage:

[It was] adrift between the fear of the deluge and the hope of moral salvage, in the tidal ebb and flow between worldliness and homeliness, between the gratification of appetite and its denial, between the conditional consecration of wealth and perdition in its surfeit.... To be Dutch... was to live in a perpetual present participle, to cohabit with the unsettled.... To be Dutch still means coming to terms with the moral ambiguities of materialism in their own idiosyncratic but inescapable ways: through the daily living of it, in Sunday sermons on nuclear weapons and Monday rites of scrubbing the sidewalk.²

On the eve of the twenty-first century, there are an array of such tensions that confront all higher education that aims to be Christian, and some that confront us in particular ways at Calvin. I want to highlight the most pressing of these tensions to outline the task ahead if we are to keep faith by embracing them.

1. *The tension between piety and intellect.* There is a fragile balance that can easily be lost between efforts to develop and maintain piety and efforts to develop the mind and the intellect through education in the liberal arts. Those more concerned with a character of piety worry about a focus on the life of the mind and where it might take the college. Those who stress the need for intellectual development decry anti-intellectualism and fear that a shallow, personally focused emphasis on pietistic feelings and practices will limit the intellectual development of students and faculty. But Calvinism, at its best, is at the crossroads of searching inquiry and spiritual devotion. The challenge is to keep this creative debate alive and, in the words of Yale University historian Harry Stout, a Calvin alumnus, to make “intellect and piety mutually reinforcing instead of mutually antagonistic.”³

2. *The tension between teaching and scholarship.* The education of Calvin’s students and the scholarly pursuits of its faculty can be enriched through a fruitful embrace of the tension between teaching and scholarship that continually looks for ways to leverage one for the benefit of the other.

3. *The tension between the needs and desires of individuals and the needs of the community.* For faculty, professionalization and disciplinary specialization compete for time and attention with interdisciplinary undertakings, participation in campuswide dialogue and events, and interaction with students outside of class. For students, job orientation and preoccupation with self can come at the expense of liberal arts breadth and involvement in community activities and in the lives of others.

4. *The tension between living in a science-based, technology-driven modern society and carrying out the college’s mission to teach that there are eternal truths and transcendent values.* The courageous embrace of the tension between technology-driven modernity and a Christian liberal arts education places us at the cutting edge of technology and media. We must be there to serve as informed and responsible participants in the debate about technology’s uses — and limits. We need to have the confidence displayed by our Communication Arts and Sciences and Computer departments to be skilled agents of cultural impact and change, as our response to the unchanging gospel of Jesus Christ.

5. *The tension between motivating students and faculty through public recognition of achievement or promise of material rewards and the Calvin community's preference for an egalitarian community environment, modesty, and inner motivation.* The embrace of this tension will help us to avoid the potential excesses at either pole, while keeping alive the debate about the proper balance between external and internal motivations for personal best efforts.

6. *The tension between wealth and its obligations.* Material riches are frequently seen here at Calvin — as they were by the Dutch of the seventeenth century — to be in tension with morality and stewardship. The tension is amplified in the seemingly contradictory texts in the Bible affirming material prosperity — even abundance — as God's blessing and those condemning riches as a curse. The dangers of materialism and its excesses are tugging against the privilege of enjoying the fruits of God's creation and the need for significant resources to carry out our mission with adequate facilities and budgets. Professor John Schneider of our faculty has served us well by thoughtfully analyzing the tension between the possession and enjoyment of material wealth and the requirements of Christian stewardship, morality, and charity. His book *Godly Materialism: Rethinking Money and Possessions*⁴ is a first-rate example of how we as Reformed Christians at Calvin College can creatively embrace the tensions that confront us.

7. *The tension between a college or university's adherence to a distinctive Christian tradition and the drive for academic excellence and academic freedom.* This tension has existed throughout the history of higher education in America. In his widely read book *The Soul of the American University*, George Marsden describes how several hundred American colleges and universities — from Harvard and Yale to the University of Michigan and Vanderbilt — resolved this tension. Through a series of gradual changes, most often in the name of academic excellence and academic freedom, they became thoroughly secular institutions. Few Christian academic institutions have maintained their religious character for more than 150 years⁵. Again, I believe that we must boldly embrace this tension. We must defy the precedent. We must beat the odds. We must be distinctively Reformed Christians *and* academically excellent. We must be academically excellent *because* we are Reformed Christians. We must remain a prime, attractive example of why there should always be what Marsden calls “institutional pluralism” — that is, a variety among institutions — rather than succumbing to the impulse that all colleges and universities become uniform and devoid of distinctive religious features.

8. *The tension between Calvin's distinctive cultural identity and the need for diversity within the faculty and student body.* The scope and claims of the Christian faith are far broader than any college or denomination. Diversity is an important component of an excellent liberal arts education. Calvin's cultural heritage includes features that are valuable and important to maintain, a dedication to family and liberal education, a loyalty to the work ethic even while calling into question popular American mores and materialism. Calvin's cultural heritage also has baggage that must be abandoned — unequal treatment of women, tendencies toward isolation, a “chosen people” complex, and lack of hospitality toward those who are ethnically or culturally different. When we embrace the tension between our cultural identity and need for diversity we will evaluate carefully the components of Calvin's culture, to see what is valuable and what is harmful. We will emerge from this exercise a community that is more diverse and more welcoming — a better reflection of God's kingdom.

So, on this morning of inauguration, at the dawn of a new administration, I pose these questions: Can we live confidently and creatively as characters in parables with unknown endings? Will we remember that we have only *one* comfort in life and in death? Can we muster the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual courage to face head-on the difficult issues and decisions that confront us? Will we embrace the tensions? For as the embarrassment of riches fostered a golden age in the seventeenth century, our embrace of the tensions facing Calvin College can be our way of living up to our potential, our maturity mandate.

Former Calvin President William Spoelhof — my president — tells a story that beautifully illustrates what I have been talking about. He begins by recalling his childhood years in New Jersey, growing up in a home with blue Delft tiles hanging on the walls, bearing proverbs. On one of them is painted, “Van het concert des levens krijgt niemand een program.” In English it means “For the concert of life no one gets a program.” This is Dr. Spoelhof’s favorite proverb, but he wisely calls it a “half-good” proverb. For in the concert of life, although there may be no program, there is a Conductor. Dr. Spoelhof understands very well the underlying tension of this proverb. God is the Conductor, and every now and then God allows us to hear, and even play, some grace notes.

This ceremony is a formal acknowledgment of a transition, the beginning of a new chapter in the life of Calvin College. I wish to begin not with the end in mind, but with agreement on the quality and character that our lives and actions should have. I trust, God helping us, that it will be said of this administration that we acted boldly to safeguard what is distinctive and most valuable about this college. I trust, and expect, that our legacy will be one of embracing the tensions, of having the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual courage to face head-on the difficult issues and decisions that confront us.

I invite you to keep company with me as we step out into the challenges and opportunities before us. I pray that we will follow the example of Dr. Spoelhof and all those who understand the message and meaning of the blue Delft proverb. I pray that we will keep our eyes on the Conductor each step of the way.

1. James Breech, *The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).
2. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 609.
3. Harry Stout, “The Ghosts of Puritan Die Hard: Interview with Harry Stout. By Kyle Farley,” *Dialogue* (Jan./Feb. 1995): 32-36.
4. John Schneider, *Godly Materialism: Rethinking Money and Possessions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).
5. George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).