

Columns



Technically Speaking

Derek Schuurman

Remembering
Theo Plantinga

On a cold evening in late January, a group of people gathered in a warm classroom at Redeemer University College to celebrate the life and work of Theodore Plantinga, a professor who passed away in 2008. The evening included a book launch, a *Festschrift* of writings in Theo's honour. The project was launched by one of his former students. Members of his family, students, colleagues, friends and pastors were all in attendance. Redeemer was a fitting place for the event to be held, to remember one of its founding faculty members and author of *Rationale for a Christian College*, a 1980 manifesto on the establishment of a Christian college in Ontario.

I began working full-time at Redeemer in 2003 and got to know Theo as a colleague. It became clear that we shared a common interest in computers, and so began a mutually beneficial relationship where he taught me some philosophy and I answered his questions on computers. In fact, Theo was among the first at Redeemer to adopt computer technology, and the first prof to put his lectures online. Some of his writings can still be found at plantinga.ca, which includes his writings on Reformational history (readers interested in technology may wish to read Theo's article entitled "Technology and Verzuiling" at plantinga.ca/m/MDL.HTM). His writings also included books, translations, and articles for a range of Reformed publications like *Christian Courier*, *Christian Renewal* and *The Outlook*.

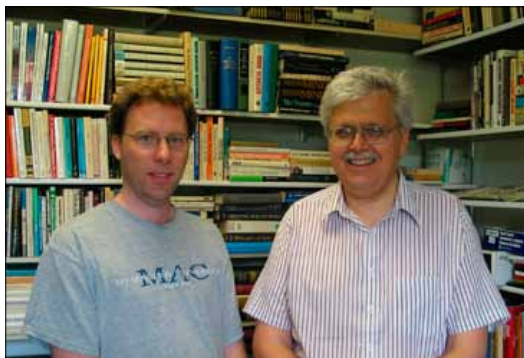
As I got to know Theo, I observed that he could sometimes be a "provocateur"; he would ask challenging questions that sometimes took you aback. He was also infamous for his loud ties, which I think were selected to evoke a similar response. Since his passing, Redeemer instituted a "Theo Tie Day" in which people playfully compete to wear the most outlandish tie. As a vegetarian he often teased me about not eating enough vegetables (something I still struggle with). I think he enjoyed throwing intellectual curve balls, and he could do it well because he was very well read and articulate. Not everyone appreciated his style, but I usually saw the twinkle in his eye. Ideas were his playground.

The unique 'yours truly'

I found Theo very encouraging and gracious. He always said hello in the halls and we would often chat together. I think he was an example of the best of inter-disciplinary interaction in a liberal arts and science college. He willingly came when invited to speak in my computer issues class and I returned the favour. Theo and I also collaborated on a few faculty colloquia, one of which was playfully titled "Free Software and the Free University: What Would Kuyper Say?" He often encouraged me to write and think more about the philosophy of technology and he generously read some of my initial attempts to write on this topic (while I was still "in my literary underwear," as he put it). He would give me books, send me occasional links to interesting articles, or suggest that I read something because "someone in your field should be familiar with this topic or with the writings of so-and-so." Although I didn't always agree with him on everything, Theo grew to be a mentor and a friend.

In time, Theo openly shared with me things about his life – and later about his struggles and declining health as he battled cancer. A few weeks before he died, I asked Theo whether the reality of facing one's mortality changes your academic view of things. He said yes; for example, he recalled how he used to lecture about how our society is afraid of pain and how it anesthetizes itself too much. His own experience of managing the pain brought on by cancer gave him a different perspective on this, and he confessed he would teach that topic differently now.

It's not quite the same at Redeemer without "yours truly" – a phrase Theo often used to refer to himself. I am thankful for the opportunity I had to know Theo, with all



Schuurman visiting Plantinga's book-filled office at Redeemer.

his idiosyncrasies and shortcomings. I learned many things from him, and many of us have benefited from the pioneering role he played in helping establish Redeemer University College. ➤

Editor's note: The next issue of Christian Courier will include more about January's Festschrift for Theo Plantinga, as well as a review of the book of essays in his honour.

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Christ @ Culture

Lloyd Rang

Decoder Ring
not included

"One should aim not at being possible to understand, but at being impossible to misunderstand." Quintilian

When I was a kid, the back page of comic books held untold wonders, available for just a few dollars plus shipping and handling. You could order Sea Monkeys, joy buzzers, exploding cigars, onion gum, X-ray vision glasses and – coolest of all – a secret decoder ring. With the ring, you and your friends could pass secret messages back and forth that no one else could understand.

Unless they had a decoder ring.

Sometimes I wonder if our churches shouldn't hand them out to guests. Because it seems to me we often speak in a language no one else understands. I first noticed this many years ago, during university. One Sunday, I decided to take a friend to church with me. She hadn't been to church much, so it was a big deal for her to attend the service. And she was a little nervous. One of the first things she heard was an elder invite guests to "come downstairs to the fellowship hall for coffee and fellowshiping after the service."

She leaned over to me and said: "That's the first time I've ever heard 'fellowship' used as a verb. What does that mean, exactly?"

I told her the truth: "In my church, it means people come up to you, ask your last name and try to figure out which other Dutch person you're related to. It's kind of like how dogs greet each other, except with coffee and cake." Mind you, she was Ukrainian – which meant the conversations after the service ended rather abruptly.

Exclusive jargon

That's just one small example of language that requires a decoder ring. And that's not even a particularly bad one.

Consider the following sentence: "Brothers and sisters in the Lord, as we look to God in prayer, let us join our hearts to pray that the Holy Spirit may move among us, that we may bear fruit, and grant us the assurance that we are covered by the blood of Jesus."

Now, an experienced churchgoer would recognize that sentence for what it is: a bunch of pious nonsense uttered by someone who doesn't want to say the wrong thing in front of a congregation full of peers. We might smile, knowingly, realizing the many times we've done exactly the same

thing. And it would sail in one ear and out the other without hitting anything solid in between.

Now read it again. This time imagine that you are in church for the first time, and that someone has just prefaced a prayer that way. How would you respond?

Would you be confused? Probably.

Would you be repulsed? Maybe.

Would you feel excluded? Absolutely.

The irony is that this kind of "Christianspeak" is a language we Christians only ever use in a church setting. The rest of the week, we happily go about our business, speaking to people in plain English. If you were speaking to someone at work about your faith, you wouldn't begin using phrases like "led by the spirit" to describe your beliefs. If you did, you'd quickly lose them, and see it in their eyes.

Yet, when we get to church, we flip a switch and change the words we use and the metaphors we employ.

Pure and simple

Maybe this is a kind of spiritual shorthand. Maybe we feel we're being reverent – like we're putting on our Sunday-best words to go along with our Sunday-best clothes. Maybe it's because, to capture spiritual truth, we feel we need to speak in a different tongue. Whatever the reason for it, it's off-putting for newcomers.

Now, some might say that's perfectly fine. After all, when you visit a new country, you can expect people there to speak a different language. And, as a community of believers who have read and studied the Bible, there's bound to be a lot of things we talk about that others don't understand. It's up to them to read the Book and learn the language.

Fair enough.

But quite often, we use Christianspeak as shorthand. Rather than unpacking the meaning of a spiritual truth, we reach for something that sounds good, because it's easier. When we do that, we turn powerful and visceral phrases like "washed in his blood" and "the throne of grace" into meaningless platitudes.

Perhaps we can all work a little harder to speak more plainly in church. Not only for the sake of our new members, but for each other, too. Aren't we there because we want to sincerely know God and one another better? How can we do that when we use words whose true – and perhaps beautiful meaning – has worn away with overuse?

Or, as it says in 1 John 3:18, "Our love must not be a thing of words and fine talk. It must be a thing of action and sincerity."

For plain words like those, no decoder ring is required. ➤

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