

## Features

# Meeting God: the relay race of generations

Calvin Seerveld

One thing you cannot give your children before you pass away is a living faith to follow Jesus Christ as the Son of God revealed in the Scriptures. Most of us believers try to outfit our offspring and friends with the habit of “living and thinking Christianly,” but often that set of clothes feels like a dated uniform to the next generation. Besides, our private lives (at home and with friends) are often at odds with the persona that appears in public or stands in one’s pulpit. All of us have trouble being faithful witnesses 24/7 to God’s grace.

Is there some way to get the Holy Spirit active in this relay race of generations, or must we just muddle through by ourselves? Can we help a younger generation mysteriously catch an active trust in the living God the way one used to catch the mumps? I have two suggestions: (1) tell simple, straightforward stories of your encounters with God and God’s Holy Spirit, and (2) get people to read the Bible knowingly out loud to first of all themselves.

## Telling simple stories

One summer (in 1937), as a young boy, I was signed up for two weeks of group swimming lessons. I only learned “the dead man’s float.” On the last day of lessons we were taken out to the end of the pier and told to jump into the deep water to show we could swim. Since I wouldn’t jump in, they threw me in. The instructor finally jumped in as I was going down under the water the third time, and kept me from drowning.

I walked the two miles home by myself, crying and remembering #318 in the red *Psalter Hymnal*: “Put no trust in princes, nor for help on man depend.” Later that summer I learned to “dog paddle” by my-

self, and eventually to swim in the ocean.

I was about to be drafted into the U.S. Army during the Korean war (1950-1953), since the local draft board and the New York State appeal board – each by split vote – decided to conscript me. As I wrote my final appeal letter to the Presidential board, arguing that since the U.S. Government had given me a Fulbright scholarship to study in Europe, why force me to go kill Communists in Asia? I vowed to God: “If you let me go study, Lord, rather than learn to kill, I will give you and your people my scholarship.”

The President’s board of three voted 2 to 1 to let me go study Christian philosophy in the Netherlands.

As a young graduate student in Holland (summer 1954) I hitch-hiked alone over the Alps to Italy to learn Italian. Hitch-hiking back after two months in Florence I took a bad ride late at night with a driver and his helper in the cab of a big transport truck. First they flattered me, and then the helper began to make sexual advances. I was trapped in between them and the door as we rode on.

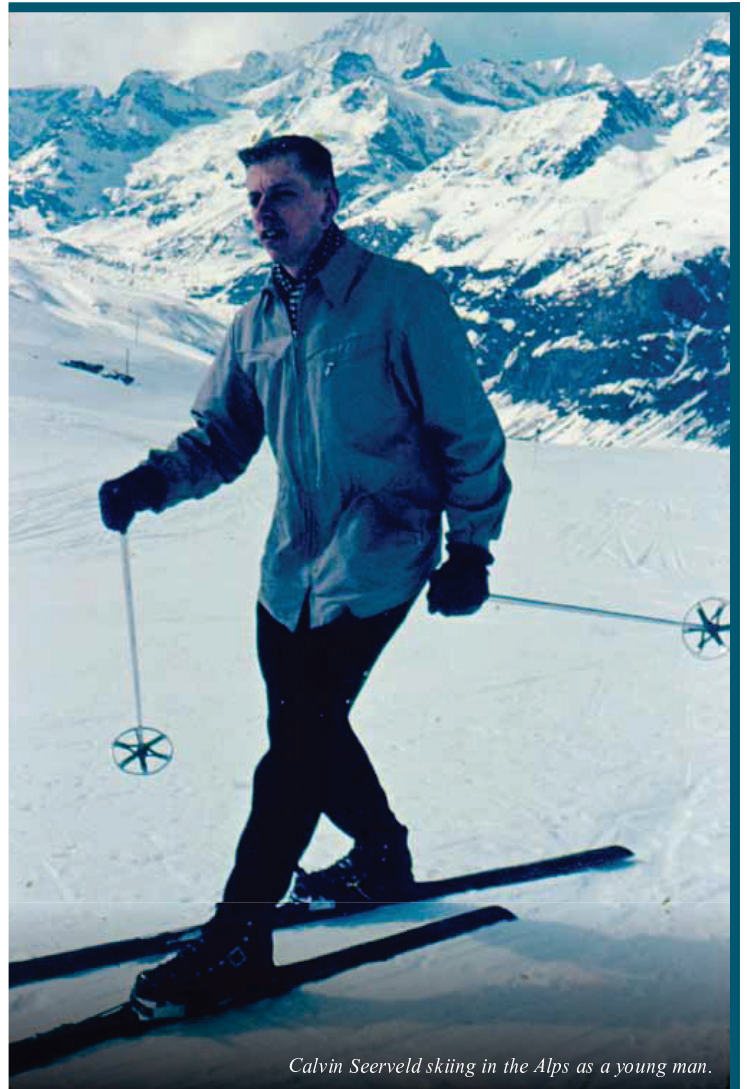
Suddenly, the truck had to stop because a long slow freight train blocked the road. I was able to grab the door handle, shouting in my broken Italian, “*Aprira! Tutto non è giusto!*” Pushing past the helper, I was able to get out, back pack and all. Shaken, I walked along that lonely road through the dark night to reach the youth hostel where I had planned to sleep, thanking God for sending the freight train.

One winter (1955), staying with my fiancée at her Swiss relatives in Crans, Wallais, for a short week, I wanted to go skiing. Every day the weather was bad. On day five, against their counsel, I decided to go anyhow, by myself. I took the ski lift alone up the mountain. Nobody else was around. So now I had to ski down the alp alone. I am not an experienced skier; so I snow-plowed and crisscrossed to make my descent through the heavy wet snow. At one turn I fell over, head first into the deep snow, ski poles fortunately still in my hands.

I do not know how I extricated myself from being smothered there. Somehow I got my rump and skis below my head, got up, and shakily, very, very slowly, came down to safety. I believe one of God’s angels saved my life that day. Nobody else was around.

## Mysterious, normal, merciful care

These brief personal stories are not paradigms for moral choices. I do not mean them to be stirring testimonies of successful acts of faith. I remember these trivial, possibly pivotal incidents in my life, and tell them matter-of-factly. The LORD God revealed in Jesus Christ, in whose Name



Calvin Seerveld skiing in the Alps as a young man.

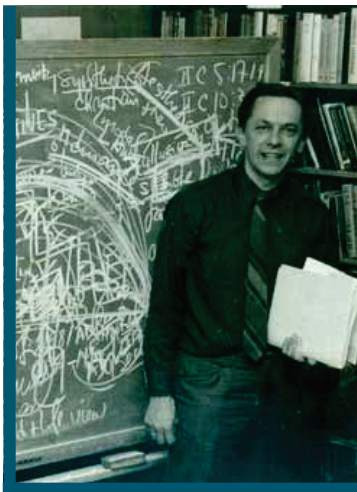
I am baptized, who has done great deeds like creating the universe and freeing the Israelites from Egyptian captivity and the Babylonian exile, whose Holy Spirit has birthed the Church after Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension, has stooped to act historically again and again in mundane matters of my very life.

You may not believe my report, since these things did not happen to you. But like the mystery of the birth of me and the forthcoming gift of my everlasting life, I know the truth of these stories the way a child knows surely who loves them. The covenantal LORD God was behind my not drowning, my not needing to become skilled in killing enemies with guns; it was God’s timing behind that night train in Italy, and rescuing that stupid American student in alpine snow. To this very day, as a redeemed sinner, I experience the Almighty God’s mysterious, normal, merciful care, along with the troubles and hard times. As Psalm 16 puts it, “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.”

## A second naiveté

Yes, thank God, apparently the Psalms were early inscribed by church songs in my childhood consciousness (Psalm 146: “put no confidence in princes”). My rural parents breathed a genuine, gentle piety and a steady, dedicated church life that made it seem right for me to make a serious vow to God in a major crisis. And maybe, because I had heard Karl Barth lecture weekly for three months on angels as pinpoint messengers of God’s powerful presence (*Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/3 ¶51), angels are uppermost in my mind when I hitch-hike or suffer accidents.

However, I am thankful to have been given what Paul Ricoeur calls “a second naiveté,” a kind of seasoned childlike confidence in God’s veritable presence that does not try to argue somebody into recognizing God’s being, but calmly knows for sure that what is happening, to me too, occurs under God’s providing for my well-being. So, let that reality rub off on your children and friends like a virus.



## Features

### Reading the Bible out loud

The best place to meet God is in the biblical writings, because the Scriptures existentially embody *God's speaking to us*. We humans need to capture that primal reality by exercising the *oral character* of the Bible. One needs to read the Bible out loud so you can *hear* God's word spoken to you.

Of course one needs to prepare for meeting God in the Bible by studying the text. You need to know the contour of the whole story God tells, as Luke said to Theophilus, about "the Rule of God" acoming (Acts 1:1-3). It helps to find out, for example, that Joseph's forgiveness to

*The LORD God has stooped to act historically again and again in mundane matters of my very life.*

his brothers captures the thrust of Genesis chapters 12-50: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as God is doing today" (Gen. 50:20). It helps to realize that chapter 1:9 epitomizes the message of the last picture book of the Bible, The Revelation of Jesus Christ given to John, about how to live in God's messed up world, sharing "in Jesus, the troubling persecution, the ministering Rule, and the persevering expectancy" of Christ's glorious return.

It helps to learn that Psalm 1 (respect God's torah direction), Psalm 2 (expect political struggle against God's anointed ones), and Psalm 110 (become royal priests like Melchizedek) shape the burden of the book of Psalm histories, laments and praise. The book of Proverbs opens up when you recognize its format of wisdom is made up of paragraphs rather than one-liners. When one becomes truly familiar with the Bible, you realize the high pressure points of Exodus 32, 1 Samuel 15, Isaiah 56-66 or Micah 6:8, which act like shooting stars revealing the amazing, jealous and enduring covenantal love of Almighty God for us troubled creatures.

### Hearing God speak

Preparation to read the Bible aloud asks a person how the little phrase in Nehemiah's diary should sound: "Remember me for my good, O my God, all the stuff I have done for this people of yours" (5:9, 13:14,22b). Was the apostle Paul tired and discouraged when he wrote Philippians 1:18b-20? Do you recognize that The Greatest Song (7:1-9a) is a lustful male catalogue of a woman's charms? In what tone of voice did Deborah (Judges 5),

Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10), and the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:46-55) sing their tough songs? Exultant and triumphant, but not vindictive? Can you speak appropriately Jesus' last remark to traumatized Simon Peter recorded by competitor John: (even though you cannot agape me, Peter) "Follow me anyhow" (John 20:15-19, v.19)?

That is, a person does well to wrestle with the written record, its historical settings, its metaphorical colour, its interconnective overtones, and to master the narrative from genealogies to parables. But then one must not read it like a theologian, making up a commentary as you read, about its doctrines. Read it simply and intelligently first of all as if hearing God speaking the stirring message directly to you, convicting you in your heart as well as in your head, of the Lord's merciful just-doing in the world with a redemptive intention for you amid your neighbours so you can respond "Abba" and receive *shalom*.

### God's voice through our sounds

And to *hear* God speak, it makes sense to get the language *aural*. Lingual activity is basically *oral*. Printed language comes alive when it is spoken aloud, deepening with a personal voice (or distorting) the meaning captured in the script. There is a critical difference in reading silently or in reading the Bible out loud – more of you

is invested in the process when you make it a verbal activity. One does best, I think, in reading Scripture to become like the dummy of a ventriloquist, and let God's voice reverberate through your sounds.

To read God's word aloud woodenly or unintelligently is like a curse! Like taking God's name in vain, since God's word is actually razor sharp and fruit-bearing (Is. 55:10-11, Heb. 4:12-13). When you hear someone speak the Bible clearly, fluently, understandingly, then the Word has a convincing character in its testimony to the lordship of Jesus Christ. So it is important to practice reading the Bible out loud aright. Do it privately in your "closet," at meal times, before you sleep, until one dares do it at the opening of meetings and in the worship liturgy. If a person comes to be able to speak aloud God's Word with informed passion and sorrowful serenity, then it is possible that those who hear the live word may catch the virus of meeting God in the holy Scriptures.

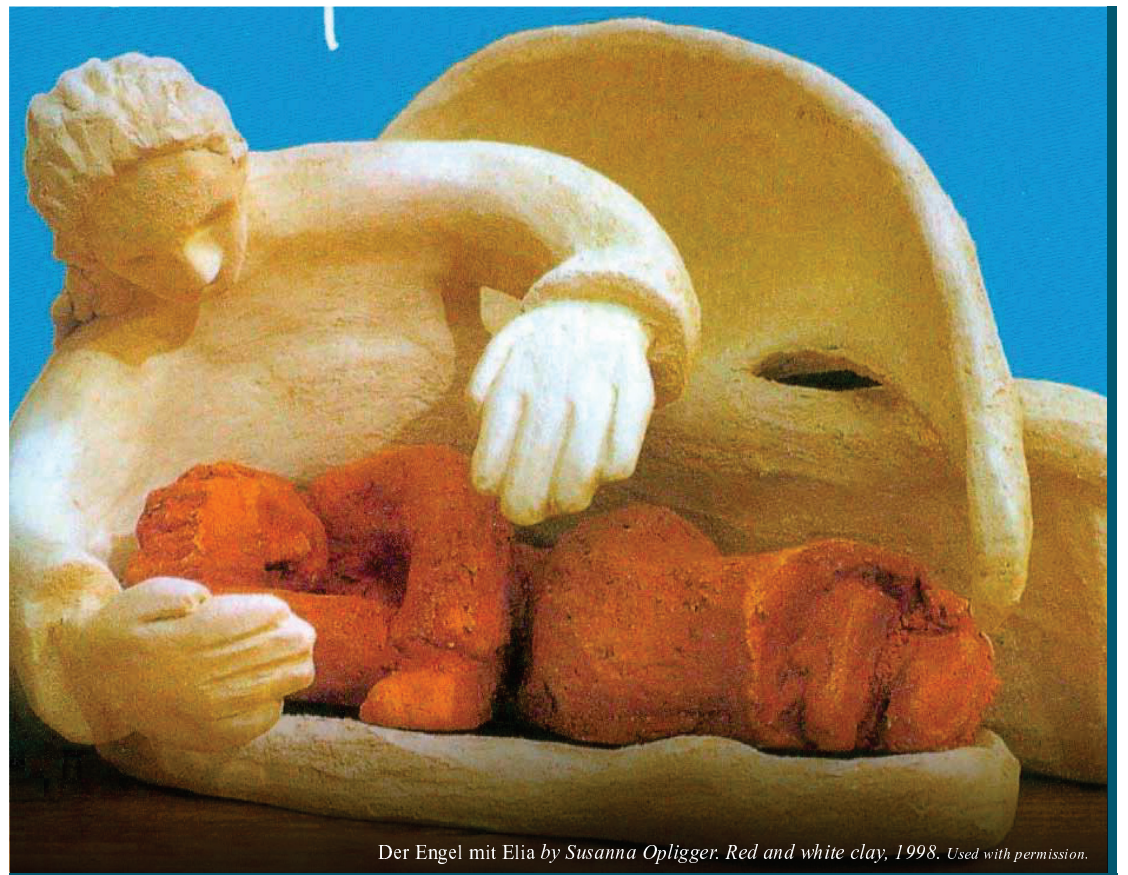
### Continuing with steadfast drive

Helpful to me in preparing to read the Scriptures aloud have been books like Buber and Rozenzweig's *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (1936), K.H. Miskotte's *Als de Goden zwijgen, Over de zin van het Oude Testament* (1956), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) and Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum*

*Neuen Testament* (1933-1973). Learning to translate from the original languages is perhaps the best training for pastors, because it slows down one's hearing what is said. That is why reading the Bible in any language other than your mother tongue is a deepening practice.

I write this article to say that over the years I have experienced the non-ecclesial *Calvinist Contact* and *Christian Courier* edited by Dick Farenhorst, Bert Witvoet, Harry der Nederlanden, and now Angela Reitsma Bick, in this tradition of communicating about all and sundry matters, seriously and humorously, with the steadfast drive to be hearing God's word for our lives. Its editorial policy has not been parochial, partisan or narrow-minded, but has been biblically minded, Reformational, a humbly spirited offering. I pray that *CC* remain a winsome offshoot in print as a regular place for hearing about meeting God in both ordinary and unusual circumstances, so the upcoming generation who still read will be blessed. 7A

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