INSTITUTE FOR
CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Spring/Fall 2025
Volume 59 • Number 1

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SPECIAL ISSUE
FREE TO BE FAITHFUL



PERSPECTIVE

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

We are living in a moment when faith is being claimed loudly and deployed recklessly. Public life is strained by polarization. Political imagination is thin. Communities fracture along ideological lines, and the name of Christ is too often conscripted into projects of power rather than service.

What does it mean to be faithful at this time when public life feels fractured and our common world fragile? Are we free to respond in new ways to the current needs of our communities while continuing to be inspired by the richness of our faith and spiritual traditions?

In this issue of *Perspective*, our contributors refuse both nostalgia and resignation. President Ron Kuipers reminds us that Christian freedom is not autonomy without limits, but apprenticeship in the way of shalom, a freedom formed through disciplined love. Gideon Strauss confronts the enduring idolatries of Christian nationalism, drawing from the Reformed tradition's own history to call the church to repentance and courageous resistance. Angela Reitsma Bick reflects on deconstruction within Canadian Christianity, insisting that ruins are not the end and that honest reckoning may yet prepare the ground for restoration. Héctor Acero Ferrer argues that our political paralysis is rooted in a failure of imagination, and that without renewed inquiry and hope, we cannot build a common future.

These essays share a conviction: faithfulness in our time requires discernment, courage, and imagination. It requires the freedom to salvage what has been distorted, resist what enslaves, and reclaim traditions for the sake of the vulnerable.

In a moment tempted by fear and fragmentation, may this issue encourage us to take up our freedom to be faithful in the service of our world in great need.

AUTHORS



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Ronald A. Kuipers

FREE TO BE FAITHFUL

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

—Galatians 5:1

WHAT DOES FREEDOM HAVE to do with faithfulness? At first blush, the phrase "free to be faithful" sounds like a contradiction. Doesn't freedom mean liberation from constraints, while faithfulness requires us to willingly accept them? In Christian life especially, doesn't being faithful mean submitting ourselves to the demands of a religious tradition, and therefore giving up some of our freedom?

That's one way of looking at it. And certainly, any real sense of freedom does involve being freed from some kinds of constraint, while faithfulness always involves a measure of surrender to authority. But this way of framing things misses something crucial: freedom and faithfulness are not just opposed to one another, they also deeply depend on one another. If we think of freedom not only as *freedom from* something but also as *freedom for* something, then we begin to see how the constraints of faithfulness actually create the conditions for freedom.

Take the example of learning a craft like knitting or playing a musical instrument. I am not truly "free" to play my guitar just because my hands aren't tied and no one stops me from strumming its strings. To play it well, I must first apprentice myself to the art and discipline of music (with more concerted effort than I have done to date, alas!). I need to practice, to submit to the rules and guidance that generations of players before me have passed down. Only by submitting to those constraints do I gain the freedom to really play.

Christian faith works the same way. It is an appren-

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ticeship in living, helping us take up a way of life that, over time, frees us to act and love in a particular direction. My own apprenticeship has taken shape in the community of teachers, mentors, and conversation partners I've had the privilege of learning from: Hendrik Hart, Jim Olthuis, Cal Seerveld, Bob Sweetman, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Hendrik Vroom, George Vandevelde, Sylvia Keesmaat, Brian Walsh, Richard Middleton, Lambert Zuidervaart, Nik Ansell, Jeffrey Dudiak, Janet Wesselius, Douglas Harink, Roy Berkenbosch, Thyra Van Keeken, and many others. The list is long! Each in their own way has helped me discern God's call to walk the shalom way—the path of justice and peace that our Creator and Redeemer sets before us.

Of course, each of us will look to different guides. Every tradition contains a variety of voices, sometimes even competing ones, and discerning which to follow is never easy. As in any apprenticeship, mistakes and missteps are part of the learning. But for me, I have been drawn most strongly to those who echo God's special concern for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, for all those who are harmed by systemically unjust political and economic systems. My "morning star," to borrow Henk Hart's phrase, remains Jesus as we meet him in the gospels: the travelling teacher and healer who broke down social distinctions between insider and outsider so that he could enfold everyone in God's all-embracing love.

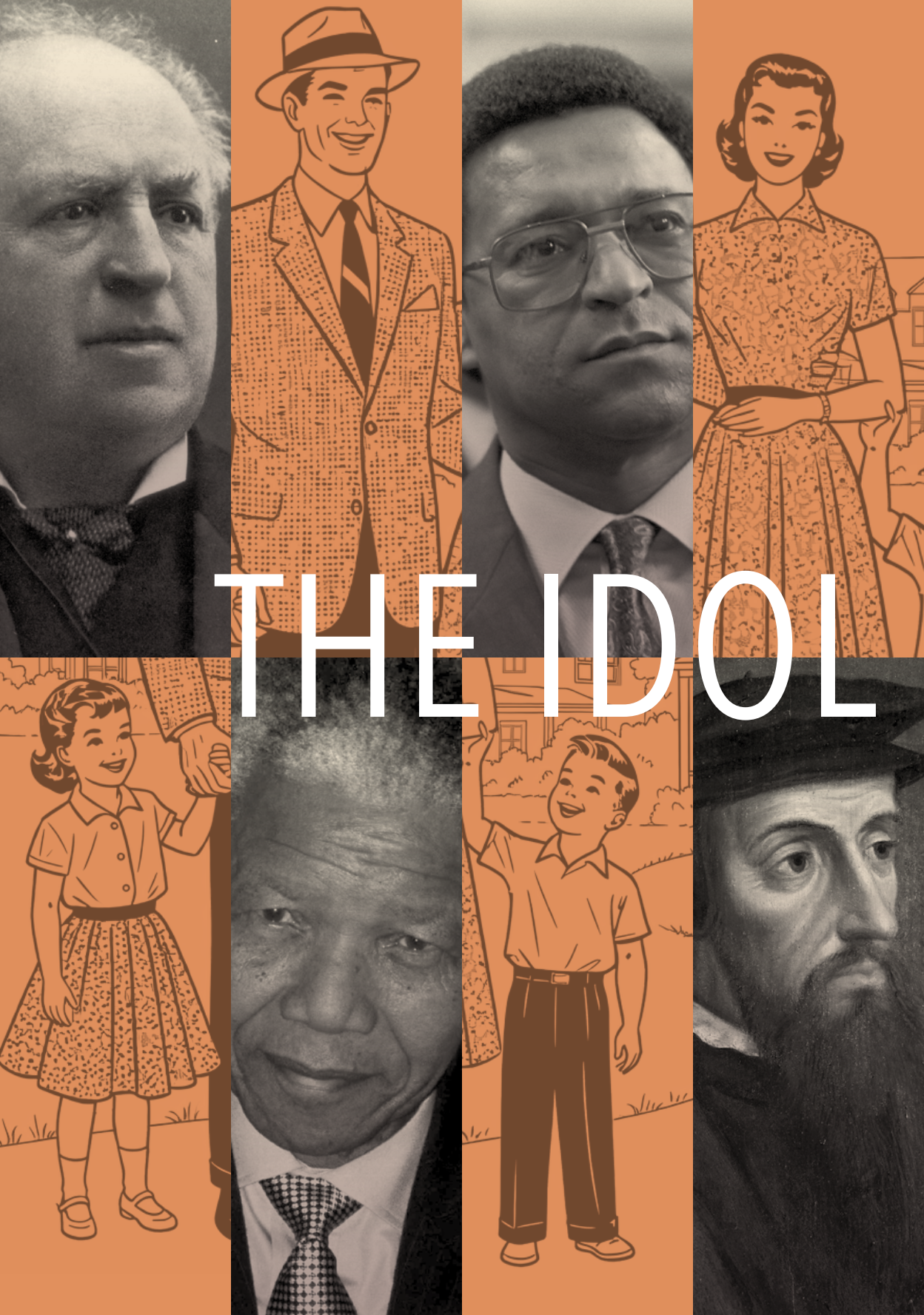
Do I stumble on this way? Of course. Yet the freedom I long for is the freedom to keep walking this path unencumbered by all the baggage that prevents me from joyfully embracing it. That's why I resist labels like "progressive" and "conservative" in our Christian debates. Both can become traps. If "progressive" means rejecting the past entirely, it forgets that we can't grow without roots. The past that any tradition allows us to plumb is so much more than a shackle to be cast off. Likewise, if "conservative" means nothing more than clinging nostalgically to a frozen past that never really existed, it blinds us to God's new future breaking in.

The better way, I believe, is to remain faithful apprentices. In taking up the tradition, we both *conserve* its life-giving resources for future generations, while also contributing to its *progress*, its ability to grow and adapt as the Spirit calls. As traditions move through time they change. Every generation faces challenges our ancestors could not have imagined, and sometimes the old, shopworn answers wear thin. In these moments, God's Spirit invites us to discern anew how to walk the shalom way together. This is the heart of our reformational tradition at ICS: seeking fresh, redemptive responses to the world's trials without losing sight of the wisdom handed down to us. That's why I remain committed to this work.

In this issue of *Perspective*, you'll see how others in our extended community are taking up their freedom to be faithful. Academic Dean Gideon's Strauss shares his journey from youthful acceptance of the Christian Nationalism of Apartheid-era South Africa to a deeper embrace of God's cosmic love for the entirety of creation. Angela Reitsma Bick, former Editor-in-Chief of *Christian Courier*, reflects on what she has learned by listening to faithful seekers who feel alienated from, or even abandoned by, the faith communities in which they were raised. In her book *Blessed are the Undone* (co-authored with Peter Schuurman), she reminds us that faith is never a straight line; doubt, critique, and struggle are all part of the freedom Christ gives us to seek God's truth.

In Galatians 5, St. Paul speaks of a freedom in Christ that is sheer gift. He proclaims a grace we cannot earn or secure for ourselves. This grace, this freedom, liberates us *from* our anxious pursuit of our own security, so that we can freely live *for* each other. Paradoxically, Paul says, this freedom makes us "slaves to one another" (Gal. 5:13). What kind of freedom is this? The gospel's startling answer is that the way of self-giving love, the way of shalom, is the only path to true liberation. If we set our hearts on this way, if we embrace our freedom to be faithful, then no law can stand against us (Galatians 5:23b). Or, as St. Augustine once preached in a sermon on the first epistle of John: "Love, and do what you will."

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THE IDOL



Gideon Strauss

"It is my conviction that the Reformed tradition has a future in this country only if black Reformed Christians are willing to take it up, make it truly their own, and let this tradition once again become what it once was: a champion of the cause of the poor and the oppressed, clinging to the confession of the lordship of Christ and to the supremacy of the word of God."

– Allan Boesak

Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition

OF KINSHIP

Some of the desires that motivate the common life of humans are so fierce they might be gods. The ferocity with which such wild wants are pursued can make this earth a hell. Throughout human history, few idols have drawn forth as great a degree of fanaticism as has kinship (real or imagined). I saw the murderous effects of the idolatries of race and ethnicity up close as a teenager active in the struggle against apartheid in 1980s South Africa and again as an interpreter for the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s.

I had imagined that the struggle against Christian nationalism—including my own struggle—ended in victory on June 24, 1995. On that glorious day, I enjoyed a barbecue (or as we say in Afrikaans, my mother tongue, a *braai*) with friends and on television watched the South African national team, the Springboks, decisively defeat their arch-nemeses, the New Zealand All Blacks, to win the Rugby World Cup. It was not the Rugby World Cup itself that was glorious: it was the way in which all South Africans, people of every race and ethnicity, came together to support and celebrate the Springboks—a hitherto unprecedented expression of a common humanity and a shared patriotism, South Africa having been deeply riven by racial and ethnic enmity during the preceding 47 years of apartheid.

To see Nelson Mandela, the first truly democratically elected—and the first black—president of South Africa, wear the green-and-gold rugby jersey of the Springboks at that game was to revel in the glorious possibility of a future of peace overcoming ethnic enmity, of races reconciling, and of prosperity becoming available to all South Africans.

Thirty years later, my naïveté is being brutally

All photos Wikimedia Creative Commons: Abraham Kuyper, Allan Boesak, Nelson Mandela, John Calvin

exposed by the re-emergence of that heresy as the motivating heartbeat of the current policies and practices of the global hegemon, the United States of America. On May 21, 2025, the now president of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, was confronted with false claims of genocide against white South Africans in a meeting with the President of the U.S., Donald Trump—claims derived from propaganda engineered by Afrikaner organizations motivated by the very same Christian nationalism that animated the apartheid regime. Contrary to what I believed for the past three decades, the heart of Christian nationalism still beats in 2025. And the powers it animates today are far greater than the powers it animated in 1995. John Calvin was right when he wrote (Institutes I.11.8) that "the human heart is a perpetual idol factory."



"I did it for love's sake."

These words have been susurrating in the background of my thinking ever since I heard them spoken in the testimony of a security police officer to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission sometime in 1996–1997.

During those years, I worked as a simultaneous interpreter for the Commission, offering my English interpretation of the Afrikaans-language testimony of agents of the apartheid state. The Commission was concerned with gross human rights violations, defined as abduction, torture, and murder, perpetrated by the organized participants in the armed struggle against apartheid. So stories of abduction, torture, and murder were what I interpreted.

This officer was offering testimony behind closed doors in the hope that the Commission would offer him a provisional amnesty, freeing him from his fear that giving public testimony would expose him to the danger of criminal prosecution. Such amnesties provided the leverage with which the Commission extracted truth about the evils perpetrated during the struggle, given that it was not otherwise in the interest of perpetrators to be forthcoming.

His testimony was, indeed, appalling. He had participated in several illegal abductions and tortures of anti-apartheid activists in his work for the Security Branch of the South African Police during the 1980s. Judging by his testimony, at least one of the people he helped abduct and torture had, during the mid-1980s, been a friend of mine: a friend who had disappeared. It was not easy to interpret the particulars of his torture.

The idol of Christian nationalism is so tenacious because it does not begin in hatred, but in the fierce and familiar love of one's own.

Towards the end of the hearing, one of the commissioners asked the officer *why* he did all these appalling things. And that is when he explained: For love's sake. He loves his wife, he loves his children, he loves his friends, he loves his *volk* (ethnic community), he loves his white race, he loves the country of South Africa. And all of these, he explained, face an existential threat from their racial and political enemies. None of the evils he perpetrated gave him pleasure. Rather, he found the abductions and tortures in which he participated hard to carry out, and he suffered personal trauma from having to act in these ways. But his loves inspired him with the courage and perseverance he needed to do his work.

This testimony, as I recall it, explains why the idol of Christian nationalism has proved to be so tenacious: nationalism is rooted in one of the most basic of our natural human loves, the love of our kin, and is an expression of our desire that we and our people might flourish. If this is so, you might ask, why denounce nationalism? Should these natural loves not rather be celebrated, also by Christians?



Such a posture was indeed that of the Afrikaner theologian Andries Treurnicht, the Christian nationalist with whose work I was most familiar in my own childhood. His book of essays, *Credo van 'n Afrikaner* (1975), lived on the bookshelves of my childhood home and was a reference for my father and me as we argued with each other about Christian nationalism during my adolescence.

No later than the second page of *Credo*, Treurnicht tethers his moral defence of Christian nationalism to his neo-Calvinism with the following quote from Abraham Kuyper (all translations from the Afrikaans and Dutch are my own):

> In each nationality a centripetal force is at work that sharply delineates the distinctions between ethnicities and the differences between nationalities. This force causes a realization to take hold, both inside and outside the resultant boundaries, that people intend differently, feel differently, are differently, if they are either inside or outside. And exactly by means of this concentration of the national lived existence on its distinguishing definition an ever more deeply rooted character formation is advanced which awakens, in the national consciousness, an awareness of an own existential task, an own vocation, an own end. Not imitation of what is foreign, but originality, and an own identity and therefore a difference from others, is the criterion of that striving.

Treurnicht's reliance on Kuyper in the articulation of an Afrikaner Christian nationalism is highly inconvenient for me as someone who looks back to Kuyper as a source of my own philosophical tradition and, as such, of my own critique of Christian nationalism.

Treurnicht vigorously disapproved of interracial marriage, writing with reverence for the Afrikaner church leader J. D. Kestell who, in 1939, collected a quarter-million signatures to petition the then Parliament of South Africa for legislation enforcing racial segregation and criminalising racially mixed marriages. Treurnicht identified a desire for racial segregation as a necessary element of nationalism, insisted that nationalists are justified in resisting social and political equalization among races, and affirmed the compatibility of a particular Afrikaner ethnic nationalism with a generic white racial solidarity. And yet Treurnicht insisted that, somehow, his nationalism was not racism.

Treurnicht's Calvin is the Calvin that Treurnicht can quote as having written that, "God distributed the nations as an inheritance is divided … He set bounds to the nations," so that "every nation may be content within its own boundaries." In particular, Treurnicht's Calvinism is the neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch church and political leader, insofar as that neo-Calvinism can be deployed in support of nationalism. So, for example, Treurnicht can quote Kuyper as having written that, "Every nation constitutes an own organism, guided by its own thought, energized by the pumping of its own heart, and called by God to its own task."

Treurnicht insists that "the Afrikaner policy of segregated development for different nationalities [that is, apartheid] is a result of Calvinism," because of Calvinism's emphasis on diversity. Treurnicht is able to quote the Kuyperian theologian C. Smeenk as having written that, "All civilization is rooted in the separate existence of nations and each nation must develop its own national culture. Exactly this separation enriches humanity as a whole. Each individual nation must give full expression to its historical vocation for the sake of all of humanity. For this purpose the nation must be energetically developed while the national character must be kept pure."

Calvinism is undeniably the Christian tradition to which Andries Treurnicht appealed in his moral defence of apartheid, or segregated national development. But it is equally the tradition to which Allan Boesak appealed in his volume of addresses and essays published in 1984, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition* (Orbis Books). (An early version of the key essay had appeared in the November-December 1981 issue of *The Reformed Journal*.)

Treurnicht had argued vehemently against those who would consider Christian ecclesial solidarity to be a negation of racial and national difference: "Die kerk van Christus is daar om die volkere van die wêreld te *verbroeder*, nie om hulle te *verbaster* nie." ("The church of Christ exists to bring the nations of the world to *brotherhood*, not to *bastardization*.") Boesak interpreted Treurnicht's unapologetic assertion as evidence of the thorough entanglement of the Afrikaans Dutch Reformed churches in the racism and nationalism of the *apartheid* regime:

> The white Dutch Reformed Church has not only provided a theological justification for this policy; it also worked out, in considerable detail, the policy itself. It was the white Dutch Reformed Church that, from 1932 on, sent delegation after delegation to the government to support proposals for racial legislation. It worked hard to devise practical policies of apartheid that could be implemented by the government, while formulating theological constructs to justify the policy. . . . It is no wonder that the *Kerkbode*, official mouthpiece of the white Dutch Reformed Church, wrote with pride in 1958: "As a church, we have always worked purposefully for the separation of the races. In this regard apartheid can rightfully be called a church policy."

The future of the Reformed tradition depends not on defending its past, but on rescuing it from the powers that would bend it toward nation rather than kingdom.

Included in *Black and Reformed* is a 1979 open letter to the then-South African Minister of Justice in which Boesak writes, "I believe I have done nothing more than to place myself squarely within the Reformed tradition as that tradition has always understood sacred scripture on these matters." Boesak identifies the political consequence of his self-placement in the Reformed tradition by quoting John Calvin's 1536 address to King Francis I of France that appears as the prologue to Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: "For where the glory of God is not made the end of the government, it is not a legitimate sovereignty, but a usurpation."

As Treurnicht does, Boesak relies on the neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper, whom Boesak quotes from an address in 1891:

> When rich and poor stand opposed to each other, Jesus never takes his place with the wealthier, but always stands with the poorer. ... Both the Christ, and also just as much his disciples after him as the prophets before him, invariably took sides *against* those who were powerful and living in luxury, and for the suffering and the oppressed. . . . *It can neither nor may ever be* excused in us that, while our Father in heaven wills with divine kindness that an abundance of food comes forth from the ground, through our guilt this rich bounty should be divided so unequally that while one is surfeited with bread, another goes with an empty stomach to his pallet, and sometimes must even go without a pallet.

Together the example of Andries Treurnicht and the counter-example of Allan Boesak show that the Reformed tradition that looks for inspiration to John Calvin and the neo-Calvinist sub-tradition that looks for further inspiration to Abraham Kuyper engenders interpretations in support of both nationalism and anti-nationalism. This reality does not demand the abandonment of the tradition by its adherents. But it does demand, I believe, recentring the tradition on Jesus. In recentring the Reformed tradition thus, North American Christians have a ready example in the black Reformed church of South Africa.

Boesak writes that, "We confess that Jesus Christ embodies true divinity and true humanity. He was human as God intended humans to be. In him God was in the world. In him God was with humankind.

In him our being 'like God,' of necessity, took a clear and distinct form." This confession raises a question for Boesak: "What is the meaning of this confession for blacks who are the oppressed of the world?" He articulates an answer to this question throughout his addresses, for example as follows:

> For the black church, Jesus Christ is Lord. He is Lord over all of life. To this confession we must cling at all costs. Our loyalty and obedience are to him alone. If the black church is to have any future at all, this is where we must be firm. Our allegiance is ultimately not to the laws of the state, or to the laws of self-preservation, but to the commands of the living God. Our loyalty is to Christ. Our criteria are the demands of his kingdom. We shall have to learn not to be dictated to by the demands of the status quo, however intimidating; or by the demands of any ideology, however tempting.

Boesak moved from confession to conviction:

> It is my conviction that the Reformed tradition has a future in this country only if black Reformed Christians are willing to take it up, make it truly their own, and let this tradition once again become what it once was: a champion of the cause of the poor and the oppressed, clinging to the confession of the lordship of Christ and to the supremacy of the word of God. . . . Beginning with our own South African situation, we should accept our special responsibility to salvage this tradition from the grip of the mighty and the powerful who have so shamelessly perverted it for their own ends and let it speak once again for God's oppressed and suffering peoples.

What was the task for black Reformed South Africans in the 1980s is no less the task for white Reformed North Americans in the 2020s: "to salvage this tradition from the grip of the mighty and the powerful who have so shamelessly perverted it for their own ends and let it speak once again for God's oppressed and suffering peoples."

More than once, Boesak relies on John Calvin's famous excoriation of tyrants in Calvin's commentary on the prophetic Old Testament book of Habakkuk, quoting Calvin as writing:

> Tyrants and their cruelty cannot be endured without great weariness and sorrow. . . . Hence almost the whole world sounds forth these words, *How long, How long?* When anyone disturbs the whole world by his ambition and avarice, or everywhere commits plunders, or oppresses miserable nations, when he distresses the innocent, all cry out, *How long*? And this cry, proceeding as it does from the feeling of nature and the dictate of justice, is at length heard by the Lord. . . . [The oppressed] know that this confusion of order and justice is not to be endured. And this feeling, is it not implanted in us by the Lord? It is then the same as though God heard himself, when he hears the cries and groanings of those who suffer unbearable injustice.

It is this Calvinism that enables Boesak to write in his 1979 open letter to the Minister of Justice of South Africa with apocalyptic seriousness:

> I think the time has come for your government to make a choice: you are either the "servant of God" of Romans 13, or you are the "beast from the abyss" of Revelation 13. Unless and until the right choice becomes *evident* (through the whole-hearted and fundamental change of your policy), Christians in South Africa shall be called upon, *for the sake of their faith*, to resist you as we would the beast of Revelation 13.

The Reformed tradition can only be salvaged in North America in the 2020s if, in repentance from its complicity in the construction of Christian nationalism, it answers the call to resistance. That is, in Boesak's words as I quoted them above, if its adherents recognize and take up "our special responsibility to salvage this tradition from the grip of the mighty and the powerful who have so shamelessly perverted it for their own ends and let it speak once again for God's oppressed and suffering peoples."

Gideon Strauss *is the Senior Member in Leadership and Worldview Studies at ICS, and the school's Academic Dean.*



Angela Reitsma Bick

CANADA READS: THE SUNDAY EDITION

If the Canadian church had its own version of Canada Reads, which stories would be right for this moment? In a time of reckoning and rebuilding, the writers we choose matter.

NOTHING BRINGS ME GREATER joy than handing the right book at the right moment to someone I love. The right moment for them, I mean. A copy of *The Poisonwood Bible* to my niece, who will be living in Uganda next semester. Michael Christie's dystopic *Greenwood* to my daughter studying environmental science. *Baby's First House Plants* to my cousin and her avid-gardener husband expecting their first child this fall.

The "right" book and moment have little to do with bestseller lists or award-winning writing, although I do pay attention to those. It's defined instead by the reader: what will resonate for them in this moment? What are their interests? What story might crack open new insight, might make their heart sing?





When CBC Radio first introduced its Canada Reads competition in the early 2000s, I liked the idea of a national Battle of the Books so much that I joined in like it was my part-time job. My husband and I were living on a Canadian Army base up north in drafty concrete-block barracks at the time. I tracked down the five nominated novels and read them before the debate began so I could follow along from home with my own dog-eared copies. If radio host Bill Richardson had asked which book listeners in Petawawa, Ontario, liked best, I was ready.

Twenty years later, I still appreciate Canada Reads and its mission to publicize Canadian authors. The competition not only boosts book sales but adds drama and community to the solitary act of reading. In 2014, when the first overarching category was added – "A Novel to Change Our Nation" – moral adjudication joined aesthetic criteria. Some years, the themes are whimsical, like 2016's "Starting Over," while others highlight the social climate in Canada with categories such as "The Book Canadians Need Now" (2017) and "One Book to Shift Your Perspective" (2023).

The prophets of our day

Peter Schuurman and I began a book project in 2021 that culminated in the publication of *Blessed are the Undone: Testimonies of the Quiet Deconstruction of Faith in Canada* (New Leaf Press, 2024). Leaning into Peter's sociological skills and my experience as a journalist, we interviewed Canadians questioning their faith and examined the current reckoning for Christian institutions. Though it's tempting to be defensive, it's undeniable that pastors are making headlines for the wrong reasons and that church attendance has declined for decades. We are living in the ruins of Christendom in Canada.

But the very good news of the gospel remains as true as ever: ruins are not the end. Not even close! Even death isn't the end for the God of David and the God of Esther, both of whom faced certain ruin and survived. Although (and this is crucial), they did rely on someone else pointing out the peril—like Nathan saying, "*Imagine if*. . ."; like Mordecai saying, "*Unless you*. . . ."

Blessed are the Undone suggests that healthy deconstruction can be a normal, even vital, part of faith for individuals and that it's crucial for Christian leaders and faith-based institutions, too. Our prayer for the book is twofold: that it reminds weary Christians they are not alone and that it holds powerful Christians to account. Together, it's a call to the Canadian church to address brokenness and join God in loving, careful restoration.

If the Canadian church had its own version of CBC's Canada Reads, which stories would be right for this moment? Which writers might be the prophets of our day, calling us to make the ruins livable again?

Which leads me to wonder: If the Canadian church had its own version of CBC's Canada Reads, which stories would be right for this moment? Which writers might be the prophets of our day, calling us to make the ruins livable again?

"Fight injustice. Quit victim-blaming. Be generous." This is how to restore ancient remains, according to Isaiah, advice he gave while standing in the rubble of Jerusalem (Isaiah 58, *The Message*).

I see those same calls for justice reverberating through contemporary Canadian literature in books I believe could help this tense moment for Christianity in Canada. Stories that show all the sharp edges surrounding us and how we got here.

What will happen next? I cannot say. Isaiah remains hopeful, though, that a full life in empty places is possible. Foundations can be rebuilt; thanks be to God.

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Héctor Acero Ferrer

FREEING FAITHFULNESS

INQUIRY, IMAGINATION, AND THE CRISIS OF THE COMMON

"Without imagination, there is no action, we shall say. And this is so in several ways: on the level of projects, on the level of motivations, and on the level of the very power to act."

—Paul Ricoeur
"Imagination in Discourse and in Action"

One of the questions that every person professionally dedicated to philosophy, and to the humanities more broadly, has asked at some point in their career concerns the significance of their craft. Is there value in the philosophical exercise for the people around us, for the communities we inhabit, for society at large? Does the world truly need the disciplines to which we have dedicated our lives, or is our professional practice superfluous? Do philosophy and the humanities matter?

Ironically, the moments in history when these questions receive their most confident affirmative answers tend to be moments of crisis. War, social collapse, democratic fragility, and economic instability suddenly make reflection urgent. Meanwhile, periods of growth, technological development, and relative peace often breed suspicion toward the humanities. Reflection on the human condition is dismissed as indulgent, slow, and inefficient, consuming resources that could be better invested in sustaining "progress."

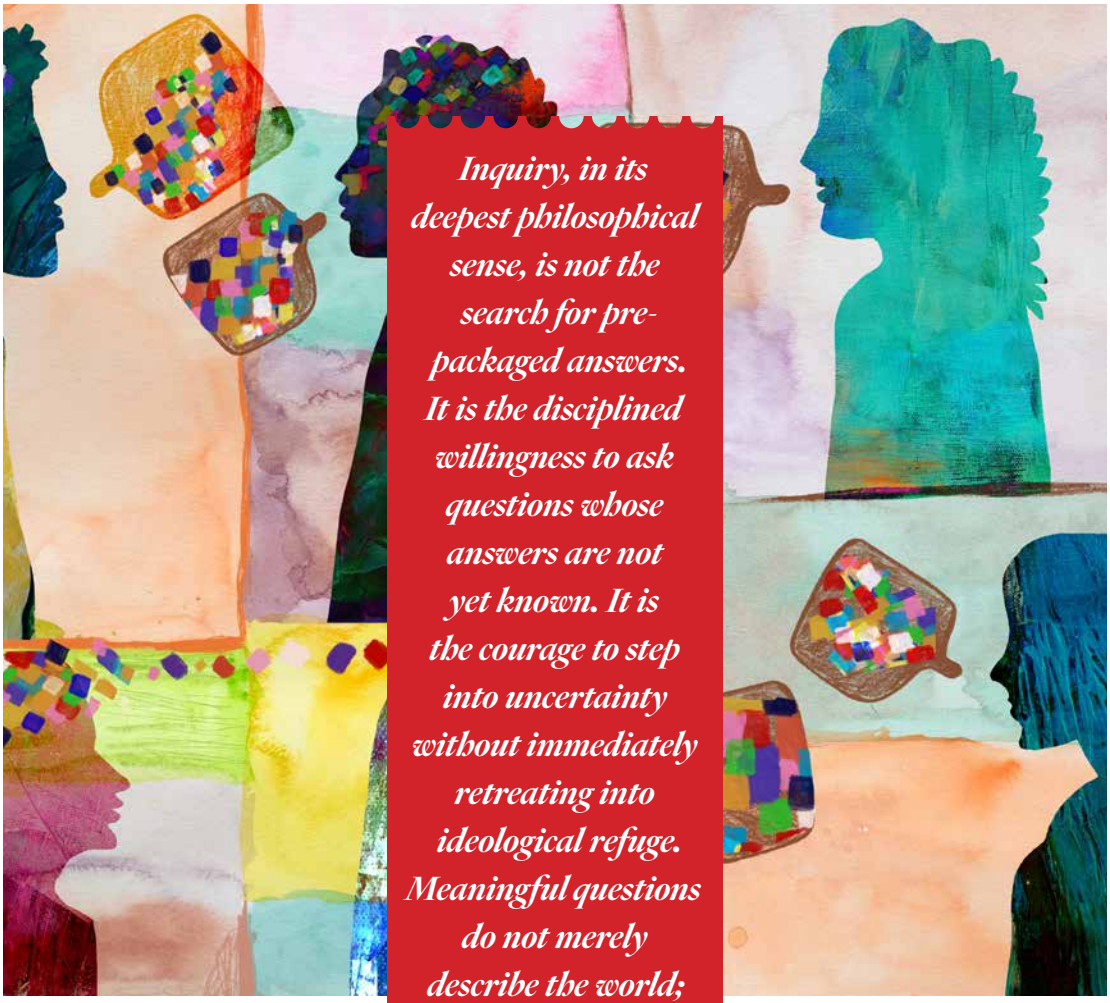
This paradox has shaped the humanities in a particular way. Ours is a disciplinary ecosystem most sought after in moments of scarcity. Yet precisely because of this precarious position, the humanities have developed remarkable resilience. They produce knowledge under adverse conditions. They persist under external pressures. They accompany individuals and communities in their darkest hours: when injustice appears normalized, when violence feels inevitable, when human self-destructive tendencies seem unstoppable. But how do they do this?



At their best, the humanities cultivate two intertwined capacities: inquiry and imagination. Inquiry, in its deepest philosophical sense, is not the search for pre-packaged answers. It is the disciplined willingness to ask questions whose answers are not yet known, the courage to step into uncertainty without immediately retreating into ideological refuge. Meaningful questions do not merely describe the world; they generate new possibilities within it and, at times, entire new worlds.

Imagination, meanwhile, is not fantasy. It is the capacity to envision forms of life that do not yet exist but could. It allows us to perceive alternatives to the status quo, to see beyond inherited categories, to conceive of a future that is not merely an extension of present antagonisms. Imagination crafts possibility and renders it attainable.

It will surprise no one that our current political moment is not characterized by the flourishing of either of these capacities. For some time, our collective energies have been directed toward narrow versions of inquiry and imagination (those that serve technological acceleration or economic growth), often at the expense of the social and political conditions



Inquiry, in its deepest philosophical sense, is not the search for pre-packaged answers. It is the disciplined willingness to ask questions whose answers are not yet known. It is the courage to step into uncertainty without immediately retreating into ideological refuge. Meaningful questions do not merely describe the world; they generate new possibilities within it and, at times, entire new worlds.

that make shared life possible. Political deadlock has emerged alongside the erosion of the kind of imagination and inquiry required to sustain a common world. The natural friction generated by diversity has hardened into fissures that seem impossible to bridge.

An impoverished imagination has rendered us unable to ask meaningful questions that risk destabilizing our certainties, invite us into the unknown, and open space for something genuinely new. Instead, we recycle predictable talking points, defend predetermined positions, and argue not to understand but to win. A brief glance at social media reveals the endless loop of these practices, amplified by our ability to curate our own informational ecosystems and delete dissent with a click. In this climate, conversation becomes performance and dialogue a strategy. The sad corollary of this story is that political life reduces itself to managing enemies rather than constructing a world in common.

Western philosophy bears some responsibility here. Much of its history has been animated by the search for what we already share: universal reason, common nature, foundational principles. The implicit assumption has been that political community rests upon a prior commonality waiting to be discovered or defended. But what if that assumption is part of the problem? What if what unites us is not a pre-existing shared essence, but the ongoing task of constructing something common together, namely, a shared future?

The distinction is subtle but decisive:

If we assume a common foundation already exists, disagreement appears as deviation. Those who do not align with the supposed universal are cast as irrational, misguided, or morally deficient. We see this in our responses to political and religious opponents, to knowledges emerging from communities long subjected to colonial violence, and to queer expressions of gender and sexuality. In each case, conflict intensifies because difference challenges simplified anthropologies that overemphasize sameness as the condition for dialogue.

But if what binds us is the ongoing construction of a shared world, then disagreement becomes constitutive rather than threatening. Plurality is not a problem to overcome but the raw material from which common life is built. Many religious traditions, in fact, narrate difference as both an intentional feature of creation and the foundational component of generative freedom.

Our political paralysis reveals what happens when we lose sight of this distinction. We no longer imagine a future we are capable of building together. Instead, we envision competing futures in which one side triumphs and the other is silenced. We do not lack intelligence. We do not lack information. What we lack is a generative imagination of coexistence.

Without such imagination, political action stalls, not because our problems are insurmountable, but because we cannot envision solutions that do not replicate existing hostilities. We are trapped in permanent reaction: responding to crises, countering narratives, mobilizing against opponents, without articulating a horizon that transcends the present.

This is why the humanities matter. Not because they offer ready-made political programs, but because they cultivate the conditions under which new political possibilities can be imagined. They teach us to ask questions that do not yet have answers. They train us to inhabit ambiguity without collapsing into cynicism. They remind us that the future is not a fixed trajectory but a space of contested creation.

Political action deadlocks when imagination collapses. And imagination collapses when we stop conversing, not merely exchanging words, but risking transformation. If we are to move beyond paralysis, we must recover the audacity to imagine a common future.

This conviction lies at the heart of the Institute for Christian Studies' Free to Be Faithful initiative. Born from ICS's longstanding commitment to nurturing imagination, the program has met a rising need across North America for spaces where genuine inquiry can still occur. In working alongside diverse communities, we have encountered individuals who resist narrow visions of the future and refuse the closure of difficult questions. Rather than erasing difference, they seek to place it in fruitful exchange, recognizing that diversity is not an obstacle to common life but its precondition.

Free to Be Faithful aims to accompany those communities in precisely this work: creating spaces where questions can be asked without predetermined answers, where imagination can stretch beyond ideological boundaries, and where common futures can be constructed without collapsing plurality into uniformity. We invite you to find out more about Free to be Faithful and, in doing so, connect with other individuals and communities resisting division and conflict and actively imagining a spacious world animated by faith and shaped by dialogue across boundaries of difference.

Héctor Acero Ferrer *is ICS's Director of Lifelong Learning and Associate Director of the Centre for Philosophy Religion and Social Ethics, as well as a PhD candidate in the VUA-ICS Conjoint program.*



Free *to be* Faithful

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Six-week, online courses with world-class thinkers

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03 Community
Events, retreats, and a growing network

rather than dismiss alternative ways of seeing, Free to be Faithful seeks to open our eyes to the possibility of a **transformed perspective**.

rather than follow the crowd, Free to be Faithful strives to hear the call to **do what's right.**

rather than avoid important questions out of fear, Free to be Faithful ventures to **ask those questions courageously**.

rather than wield the Bible as a weapon, Free to be Faithful imagines reading the Bible as a way to see **redemptive promise around every corner**.

INSTITUTE FOR CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Spring Fall 2025
Volume 59 • Number 1

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Perspective is the newsletter of the

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Affiliate member of the Toronto School of Theology at the University of Toronto

Publication mail Agreement no. 105244
Rg. No. 2091 • ISSN 0847-0324

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