

## Greetings!

Welcome to the last RTC Monthly of this year! Exams ended on 15 November and the past few weeks were mostly taken up by marking exam papers and essays. Our annual graduation ceremony also took place on 15 November (more about this below). Please pray for the students who finished their studies this year, that the Lord will bless them with clear guidance for the future. Please also pray for a time of refreshing and spiritual growth over the summer holidays for those who will be coming back next year.

Please join us in praying for a good intake of students at the start of 2014. At the very least we would love to see more new students than the number who completed at the end of this year so that the College community grows. We would appreciate your prayers for everyone considering the possibility of pursuing theological studies at the RTC in 2014.

## Faculty News

**Bill Berends to Visit Myanmar.** The RTC is looking into setting up a special relationship with the Reformed Theological College of Myanmar following a visit to that institution by Phillip Scheepers last year. To further explore that option the college is sending Bill Berends to teach a course in Christian Ethics to the Myanmar students in January, Lord willing. Henny will accompany Bill, and hopes she can do some work with the women in children's ministry. Please pray for a safe and profitable lecture tour.

## Distance Education

We are very pleased to announce two new Old Testament courses to be presented by distance education during the first and second semesters of 2014. In semester 1: "Old Testament Foundations," and in semester 2: "Old Testament Prophets and Writings." These courses will be presented by our Old Testament lecturer John de Hoog. These courses will prove invaluable to all who wish to understand the Old Testament writings within their historical-cultural contexts. Students will also come away from the course with a greater appreciation of the role these writings play in the larger drama of redemptive history. We encourage you to make use of this opportunity to delve deeper into Scripture with the help of an experienced guide.

The other courses that will be offered through distance education during the first semester of 2014 are:

- CH301/501: The Church to 1550 (presented by Dr Phillip Scheepers)
- TH403/603D: Grace and Eschatology (presented by Dr Bill Berends)

Participating in these courses will give you the opportunity to experience high-level theological education right where you are! The courses are accredited and can therefore provide credit towards ACT qualifications. More information about all these courses can be found at: [www.refstudy.org](http://www.refstudy.org) or by contacting Dr Phillip Scheepers (who heads up our distance programme): [pscheepers@rtc.edu.au](mailto:pscheepers@rtc.edu.au).

Still deciding whether our distance programme is for you? Dr Bill Berends authored a basic theology course designed to give students a "taster" of what online theological study is like. This course is free and the RTC will send certificates of completion to successful participants. The course can be found at the RTC distance education page: [www.refstudy.org](http://www.refstudy.org) (click on "Free Courses" towards the bottom of the page).

## Graduation



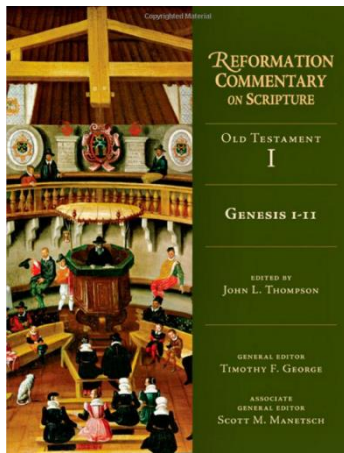
*The RTC Faculty with students who received awards or were valedicted (farewelled) at our recent*

Our annual graduation ceremony took place on 15 November. Twelve students received degrees and other qualifications. Some others were "valedicted" (farewelled). These are students who completed their courses of study but are still awaiting final results. It was very special to be able to celebrate the fruits of their hard work with the students. The graduation address was given by Rev Bill Bosker, the past chairman of the RTC board. Rev Bosker gave an excellent address on "God's Job Description for Church Leaders" based on 2 Timothy 2:1-10.

## In Memoriam

We want to give thanks for the life of Don Capill, who went to be with the Lord on November 29. In 1989 Don and Helen came over from New Zealand following his appointment to lecture in Christian Education at the RTC. While the Christian education program did not take off, because of competing courses set up elsewhere, Don led many students in stimulating discussions on what is now known as Christian worldview during his time in Geelong. When Don and Helen returned to New Zealand he continued to write and lecture on Christian education. Some years later their son Murray started teaching part time at the RTC while ministering to the South Barwon congregation, and in 2008 Murray took over as principal of the college.

## Book Recommendation by Rev John de Hoog



**Thompson, John L.,**  
**Genesis 1-11.**  
**Reformation**  
**Commentary on**  
**Scripture. Downers**  
**Grove, Ill.: IVP**  
**Academic, 2012.**

John L. Thompson is the editor of the first OT volume in the series Reformation Commentary on Scripture (RCS). RCS is envisaged as

a twenty-eight volume series that will cover the whole Bible. It gathers exegetical writings from sixteenth century preachers, scholars and reformers in the Reformation tradition. IVP is to be highly commended for this new venture.

The fact that a whole volume is dedicated to Genesis 1-11 (in comparison, Volume 3 of the series is projected to cover Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) shows how important this early part of Genesis has been to Christian commentators and particularly to Reformation-era scholars. This large-format work of over four hundred and fifty pages is a pleasure to use. Thompson has selected excerpts from a range of Lutheran, moderate or “reformist” Catholic, Anabaptist, Continental Reformed and English Protestant and Puritan writers. For the English reader, with the exception of Luther, Calvin and various radical reformers, most writers are translated into English for the first time in this volume. This book thus represents a magnificent example of seasoned scholarship serving the (English-speaking) church in a wonderful way.

The book proceeds pericope by pericope through Genesis 1-11. As you can imagine, this work is a goldmine of comment on Genesis 1-11. But what is

the point of reading old commentaries on Genesis? Isn't it much better to stick with modern works that have put the past heritage of commentary on trial, preserved what is best and now use the tools of modern biblical scholarship to enhance our understanding of the text? If only it was so easy!

The Reformation was at bottom a return to the Bible, but that did not mean that all prior theological writing was rejected; far from it. The Reformers were often very familiar with earlier writings on Scripture. Thompson tells the story of one episode in Calvin's life that made it perfectly clear that Calvin saw past theological writing as a gift from God, and that we should not try to get along without earlier writings, particularly that of the early church (xliv). How helpful it could be to those of us whose roots run through the Reformation to have our understanding shaped not merely by modern work but also by the work of those whom God provided in the past as helpful teachers of his Word.

In order to get a sample of Reformation-era work on Genesis 1-11, I went to a key text, Genesis 3:15. The very first entry is from Wolfgang Musculus, who quotes from Augustine's idea that the woman in the text represents “animal intellect, the lower part of the human mind” through which alone we can be tempted by the devil, which is to be overcome by the fruit of good works represented in the story by the seed of the woman. Musculus dismisses this interpretation as “absurd” and goes on to contend for a Christocentric interpretation in which Christ is the seed of the woman who is victorious over Satan (156). Luther argues that in this account Adam and Eve were drawn up “into battle line against their condemned enemy (157).” Peter Martyr Vermigli notices that just as the woman fell through an instance of friendliness to the serpent, so God introduces the exact opposite – eternal hostility. After 14 further excerpts the section closes with some words from Andrew Willett, who argues that the promise of the Messiah suggests that Adam and Eve did not lose their faith, for what would such a promise mean to a faithless man (162)?

Fifty or more commentaries on Genesis appeared in the sixteenth century, and Thompson has concluded a labour of love in working through them and selecting useful excerpts. The Reformation was an era of biblical revival. May God use this series for similar work in our day.

## Ministry Spot

***The Return of an Ancient Heresy***  
**by Dr Bill Berends**

The Reformed churches were originally identified by that name on the basis of their reforms in the church liturgy. They not only joined Lutherans in doing away with the idolatry so prominent in medieval churches, but sought to structure their worship wholly according to biblical guidelines. However,

since the late 16th century this label was more and more used to identify the Reformed theology of grace. The reasons were, firstly, that this differentiated Reformed doctrine from the emphasis on works found in the Roman Church. Secondly, Lutheran churches, which had similarly emphasised God's sovereign grace under Luther, soon abandoned this emphasis to teach that coming to and persevering in the faith ultimately depended on human effort. Lastly, when Reformed churches were faced with the challenge to divine sovereignty under Arminius, the Reformed label became strongly identified with the five points of Calvinism.

Benjamin Warfield pointed out that the move away from divine sovereignty in works of grace was a move back to the ancient heresy of Pelagianism. Pelagius was a fifth century British monk who taught a pure theology of works. He looked upon the final judgment as an event where God would weigh up each person's works to see whether they deserved to go to heaven. Under the influence of Augustine this doctrine was strongly denounced, but in time it came back in a weaker form. The church began to teach that only some sins were fully paid for by Christ, namely those committed by baptised children before their confirmation, and those of adult converts before their baptism. Any subsequent sins had to be paid for by means of going to Mass, doing Penance, or by invoking the help of saints. Warfield identified this Roman doctrine as semi-Pelagianism. Warfield identified the post-reformational heresy that humans are responsible for choosing their own salvation apart from God's electing grace as semi-Pelagianism. We usually tend to identify this as Arminianism, the heresy that was condemned by the Synod of Dort's five points of Calvinism. Here we should note that Wesleyans did not follow all five Arminian heresies, though they did hold that human choice rather than God's sovereignty was the determinative factor in salvation.

Recently Evangelicalism has seen a return to the Reformed doctrines of Grace, especially in North America under the leadership of men like John Piper, Mark Driscoll and R.C. Sproul. This may give the impression that lingering forms of Pelagianism are on their way out, but that would be a false impression. In fact, Pelagianism may have a firmer foothold in Evangelicalism and Christianity in general than ever before, and here we are talking of full-blown Pelagianism, not some weakened (semi, or semi-semi) form. Let me explain.

Recent surveys among Christians and Evangelical show that the majority of them believe that people other than Christians will also go to heaven. Statistics vary according to the nature and place of the polls, but it is clear that this has become the default position in Christendom, if not evangelicalism. In itself the view that some "non-Christians" might be saved is perhaps not unreasonable, if this represents the hope that God's grace will extend to more than those who have

heard the Gospel (the Reformation's Second Helvetic Confession, written largely by Bullinger, expressed such a hope). The problem is that when people are asked why they believe some Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others of different faiths, or no faith, will be saved the usual answer is: "because there are so many good and nice people among them".

The idea that people are saved because they are good or nice is pure Pelagianism and thoroughly unscriptural. The Bible clearly says, "There is no-one righteous, not even one; there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no-one who does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:10-12). It was this clear biblical truth that led Augustine, and Luther, and the theologians at Dort, to reject any idea that humans can do anything to save themselves; salvation is purely by grace.

The idea that some, or even many, of those who do not know Christ will be saved because they are such good and nice people is a dangerous doctrine that must be strongly opposed. The Bible makes it clear that Christ, who said "I am the way, the truth and the life", is the only way to salvation (Jn. 14:6). "Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The rich young ruler who questioned Christ about how he might be saved was a good and nice man by all social standards; even Jesus loved him (Mk. 10:21). But Jesus made it clear that this man would not be saved unless he placed his faith in him instead of his possessions. Being good and nice may be a fruit of salvation, but it is never a contributing cause to salvation. Abraham and his offspring were not called by God because they were good, but "to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just" (Gen. 18:19).

If Christians come to believe God saves people because they are good and nice this will have many sad repercussions. It would leave Christians without assurance, because, like Luther, they would always be wondering if they were good enough. It would encourage boasting and showing off (1 Cor. 1:28, 29; Eph. 2:8, 9), outward piety (Mt. 23:25-28), and an unwillingness to repent and let God's Spirit work true renewal (Eph. 2:10). In fact, it would lead to a church little different from the Jewish society that Jesus sought to reform through his preaching of faith and repentance.

We may also wonder if the new perception of non-Christians as deserving people has not taken away a major incentive for evangelism and mission. Yes, short term mission tours are immensely popular, and fun, but how many people today are prepared to devote the whole of their lives to reach those without knowledge of Christ? Perhaps we can bring

this closer to home. How many of you believe that those who do not know Christ will perish? And if so, have you thought of answering the call to missions or evangelism because of your compassion for the lost?

At the end of Matthew 9 Christ encourages his twelve disciples to pray for workers in the harvest. And guess what, their prayer is answered. In the very next chapter we see that the same twelve are sent out to preach the good news that Jesus saves. Are you praying for the lost? Do you dare pray for the lost? Would you be prepared to go if the Lord were to send you?