

Perspectives

IN COVENANT EDUCATION

Tests & Exams

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Statement of Purpose

Perspectives in Covenant Education is a journal regulated and published quarterly, in November, February, May, and August by the Protestant Reformed Teachers' Institute. The purpose of this magazine, in most general terms, is to advance the cause of distinctively Christian education as it is conceived in the Protestant Reformed community. More specifically, the magazine is intended to serve as an encouragement and an inducement toward individual scholarship, and a medium for the development of distinctive principles and methods of teaching. The journal is meant to be a vehicle of communication, not only within the profession, but within the Protestant Reformed community and within the Christian community in general.

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Editorial Policy

Perspectives in Covenant Education exists for the purpose of furthering the cause of Protestant Reformed Christian education. This principle therefore regulates the entire contents of the journal.

Perspectives in Covenant Education will publish any article written by a teacher, parent, or friend of Protestant Reformed education, provided the article is in harmony with the stated purpose of the magazine. The journal will publish articles whether theoretical or practical. All manuscripts must be signed and all authors are solely responsible for the contents of their articles.

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Tests and Exams: A Worthwhile Practice

Tom Bergman

How many test pages do you grade in a year? 1000? 10,000?

What frustrations have you witnessed during a test?

Should the whole practice of tests and exams be abolished and replaced?

Unit tests and semester exams often constitute a large part of student assessment. Already in lower elementary students take tests, perhaps spelling tests or Bible tests. Middle elementary students have regular tests, too. Then junior high students get their first experience with exams. Throughout high school and into college, students take test after test after test. When the tests are done, there is a final exam looming over them.

Semester exams are very large tests. Exams normally require students to review an entire semester's worth of material before they are tested on it for ninety minutes or more. In junior high, high school, and college, exams can count for a major part of the final grade.

Tests and exams consume a great deal of time. Many tests, even catechism tests, take up an entire instructional period. One whole period is devoted not to learning something new, but to testing something old. If tests consume time, exams devour it. Most high schools and colleges have "exam week." An entire week of school is earmarked solely for the purpose of testing.

Not only do tests and exams gobble up perhaps 5-10% of the days in a semester, but they also cause the students to feel pressured. Since exams count for such a large part of the grade and cover so much material, students can feel overwhelmed, distressed, and anxious. Do we go overboard with our tests and exams? Do tests and exams put too much pressure on students? Is a test day or an exam week a worthwhile allotment of class time? Does anyone know why we have exams, or is this an age-old practice that has become merely customary for us?

I just graded over 800 pages of exams last week. I dearly hope I didn't go

through that just for sake of custom and tradition. I want to be able to defend what we do, or else scrap the whole business and find a better way. As a teacher, I want to have rationale explaining why we commit so much to assessing through tests and exams.

Insisting on having good grounds for our instructional practices is not whining. Questioning the practice of exam week is not a *de facto* indicator of disagreement. Rather, I agree wholeheartedly with the practice. I have come to appreciate more and more the valuable practice of tests and exams.

The value of tests and exams is not trivial, but rather substantial. Taking a test helps students to learn. Taking a test, especially a semester exam, helps students to learn the material again. Taking a test, a good test—the giving of that test and the taking of that test—that is quality instructional time.

According to recent research done by Jeffrey Karpicke and Janell Blunt at Purdue University, the act of test-taking can be a better way of learning than some studying techniques.¹ Their results indicate that retrieval practice, having the brain retrieve information for a test, is more conducive to retaining that information than spending the equivalent time going through popular studying techniques such as mapping concepts and drawing connections. In other words, while studying for a test may very well be beneficial, the actual taking of that test and the sending of requests to the brain to retrieve and organize that information is also an effective way to drive the information deeper into long-term memory. The retrieval involved in test-taking will boost knowledge retention more than mere studying alone. A *New York Times* contributor said it well with the headline for her report on the Purdue study: “To Really Learn, Quit Studying and Take a Test.”²

Another aspect of tests and exams is that we are really asking our students to learn the material again. They do not first see the material during the test; they have been expected to learn it as it was taught in prior class days, maybe weeks earlier. If tests really do boost learning, then having the students take a test is tantamount to having the students learn the material again. The repetition of learning things a second time around is very helpful. What happens when we

1 Karpicke, Jeffrey D. and Janell R. Blunt. “Retrieval Practice Produces More Learning than Elaborative Studying with Concept Mapping.” *Science* (Feb. 11, 2011), 772-775.

2 Belluck, Pam. “To Really Learn, Quit Studying and Take a Test.” www.nytimes.com. January 21, 2011.

locate an unfamiliar street address a second time? What happens when we read a good book all over again? What happens when we hear a sermon twice? What happens when we teach two sections of the same class? What happens when we teach the same concept year after year? Similarly, at the end of a semester, the exams help the students learn the facts and concepts yet again, and therefore, better. The fact that such repetition causes us to remember better is a crucial basis for having tests and exams.

Tests and exams do not detract from instruction time; they do not reduce the overall time dedicated to classroom instruction. All of those hours and days set aside for tests and exams is instructional time, not wasted time. Not only are tests and exams used for assessment, but they are also instructive (at least, they ought to be). Questions can be designed to check the students' understanding *and* to lead them to arrange their thoughts and assimilate ideas. Being forced to retrieve and organize information for the purpose of forging cogent answers and forming cohesive arguments is learning in and of itself. Teachers who go back to college for continuing credits will be reminded from their own recent experiences taking midterms and finals that taking a good test does help the test-taker to learn the material better.

As a rule, tests and exams are worthwhile. There are exceptions. Not every test is a good test. Not all students can profit equally from the test-taking experience. Not every learner has the ability to learn better during a test. Some personalities and some learning styles are not well suited to the size, scope, and pressure of large written tests. Tests and exams have no mystical qualities that magically infuse the learners with new knowledge; a student who does not try to prepare for a test and does not try to prepare later for the semester exam is not one to gain from either experience.

In spite of these caveats, tests and exams are an integral part of the learning process. In spite of the stress and tears that may be a part of exam week, there ought to continue to be an exam week. I hope our ministers keep up the practice of periodic tests in catechism, and I hope our teachers continue to compose good ones. The potential value of tests and exams is considerable; let's work to realize that potential.

A Bilingual Education

Fred Hanko, Jr.

Our children must be fluent in *two languages*.

But I'm not talking about having children learn Spanish, Dutch, or French. Those other languages have their uses, I suppose. But the language I am speaking about is *absolutely essential* for our children to know.

I'm talking about the language of the Reformed faith. Can our children speak THAT language?

The language of the Reformed faith is the language of Holy Scripture, the creeds, and the confessions. It's the language used to explain what one believes concerning God, his Word, Christ, and his work of salvation. Are our children fluent in that language?

Language is more than simply words; it's more than communication. Language has power!

Language unifies. At the time of the Tower of Babel, the world was united with one language. And in that unity, they began to persecute the Church. But that was not to be, according to God's plan. God scattered and dispersed the people. How did he do that? He changed their language.

One's language is one's identity. Nebuchadnezzar knew this. He took the best of Judah's youth and brought them to Babylon to change them. How would he do that? He would teach them the learning, knowledge, and language of the Chaldeans. He even changed the names of Daniel and his three friends, from beautiful names which honored God, to names which honored Chaldean idols of Bel and Nego. Why did he do that? Nebuchadnezzar wanted to make Daniel and his three friends lose their identity. *He wanted to make them forget who they were as God-fearing young people; he wanted them to forget their heritage and their God.*

The language of the Reformed faith has that same power. It unites us as believers. As we speak to each other of our faith, we are knit together as believers.

That's one reason why the Psalmist tells us to "Talk of all his wondrous works" (Psalm 105:2). It's also our identity—who we are. How strange it would be to be children of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:5-6) but yet not have the words or language to talk of it! How strange it would be to be "called the sons of God" (I John 3:1), but yet have no language to articulate what that means!

Because language is so powerful, the language that our children are learning is of vital importance. You can be sure the devil is interested. He has a language all his own...

You know what the devil's language is. It's the obscene, vulgar, filthy language that is so much a part of our culture today. It is the language of blasphemy against God and all things spiritual and holy.

The devil has a powerful tool he uses to teach his language: television and the movies. What TV or movie comedy does not have filthy, obscene language? What mystery or action movie does not have vulgar or blasphemous language? Even so-called "reality shows" or "home make-over shows" are filled with the blasphemous "O my God" spat out over and over again. This language that so bombards us that after a while we don't even realize what we are hearing. We and our children can become immune to it. At first, we hear the language and we cringe. But, over time, we don't even notice it. And then we begin to speak it.

In our homes and classrooms, we may not allow this "foreign language" to be spoken. We have to understand that this IS the devil's language—not something to smirk at or pass off as "cute" or somehow harmless. And it is so easily learned—with hardly any conscious thought. It is so easily spoken. It so quickly spreads. And it corrupts.

In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod...

And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people (Neh. 13:23-24).

But there's another kind of "foreign language" we need to consider. One writer has called this language the "counterfeit Christian language."

The "counterfeit Christian language" is the language that is so popular among so-called Christians and evangelicals today. Here are examples.

You just have to "name it and claim it." (If you want money or health or something else from God, just ask for it and if you have enough faith, you'll get it.)

You need to “pray the sinner’s prayer.” (If you want to be saved, you just have to go and accept Jesus into your heart.)

You need to have “a testimony.” (You must have—and be able to tell others—about how you were once hopelessly lost in drugs, alcohol, or some other sin and now miraculously changed. The better the testimony, the better the Christian.)

You need to “redeem the world for Christ.” (Your purpose in life is to make this world a better place so that Christ can come and rule.)

I’m sure you’ve heard some of this “counterfeit Christian language.” It *sounds* so Christian! But in that lies its danger. It is so deceptive! But it is a language of lies.

Anyone who doubts the deception of this language just has to remember Harold Camping. Think of the thousands and thousands of people deceived by his “counterfeit Christian language.” Christ will come on May 21, 2011, Camping said, and secretly rapture the faithful and leave the rest behind. So, many people quit their jobs, left their homes, and traveled the country to spread Camping’s message...and waited for the rapture that never occurred.

Talk of a secret rapture is “counterfeit Christian language.” The idea of the rapture—a time when Jesus will come and suddenly take His people off this earth before the great persecution—was introduced into the language of the church world in the 1800’s by John Nelson Darby, a British evangelist. Charles Spurgeon, a contemporary of Darby, said that Darby and his followers “have embraced unscriptural and pernicious doctrines” and “entertain deadly heresies.” Yet, today, how many radio preachers don’t teach the very same heresy? The “Left Behind” books popularized the language of the rapture, and Harold Camping made it mainstream. But it’s not the language of Scripture or the historic Reformed faith. It’s a foreign language.

“Counterfeit Christian language” has invaded much of Christendom today—in the books, music, and thought. We do well to beware that our children aren’t learning that language—and we aren’t speaking it.

The “language of the devil” and the “counterfeit Christian language” are two foreign languages. They should seem strange to our children; they should make our children uncomfortable. But this will only be the case if our children are fluent in the language of the Reformed faith. This is not optional; it is *absolutely vital* that our children are fluent in this language.

Consider...

The Bible is under attack—everywhere—including Christian college class-

rooms and many Christian high schools. How will our children ever stand for the truth about the Bible if they can't explain the inspiration of Scripture and the infallibility of Scripture? Do they know the classic Bible texts of II Peter 1:21 and II Timothy 3:15-16? *If they can't articulate what they believe, how can they ever defend the truth?*

And then think about all the wrong perceptions of God that many have today. God is considered to be a grandfatherly gentleman who winks at sin; God is a benevolent being who frets over our refusal to accept him; or God is a powerless king who wept when the World Trade Center fell. This is NOT the God of the Scriptures or the Reformed confessions! Our God is immutable, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, sovereign, eternal, infinite, holy. If our youth don't know these words—if they are not part of their language—how can they ever explain what they believe to others...and to their own children? And if we can't describe or articulate who God is *can we really even know him?*

One day our youth may have to battle for the truth—as many have had to do recently—with Federal Vision heresy. Can you imagine someone trying to defend the truth over against this heresy without speaking about justification? Will our children ever be able to take their place as warriors for the faith if they cannot articulate the truth of justification, sanctification, redemption, regeneration, Christ's divinity? Men fought tooth and nail for this language. Some gave their lives for it! *Can we ever really understand that which we cannot put down or express in words?*

So what is the best way to learn this language? People who study the spoken languages will tell you that the best way to learn a language is to use it daily, making it part of everyday speech and experience. That is what we must do. The language of the Reformed faith should not be left in the pulpit on Sunday or in the catechism room—or even only in Bible class. We need to use it everywhere in school and in our homes.

After reading the Bible for dinnertime devotions, discuss what the passage teaches about *who God is*. Make your prayers fill with the language of Scripture. Insist on reverence in prayer, Bible reading, and all spiritual things, and teach that when children are very young! In doing that, you are teaching them of the wonder of Scripture. Children at the youngest age begin to understand that the Bible is something special...inspired...infallible.

You're driving in the car with your children, and you are listening to the news or talk radio. No doubt you will hear news of war, violence, and unrest. Turn the

radio down and talk to your children about *God's sovereignty over all these things*. In this election season, we hear much about freedom in America. Tell your children about *freedom and redemption in Christ*. Be sure to talk to them, too, about *God's kingship and how we must obey all authority for his sake*. Do you hear news about the verdict in a court case? Tell your children about *God's justice—and the only way we sinners can ever stand before God the judge and be declared righteous*.

You are outside with your children—working, walking, camping—on a clear night. Show them the stars and planets and tell them *how all the universe speaks of the wisdom, design, and order of God*. Did you find a dead bird on the lawn in the morning? Tell your children of *God's providence and how not a sparrow can fall except he wills it, and you, son or daughter, are kept in his fatherly hand*. Stand on the rocks of the coast and tell your children how *God is a Rock, strong and immutable*. Take note of the change of the seasons in springtime and teach *the wonder of regeneration in the hearts of God's people*.

Are you reading stories together? Talk about the character's actions. Were they right or wrong? *Tell them of the importance of antithetical living*.

One could go on. There are so many opportunities that God gives us as parents and teachers. Be ready for them. Take advantage of them. Speak the language! Make it as common in your homes as talk of work and weather and sports.

The language of the Reformed faith is special. It's not frivolous, flippant language. This is a language that had its birth in the fierce struggle over heresies; it was shaped and crafted by valiant warriors of the faith who needed to be precise and clear in language because they were defending the very truths of Scripture. Some even gave their lives...over a few words.

If we fail to teach our children the language of the Reformed faith, not only a language will be lost. *The truth will be lost. The glorious heritage of the Reformed faith will be gone*.

But if we are faithful in church and school to teach our children, then in that day of days, we will stand, by grace, with our children and a book will be opened.

It will be a book of remembrance; but it will not be a book remembering all our great feats and deeds for the world. It will be a book of the words and language that God heard, spoken by those who "feared the LORD and thought upon his name" and "spoke often one to another" (Malachi 4:16).

May the words in that book be the words and language of Scripture and the Reformed faith, spoken by us and our children.

The Federation Board of Protestant Reformed Schools

Alex Kalsbeek

Purpose and history

The Federation of Protestant Reformed Schools is an organization based on three principles.

1. The Bible is the infallibly inspired, written Word of God, the doctrine of which is contained in the Three Forms of Unity, and as such forms the basis for administration, instruction, and discipline in the school.
2. Our Sovereign, Triune, Covenant God has from eternity chosen and in time forms a people unto Himself, that they may stand in covenant relationship to Him and live to his praise, friendship, and living service in all spheres of life, in the midst of a sinful world.
3. The training of covenant children in the school as well as in the home and in the church must serve to reveal the glory of their God in a life lived from the principle of regeneration by grace.

The Protestant Reformed schools have a common cause and calling in providing teaching personnel and material in harmony with these principles and they realized this from their very beginnings. So, fifty-five years ago, the boards of three schools, Hope School (Walker, MI), Adams Street (Grand Rapids, MI), and Protestant Reformed Christian School (South Holland, IL) met together to determine how they could work together to carry out this common cause and calling. Thus was born the Federation of Protestant Reformed School Societies.

In its constitution, the Federation explains its purpose—“to deal with those matters pertaining to Protestant Reformed School Societies in common.” Specifically:

1. Attaining cooperation and coordination in the areas common to all Protestant Reformed School Societies.

2. Providing seminars to promote the development, understanding, and presentation of distinctive Christian education.
3. Seeking ways and means for a more thorough training of teachers and prospective teachers in Christian principles.
4. Recommendations in the areas of teacher contracts, salaries, pensions, insurance, etc.

Currently the Federation is made up of fifteen Protestant Reformed Christian schools from across the U. S. and Canada as well as the board for Protestant Reformed Special Education.

Delegate Board

The Delegate Board of the Federation is made up of three representatives from each school and meets twice a year, spring and fall. Due to distance, time, and travel restrictions, it has not historically been possible for all member schools to send delegates, and so typically the meetings of the Delegate Board have been attended by the schools in Michigan and Illinois. With advances in technology, however, we were able to include six western schools in our meeting via video-conferencing this past October. We hope one day to include all of our schools in these delegate meetings.

TED Committee

The Teacher Education Development (TED) Committee does much of the work of the Federation, carrying out the decisions made at the semi-annual meetings. This committee is made up of the President, Vice-President, Treasurer and Vice-Treasurer/Secretary of the Delegate Board. Also on the committee are two teacher representatives, one appointed by the Federation, the other appointed by the Protestant Reformed Teachers' Institute (PRTI) and the Executive Director. The Executive Director has the responsibility to develop a strong network of communication between the Federation Board, its committees, the member schools, and our teachers.

This committee meets monthly to discuss the progress it has made on the various projects of the Federation Board. Right now the TED Committee is working on a seminar for teachers in June 2012, developing its website (prcs.org), and continuing the P. E. curriculum that was begun in the past.

Distinction from the PRTI

The Federation is not to be confused with the Protestant Reformed Teachers' Institute (PRTI). The PRTI is an organization of teachers; the Federation is an or-

ganization of school boards. Although they are different bodies, the PRTI and the Federation work closely together because both share the same goals (promotion of Reformed education and the development of Protestant Reformed teachers).

As was noted earlier, the PRTI appoints a representative to work on the TED Committee of the Federation, and the Federation regularly gives funds to the PRTI. These funds are to help defray travel expenses for teachers in our western schools to travel to the annual convention hosted by the PRTI.

What we do

Over the past fifty-five years, the Federation has done a great deal to carry out its purpose. Early on it gave up the idea of a normal school (teacher college) for preparing Protestant Reformed teachers, although that is an idea that has come up since then and continues even today. Instead, it hosted a number of seminars on a variety of education topics. They covered the history of education, psychology and pedagogy, and methods of teaching the various subjects.

In 1970, the Federation sponsored its first workshop for teachers. This was at the request of the PRTI, and the purpose of these workshops was to produce a written product that teachers in our schools could use. This was done during the summer by teachers of the member schools. Out of this came a series of teachers' manuals, covering topics like literature, world history, and stream ecology.

Currently, we provide the Principles and Practices of Reformed Education course, ably developed and taught by Jon Huisken. Mr. Huisken taught this course a number of times during the winter and spring in western Michigan, and he also taught it once as a two-week summer course in Indiana. Since Mr. Huisken has stepped down, Prof. Dykstra has agreed to take over the course in the coming years.

The most recent project completed is a U. S. geography textbook for middle elementary. This book was written by Mr. Mike Feenstra, the fifth-grade teacher at the Protestant Reformed Christian School in Dyer, IN, and edited by Mr. Jerry Kuiper, a retired teacher. One of the nicest parts of this textbook is that Mr. Feenstra put "Reformed Worldview" boxes throughout the text. In these sidebars, he challenges students to think about what they are learning from a Reformed perspective—a goal of Reformed education. A copy of this book has been distributed to our member schools.

The projects that we work on come by way of proposal from teachers in our member schools who see a need in an area of education and are willing to step

forward and fill that need. We provide financial, moral, and any other type of support that we can. This process benefits the teacher who does the work, as that teacher grows and develops in his understanding of the material he is working with. But it also benefits the Federation as a whole—the product of that teacher’s work is distributed to all member schools.

The work that we have to do as a Federation is good work. It is Kingdom work. It is exciting work. It is good to work with teachers and boards from all of our schools around the country. It is work that benefits the training and instruction of covenant children, preparing them for lives as Kingdom citizens. It is exciting to discuss and develop materials and opportunities that help our teachers provide distinctive Christian education.

Please remember the work of our Federation as we seek to promote the good of all our schools.

Book Review

The Ice Jam

Jim Regnerus

The only time I can look out of our kitchen window and see the Rock River is when it’s out of its banks. A few years ago, I could see the river on a Sunday morning.

The river always has a certain magnetism that draws me to it. When I took a brief road tour of the river’s floodplain, I was rewarded by seeing something I have often heard of, but had never seen—a massive ice jam. Viewing the river from what locals call the “North Bridge” on Garfield Avenue (the blacktop head-

ing due north and south out of the west end of Doon, Iowa), the ice jam extended both east and west of the bridge for several hundred yards. The grandeur of it was striking. Thousands of huge ice junks were tightly wedged together, holding each other and any trees uprooted along their journey captive in a kaleidoscope of shapes and colors. It was breathtaking. And then it got even better.

Looking far downstream to the west, I witnessed a bus-sized piece of ice slowly rise until it was nearly twenty feet vertical. After standing upright for just a second, with a great creaking and groaning it toppled over in slow motion. The crash of it jarred several other pieces of ice loose. As they began floating away the whole jam started to break loose. At first slowly, but then with increasing speed, the whole half-mile chain of ice chunks started loosening their gridlock and resuming their journey downstream. As I stood on the bridge the now-moving kaleidoscope had a dizzying effect on me. The bumping and grinding of the ice chunks and logs held me spellbound until a few huge chunks smacked the piling so hard the whole bridge shuddered. I scrambled for firmer ground as the big chunks rattled under the bridge, clobbering every beam as they went. It was fascinating to see the water that had backed up onto the surrounding pastures pour back toward its rightful place in the river. After fifteen minutes the whole scene was nearly serene, with a scattering of stranded ice chunks clinging to some banks as the only evidence of the earlier drama.

The school year can be like the river. We might envision it always flowing calmly and evenly as a river might on a warm summer day. However, there are times during the year when the events so dictate it that, according to our weak faith, it looks more like an ice jam. Maybe a lesson didn't go just as a teacher had planned, maybe a student was often ill and is in danger of falling behind, or maybe a pile of snow days interrupted the continuity of instruction. As I say, through our weak eyes, it may look for a moment like an ice jam.

Yet, God is good. Even as he sends his swift commandment and again the waters flow, so we also enjoy his fatherly hand in the school. What we may think are matters that constrict the flow of instruction, God often shows us to be matters that can actually enhance learning. To him be the glory!

Daughter of China

Lois Kregel

Daughter of China by C. Hope Flinchbaugh. Bethany House: Minneapolis, MN, 2002. Available at Reformed Book Outlet. Reviewed by Lois Kregel.

This is a story about some of the Christians in China, Christians who are not allowed freedom of worship, who cannot gather in churches as we do, but meet in what are called house churches. These are shelters of some kind, where they gather secretly with other saints for worship and fellowship.

The story opens as Mei Lin and her father are making their way across the fields at night to an old abandoned barn to meet with others for worship. As the narrative unfolds the place is raided, and Pastor Chen, who was leading the service, is imprisoned and tortured.

Mei Lin is determined to witness to her faith, and she does so at school by handing out tracts and bowing her head in prayer before lunch. The village cader, representing the authorities, threatens her, unless she consents to his courting her.

Her heart is already given to Liko, the son of Pastor Chen. She goes ahead with her plans to hand out tracts at school, and she continues to pray before her meals there. As a result she is visited by officers and threatened with prison unless she renounces her faith. This she refuses to do and as a result is imprisoned in Shanghai. In prison she witnesses to the other prisoners, and as a result is finally freed because she is so disruptive. (I find this hard to believe.) The story goes on to tell how she continues to find opportunities to witness, and finally goes back home to her loved ones.

I do not know enough about China to judge how much of this story is believable.

What I question is that the author has received all of her information from others. She herself has never been in China, and she credits by name all those

who have given her the information she used to write this book. I do not doubt for a moment that the church of Jesus Christ in China is being persecuted, but none of what this author writes is from her own personal observation—not the description of the cities, the farmlands—even the diets of the people. I would prefer to learn about Chinese Christians from someone who has had personal experience with them.

Still, you can enjoy this little book (you can read it in a short afternoon or evening), and surely we can and should continue to pray for the persecuted church in China, as well as all over the world. Of that this book serves as a reminder.

Book Review

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Lois Kregel

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot. Crown Publishing, 2010.
Reviewed by Lois Kregel.

I had read about this book, and to my surprise, found it immediately available at the local library. It is the story of how cells from a sample of tissue, taken during surgery from a woman with cervical cancer at Johns Hopkins Hospital and sent to the lab of Dr. Gey in that hospital, were found to reproduce themselves continuously in a lab dish—and they still do.

The patient was a black woman named Henrietta Lacks.

Dr. Gey had been sent many tissue samples, but until this instance none of them had survived in the lab. He was trying to find self-perpetuating cells to

be used in labs that were seeking to develop cures for many diseases, the most urgent being polio. Polio was a much feared disease that was spreading over the country. It was the late 40's and early 50's; many of you will remember those days, and knew someone with polio, as did we. Many laboratories were experimenting with various potential cures, and Dr. Gey sent samples of these cells, known as He-La cells, to any lab who asked for them, at no charge. He never profited from them.

It was through the use of these cells, in the providence of God, that the Salk vaccine was developed. The nation breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Some of you will remember when your children first received the polio vaccine: they stood in line to obtain a sugar cube containing it. This book tells the events that led up to that time.

The author became acquainted with the name Henrietta Lacks in a community college biology class, but she knew little beside the name, and decided to look up some of the family members, with the intention of writing a book. She made contact with some of them in a little town called Clover, in southern Virginia. Henrietta herself had moved near Baltimore to be treated at Johns Hopkins Hospital. She was treated with radiation and surgery, but did not improve, and finally died. She never knew what had happened to her cells.

Rebecca became rather close to one of Henrietta's daughters, Deborah, and took her many places in an effort to find out more about her family. They visited an asylum, where one of her sisters had died under suspicious circumstances.

The members of the family never understood what happened to Henrietta; they could not fathom how their mother could be so famous, while they were all so poor that they could not afford health insurance or proper health care. They only knew that they did not receive the same treatment as white people: Johns Hopkins had separate bathrooms for "colored" people, as they were called, separate treatment rooms, separate operating rooms, and the family assumed that someone had made a lot of money on their mother's cells. It was the era of segregation, and they were distrustful, and understandably so. But their mother's cells were given away, not sold.

There is a pleasing anecdote near the end of the book. A young doctor took some members of the Lacks family to the part of Johns Hopkins where the He-La cells were stored, and showed them their beauty under a high-powered microscope. It was a completely selfless act, and filled them with wonder.

The author's emphasis is on the poverty of Henrietta's family, over against the

fame of their mother. The author fails to see the marvel of it all. “Fearfully and wonderfully made” is a phrase that kept recurring in my mind as I read. I hope that thought is in your minds as well.

Book Reviews

Children and Youth Literature

Brenda Dykstra

Caldecott Award winner, 1949

Blueberries for Sal by Robert McCloskey. Recommended ages: 2-6 years.

Two characters are likely going to meet one another in this tale. Meet Little Bear and a little girl named Little Sal who both go blueberry picking with their mothers on Blueberry Hill. After sitting down to rest, they each end up following the other’s mother. Will they find the right mothers? Will the blueberries ever get picked? Join the two on this adventure of mistaken identity.

Response: Robert McCloskey is the well-known author of other Caldecott award-winning books such as *Make Way for Ducklings* and *Time of Wonder*, recently reviewed in *Perspectives*. This book is no exception to his excellence in artistry. The black-and-white penciled illustrations draw the reader to a simpler time, a time for canning blueberries while a little girl tags along on her mother’s skirt. One can not help but be drawn in by the endsheet spreads as little Sal “helps” her mother can those blueberries in the kitchen.

Again true of McCloskey, his writing is actually quite a joy, too, especially to

read aloud. “Kerplink, Kuplank, Kuplunk!” The sounds of those blueberries as they hit the bottom of Sal’s can are such fun alliterations for kids to repeat. And the plot line is exciting as suspense fills each page turn.

The warnings can be taught to children, too: DON’T follow strangers and stay close to your mother. This danger or message isn’t clarified by the story, but even tiny little ones pick up that this Little Bear and her mama are not cartoon characters and probably aren’t people-friendly. Scary!

All in all, this is an old classic that ought to be owned by both parents and teachers. It includes nothing objectionable, and both the artistic pencil drawings and writing are impeccable. What talent the Lord gave this author!

Moose Tracks by Karma Wilson; illustrated by Jack E. Davis. Simon and Schuster, 2006. Recommended ages: 3-7 years.

Our unseen narrator friend travels around his house trying to find the source of messy moose tracks everywhere—kitchen, bathroom, tub, den, back porch. On his hunt, several animal oddities, however, surface. He finds bear hair on his chair, beaver wood chips in his bed, and goose feathers on the carpet. But *who left all those moose tracks all over the place?*

Response: Karma Wilson’s *Bear* books are fantastic and nearly all are “must buys.” The rhyming cadence and natural flow will draw the reader into the narrator’s plight. This one is an absolute joy to read aloud. The kids love Jack E. Davis’ cartoon-like drawings, too. This book is worth looking at, especially if kids love rhyming and animals. Although it’s not Wilson’s best, I share it because it’s definitely a fun read and would be a nice gift for any child or teacher’s book library. And best of all, no questionable issues are present. Find out for yourself how those muddy moose tracks arrived everywhere. (And check out www.karmawilson.com for great activities to go with some of her books.)

The Hundred Dresses by Eleanor Estes. Harcourt Publishing, 1944 original; 80 pages. Recommended reading level: 3rd-4th grade.

Our main character is Wanda Petronski, from a rather poor family. Wanda wears one pale dress to school every day. Though cleaned and—most of the time—ironed, it is still a source of teasing by many of her schoolmates. Wanda’s friend Maddie becomes sympathetic to Wanda’s plight, while popular Peggy shows little remorse.

One day Wanda announces she is the owner of one hundred dresses! The other students wonder about her statement and can hardly believe it. But then Wanda has to unexpectedly leave school for good. Is she lying? Will she ever face her taunting teasers?

Response: This is clearly an older novel, but it is a classic that is worthwhile to read and to own. Its plot line and characters are meaningful and will make a difference in the lives of children, especially those who bear the name of Christ.

Some discussion issues clearly stand at the forefront in this novel. First, Wanda's courage is a point of discussion. As the reader will discover, she IS telling the truth concerning those one hundred dresses. It's so thrilling to read the results of her announcement about the one hundred dresses. The age level for discussion is an opportunity as well because while the reading level is quite elementary, the concepts could easily go into middle school or even junior high. The heart-wrenching concept of bullying is clearly present. And both sides can be addressed—Why do we bully others? How does the godly child respond to being the target of bullying or to witnessing bullying? Sin, our sinful natures, and the need for the Christ's cross and redemption are just some of the great discussion and growth opportunities.

I would encourage every lower elementary to middle school teacher to purchase this book. The springboards for discussions are endless. It would make a great gift idea for seven- to ten-year-olds or even for a parent or teacher.

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