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## Emily Dickinson, Peter De Vries, and the Strangely Unshakeable Calvinist Character

James C. Schaap  
*Dordt College*

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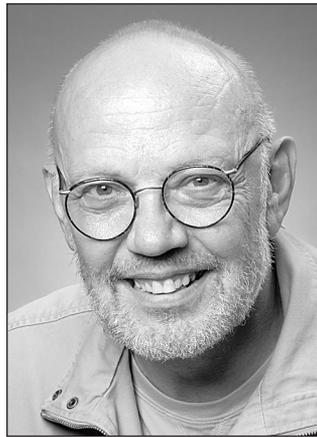
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**Editor's Note:** Dr. James Schaap presented this paper at the Calvinism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conference at Dordt College, April 8-10, 2010.

## Emily Dickinson, Peter De Vries, and the Strangely Unshakeable Calvinist Character

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by James Calvin Schaap

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Dr. James Calvin Schaap is Professor of English at Dordt College and author of *Romey's Place*, *In the Silence There Are Ghosts*, *The Secrets of Barneveld Calvary*, and other works. Schaap has been honored by the Associated Church Press and the Evangelical Press Association for his fiction. He has also written plays, histories, and numerous articles on Faith and Writing. Among his other titles are *On the Trail of the Spirit*, sixteen stories of people affected by the ministry of the Back to God Hour; *Every Bit of Who I Am*, a devotional for teens; and *Paternity*, a collection of short fiction. His novel *Touche the Sky*, released four years ago, was given an Award of Merit by *Christianity Today* in their annual book awards. His most recent works are *Fifty-Five and Counting* and *Sioux County Folk*, released last fall by Dordt Press. He has been teaching literature and writing at Dordt College for thirty-three years.

Writers—like artists of other mediums—like to say that no novel or short story is finished until it's read. Stories and poems and art work of all kinds leave a space for the reader, sufficient space for us to bring our lives and ourselves in, and thereby make that work real or whole or alive.

Last summer, I read Peter De Vries's *Blood of the Lamb*, for the second time. I had read the novel first in the Sixties, four or five years after it was published, forty years ago, at a time in my life when I loved the irreverence De Vries wields at the Dutch Calvinists, a tribe into which both of us were born, for their silliness, the occasional idiocy of their austere, other-worldly piety. In places, the novel is rib-tickling funny. Peter De Vries was among the most well read and beloved of American humorists, his novels—most of them at least—knee-slappers.

*Blood of the Lamb* has humor, too—Don Wanderhope and his father, aboard their garbage truck, slowly sinking into the primordial ooze of some Chicago dump, like the *Titanic* into the North Atlantic. Scared to death of their own demise, they start singing the doxology.

But, for the most part, *Blood of the Lamb* isn't funny. Not at all. Or at least it didn't seem to me to be so hilarious this time through.

Forty years ago, I was a rebel, chafing under the strictures of De Vries's own ethnic and religious heritage, a unique American sub-culture in process of significant change. It was the Sixties, and little was left unaffected by the seismic cultural shifts of the era. At twenty, I read Peter De Vries's *Blood of*

*the Lamb* and roared, as I did at almost anything DeVries wrote. Google him sometime and read a few of his finest quotes—he can be uproariously funny.

Forty years later, I am not nearly so headstrong. Forty years later, I've got some scars, even open wounds, from fisticuffs the Lord and I have come to. Last summer, when I finished *Blood of the*

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*De Vries asks the same question Elie Wiesel can't help asking in Night and elsewhere, one of the most profound and difficult questions believers have faced or will ever face: if God almighty loves us and if he reigns, why on earth do the innocent suffer?*

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*Lamb* again, I had read an entirely different novel. The story hadn't changed, but I had. The novel really wasn't funny this time around—not at all.

Peter De Vries died in 1993. I wonder if he ever guessed that of all his novels, *Blood of the Lamb* would be the one that wouldn't go away. He wrote it just a year after his daughter, Emily, just a few days short of her 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, died after a ferocious two-year battle with leukemia. Much of the novel is the near recitation of prolonged agony that the child—and her father—faced before eventually succumbing.<sup>1</sup>

Honestly, the theologically chilling part of the story I had forgotten because *that* story didn't connect when I was 20 years old—"no young man thinks he shall ever die," after all. Today, I'm sixty, and *Blood of the Lamb* nearly took out the knees of my soul.

De Vries is just as affecting, maybe more so, when he describes, even carries, Dutch Reformed seriousness, as when he describes its silliness. Through his daughter's suffering, Don Wanderhope goes to war with a sovereign God for putting his darling daughter through unrelenting human suffering. De Vries asks the same question Elie Wiesel can't help asking in *Night* and elsewhere, one of the most profound and difficult questions believers have faced or will ever face: if God almighty loves us and if he reigns, why on earth do the innocent suffer?

This time through the novel, I just about cried at the torturous human suffering De Vries chronicles in *Blood of the Lamb*. His most memorable novel is not a book for the weak of heart—or soul. But the novel was a blessing to me, at sixty, the best thing I read last summer.

Peter De Vries could have had a field day at Dordt College in the mid-Sixties, just a few years after *Blood of the Lamb* was published. For a time, to keep the Sabbath holy, dorm counselors put Scotch tape over the coin slots on the Coke machines every Sunday morning. Back then, women were required to wear skirts, not slacks, even though minis were all the rage. Dorm hours were draconian—for women, not men; the rule of thumb was, keep the women corralled and the men turn docile. The Dean of Students would wander residence halls at chapel time, searching out sinners. Rock music was verboten, as were beards, symbols of hippie life, the free love of flower power.

In a strange but understandable way, at that moment the pietistic rules of early to mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch Calvinist culture were as excessive as the hippie culture it so terrifyingly feared. Good Christian people were trying hard to balance the contrary scriptural injunction to be in the world but not of it—just as those of us who are believers still do. The vanities of the time required, or so it was thought, not just lines in the sand but sweat-drenched battle trenches that were themselves blown away by the winds of change—and right here many of us could hum a tune from Bob Dylan.

Clearly, in the Sixties the church—and let me be specific here—the Christian Reformed Church—was beginning to lose its authority. When I was a boy, backsliders were publically admonished for

their sins, even banished from the community in rites that took place during communal worship; it was called excommunication, a tribal practice all but abandoned in most fellowships today.

Some might call that process decline, some liberation. I myself am not so sure. My guess is there are likely as many believers in America today as there were in the late Sixties, perhaps more. But things have changed. The church no longer has much authority.

*Blood of the Lamb* may well be helpful in observing what's been gained: far less Pharisaical posturing and holier-than-thou self-righteousness; an end to punishing violations of only one or two of the sins on Moses's tablet (often the seventh commandment); too much Old Testament-style works righteousness; and steep passageways through unending labyrinths of guilt—for not attending church twice on Sunday, for television antennas in the attic, for wine or beer or liquor only when you're out of town. What's been gained as a result of the church's immense loss of authority? Much, much of that kind of thinking and practice is behind us. Thank God.

But if you, like me, are too much a Calvinist to trust progressivism, to truly believe the world is a better place because we're smarter, more morally sound, or less judgmental than my ancestors, then a question we have to ask is "What might have been lost?"

Maybe *Blood of the Lamb* offers some answers here too. While it makes sport of all our penny-ante prejudices, it also paints a deeply painful portrait of a man named Don Wanderhope, who is so God-haunted that he can no more love God than be rid of him. There's absolutely nothing endearing about that description, of course, so let me phrase it another way: Wanderhope's long and agonizing fight with God almighty is so terrifying that reading it today suggests to me that maybe, amid our liberation, we have lost a certain kind of God-seriousness. We're all for personal relationships with Jesus these days; that's clear. But I wonder if there are any young writers from the Dutch Reformed world who would or could chronicle as fierce a battle with the reality of the living God, whose ways are, as they always have been, far beyond our own.

In most every DeVries novel, characters are named precisely, and Don Wanderhope is no

exception, his hope and faith tried to the quick by the awful death of his child. Most of the second half of the novel follows his wandering path as he seeks to find not simply some possible cosmic meaning to his beloved daughter's death but, even more, a reason for life as we know it:

We live by a kind of conspiracy of grace: the common assumption, or pretense, that human existence is "good" or "matters" or has "meaning," a glaze of charm or humor by which we conceal from one another and perhaps even ourselves the suspicion that it does not, and our conviction in times of trouble that it is overpriced—something to be endured rather than enjoyed. Nowhere does this function more than in precisely such a slice of hell as a Children's Pavilion, where the basic truths would seem to mock any state of mind other than rage and despair. (215)

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Carol's stay in the Pavillion, the children's hospital, creates an eternal battle that might well be funny if it weren't so horrific. After months of suffering, Wanderhope buys a cake for Carol when the doctor tells him that she seems almost

miraculously to be in remission. But just a moment later, when an infection has marched through the ward “like wildfire,” a woman tells him, Carol is housed in an oxygen tent, and Wanderhope discovers, after years of fighting, that his daughter’s precious life will be gone in a matter of hours. “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee,” Wanderhope prays, for the last time, at his daughter’s bedside. “The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace”—words he must have heard thousands of times as a boy in thousands of worship litanies. “Then I touched the stigmata one by one: the prints of the needles, the wound in the breast that had for so many months now scarcely ever closed. I caressed the perfectly shaped head. I bent to kiss the cheeks, the breasts that would now never be fulfilled, that no youth would ever touch. ‘O, my lamb’” (234).

In DeVries’s most famous novel, that line cues the title: the lamb that is slain is not Jesus Christ but Carol Wanderhope, an innocent whose appalling death, by her father’s mad reckoning, slays the Savior, Jesus Christ. Love and compassion dies with his daughter; words and promises are as worthless to him as the paper the Word is printed on.

In a last black moment, Wanderhope, drunk, retrieves the cake he’d left in the church where he’d offered up his last prayer, the cake he meant to use to celebrate Carol’s unforeseen remission. He walks outside, where, like a demonic slapstick comedian, he tosses that cake into the sculpted face of the suffering Jesus. “Thus Wanderhope was found at that place which for the diabolists of his literary youth, and for those with more modest spiritual histories too,” DeVries writes, “was said to be the only alternative to the muzzle of a pistol: the foot of the Cross.” Not particularly humbled, and dead drunk.

But there, nonetheless.

In the midst of the battle, Don Wanderhope receives a note from his college newspaper, asking him to write down for them his own philosophy of life. He does—and includes it in the novel, twice, interestingly:

I believe that man must learn to live without those consolations called

religious, which his own intelligence must by now have told him belong to the childhood of the race. Philosophy can really give us nothing permanent to believe either; it is too rich in answers, each cancelling out the rest. The quest for Meaning is foredoomed. Human life “means” nothing. But that is not to say that it is not worth living. What does a Debussy Arabesque “*mea*,” or a rainbow or a rose? A man delights in all of these, knowing himself to be no more—a wisp of music and a haze of dreams dissolving against the sun. Man has only his own two feet to stand on, his own human trinity to see him through. Reason, Courage, and Grace. And the first plus the second equals the third. (166-167)

Because DeVries repeats that “philosophy of life” twice in the novel—once again in the last few pages, when he’s reminded of what he wrote—one can’t help but believe that those words represent something more than the creed of Don Wanderhope, especially because the entire novel is painfully autobiographical.

And yet, like Jacob, Wanderhope—and DeVries?—simply can’t stop believing in God, even though his suffering would be less should he find himself capable of stopping the furious engagement. In a way, as Charles Spurgeon says, Wanderhope—and DeVries?—suffers in a way only real believers can, a way that King David himself knew, not the affirmation that God does not exist, but that he does—but that he’s just not around.

I could go on and relate stories of DeVries’s later life that suggest this dilemma was something he never could put to rest. Even in his later novels—far more comic, less dark, less theologically quarrelsome—reviewers were often quick to point out that his fiction always carried something of his own Calvinist heritage, a darkened view of humankind and our situation on this earth. “How I hate this world,” Wanderhope says, sounding much like the author. “I would like to tear it apart with my own two hands if I could. I would like to dismantle the universe star by star, like a treeful of rotten fruit.” Peter DeVries spent far too much of his life in a Calvinist church and is far too brilliant

a writer not to know what he was saying there, especially and precisely with that last line.

My American literature anthology makes the claim that Emily Dickinson was and perhaps is the premiere Calvinist poet, an assessment that, once upon a time, had me puzzled because what seemed clear to me, even after a quick reading of a number of Dickinson's most anthologized lyrics, was that she certainly gave no quarter to the Plymouth Brownists or Cotton Mather or, even a century later, to their theological descendent, Jonathan Edwards. That Calvinism as a religious force still existed in Amherst, Massachusetts, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, is impossible to deny. But by the time Emily Dickinson was writing her "letters to the world," most scholars would agree that Calvinism had already morphed into, and even begun to pass through, a patrician Whig mentality that was itself already evolving into the modern age.

In his fine biography, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, Roger Lundin suggests that Ms. Dickinson may have been one of the only old-line Calvinists around Amherst, someone left almost untouched by the changing religious landscape of her time. Her letters and poems make clear, for instance, that she was not taken with the emotional excesses of the "revivals" that took place in her neighborhood—revivals that had clearly affected even her own family members; but neither was she charmed by any of the new religious and philosophical currents fashionable in academic and cultural life. "Dickinson undeniably chafed under the grip of evangelical piety and apologetics," Lundin says, "but that discomfort hardly drove her to embrace the rationalistic secularity that was loosening the evangelical hold on the New England mind" (187).

Ms. Dickinson was familiar with Charles Darwin, as were many of those around her. She was not at all unfamiliar with the early stirrings of more mainline, culturally softened American Protestantism, as it lived and breathed and had its being in her era and beyond. Furthermore, she stopped attending church altogether quite early in her life. How some scholars could call her "a Calvinist poet" seemed, at one time, rather odd. And let me add, I'm not Dickinson scholar—but I am an admirer.

But like Peter DeVries, Emily Dickinson, a century before, was blessed—or cursed—with an

incurable Calvinism that may well have been more evident in her heart and mind than it was in the hearts and minds of the throngs who regularly attended worship just down the street from her Amherst home. What scholars intend when they call her "the Calvinist poet" is a description created upon the twin pillars of classically defined Calvinist theology—the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man.

The recipe goes like this: God is sovereign, unreachable in his transcendence, and inasmuch as his authority is beyond question, he is, in fact, King over all. Our depravity renders us subject only to his grace alone. But because we aren't granted the privilege of fully knowing the eternal status of our faith or our standing with that God, Calvinists live their lives fretting about themselves and their destinies in the face of an unapproachably sovereign God.

Just like Peter DeVries, Emily Dickinson, who some would claim as America's greatest 19<sup>th</sup>-century poet, seemed unable to find a way to live with that sovereign God. "For every poem that questions the nature or existence of God, another affirms the existence of the Divine character and power," Lundin says. Her poetry occasionally reveres God, often rejects him, sometimes ridicules his rule, and frequently stubbornly picks fights. Sometimes she sounds simply irreligious, even blasphemous; other times, she seems incapable of living without faith:

I know that He exists.  
Somewhere — in Silence —  
He has hid his rare life  
From our gross eyes.

'Tis an instant's play.  
'Tis a fond Ambush —  
Just to make Bliss  
Earn her own surprise!

But — should the play  
Prove piercing earnest —  
Should the glee — glaze —  
In Death's — stiff — stare —

Would not the fun  
Look too expensive!  
Would not the jest —  
Have crawled too far!

In this poem, Dickinson begins with an unqualified affirmation: although she does not say she loves God, she makes clear that she harbors no questions about his very real existence. He's there, but unapproachable, or at least too often silent, hiding his oh-so-important life from our deprived sensibilities.

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That peek-a-boo behavior is really something of a joke, “an instant’s play,” a ruse his divine and comic self has created simply to make us “earn” (a hard word, I think) our own joy or surprise. Such behavior, she suggests, with an exclamation point, is truly reprehensible because should his playing around with us in that way draw us anywhere close to death, then the game itself, she says, would certainly be, to say the least, a cruel joke.

The last line is most telling perhaps, Dickinson characterizing God’s behavior with imagery drawn from some kind of suffering creature, or perhaps even a snake, which doesn’t so much destroy the affirmation of the first line as it does redefine it in ways that seem culled directly from the spiritual anguish of *The Blood of the Lamb*.

Lundin’s biography of Dickinson is especially helpful because he clearly illustrates that just about all of Ms. Dickinson’s poetry is, in fact, religious. She was, in his words, “one of the major religious thinkers of her day”:

She knew the Christian tradition, and especially its scriptures and hymns, in depth; on several occasions, in adolescence and young adulthood, she agonizingly approached the threshold of conversion but never passed over it; and throughout her adult life, in her poems and letters, she brilliantly meditated upon the great perennial questions of God, suffering, the problem of evil, death, and her “Flood subject,” immortality. Though she never joined the church—and quit attending it at all around the age of thirty—she wrestled with God all her life. . . . Dickinson would not let go of God. ( 3-4 )

In another of her most anthologized lyrics (1545), a poem she sent to a teenage nephew, Dickinson talks about Scripture in a way that documents both the skeptic and the believer in her character:

The Bible is an antique Volume—  
Written by faded men  
At the suggestion of Holy Spectres—  
Subjects—Bethlehem—  
Eden—the ancient Homestead—  
Satan—the Brigadier—  
Judas—the Great Defaulter—  
David—the Troubador—  
Sin—a distinguished Precipice  
Others must resist—  
Boys that “believe” are very lonesome—  
Other Boys are “lost”—  
Had but the Tale a warbling Teller—  
All the Boys would come—  
Orpheus’ Sermon captivated—  
It did not condemn—

Clearly, she dislikes the Bible’s “faded” voices, its seemingly hackneyed character and characters, the anger and punishment she found abundant in her own reading of the texts; if the story had a more captivating voice, she says somewhat superciliously, if it only had a “warbling teller,” then “all the boys

would come”—human beings would throng to the Bible’s truth.

The poem is a really a kind of joke.

There is, nonetheless, an unmistakable affirmation amid the sarcasm. Her attitude toward the Word of God is not necessarily diminished by her criticism of what she judged to be its often antique rhetoric. The “if. . .then” construction of the poem does not in any way diminish the stature of Scripture; it merely suggests that if the Word of God didn’t come packaged the way it is, more “boys,” more of us, would be drawn to its riches.

The context of the poem is of interest here too. She is talking to a nephew about the Bible itself, exercising, perhaps, some empathy, and, like a good teacher, coming to him in terms of what may have been his own childish perceptions of the Bible—as if to say, “I understand what you feel about what you read.” But by not denying the significance of Scripture, she’s helping him to see and understand what he’s feeling as he continues to make his way through the Word.

As Lundin makes clear, Dickinson, not unlike King David, was capable of some fairly hearty fisticuffs with God. Unlike the psalms, the Dickinson canon does not contain anything approximate to David’s near ecstasy in, say, Psalm 100, or the comfort the psalmist derives from the mere idea that the Lord is his shepherd. But the absence of such striking and blessed imagery should not inure the attentive reader from observing that God, in Dickinson, is not dead:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—  
I keep it, staying at Home—  
With a Bobolink for a Chorister—  
And an Orchard, for a Dome—

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice—  
I just wear my Wings—  
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,  
Our little Sexton-sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman—  
And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at least—  
I’m going, all along.

While this little delight documents Dickinson’s personal refusal to attend Sunday worship, it

doesn’t for a moment diminish the importance of worship, nor any believer’s righteous motivations to worship the Creator.

In a thoughtful and comprehensive essay on Dickinson’s religious thought, “Wrestling with Silence: Emily Dickinson’s Calvinist God,” Magdalena Zapodowska ends with this assertion:

Dickinson clung to the Calvinist categories of thought despite her acute sense of their inadequacy, and while she resisted conversion as the ultimate settlement of one’s business with God and rejected the formality of institutional religion and public rituals, she pursued her controversy with the Calvinist Jehovah whose image she detested but could not renounce. (12)

Other 19<sup>th</sup>- century American writers likewise lived in the autumn of this nation’s Calvinist heritage, but, like Ms. Dickinson, they simply could not shake its strictures. Herman Melville, reviewing Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Mosses from the Old Manse*, a review which many scholars assume is as much about Melville himself as it is about his would-be friend Hawthorne, makes this claim:

For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne’s soul, the other side—like the dark half of the physical sphere—is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black. . . .Whether Hawthorne has simply availed himself of this mystical blackness as a means to the wondrous effects he makes it to produce in his lights and shades; or whether there really lurks in him, perhaps unknown to himself, a touch of Puritanic gloom,—this, I cannot altogether tell. Certain it is, however, that this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance. (1336)

While it is more difficult to find, among Dickinson’s thousands of poems, a number of

them that speak to her attitude concerning the theological doctrine of original sin, what seems clear, to me at least, is that the suffering she endured, in part because of her inability to accept God or his ordinances, could be attributed, at

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*In evangelical circles today, millions love Jesus—and that certainly is a joy and blessing, an article of faith right out of the summary of the law itself. But Don Wanderhope’s epic battle in Blood of the Lamb and Dickinson’s life-long clash with a God she could neither fully accept nor reject, fights that had to have grown out of a faith tradition now more historic than contemporary, may well have been borne from what people used to call “the fear of the Lord.”*

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least in part, to the impossible chasm which in her estimation separates God from humankind. The perception of the reality of darkness changed Young Goodman Brown, in Hawthorne’s story, from

a man fully confident of warding off the Devil’s wiles, to someone whose life ended “in gloom.” Dickinson was never—by my perceptions—a Young Goodman Brown. Throughout her life, like Jacob, she wrestled with God, as does Peter DeVries, gigantically, in *The Blood of the Lamb*.

Where these two parallel each other, or so it seems, is in their inability to accept the battle lines inherent in Calvinism’s classically-perceived character—the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man. Unlike Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, Dickinson and, a century later, Peter DeVries simply would not accept that the darkness of the Calvinism they inherited was inherent in the human condition, post-fall; but neither, it seemed, was either of them blessed sufficiently simply to write it off.

What we witness in both Emily Dickinson and Peter DeVries is the powerfully residual character of Calvinism itself, a comprehensive theological system that some would call an ideology. It seems impossible that either of them would have considered themselves a Calvinist; yet, if we believe the tales and not the tellers, the lines are irreducible throughout their respective work.

It seems almost indisputable to assert that Calvinism—in its American manifestation—had an immense effect on American letters and American culture, for better or for worse. What seems equally clear is that Dutch Calvinism had a similarly powerful effect on the man who was its most famous novelist, Peter DeVries.

Those of you with a knowledge of the tribe in which Peter De Vries was raised will find it remarkable that the man’s first cousin was another Peter, another religious man with a significant following: the Reverend Peter Eldersveld, an almost legendary broadcast voice of the *Back to God Hour*, a radio ministry of the Christian Reformed Church. If letters ever passed between those two first cousins, wouldn’t they be rich? The two could not be more different, with one exception: they undoubtedly shared a deep and unshakeable God-seriousness.

In evangelical circles today, millions love Jesus—and that certainly is a joy and blessing, an article of faith right out of the summary of the law itself. But Don Wanderhope’s epic battle in *Blood of the Lamb* and Dickinson’s life-long clash with a God she could neither fully accept nor reject, fights

that had to have grown out of a faith tradition now more historic than contemporary, may well have been borne from what people used to call “the fear of the Lord.”

A year after the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, it might be instructive to go back to the man whose name I also bear as an inheritor of a certified intellectual and theological tradition. Not long before Calvin died, he wrote this:

The will I have had, and the zeal, if it can be called that, have been so cold and sluggish that I feel deficient in everything and everywhere. . . . Truly, even the grace of forgiveness [God] has given me only renders me all the more guilty, so that my only recourse can be this, that being the father of mercy, he will show himself the father of so miserable a sinner. <sup>2</sup>

I don't believe I know many people, myself included, who would or could offer such a dour assessment of themselves anymore, if in fact someone should. But thus saith John Calvin—late, late, late in life.

Professor Christian Smith and his researchers published a study in 2006 that examined religious practice among American teenagers (*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Eyes of American Teenagers*) and determined that most young people today maintain a view of God almighty that he and his research team characterized as “moral, therapeutic deism,” a faith that is characterized by, simply enough, moralism, feeling good, and not much else. There are times that I wonder—and I teach “covenant youth”—whether young people's attitudes don't resemble that of their parents, that of many—if not all—of us.

How many of us fight with God, like Jacob—or like the psalmist of Psalm 13 or 88 or like Peter DeVries in *Blood of the Lamb*, a novel that is not a pleasure to read; it's a stiletto in the ribs of the Lord. Don Wanderhope finally loses the fight; but so does, in a certain way, the love of God. But the battle is Promethian, and the God of *Blood of the Lamb* is nothing to sneeze at.

Dickinson's poetry simply won't let God alone. Often, it's not pretty for conventional Christian believers. But her God simply won't be discounted, even though he more than occasionally merits her disfavor.

When I left Dordt College after graduation

in 1970, I tried to shake the dust off my sandals. The place was a hotbed of Nixonian politics, even in the late Sixties, when riots of all kinds were burning cities and shutting down universities, when young men my age were dying at a rate of 500 per week in Southeast Asia. The institution's almost insolent silliness about beards and jeans and rock music were, to me, what Calvinism was all about—and I wanted nothing more of it.

Only a few years later, in graduate school, did I read the *Institutes* and begin to understand that I was—as was Hawthorne, Melville, and Emily Dickinson were—perhaps forever a carrier of what sometimes seems an unshakeable legacy, a theological tradition I'd been raised within, for better or for worse. In some ways, my graduate school experience taught me more about the enduring legacy of Calvinism than my undergraduate program at a college that would have proclaimed itself “Calvinist” back then, forty years ago—and might well do it again today, only because the word *Calvin* has somehow fought its way back into favor in the evangelical world.

Maybe that's why, forty years later, I found the novel *Blood of the Lamb*—this time to be sure—as deadly serious as it is instructive.

#### Endnotes

1. For a fascinating medical study of the Carol Wanderhope's leukemia—and the story's relationship to the medical history of De Vries's own daughter, Emily—Dr. David Steensma, an oncologist at Harvard University Medical School, compares the novel's rendition of the story to the real story of De Vries's daughter's death. Steensma's essay can be read on line in *the Journal of Oncology*, at <http://jco.ascopubs.org/cgi/content/full/27/16/2729>.
2. As qtd. by Sarah Vowell, *The Wordy Shipmates*, p. 42.

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