



INTERNATIONAL REFORMED THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

TEACHING REFORMED THEOLOGY ONLINE
TO PORTUGUESE SPEAKERS WORLDWIDE

Newsletter

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"So he got up and went to his father. 'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.'"

Luke 15:20 – NIV

Welcoming Sinners

Clovis Alexandre Oliveira

The parable commonly known as the "parable of the prodigal son" is actually a parable of two sons: "...There was a man who had two sons." (Luke 15:11) Central in this parable, however, are not the two sons, but the welcome from the father to the younger and penitent son. The father in this story represents God. If He welcomes sinners, why shouldn't we do it? So let's dig a little bit deeper into this parable of the "two sons" in order that we can better understand our role in welcoming sinners.

Who are the sinners?

When the Lord Jesus told this parable in Luke 15, He wanted to compare two groups: the sinners and the religious leaders of His time (vs. 1-2). The sinners are represented by the "younger brother" (vs. 12-13), while the religious leaders are represented by the "older brother" (25-30). The younger brother is the kind of person who lives without regard for the commandments of God and who decides what is truth for himself. The older brother is the kind of person who decides to obey all the commandments, even in a rigid way to some extent. He does this, not because his heart seeks the Father, but to receive God's gifts. The "younger brother" type is easy to recognize because normally he is outside the church living "far from the Father". However, the "older brother" type is more difficult to recognize because he is usually within the church. Even true Christians may suffer from "the older brother disease." When we obey as a way to control God and to get what we want, the "older brother" attitude is manifested. From this perspective, God is seen as a means to an end, not as the end itself.

Therefore, sinners are not just "out there," but "in here" too, even in our own hearts.

Why should we welcome sinners?

He who experiences the welcome of a gracious and loving Father, despite his sins, is led to also welcome other sinners. The younger son of the parable, after spending his entire inheritance recklessly, returns home and experiences his father's forgiveness and grace rather than rebuke. In verse 20 we read that the father, full of compassion, "runs, hugs and kisses" his son. This



experience of the touch of God's love is not only for the time of our conversion, but should be part of all of our life. If we lose the perspective of being embraced by this loving and gracious God, it is possible that we live as the older son of the parable: lacking joy and feeling superior to others as we compare our performance with theirs, and even feeling angry when we see that they are not walking according to our own "standard". Of course we must exhort one another to live sanctified lives, but

we must also never forget to offer truth in love.

How do we receive power to welcome sinners?

To receive power to welcome sinners, with eyes of faith, we need to see that a high price was paid so we could be welcomed into the family of God. The grace of God is not dissociated from His holiness. The younger son had sinned. Since he had spent his part of the inheritance, someone would have to pay in order for him to be accepted back into the family. Now, the part of the inheritance that belonged to the older son would have to be used. That is why the older son got angry. His heart was not in tune with his father's heart, who ordered to kill the fattened calf and who threw a big party to celebrate the "salvation" of the younger son (vs. 23-24). We would expect of a true older brother that he would go after his younger brother and spend whatever it took to bring him back home. Unfortunately, the younger brother in this story does not have a true older brother. However, we do. The Lord Jesus did not come just from one country to another to search for us; He came from heaven to earth. He didn't just spend part of his inheritance for us; He spent his own life, dying on a cross. He did this so that we who were "out", could be brought "in", into the family of God. This is the message of the gospel. We need to preach it to ourselves every day, so that we may receive the power we need to welcome sinners like us. God welcomes us simply by grace, so that we can graciously welcome others who "do not deserve it". Let us go out as Christ "went out" to get us! If He "spent" His own blood, why can't we spend our time, resources and even tears?

Developments the IRTC is Praying About

President Ralph Boersema

Comparing ourselves with some other Reformed distance-education colleges, working among different, but comparable populations, suggests that we can grow to be a school with several thousand students worldwide. Although we are in our fifteenth year and much effort is faithfully being exerted by a team of brothers and sisters who love Christ and hold that Reformed thinking is biblical thinking, we are still only a very small enterprise, with some 60 to 70 students taking courses each year. Much can and should be done to grow the College under God's gracious providence. I could tell you about many long-term developments that we can envision for the future. However, that would take us too far afield for a short article. Let me, rather, just describe some projects that currently have our attention, but are not yet in place, so that you can join us in praying for their implementation.

In-Person Discipling

For our instruction to be as effective as possible we long to have a much stronger face-to-face component as part of the learning process. Since we see ourselves as servants of Christ's local churches, it is our understanding that person-to-person discipling is best carried out within the student's local church and its ministry. For this reason, all students are required to have a local mentor, which often is their pastor or an elder. These mentors have full access to our online teaching environment and are enabled to view all the lessons and projects assigned to their students. We encourage the mentors and students to discuss the studies on a weekly basis and pray that the personal guidance of the mentor will be a most important element in the student's growth. In general, however, it turns out that most mentors are virtually inactive in the IRTC training. We are disappointed about this and currently are developing plans to address this deficiency.

A student's learning experience can be enhanced even more by the local church organizing a study center, where several IRTC students participate in group discussions, under the guidance of a mentor. Weekly group discussions can be most profitable. From our inception we have promoted this idea, but we have only had one church organize such a study center and none is currently active. For years we have wanted to address this lack by having an IRTC representative make visits to churches, in order to provide concrete, practical guidance and encouragement to stimulate the organizing of local groups. We even have been given funding for this activity by a charitable foundation in the Netherlands. The first step in this project is the making of a manual for mentors and study centers, as well as a Portuguese-language school catalog, so that a visiting representative can provide churches with materials to guide them in setting up such local learning activities. At present, we are giving renewed attention to this project. The difficulty had been to find persons with both skills and time available to produce these materials, but now we are engaging some new people to work on making the manual and catalog, and we are encouraged with this new progress.

Digital Libraries

Since our founding we have been much in need of providing research library services for our students. Early on we initiated work on this and received startup funding for it. It was not long, however, before the project was stopped, due to lack of human resources. An electronic library is particularly important for students living outside of Brazil in countries such as Mozambique, Portugal and Japan, since most of the assigned texts are published in Brazil and very costly to obtain in other countries. We are currently exploring a very exciting project, through a major electronic theological book publisher, that could provide all of our community with excellent personal electronic libraries. It is estimated that USD\$30,000 might be needed to get this project off the ground. Funds from that early donation for a library now provide us with USD\$3000 toward this goal. We pray for donors to help raise the remaining USD\$27,000.00.

IRTC Administration

Pastor Ulisses Horta Simões, moderator of the Board of Directors since 2005 and current assistant to the president, is leaving the IRTC to serve in a new ministry.



He will soon be the director of the Presbyterian Theological Seminary *Rev. Denoel Nicodemus Eller* in Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil, which is one of the seminaries of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil. For now, he is organizing the annual plans for the seminary.

Because of this new ministry direction, Pastor Ulisses is now finishing up his last responsibilities with the IRTC, limited to the completion of projects already underway. Therefore, we count on the understanding of all with these changes and adjustments.

All of the IRTC community is immensely grateful to Pastor Ulisses for his ministry in our institution. We pray the Lord will use him greatly in his new role for God's glory!

Why and How to Support the IRTC

The College has set a goal of raising USD\$92,000.00 in 2015. This will allow us to meet our expenses for this year, as well as implementing our need for a full-time person in Administration, to be engaged in 2016. Our goal suggests that we need to raise an average per month of USD\$7,666.67. As I write this at the end of October, I note that by now it would be good to have received USD\$68,999.99. Then we would have been on track to achieve our goal by the end of the year. However, until now, for this year, our receipts from all sources have been only around USD\$31,000, which means that we are far from attaining our goal for 2015. This is a matter of deep concern and we turn to the Lord for gracious help.

If you would like to make a donation, visit the "Donations" page on our website (www.pro-rege.net/ds14.htm). There you will find all the information necessary for making your contribution in the USA. Canadian donors, please make your donations at www.irtcsociety.ca. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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