

CALVIN SEERVELD



Dr. Calvin Seerveld

Calvin Seerveld was born in 1930 on Long Island, New York into a devout Calvinist family. His family owned and operated a fish and fruit and vegetable market in which Cal worked as a boy and young man, positively marking him for life. One of his favorite descriptions of himself is “a fishmonger’s son.” Cal’s mother was what he calls the “household provider.” A legal secretary before marriage, she was also an excellent musician, playing the violin, especially in church. She insisted on Cal’s piano lessons from age six onward, which led him to learn musical composition and to play string bass in Calvin College’s orchestra. He credits her excursions with her children into New York City from their Long Island home for his early interest in the arts and culture.

After earning a BA in Philosophy and English Literature from Calvin College, where he also studied Latin and classical Greek (1948-1952), he pursued an MA in English Literature and Classics at the University of Michigan (1952-53).

In 1953, Calvin Seerveld began five-year university doctoral studies in Europe. He began and ended at the Free University of Amsterdam (1953-54 and 1957-58) where he obtained a Ph.D. in Philosophy and Comparative Literature. His work in philosophy was primarily with D. Th. Vollenhoven, one of the two leading figures in the development of a new Christian philosophy in the Reformed tradition.

Seerveld spent interim years at Basel University (1955-56) in philosophy and theology with philosopher Karl Jaspers, theologians Karl Barth and Oscar Cullmann, and Hebrew scholar Walter Baumgartner. He also studied aesthetics with Carlo Antoni at the University of Rome (1956-57) in preparation for his doctoral dissertation.

Having learned Latin, classical Greek, and German during his undergraduate years, he learned Dutch, French, Italian, and biblical Hebrew in Europe. During his doctoral studies years, Cal met his future wife, Inès Naudin ten Cate, in Switzerland. They married in 1956. Inès was also fluent in German, French, and Dutch, and learned Italian while in Rome.

After a year of teaching at Belhaven College in Mississippi, Dr. Seerveld became one of the first five professors at the newly chartered Trinity Christian College in 1959. Here, he founded and shaped the Philosophy Department, but also taught German language courses and was vigorous in setting the curricular and perspectival direction of the fledgling college.

During thirteen years at Trinity, Cal was a powerful faculty voice in shaping a distinctive curriculum that advocated parallel development of rigorous scholarship and a deep spirituality and faith in God that was personal, but also communal, social, and academic. His perspective, teaching, and emphases on wide cultural and social awareness, engagement, and spirited dialogue were always rooted in the foundation and power of Christian faith in Yahweh-God. Cal and his colleagues modeled for their students the virtues of faith, hope, love, and diligence that gave purpose and energy to the Trinity experience.

His mission for the college, each student, and himself was at least two-fold. First, to develop a learned awareness of one's religious "place to stand" that was strong and deep enough to encounter, challenge, and bless other humans, whether Christian or not. Second, it led Cal, his students, and others at the young Trinity Christian College to its unique informed, open, fearless, and appreciative engagement with culture, society, and its people.



Dr. Seerveld's
Philosophy Class

As important as Seerveld's lectures and assignments in philosophy were, each his semester he would invite guests who embodied the topics he covered in his courses. These included businesspeople, Marxists, atheists, successful capitalists, radical preachers, and people from ethnic groups that were not highly represented in this small college founded and populated by European-origin white Reformed church folks.

Cal also sponsored a series of Christian Action Seminar and other such events that brought social structural leaders from Canada, US, and Europe to broaden the horizon of Christian witness to the social and political spheres.

Cal's chapel speeches engaged the whole campus community as audience. Each meditation was preceded by Scripture passages freshly translated from Hebrew or Greek in Cal's uniquely vernacular style, always drawn from current affairs of the world or the college. Students now in their 70s and early 80s still remember these experiences. Some of these chapel talks were published in two volumes—*Take Hold of God and Pull* (1966, 1999)—forty-four chapel talks in the college's first five years—and thirty-five more in *For God's Sake, Run with Joy* (1972).

In 1966, he published *The Greatest Song: In Critique of Solomon*, his literal translation of the biblical *Song of Songs*, arranged for oratorio performance. He and his students rendered performances at Trinity and other Christian colleges in the Chicago area and abroad. In 2011, Cal returned to Trinity to stage his translation of the biblical book of *Ecclesiastes*, directed by Trinity Professor of Theater Arts, John Sebestyen. In 2018, Cal and Inès gifted Trinity with a small publication of Cal's speeches given at Trinity since he left in 1973, entitled *Personal Memories of God-given Opportunities: 1959-1972 at Trinity Christian College*.

Cal's intellect and imagination came to be the trademark of the innovative and caring Trinity professoriate continued to this day—though perhaps never exceeded.

In 1973, Cal left Trinity for the Institute for Christian Studies of Toronto, a graduate school in the reformational Christian tradition in which Cal continues to play an active part.

His perhaps most influential book, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature*, was published in 1964 while he was at Trinity—edited and republished in 1977 & 1995. That was at a time when he and other visionaries opened the Patmos Art Gallery, which worked alongside the Trinity Art Department under the guidance of Henk Krijger, an established Dutch artist. Other publications, among many others, include *A Turnabout in Aesthetics to Understanding* (1974); *On Being Human: Imaging God in the Modern World* (1988); *In the Field of the Lord: A Seerveld Reader*, edited by Craig Bartholomew (2000); *Voicing God's Psalms* (with audio CD, 2005).

In 2014, under the editorship of Dr. John Kok, a professor of philosophy and an early student of Calvin Seerveld, a six-volume series (totaling around 2,000 pages) of Seerveld's scholarly articles, speeches, and lectures was published.

As of this writing, Calvin Seerveld's work continues. In 2020, he published a series of sermons on Revelation, entitled *Bewondering God's Dumbfounding Doings: God Talking to Us Little People in the Final Book of the Bible*. In 2023, he published *God Picks Up the Pieces: Ecclesiastes as a Chorus of Voices*, which includes both his translation of *Ecclesiastes* and his wrestling with it and its performances over a period of sixty years.

Also in 2023, he published the first of four volumes of over sixty exhortations with the series title *Tough Stuff from the Bible, Tendered Gently: Encouraging Faith Manifestoes for People with Open Ears*. Each message is based on one or more chapters of Scripture translated from its original language.

A recent and astounding feature of Cal and Inès's generous care for Trinity is their establishment of *The Calvin and Inès Seerveld Arts in Society Fund*. Given as a gift after they pass, the Seerveld's have already provided a substantial amount even before Inès passed in 2021. That additional money funded several art projects between 2011 and 2023, including the expansive and lauded *Roseland Portrait Project* completed by Trinity artist, Professor John Bakker. That gift will continue to fund projects featuring art in society for years to come. The rest of the bequest will fund projects in the future. In addition, Cal has bequeathed to Trinity much of his and Inès's personal collection of art by Christian artists.

Calvin Seerveld's contributions to Trinity are immense and complex, in keeping with his visionary intellect and commitment to the Christian message in the world. They endure in Trinity's attention to personal identity and unique commitment to truth, academic depth, and global perspective.



Roseland Portrait
Project by John Bakker