

Our need Lament

A conversation between Michael Card and Calvin Seerveld

Editor's note: Shortly after 9-11, Calvin Seerveld, a highly respected Reformed philosopher in aesthetics, began a conversation with well-known singer/songwriter and author Michael Card about the church's lost language of lament. The Banner is privileged to share part of this dialogue with you. Seerveld, who had previously written "A Congregational Lament" for use in worship (see Reformed Worship, June 2004) inspired Card to begin developing both a book and a CD on lament (see sidebar, "The Path to Praise").

Seerveld: The great gospel singer Mahalia Jackson is reported to have explained why she never sang the blues: "Because I'm not down in that pit hollerin'." I understand that sentiment as a firm statement of saving faith. On the other hand, the biblical psalms apparently approve of steadfast believers in the Lord voicing their unstinting complaints to God. They lament sickness and the threat of untimely death, enemies, and even God's silent treatment and severe punishment for sin. Doesn't that tell us that we too need songs the faithful can sing that have a beseeching, weeping "blues" character before God? As a church elder I learned congregation members



Calvin Seerveld

were not really as happy-go-lucky as they appeared in Sunday-morning services. I think that inside and outside church buildings we need popular songs that give vent to the genuine sorrows of our lives and of the world—songs that still allow the grit of a patient faith in our Lord to come through.

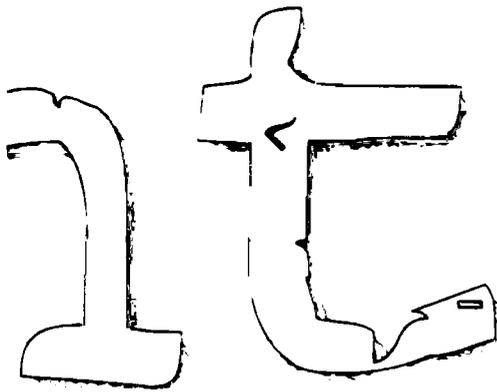
Card: I agree. After 9-11 you pointed out to me that the church has no such songs to sing. That pierced my heart and forced me



Michael Card

to look at biblical laments. The literature states that anywhere from 30 to 70 percent of the psalms are laments. As you suggest, they range from struggling with disease and death to the victory and prosperity of the wicked to downright disappointment with God.

I've noticed also that Job provides a wonderful paradigm for one who longs to lament, to cry out to God, but whose "friends" advise him that such speech is inappropriate. His friends reduce the vast



mystery of the way God works in the world to a simple formula of retributive justice. But Job discovers their formula doesn't work.

Those of us who long to be honest enough to speak to God through Scripture-ordained laments find ourselves surrounded by similar friends who try to theologize away our pain, or the world's pain, thereby confining God to a formula. I don't know about you, but the Father Jesus introduced me to is no such frozen theological entity. He is a God who is moved by my tears.

Seerveld: What happened to people in New York City and elsewhere on Sept. 11, 2001, was evil. Can one sing a lament about such atrocity that does not propose powerful vengeance (and pre-emptive war) but repentantly mourns the evil that we ourselves also do in God's wide world?

Card: I believe, if the psalms are truly a paradigm for us, that there is even a place for an imprecatory response to 9-11. The psalms that cry out to God to take vengeance on our enemies have a deeper purpose than simple revenge. They tell us that it is appropriate, indeed vital, that we

take everything to God—even our hate. Confessing that I have enemies and that there is darkness in my heart toward them is precisely the place to start moving toward obedience to Jesus' difficult command to *love* my enemies. Lament represents a reversal of denial. Most Christians cannot love their enemies because they deny they have enemies.

I believe Daniel Berrigan's book *Lamentations: From New York to Kabul and Beyond* (Sheed & Ward, 2002), which connects the situation of Jeremiah in Lamentations to ours regarding 9-11, is the best attempt so far at moving toward a confessional understanding of the part we each played in 9-11. This is another lament or series of laments that needs to be written. In the psalms, most pointedly in Psalm 51, we hear the desperate cry of one who has come to the horrible realization that all sin is sin against God: "Against you, you only, have I sinned" (v. 4). It seems to me that not until we gain this perspective will we begin to move toward the Lord with lament on our lips.

SINGING PSALMS

Seerveld: Songs in the marketplace rightly cover a larger terrain and have a wider ambit than songs fit for congregational Sunday worship. Both kinds of songs can be either redemptive or bad news. To save the rising generation from an escapist mentality in church, we could learn to sing honestly and regularly more of the psalms in church. Without politicizing into songs of protest, they introduce the reality of laments about the pitiful plight of the destitute in God's world and the horror of "collateral damage" in war. It's through psalms that God's Holy Spirit led the guild of composers and pop-song writers like David, Asaph, and Korah's descendents to bring their joys *and* their sorrows into temple and synagogue worship. Do you have any thoughts about such a liturgical reformation, about re-instituting the earli-

er Christian church practice of singing whole psalms?

Card: Because laments really are a door to reality, we need them now more than ever. The church is "asleep in the Light," as Keith Green wrote years ago. I believe laments help wake us up. Reintroducing the lament psalms would be a wonderful place to start. Beyond that, like you, I believe artists must move into their own interior suffering and respond to God by all the various forms lament can take: poetry, congregational and individual song, dance (an especially powerful medium for this), and your favorite field, fine art.

Lament, after all, is nothing more than humans doing what we've seen God do in Jesus. All lament centers on two themes: the presence of God and the *chesed*, the "covenant faithfulness," of God. When God responds to our laments, be it Job's, Jeremiah's, David's, or even Jesus' (who laments at the moment when God is most using him), God rarely fixes the hurt by merely waving a magic wand. Often the cancer remains, the rubble of destruction remains, our aching loneliness remains.

What God does and what he surely did in Christ is to actually enter into our suffering alongside us. God's deepest desire is simply to be *with us* (Immanuel). Jesus enters the world as the Man of Sorrows who is acquainted with our grief. Jesus is the presence of God for us. He came to incarnate that defining characteristic of God, *chesed*. So when we lament, we do what Jesus did—we enter as fully as God allows into our own or someone else's suffering. The most exciting part is that dur-

The laments of the faithful, like the entreaties of Job, are not bootless cries in the dark.

ing those mysterious forays we encounter God and worship—all of the lament psalms, except Psalm 88, end in worship.

CRYING OUT WITH CREATION

Card: Calvin, you coined a wonderful term, “hallelujahing,” to describe creation’s response to the beauty and presence of God. You made the point that we’re called to participate through our imagination in this joyful response to God. I say a hearty “Amen.” At the same time, based on Romans 8:22, can we make a case that creation is also lamenting? And if so, are we also called to participate in this groaning through biblical lament?

Seerveld: Yes. Because of the accumulated polluting sin of humans, the trees of the fields are *not* clapping their hands or dancing today. And the apostle Paul continues on to say that if we humans have the beginnings of the Holy Spirit in us, we will *groan inwardly* because the redemptive bodily deed we yearn for is not yet forthcoming (Rom. 8:23-25). That is one New Testament biblical directive that charts lamenting in faith. We groan because we see how we are ruining the praise God’s environment is created to bring to the LORD. It hurts to pick up oil-slicked birds and dead fish washed onto beaches.

I remember James Ward’s rollicking “Creation” song, “The heavens are telling” (1970s), which is composed in the certain hope of Isaiah 55:12-13. It’s true, we need a companion song that cries along with the diseased grasshoppers and the little girls in sweatshops who no longer sing (Eccl. 12:1-7). As God says a little later to would-be followers of the Christ: “Rejoice with those rejoicing, and weep with those weeping” (Rom. 12:15). Maybe we Christians do not respond so well to these Scriptural appeals to groan and weep in our songs because we don’t hear nonhuman creatures groaning or our human neighbors weeping.

Card: I’m afraid that some in the church will dismiss this idea of lament as merely good psychology. “It’s good to get stuff off your chest,” they might respond. But isn’t there much more at work here? I want to say that lament is the road to genuine worship, but is that too narrow?

Seerveld: I would rather say that the kind of lament the Bible enjoins is the in-depth



cry of seasoned believers who trust the LORD all the way. Immature believers miss out on the psalm laments.

God also hears the wailing of helpless Iraqi, Palestinian, Israeli, and Sudanese mothers for their freshly killed children. (Woe to the murderers!) But the kind of lament the Lord wants us to utter is the cry of outraged faith in the LORD of *chesed*—which your questions rightly highlight—pleading with the covenantal LORD God of reliable mercy to come through *now*: Why are you destroying my life, God! At least treat me with a little hospitality before I die (Ps. 39)! My God, why have you left me in the lurch? The evildoers like beasts surround me for the kill (Ps. 22). O God, devastate those who systematically murder the innocent! End the lives of those driven by

evil principalities to desecrate us faithful who are in terrible need (Ps. 69)! Why do you have to punish us so drastically for our sins, O God? Jerusalem is *your* city, LORD—we are *your* people, O Redeemer—what will the disbelievers say about *you* if we are destroyed (Lam. 2-3, Ex. 32:7-14)?

Biblical laments are intercessory prayers by God’s children who experience their helplessness to set things straight in God’s



world. I too believe God is moved by our tears of faith.

Biblical laments are also sometimes the obedient response of praying *for* those who persecute the weak. Terminate their evil-doing, Lord! Do so for our sake and for the evildoers’ sake too, since what you made good should not be wasted.

Card: Berrigan says that 40 million people die every year from hunger. That’s like the crashing of 320 jumbo jets every day. Likewise, the persecuted church is seeing more martyrs today than at any time in the history of Christendom. These numbers represent enormous reservoirs of lamentable suffering. Closer to home, innumerable tragedies surround us: abused and abandoned children, hopeless addicts—each a

microcosm of suffering. What difference does/could our entering into their pain make? Why would God require this of us?

Seerveld: Near the core of the Christian life is growing the eyes of faith to experience the suffering of those around us, to concretely enter their pain in ways more real than a TV screen allows. The book of James is so clear it's painful to read. Anybody who thinks he or she is scrupulously religious but prays, "Thank you, Lord, I'm not bad like those crooks nearby," is self-deceived. To visit orphans and the bereaved *in their affliction* is what "pure religion" is all about (James 1:26-27).

If you can't visit orphans in Romania, if you can't get permission to visit lost souls in the penitentiary, if you're unable to listen to the lonely in rest homes, if you lack the credentials to minister to a distraught student, take it to the Lord in prayer—in a song! Laments for suffering outcasts, if made by one who is doing right in God's eyes, "avail much" (James 5:13-18).

The laments of the faithful, like the entreaties of Job, are not bootless cries in the dark. They are acts of love toward our neighbors before God's ear. The Bible warns that can we fulfill the law of Christ only if we bear one another's burdens through passionate laments (Gal. 6:2). We need song composers to school us in singing laments of faith also as exercises for humbling ourselves from vanity, power trips, and indifference to God's care for the poor.

Card: I believe that, given the perfection of his life, Jesus alone provides the final source for our understanding anything meaningful. He is the perfect paradigm. I flee to his life when I need understanding. So when I looked at lament I knew—or believed or hoped—that at some point I would finally find myself back at his feet. After a lot of reading and meditating on the subject, I want to say that Jesus incar-

The Path to Praise

The Scriptures are filled with lament. Of the major categories of psalms, lament is by far the most numerous. With the exception of one psalm (66), each lament turns eventually to praise, revealing an important truth that has been lost: lament is the path to praise.

The importance of lament is especially seen in the life of Jesus. At every turning point of his ministry, Jesus pours out his heart in lament—when he enters Jerusalem for the last time, when he experiences his final meal with the disciples, when he struggles with the Father in the garden of Gethsemane, and most important, when he endures the suffering of the cross. Jesus reveals that those who are truly intimate with the Father know they can pour out any hurt, disappointment, temptation, or even anger with which they struggle.

With all that and more in mind, I am working on a book of meditations built around a Bible study on the subject, as well as producing a series of recordings that I hope will help reintroduce this lost aspect of worship to the North American church.

In the end, I have several aims:

- **to help Christians become more thoroughly connected to the process of worship by integrating their emotional struggles and disappointments into the content of the lyrics**
- **to reintegrate into the church those who are hurting but have felt disenfranchised by feel-good, "lamentless" worship**
- **to equip worship leaders with new materials, both music and meditations, that will aid them in leading congregations in lament**
- **and to help introduce a new dimension to missions, whereby North American Christian missionaries around the world might connect with other believers, many of whom have not lost sight of what it means to lament.**

While, thankfully, biblically imaginative and Christ-centered worship music is still being produced, the bulk of what gets marketed as "worship music" these days is often shallow and self-centered. No doubt there are many reasons for this departure—the influence of commercialism, the impact of a self-focused culture, a slipping away from biblical study. However, I would like to suggest that a primary reason for the denigration of worship in North American Christianity is that we have lost the ability to lament.

—Michael Card

