

THE MESSENGER

MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY

How the Reformation matters today

by Glenda Mathes



As people around the world celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, many ask: Does the Reformation remain significant? Does it still matter?

Mid-America's faculty members contribute to the global conversation with their personal observations regarding the continuing importance of a reformation that began more than a half-century ago.

"The Reformation still matters because authority and truth are desperately needed today as much as ever," said Dr. Marcus Mininger, Associate Professor of New Testament Studies. "If Scripture alone is our authority in matters of faith and life, then we must go to it to know the truth about salvation, worship, church governance, daily life, and everything else."

Rev. Mark D. Vander Hart, Associate Professor of Old Testament Studies said, "The Reformation focused on the Solas that belong to the Christian Church. These all lie embedded in the Old Testament revelation. God blessed His people with an inspired, covenantal text. That was their light! He sovereignly saved His people through the death of a substitute with no blemishes, pointing to Christ. Even in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve needed to believe God in order to obey His every word. This was true for Israel, as it remains true for us. Lest we forget—and we are prone to forget very easily—the Reformation still matters very much today."

Dr. Alan D. Strange said, "The issues of the Reformation are perennial. Rome believed that we must add something to what Jesus did, and the Reformers believed that Christ alone could save sinners like us. Rome believed that we do good works to be justified, and the Reformers believed that we do good works because we are justified. That Christ is our only Savior, and that we do good works because He is our Savior, never goes out of style."

"The Reformation's significance continues in the church's freedom under Christ's Word, in the gospel of free justification, and in the priesthood of all believers," remarked Dr. Cornelis P. Venema. "Christ is the church's one and only Shepherd, who rules His church by His Spirit and Word. Justification liberates the believer from the burden of trying to obtain God's favor through obedience; the believer instead obeys out of gratitude and assurance of God's favor. The priesthood of all believers, who share in Christ's anointing, means that all of life is encompassed as a calling to serve God and others."

Rev. R. Andrew Compton, Assistant Professor of Old Testament Studies, said, "Modern students of the Bible stand in the well-worn path, forged by the Reformation cry *ad fontes!* (=to the sources!) While Christians had studied the original languages in the early and medieval church, it was the Reformation insistence that Scripture should be studied in its original Greek and Hebrew that created a burgeoning of original language studies—the study of Hebrew in particular—like never before."

"The Reformation still matters because the gospel still matters," Dr. J. Mark Beach said. "Ultimately, the Reformation isn't about a heritage to be celebrated; nor did it create an unchangeable cast from which any theological deviation is impermissible. Such portraits leave the church in Roman bondage. No, the Reformation is finally about recapturing the Good News of Jesus Christ, that salvation is accomplished for us. Christ did it all; God provides it all. And the good message is that we receive it all as a gift of God. Believe it!"

By God's grace, Mid-America continues the Reformation story

by Dr. J. Mark Beach

Mid-America is a *Reformed* seminary; we have a confessional heritage born out of the Reformation. And the Reformation, we must never forget, was centered upon reforming or reshaping the church to be in conformity to the gospel, to shape itself to all the teachings of the Bible. That labor is no easier today than it was back then. The task is ongoing. Every church and every generation must embrace the gospel anew. Faith in Christ and faith's obedience depends on the blessing of the Spirit as it always has. But the Spirit, like the wind, blows where God directs. We cannot commandeer the Holy Spirit and force Him to churn out His saving benefits. We cannot confiscate divine blessing as we please. Faith and rebirth are not blessings we can effect by our whim. A genuinely Reformed seminary, like a Reformed church, gladly acknowledges this. We need grace afresh. The labors of the church are a God-dependent enterprise. Just as the work of preaching the gospel depends on God's grace, so does the work of training those who would serve as pastors and teachers, as church-planters and missionaries.

As an heir of the Reformation, Mid-America Reformed Seminary is part of the Reformation story only because it continues on this path. It defends the Reformation doctrines of salvation by Christ alone, through faith alone, by grace alone. It champions the same gospel the Reformers did. With its Reformed forefathers, it acknowledges Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords, as the Sovereign One over all of life. Mid-America loves the Bible and with the Reformers of old embraces deep learning and lived devotion to the Lord. These are all Reformation traits we share.

Calvin once said that those who have God as their Father also have the church as their mother. Mid-America labors to equip the church, our spiritual mother, to fulfill its mandate to bring the gospel to the world.

“Grace Alone”—A Reformation Motto or A Lived Reality?

by Dr. J. Mark Beach



The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. It is a year packed with symposiums, conferences, and journal articles themed on the Reformation, besides church celebrations and other commemorations. Indeed, it is an anniversary not to be missed.

As is well known, various slogans (often referred to in Latin) came to summarize what the Reformation stood for: grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone. These slogans stood together, supporting each other, forming a united front against various errors that compromised the gospel. The desire of the Reformation was not to harm but to reform the church, not to despise opponents but to reassert the good news of salvation with full clarity. The slogans have become our Protestant

badge of honor. They sum up so much of what the Reformation championed. We are resolved to live by them.

But is it really that easy? While we embrace these slogans as our non-negotiable fundamentals, do we actually live in accord with them? No doubt, we want to—but we get tripped-up. Let’s briefly explore the challenges of living “by grace alone.”

We know that our salvation depends not on what we do but on what Christ does for us. And since we deserve God’s wrath, not mercy, how can we be forgiven and justified? By God’s “grace alone.” That means the work of Christ for us—Christ alone, and accepting Him in faith—faith alone. This is the gospel we believe. And yet . . .

And yet . . . we still want to justify ourselves. Somehow, we still want to set ourselves apart from others. This can happen in ways we never suspect. It can come about in trying to live according to God’s law—as when we obey some aspect of His moral truth only to extend to ourselves a message of self-congratulations. With this little shred of obedience in hand, with this tiny scrap, we claim our gold trophy of victory. This sets us apart.

But what are these little shreds of obedience that we, unsuspectingly, think set us apart? Surprisingly, they are often things that are good in themselves but get twisted into occasions for conceit. Promptly averting our eyes from salacious advertisements? Or promptly repenting when we don’t? Yes, maybe we count that as a mark of honor, but more likely other things. Look! That man is a frenzy of

“Conceit turns ‘grace alone’ into an unlived motto. Indeed, there are a thousand moral achievements, a thousand little scraps, a thousand servitudes to which we can subject ourselves, a thousand gold trophies of self-congratulation that we can lift to our lips in order to sip on our own righteousness.”

effort to build a business—and he thinks that sets him apart, makes him better. That woman has brains and the degrees to prove it. This is her step above. Another woman pursues adventure; her life is bloated with experiences, explorations, and acquaintances—unlike the humdrum crowd, no mundane, wasted life here! Oh, and here comes a couple who know how to live small, to live green—if only the masses would get with it! That one practices simplicity and frugality, with courage, with courage! Another fellow brims with grins as a sign to all that Jesus lives. And yonder there is one who is bighearted, busy at the soup kitchen, volunteering at the local animal shelter, teaching English to immigrants. Then, look at the man keeping all the rules—traffic rules, library rules, game rules, rules of politeness, rules for table-manners. He is a step above the herd. Fitness marks this one’s triumph, and he has sworn off soda, salt, meat, alcohol, and television—healthy choices. Set apart. God knows it. And across the street is the neighbor who witnesses to strangers. What can top that? God sees! God cares! “I count,” we say to ourselves, holding our little scrap in hand. Is it a scrap of conceit?

What next? Conceit turns “grace alone” into an unlived motto. Indeed, there are a thousand moral achievements, a thousand little scraps, a thousand servitudes to which we can subject ourselves, a thousand gold trophies of self-congratulation that we can lift to our lips in order to sip on our own righteousness. To be sure, grace is still in play, but now grace plus our little scrap. But absent grace *alone* we’re ever sipping and ever thirsting again! Only Christ quenches our parched souls. To live by grace alone, not as a slogan but as a reality, is to abandon all desire for being set apart, to be a cut above, somehow making a contribution. Instead of our tiny scrap, we celebrate Christ for us; Christ only, Christ alone—all by grace alone. Now, that’s worth celebrating.

Retreat

by Dan Beezhold

Mid-America’s academic year was kicked into gear on Tuesday, August 29, when returning students and new students joined together with the faculty for a fun day away at the Cedar Lake Conference Grounds. This year’s seminary retreat was opened in devotions by Dr. Marcus Mininger who provided us challenging and encouraging words from Psalm 1 and Luke 10. He challenged us to rest in the wisdom of having a child-like faith which is dependent upon the Father for all things, and he encouraged us to rest in the sufficiency of what Jesus has revealed for us as the proper path for blessing in our new year.

After devotions, as per Mid-America tradition, an opportunity was given for the Mid-America family to become acquainted with the new students and their families as well to introduce ourselves. After a few moments of coffee and fellowship we reconvened to hear a message from this year’s keynote speaker, Rev. Todd Joling. This first session focused around the theme: “A Community that Serves the Word must Live by the Word.” In this message, Rev. Joling spoke to all of us from 2 Kings 4, the account of Elisha and the widow, and he challenged us that seminary is not a substitute for faith, and that service is not a substitute for personal trust; and just as the widow’s cup of oil overflowed, Rev. Joling encouraged us that God will provide for us each step of the way by his own power and from his own loving hand.

The second session began, as the men stayed to hear another message from Rev. Joling, “God’s Gospel Deserves a Credible Ministry,” and the wives met with Mrs. Louise Wright who led a separate message entitled, “A Talk about being a Minister’s Wife.” Once both sessions were completed everyone made their way upstairs for a delicious lunch provided by our gracious hosts. The retreat concluded as many made their way outside to enjoy the beautiful weather with outdoor activities and an intense game of soccer. A new year is underway at Mid America, and we have been blessed by God to begin again after having good fellowship, hearing encouraging messages, and enjoying another successful seminary retreat!



New students from near and far by Glenda Mathes

New students this year are from the Midwestern US as well as three other countries. They chose Mid-America for its robust curriculum, experienced professors, and emphasis on preaching. Eight are pursuing their Master of Divinity degrees with the hope of eventual ordination.

Elijah De Jong, from Grace OPC in Sheboygan, WI, felt God's prodding to share the Word with lost sinners. He hopes to serve the church in whatever way God directs, drawing "the attention of God's people to His grace and salvation in a God-glorifying manner. 'He must increase, but I must decrease' (John 3:30)."

Daniel Flinn, from Palmerston North RCNZ in New Zealand, was an attorney until he realized his work could not fix hearts. He plans to pursue ministry in New Zealand, but he is open to another call. He and Candace have nine children: Esther (17), Elijah (15), Noah (13), Jael (13), Sunshine (10), Hannah (9), Jude (4), Savannah (2), and Hope (6 mos).

Cristian Garcia, from Luz de Vida in Quito, Ecuador, hopes to return to Ecuador and help plant Reformed churches. He and Carolina have a daughter, Mikaela (2). He loves God and His Word. "Today we need sound doctrine, and a good preparation is the most important thing to do if one wants to serve the Lord accurately."

Carl Gobelman, from Hope Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Grayslake, IL, wants to help God's people know what they believe and why they believe it. He sees "vocational ministry" as "the best route to fulfill that goal." He may pursue doctoral studies to teach at the graduate or seminary level. Carl and Linda have three adult children: Matthew, Lauren, and Jeremy.

Daniel Hamstra, from Living Water Reformed Church (URCNA) in Brantford, ON, was an electrician until God convicted him to consider ministry. Out of gratitude for Christ's love and a desire to see people develop relationships with God, he hopes to become a faithful preacher and loving pastor. He and Elizabeth have four children: Hannah (7), Braden (5), Judah (3), and Emma (2).

Mark Padgett, from Westminster OPC in Indian Head Park, IL, and Heather have two children: William (3) and Vivian (1). Mark's love for God's Word and His people led to a growing interest in gospel ministry, confirmed by fellow Christians. He anticipates the opportunity at Mid-America "to immerse myself in learning how to preach and teach with better accuracy, clarity, and cohesiveness."

Scottie Wright, from Cornerstone URC in London, ON, and Vanessa have four boys: Levi (7), Troy (6), Izak (3), and Jake (1). An



Inside-Outside conference led the Wrights to Mid-America on their journey toward pastoral ministry or mission work. If God continues to bless and equip them, they "would love to serve God in a church telling people the gospel of Jesus Christ."

In addition to these new students in the M.Div. program, retiree Erika Brooks is pursuing her MTS (Master of Theological Studies) on a part-time basis. Born to Lithuanian Reformed displaced persons, she came to the US with her family in 1951. Her father and grandfather were pastors in the Lithuanian Reformed Church, and she affiliates with Lithuanian Reformed and Lutheran churches. Attending a solidly Reformed seminary has been her long-time and strong desire. She hopes to continue Christian service in the Lithuanian Protestant churches as well as the Lithuanian community.

The 13th Annual Golf Outing – One for the Books! by Mike Deckinga



Saturday, September 9, 2017 – early – 72 would-be golfers shut off their alarms, brewed a pot of coffee, adorned the latest trends in golf apparel, jumped in their cars, and made their way down to beautiful Frankfort, IL, to participate in the 13th Annual Mid-America Reformed Seminary Golf Outing. As the dew began to burn off the fairways of SPG Green Garden Country Club, the competition began to heat up as the golfers dialed in

their games.

Throughout the round, various competitions were held. The usual – longest drive, closest to the pin, straightest drive, longest putt – kept the game competitive and fun, but we added a new one this year. On hole 18, golfers were greeted by our "Old Timey, Old-Testament Professor," the Rev. Andrew Compton. Dressed in MARS green knickers, argyle socks, pointy cap, and even a golf polo bearing the word "shalom" written in Hebrew, Andrew challenged the players in an out-drive challenge. This was certainly a highlight of our day.

One team stood out among the rest scoring a whopping 13 under par. First time attendees David Rambo, Mike Eifel, Josh Branter, and Rob Stanek enjoyed their unchallenged rise to first place on the podium. Second place was occupied by Tim Beezhold, Paul Beezhold, Lou Karr, and Tom Zandstra with

an impressive 10 under par. Tie breaking protocol had to be implemented after more than one team achieved this score.

There has been only one other time that the number of golfers hit 72. Let me just say, on behalf of the entire Seminary community, "Thank you for coming out and supporting our work in this way!" The annual golf outing represents a very key piece in the general fund puzzle, and we rely significantly on a good turnout. We also rely on sponsorships for this event, and I am pleased to mention that our sponsorship partners helped us realize a record also. Thank you so much for giving so generously out of the Lord's provisions to you, both individually and through your businesses!

Mark your calendars – Saturday, September 8, 2018 – same time, same place, Lord willing, we will do this again, at the 14th Annual Mid-America Reformed Seminary Golf Outing. Until then, "hit 'em straight!"



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A Note from the Development Office by Mike Deckinga



Another academic year has begun, and it is wonderfully refreshing to see the campus of Mid-America come to life again. As I spend time getting to know these men, I am struck by a number of things each time.

One thing is the faith commitment these men have to follow God's calling to pursue ministerial training. Many of these students move their entire family a great distance to attend, and they leave behind their

church families, their homes, and their steady employment – they are making quite a sacrifice.

Another thing that I'm struck by is the overwhelming generosity we see from our many supporting churches and individuals that partners with us in training men for gospel ministry. The only way we can provide our model of ministerial training is through what the Lord is pleased to provide through your gifts and prayers.

Lord willing, you will be receiving my Thanksgiving appeal soon. Our friends in Canada likely already have. There are going to

be plenty of details about our financial situation there, so I won't spend much time on it here. I encourage you to keep an eye out for it. Earlier I mentioned that the students make a great sacrifice to attend. I know your generous gifts represent sacrifice on your part, and for that, the seminary is grateful. I ask that you prayerfully consider how you may help us raise the 30% of our general fund we need by the end of the year to sustain us through the lean spring and summer months. Please know your prayers and gifts are most humbling and encourage us all in our work, and the students in theirs.