

# THE MESSENGER

MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY

## Dr. Richard Muller Delivers the Fall Lectures by Dr. J. Mark Beach



Every fall the faculty sponsors the Fall Lecture Series. This year the seminary community welcomed to campus Dr. Richard Muller, who is the P. J. Zondervan Professor of Historical Theology, emeritus, and Senior Fellow of the Junius Institute for Digital Reformation Research at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. On November 14 and 15, Dr. Muller gave two lectures on the Reformed approach to, and assessment of, natural theology, and a third lecture on the state of current Reformation and Post-Reformation scholarship.

Since this year marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, and its legacy, the faculty sought a world-renowned scholar in Reformation and Post-Reformation studies. Dr. Muller's career has focused on research and writing relative to the development of Protestant thought during and after the Reformation, with emphasis on both the theological heritage that pre-dated and helped shape the work of the Reformers, a more contextual understanding of Calvin and his Reformed contemporaries, and a reassessment of the nature and character of Protestant orthodoxy and Reformed scholasticism in the seventeenth century.

The first of Dr. Muller's lectures was entitled "Reformed Natural Theology in the Era of Orthodoxy—an Introductory Prospectus." Here he presented something of the lay-of-the-land in how the heirs of the Reformers addressed the question of Reformed natural theology, which has to do with knowledge of God through the light of nature. Muller showed how early Reformed conceptions of natural theology are quite different from modern conceptions. Indeed, natural theology underwent significant modification with the rise of rationalism, which placed reason above revelation. By contrast, for the Reformers and their theological heirs, reason was merely a servant and instrument of faith. In short, natural theology is wholly insufficient to bring fallen humans to salvation, yet sufficient enough to leave them without excuse before God.

Dr. Muller's second lecture examined "Sir Matthew Hale on the Nature of Knowledge and the Relation of Natural and Supernatural Theology." Dr. Muller first introduced his audience to Hale and his significance. Though he is mostly unknown today, Dr. Muller showed how this famed Puritan jurist, philosopher, and theologian made use of the idea of a natural theology within carefully set boundaries. Exploring his work "The Best Part and truest Use of all Philosophy," Muller examined Hale's views on knowledge, both natural and supernatural, which next led to an analysis of Hale's take on theology, natural and scriptural.

The third lecture switched gears. The faculty had asked Dr. Muller to offer some reflections on his academic career and the state of Reformation and Post-Reformation scholarship since he commenced his Ph.D. studies in the 1970s. Thus, his third lecture treated "The Study of Reformation and Orthodoxy: a Retrospect and Prospect." Here Muller presented a very informative analysis of how his own study of the Reformation theology and Protestant theology after the Reformation required a revision of the then-current scholarly consensus, and how that consensus has changed over the last forty years, mostly due to a careful examination of original sources. Thus, he set forth the "state of the question" back then, and the "state of the question" now. He observed how scholarship has broadened the inquiry into our Reformed heritage, and how the future is bright for Reformation and Post-Reformation studies with the digitization of a mass of older (now no longer hard-to-find) sources.

## Confident of Better Things

by Mike Deckinga

We here at the seminary are very concerned with providing you with plenty of information through a variety of channels to keep you informed of, and engaged in, the work happening here. We put a great amount of work into the production of *The Messenger*, written appeals, and Facebook video content. Another way to be in touch with you is to meet with you and fellowship together over a meal. I have to say, that's my favorite!

Members of the seminary were able to do that three times in 2017. Our first stop was in Sioux Center, IA, on the campus of Dordt College on April 8. Next up was The Bluff Banquet and Conference Center in Grand Rapids, MI, on November 2. The dinner tour concluded amongst local friends at Briar Ridge Country Club in Schererville, IN, on November 7.

Though the locations were different, the basic program structure remained consistent at the three gatherings. Guests were treated to a delicious dinner, and also to student and alumni testimonials. Our keynote presentation focused on Mid-America's instruction, and her relationship to the church from a past-present-future perspective. Mid-America recently turned 35, and this was a way to celebrate the Lord's faithfulness during this time, as well as inform our friends about how the Lord's work is being done today at the seminary. The presentation, "Confident of Better Things," was conducted by myself, along with Rev. Jeff De Boer, Rev. Andrew Compton, and Rev. Mark Vander Hart.

The current financial situation was reported on as well, and those in attendance proved generous once again – a most humbling and encouraging thing for all of us who labor on behalf of the seminary. Thank you!



## A Christmas Lesson from Some Pagans: Worship Him!

by Dr. J. Mark Beach



*“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him’ ” (Matt. 2:1-2 ESV).*

The story of the Magi from the east has always mystified me. It starts as the story of an alluring star. These wise ones follow the star, which guides them to the place where Jesus lay, in order to worship Him—the King of the Jews. These are pagans. These are persons from another land, another religion, another set of beliefs and longings. They are star-gazers; they have superstitious habits of heart. But God uses these very conceptions to move them to set out on an expedition with the aim to worship Jesus. They follow a star that is no ordinary star! This is also from God.

Noteworthy, too, is that the miraculous star was insufficient. The Magi also needed God’s special “word” revelation. Herod, in getting wind of this infant king, was troubled and sought from scripture-scholars where the Messiah was to be born. Micah 5:2 provided the answer. Herod in turn directed the Magi to Bethlehem. Isn’t it curious that pagan wise men heed this word of God in Scripture, as does the pagan King Herod, while none of the chief priests or scribes of the people, who know Micah 5:2, pursue the matter further? Heathens follow the alluring word of God in nature and heed the word of God in Scripture, while covenant people sit passively unconcerned. Are Christians today afflicted with a similar passivity and unconcern? Don’t forget: the word of God in nature and the word of God in Scripture still call us to seek Him—even as the signs of the times and the signs of nature, with the word of God in Scripture, call us away from passivity and unconcern to stand ready and expectant for Christ’s second coming. Indeed, why shouldn’t we long for this King to rule our lives and our world? Why shouldn’t we daily inquire after Him, for He is the Lord whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light? He is the King who will judge with equity.

The word of God in nature allured these pagans to seek out Jesus the King; and the word of God in Scripture directed them to find Him in Bethlehem. But it is the Word of God in the flesh, Christ Himself, who brings them to fall down before Him and worship Him: “... they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (vs. 11). Their actions stand as an abiding

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testimony to all people, to believers and unbelievers alike. To be sure, they worship Him in their ignorance and superstition. Yet they worship Him who alone is to be worshipped! They worship God’s Anointed One—the King who is Savior, the Savior who is King. They worship the King of the Jews—who, it turns out, is also the King of kings and the Lord of lords, who is our King. They worship Jesus, who has come to bring salvation to every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

Many of us have neighbors who wouldn’t cross the street to worship Jesus. They either dismiss Him; or they dismiss the church; or they dismiss organized religion; or they dismiss God altogether; or perhaps they figure that God is such a softy that He doesn’t much mind if they pay Him no mind. The pagan Magi-astrologers disagree. They make an extended road trip to worship Jesus. They present Jesus with costly gifts. May we do any less? That is, shouldn’t we daily offer ourselves to Him? In fact, in worshipping Him, the rest of our lives are directed along the trajectory of praise and service. One day everyone will worship Him—every knee shall bow and every tongue confess Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10-11). Take a lesson from some pagans: worship Him!

## Accelerated Course

by Glenda Mathes

During September, alumnus Tim Scheuers (2013) taught an intense prolegomena course, Theological Foundations, to nine students. The class met for three hours on Tuesday afternoons and two hours on Thursday mornings with four additional lecture hours the first week.



This introduction to Systematic Theology examined formal questions in theological study and several topics regarding the doctrine of revelation. The format included lectures and reading assignments with a final exam scheduled for December.

Scheuers is a PhD candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary and a member of First URC in Chino, CA. He hopes to become a full-time professor at a Reformed college or seminary or pastor a congregation. He considered it a privilege and pleasure to hone his teaching skills while enjoying fellowship at his alma mater. He said, “I was repeatedly impressed by the students’ diligent work, including their critical and constructive thought and pastoral concern for Christ’s church.”



**Rev. Arthur Besteman**, former member of Mid-America’s Board of Trustees, died October 1, 2017. Rev. Besteman was a significant influence in

the life of Mid-America Reformed Seminary. He was elected to six terms on the Board of Trustees serving a total of 18 years from 1984-1990, 1993-1999 and again from 2003-2009. Rev. Besteman served as chairman of the Education Committee and was also elected by his fellow board members to a number of terms as president of the Board. He was preceded in death by Audrey, his beloved wife of 50 years. The Seminary community extends its sympathy to the Besteman family.

## Reformation Jubilee Tour by Glenda Mathes

Imagine celebrating the Reformation by visiting key sites during the exact dates of its 500th anniversary. This was the incredible experience of fifty people, led by Dr. Cornel Venema and his wife, Nancy, as they traveled through three countries on the Reformation Jubilee Tour from October 28-November 9, 2017.

After arriving in Berlin, tour members worshipped at an historic Lutheran church. Dr. Venema preached from Romans 3:19-4:5 on the need for justification and why Christ alone is both just and the justifier. Rev. Mark Minegar (from Allegan, MI) led in prayer, and Nancy Venema accompanied congregational singing from a songbook prepared for the tour.

On October 30, a shuttle brought participants to Wittenberg. They saw Phillip Melancthon's house and a monastery, where Luther stayed and which later became the home for his family and many of his students. Tour member also viewed Castle Church with its famous door, where Luther nailed his 95 theses.

October 31 began with worship at the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. Tour members then traveled to Erfurt, where Luther studied at university, became a monk, and was ordained a priest. A day trip to Eisenach featured Wartburg Castle, where Luther hid for ten months.

At Worms, the travelers walked on the Cathedral

grounds, where the Diet of Worms condemned Luther. The group posed for a photo in front of a monument to Martin Luther.

The tour next traveled to Strasbourg, France, home of John Calvin and Martin Bucer and site of the Strasbourg Cathedral.

On the way from France to Switzerland, the tour crossed a corner of Germany, stopping at Constance. The travelers visited the building where the Council of Constance was held from 1414-1418. The Council primarily dealt with the schism created when three different men claimed to be Pope of the Roman Church. But it also condemned the Czech priest Jan Hus as a heretic and sentenced him to burn at the stake.

Before his death, Hus reportedly said, "You are about to burn a goose [Husa in Czech means "goose"], but in 100 years a swan will arise that you will not be able to kill." In God's providence, Luther posted his famous theses 102 years after the death of Hus.

Tour members worshipped at the Lutheran church that now stands at the execution site. Rev. Ed Marcusse of Immanuel's Reformed Church (URC) in Salem, OR, preached from 2 Timothy 3:15 on *Sola Scriptura*. He urged listeners to embrace the power and truth of God's inspired and infallible Word.



The tour continued in Zurich, Switzerland, with stops at the homes of Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger. Going on to Lucerne, the travelers viewed a famous lion sculpture and the highly-photographed Chapel Bridge with its octagonal Water Tower.

The Reformation Jubilee Tour concluded with breathtaking vistas at some of the highest points of God's creation in the Alps.

Keith Le Mahieu, Vice-President of Operations, and his wife, Lauren, thoroughly enjoyed the tour. He said, "It was wonderful to travel these historic sites with like-minded believers. I was struck by what was risked by the reformers for the sake of the gospel and reminded that we must be ever vigilant in preserving gospel truths."

## It's December? by Mike Deckinga



It's December?

Someone pinch me.

Is it December already? Where did 2017 go?

Stop pinching me, please.

I cannot believe we are getting ready to celebrate the arrival of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It doesn't seem as though enough time has gone by to ring in another New Year. Be that as it may, it is no doubt December here at the Seminary. It's cold outside – really cold. We've just enjoyed a Christmas party as a seminary community. The students are cramming in some last-minute work before the semester ends. Ugly sweaters are everywhere!

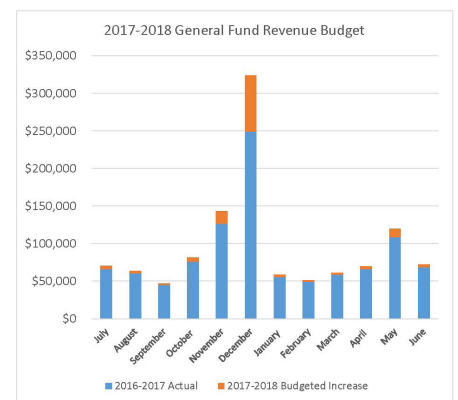
Another way to tell the calendar year is ending is that there are many generous gifts coming to us from all of you. It looks like my Thanksgiving appeals have been read and

are actively being responded to in a remarkable way. Those of you who received my US Thanksgiving appeal should recognize this graph. I'm including it here because not all of our readers of *The Messenger* receive our mail. I want to reiterate the importance of financial giving in the month of December. This graph shows us a few things. First, it represents very typical giving trends over the course of our fiscal year. It has always been the case, that in December we see a significant spike in gifts. Second, it shows us last year's General Fund donations. This number is represented in blue. Lastly, it shows us the increase we need to realize for General Fund donations in order to be on track to meet our budget this fiscal year. This is represented in orange. We depend on strong year-end contributions to our General Fund to help us be financially viable throughout the historically lean spring and summer months. We need to realize about 30% of our annual General Fund contributions in the month of Decem-

ber alone. This year, that number equates to nearly \$325,000.

I am going to leave you with a humble request. Could you please consider a generous, sacrificial gift to our General Fund by the end of the year? Will you also partner with us prayerfully, as well as financially?

From all of us at the Seminary, "thank you," for your support this year, and for your committed partnership with us in this work.





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## ◆ CAMPUS UPDATES

### Fall Evening Class



*The fall evening class was a tag-team event this year, with Drs. Strange, Beach, and Venema presenting the lectures. Not surprisingly, this class was themed on celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.*

*Dr. Alan Strange*

Dr. Strange first spoke on “Luther and Other Reformers: What’s all the fuss in Europe about?” Commencing with what Luther did on October 31, 1517, Dr. Strange examined what came before and followed this event,

as Luther went on to preach justification by faith alone and as Calvin clarified the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing us to Christ. The Reformation was nothing less than a recovery of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The second talk was on “The Reformation in America: Before and After the Civil War.” The Reformation that began in Europe also came to America. Dr. Strange examined the rise and development of the Presbyterian Church up until the Civil War. The Civil War was the defining moment in the history of the nation; it also changed the Presbyterian Church. In particular, Dr. Strange focused on Charles Hodge’s response to this in Hodge’s doctrine of the spirituality of the church. Finally, Dr. Stange assessed the current state of the Reformation in America and beyond.

*Dr. J. Mark Beach*

Dr. Beach spoke on “Grace Alone as a Lived Reality.” His lecture was less on the work of our Reformed forebears and more on how we should respond to their gospel legacy. Specifically, Dr.

Beach used Galatians 3 to inquire into the nature of the gospel of grace. As part of this he showed how sinners seek to justify themselves. The end result is that we can affirm “grace alone” with our lips but deny it with our lives. He urged us to cling to Christ afresh, and to His grace alone!

*Dr. Cornelis P. Venema*

The last evening class was entitled “Soli Deo Gloria: The Reformation of Everyday Life in Service to Christ,” wherein Dr. Venema addressed the Reformation’s recovery of the “priesthood” of all believers. Prior to the Reformation, a sharp division had been made between the “religious” and the “secular” orders. The religious life was epitomized in the monastic ideal of the contemplative life. The Reformers however rediscovered the office of believers who are called to serve God in everyday life. The Christian’s spiritual worship was now viewed as a free and thankful response to God’s grace in Christ.