

THE MESSENGER

MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY

Good Cookies and Christ-Centered Preaching by Dr. J. Mark Beach



Dr. Dennis Johnson led this year's Fall Lectures titled "Preaching Like Peter and Paul—Apostolic-Christocentric Preaching"

Sermons should be like good cookies. While some cookies are delicious, others can be bland—a fraud, a deception. So with sermons! Some are full of grace and the story of redemption, for they are full of Christ. Others are bland in the grace department—they are more like moral scoldings or moral pep-talks. Like bad cookies, they're a fraud, a deception. They fail to center hearers on Christ. A good sermon needs Christ at the center—or, at least, Christ integral to the message.

What counts as Christ-centered preaching? We mention four key traits.

(1) Christ-centered preaching is preaching that (somewhere along the way) centers on Christ and the gospel. Just saying his name or giving a nod in his direction doesn't qualify. For example, if I'm preaching from Amos 5 on the great "Day of the Lord," and fail to focus, in some significant way, on how Christ underwent the most definitive expression of that "Day" on the cross—and that for us—I've failed to place the sermon in the unfolding of the history of redemption. I've also failed to reveal the gospel that calls us to faith and repentance as the remedy from the last great day of the Lord, namely, Judgment Day. Christ-centered preaching must place proper attention on Christ in the sermon.

(2) Christ-centered preaching avoids the Deadly Be's. Bryan Chapell mentions this error: "Be Like," "Be Good," and "Be Disciplined." These messages tell us to be like Gideon or David or Peter (they are the exemplars of godliness); or hunker down and do better this week; or make better use of the means of grace (pray more, read the Bible more, etc.). The focus of this sort of preaching isn't centered on Christ or what He has done for us but on "try harder, do better"—a deadly, Christless concoction.

(3) Christ-centered preaching understands the big drama of redemptive history between "the Seed" of the woman (Christ) and the seed of the serpent. Consequently, this preaching doesn't look for fanciful ways to fit Jesus into biblical stories, or to leap-frog over the story in order to get to Jesus. Christ-centered preaching travels through the unfolding of salvation history and the perpetual contest between the woman and the serpent. By contrast, contrived efforts to find Christ-figures and Christ-types in biblical stories typically and artificially take a vertical rocket-launch to Christ and ignore salvation history. In doing so, these sermons "leave behind" the story and instead speak in generalities about Christ's saving work for us. Jesus is tacked onto the sermon by ignoring salvation history.

(4) Christ-centered preaching rejects turning historical narrative texts into jumping off platforms for doctrinal embellishments. It is mistaken to reduce biblical stories as "examples" of doctrinal truths. Such a procedure exchanges the story that leads us to Christ for a generalized sermon about doctrines as found in systematic theology textbooks. This is like slaughtering an elephant to harvest its tusks, while the carcass rots. When biblical texts are used in order to harvest morsels and nuggets of doctrinal truth from them, the main point of the text, with its Christological implications, languishes unheard.

Bottom line: like bland cookies, sermons short on Christ are a fraud, a deception. Christ-centered preaching is full of grace and truth because it's full of Him.

Preaching Christ Like the Apostles

by Dr. J. Mark Beach

On November 15-16 the seminary community welcomed to campus Dr. Dennis E. Johnson from Westminster Seminary in California (Escondido, CA), who gave three lectures under the theme: "Preaching Like Peter and Paul—Apostolic-Christocentric Preaching."

Dr. Johnson's first lecture *described* and *defined* what he means by Apostolic-Christocentric homiletics—that is, how the apostles preached Christ from OT materials. While Dr. Johnson noted that it is foolish to think that every text in Scripture speaks of Christ in the same way or degree, yet all of Scripture forms part of the terrain that brings us to Jesus Christ, with His comprehensive work of reconciliation. As such, Christocentric preaching calls hearers to believe in Jesus Christ.

The second lecture offered a *defense* of Apostolic-Christocentric preaching, wherein Dr. Johnson offered a six-fold answer to the question why we should follow the Apostles in how they preached Christ in the OT. Most significant here is that we see how the Apostles read earlier events in redemptive history in light of their goal and outcome in Christ, so that past events can function paradigmatically for a future and intensified fulfillment. Christ is the final resolution of the OT's redemptive program and calls us to faith in Him.

Dr. Johnson, then took up in his final lecture the *deployment* of this homiletic. Here he spoke of three different degrees of clarity the OT exhibits in pointing to Jesus Christ. There are *road signs* texts, *landmark* passages, and *lay-of-the-land* materials. Most important are road sign texts, for they correspond directly to Christ, but with a heightening or intensification.

Dr. Johnson's lectures were well-received by all who attended, and it was a joy to have him on campus. These lectures are available on Mid-America's website. See page 3.

President's Message: "A 'Kinsman-Redeemer' in Bethlehem!"

by Dr. Cornelis P. Venema



"So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.'" (Ruth 4:13-15)

The story that unfolds in the book of Ruth is a story of redemption. For all God's people who, like Ruth, the Moabite daughter-in-law of Naomi, take shelter under the wings of the Almighty (Ruth 2:12), the story of redemption is one that moves from emptiness to fullness, from famine to feasting, from sorrow and bitterness to joy and gladness.

The table is set in the first chapter of Ruth. During the period of the Judges, a family from Bethlehem in Judea—Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and two sons, Mahlon and Kilion—leaves to sojourn in the country of Moab. The irony of this lies close to the surface. Bethlehem means the "house of bread," but there is a famine in the land, no doubt due to the covenant Lord's judgment upon his wayward people. The irony is further compounded by the fact that Elimelech, whose name means "my God is King," chooses to take his family to Moab, a country whose people were arch-enemies of Israel and whose history was marked by unrelenting hostility toward God's people (cf. Gen. 19:34-38; Num. 22-24; Judges 3:12-30). During their sojourn in Moab, Elimelech dies, Mahlon and Kilion marry two Moabite women, and then, after a period of ten years, both sons die. When Naomi hears that the Lord had visited His people and given them food, she sets out to return to the land of Judah with her two Moabite daughters-in-law. Upon their way, Naomi endeavors to persuade her daughters-in-law to return to their own people and gods. While Orpah chooses to go back to her people, Ruth insists upon returning with Naomi, declaring to her that "your people will be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

The questions raised in the first chapter form the backdrop to the remainder of the book of Ruth. Will Ruth find rest and salvation among God's people, Israel? Will she experience the "lovingkindness" of the God of Israel as she lives among His people? Or will Naomi's lament that there is no future for them among God's people prove true? Does Naomi speak rightly, when she says that she has returned "empty" from the land of Moab, without any prospect of finding a name and place, an inheritance, among God's people?

The remainder of the story in the book of Ruth provides a remarkable set of answers to these questions. Ruth, the Moabite, finds a kind and hospitable reception among the people of Israel, especially in the fields of Boaz, who is a close relative of Elimelech. When Boaz willingly offers to marry Ruth and the Lord grants to them a son, Obed, Naomi discovers that there remains a future for her and the family of Elimelech among God's people. But more than that, Ruth and Naomi experience something of the redemption and joy that comes to those who trust in the Lord and wait upon His favor. In Bethlehem, the house of bread, they find a close relative, a kinsman, who will not rest until he redeems them out of their distress, restoring their inheritance among the people of God (Ruth 3:18; cf. Deut. 25:5-10).

Does this story remind you of another Redeemer, who was born in the line of Boaz and Obed and their descendants after them? It should. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, we discover that Ruth is among the mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 5-6). The story of Ruth finds its fulfillment in the birth of a greater Kinsman-Redeemer, the Son of God, whose name is renowned among God's people. Our Kinsman-Redeemer, who the author of Hebrews tells us was "not ashamed to call us His brothers" (2:11), would not rest until He paid the price of our redemption, granting to us a name, a place, an inheritance, among His people. For us, just as for Naomi and Ruth at the birth of Obed (whose name means "servant"), the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ is a story of redemption. Like the story of Ruth, it ends, not in emptiness and sadness, but with fullness and joy at the birth of *the* Redeemer in Bethlehem, the "house of bread"!

Professor's Dissertation Offers New Insight

by Glenda Mathes

Marcus Mininger, Associate Professor in New Testament Studies, became a Doctor in Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies on September 6, when he successfully defended his Ph.D. dissertation: "What is Revealed, Where, and How: Uncovering the Theme of Revelation and Discovering a New Approach to Reading Romans 1:16-3:26."

The dissertation shows how the text's "crucial theme" of revelation "has been overlooked and wrongly defined in the past," and how "noticing and rightly defining" the theme helps produce "a more satisfactory account" of Paul's argument than past interpretative approaches.

While wrestling with Romans 1-3 earlier in his doctoral work, Dr. Mininger noticed how often Paul emphasizes the way "different otherwise invisible things are made visible in the world and so revealed." Over time, he realized that this topic is at the heart of Romans 1-3 and how recognizing this fact "solves a host of exegetical quandaries."

His dissertation "offers a substantively new approach to a perennially challenging section of Scripture," showing that Paul's argument is "much broader and richer than scholars have previously thought," but also demonstrating "how traditional conclusions about the doctrine of the argument are essentially correct."

While recent scholarship has "assaulted and dismissed" conservative views of Romans 1:16-3:26, the dissertation "takes a fresh look" at the argument in that text, "developing a new kind of redemptive-historical approach," which "explains difficult sections more clearly and defends traditional conclusions about sin and salvation."

Dr. Mininger believes careful study of God's Word in dialogue with other scholarly efforts is "the life-blood" of his work in the classroom and important for the future work of the students.

New Jersey Inside Outside Conference by Rev. Jeff DeBoer

Inside/Outside conferences are designed to assist churches as they adapt current and biblical practices for the benefit of those outside the church. The most recent conference was held on October 29 in Pompton Plains, New Jersey. Dr. Beach spoke about preaching in an idiom outsiders can understand. Dr. Venema provided biblical instruction about hospitality. And Rev. De Boer talked about using current discipleship practices for the benefit of new disciples.

A fundraising dinner was held that evening at which Rev. Paul Murphy of Messiah's Fellowship in New York was the main speaker. The following Sunday representatives of the seminary provided pulpit supply in various areas churches.

We are deeply thankful for the participation of those who attended the conference, and we give a particular thanks to the Pompton Plains church.

The next Inside/Outside Conference is planned for March 11, 2017, in western Michigan. If you are in the area, we would love to see you there.



Mid-America Offers Free Learning Resources by Keith LeMahieu

Did you know the Mid-America Reformed Seminary website at www.midamerica.edu is a rich resource of learning materials you can use for personal enrichment or for small groups such as a Sunday School class or a Bible study? The web page has a green bar at the top with five options. Move your mouse pointer to the option entitled "Resources," and a menu will appear. I will highlight just three of the more significant resources.

LIBRARY: The library tab provides access to the Mid-America online catalog. You can browse Mid-America's collection and read a synopsis of books in our collection. There are also links providing access to thousands of online books, journal articles, biblical studies, history resources, language resources, and music.

MID-AMERICA JOURNAL of THEOLOGY: Mid-America produces an annual scholarly theological journal. This option provides access to many of these articles.

MID-AMERICA CAPTURE PORTAL: Mid-America uses technology that allows us to capture and livestream classes that take place at the seminary. Many of these classes are available on the capture portal including our semi-annual evening classes, our annual fall lecture series and our annual spring conference. For example, there are a series of lectures on how to read the Psalms by Old Testament Professor Mark Vander Hart. There are lectures by Dr. Cornel Venema entitled, "What Happens After I Die?" Do you want to learn how to interpret the book of Revelation? Check out the lectures by Dr. Gregory Beale. Dr. Derek Thomas has a series of lectures addressing the question, "If God is good, why is there pain?"

We encourage you to take advantage of these free learning resources. Let us know what you think.

Round, Round, Get Around by Mike Deckinga

The last six months have been a whirlwind for me! On behalf of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, I have travelled some 9,100 miles (14,650 kilometers for our friends north of the border). I have been in three different time zones. I have listened to radio stations whose call numbers begin with "K" and "W". I have stayed in a dozen different hotel rooms. I have attended several church ecclesiastical meetings. I have consumed more cups of off-brand hotel coffee than I would care to admit. I have had the "fast feeling" of driving 110 Km/hr be quickly dashed by realizing I was really only driving 65 mph. My Weather Channel app on my phone has too many stored locations. You get the idea. I've been around. Lord willing, by the time you are reading this article, I will have clocked an additional 5,700 miles.

Though intense, I have enjoyed my travels immensely! I have been able to meet with many of you on the road – and sadly – there are so many of you I have not been able to connect with. There are so many of you, and only one of me. If we haven't yet connected, Lord willing, we will.

I've met with bee keepers and beauticians, farmers and framers, chiropractors and consultants, teachers and technicians, pastors and paramedics. We've met in your homes, churches, schools, and offices. The point is, you've been so welcoming and warm, and I value your friendship. It has always been my intention to be a blessing to you, but in all sincerity, I am always the one who walks away feeling blessed. Your testimonies of the Lord's providence in your lives are dear to me. The love and appreciation you have expressed for Mid-America is incredible. Your prayers and gifts are very humbling, and encourage everyone at the seminary in their work. Without the Lord's provision of your generosity, we could not do what we do. On behalf of our students, staff, faculty, and Board of Trustees, THANK YOU for your prayerful and financial faithfulness to us this year!





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◆ CAMPUS UPDATES

Fall Evening Class: The Dwelling Places of God in History

by Rev. Marcus Mininger



This fall Prof. Marcus Mininger offered an evening class for the Seminary community about God's dwelling places in redemptive history.

The course began with an introduction to Biblical Theology, which studies the process by which God has revealed himself through history. It then went on to practice Biblical Theology, tracing the theme of God's dwelling place as it grew and changed through each stage of redemptive history. Before the Fall, God

dwelt with mankind in open fellowship in the garden of Eden, a place which displayed God's glory, provided abundantly for mankind, and held out a promise of greater, eschatological life still to come. After the Fall, Adam and Eve were banished from the garden. Nevertheless, God graciously promised redemption (Gen 3:15) and would bless His people with other manifestations of His presence. After the flood, Noah and his family experienced God's presence on Mt. Ararat, offering sacrifices to God, beholding His glory in the rainbow, and receiving promises of protection and more abundant life to come. During the patriarchal period, Abraham and his sons beheld glimpses of God's glory in various locations, where God assured them of His present provision and of greater, future blessing. After Sinai, the tabernacle and temple were constructed like miniatures of Eden: glorious garden-like

locations where God's presence abided with Israel, conferring blessing and abundance.

Yet all of these glimpses of Eden were far surpassed in the New Testament. First, God tabernacled with His people upon the earth in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14). Then, after His resurrection, Christ entered into the heavenly tabernacle, consecrating it for a new priestly service on behalf of God's people (Heb 9:22-23). Since Pentecost, the church is also described as God's dwelling place upon earth (Eph 2:20-22) and individual believers as temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:12-20). Finally, the heavenly Jerusalem itself will descend to earth after Christ returns, so that God's dwelling place will be with mankind in full and lasting glory, bringing complete and final abundance and blessing (Rev 21:1-4). Thanks be to our God!