

the messenger

Mid-America Reformed Seminary

Commencement 2019

by Dr. Alan Strange



Mid-America Reformed Seminary's Thirty-Fourth Commencement was held on Thursday, May 9, 2019, coinciding with the Spring meeting of the Board of Trustees. Dr. Eric Watkins, a church planter in St. Augustine, Florida, where he serves as pastor of an OPC (Covenant Presbyterian Church), and an Adjunct Professor of Ministerial Studies at Mid-America, delivered the commencement address to a large crowd of graduates' families and friends gathered for the occasion. Dr. Watkins, who had taught the nine graduates a course on Evangelism and Church Planting, in which the

students engaged in street evangelism as part of the course's practicum, gave a challenging and encouraging talk to the assembled. His address is elsewhere detailed in this edition of the Messenger.

The assembled sang three hymns: "God is Our Refuge and Our Strength," "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," and a song most appropriate for a seminary graduation, being written for that occasion at Andover Newton Theological Seminary in the 19th century, and well-suited to Dr. Watkins's talk on the believer's weakness, "Lead On, O King Eternal."

The President of the Seminary, Dr. Cornelis Venema, welcomed all, and Dr. Alan D. Strange, introduced the speaker. Dr. Venema also later gave special recognition to the wives and fiancées of the graduates for their support during the arduous training of their husbands and fiancés. After Dr. Watkins's inspiring address, Dr. Venema was joined by the Board President, Rev. James Sawtelle, for the conferring of the degrees. This year, all nine of the students received M.Div. degrees. The graduates will continue on, some in internships, the Presbyterians pursuing licensure and the Reformed candidacy, all in preparation for gospel ministry.

There is nothing more important in this world than the gathering and perfecting of the saints in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ: it furnishes the only true hope to our society and is indeed the light shining in the darkness of this sinful world. Graduation highlights the role of the seminary in training gospel heralds, pastors who can bring the comprehensive ministry of Christ into the confused cultural climate of our day. The Seminary seeks thus to serve the church by training the servants that she sends us to continue the important work of preaching and shepherding God's people, and reaching out to the lost.

After receiving their degrees, and the hearty applause of the audience, the graduates received a charge from Dr. Marcus Mininger, Associate Professor of New Testament. The faculty takes turns in giving this annual charge. While the graduates appreciated hearing from a seasoned pastor and teacher like Dr. Watkins, they also enjoyed hearing final words from one who has regularly taught them, and Dr. Mininger did not disappoint, with a stirring call to a broad vision of the task of service in our Lord's church.

Drs. J. Mark Beach and Marcus Mininger also assisted in the ceremony, placing academic hoods on the new graduates. Additionally, Prof. Andrew Compton led in a responsive litany and Dr. Beach offered a prayer for the blessing of the new graduates. Adding to the festivity and beauty of the ceremony, Nancy Venema (organ) accompanied the singing of the hymns as well as played the processional and recessional (in addition to prelude and postlude). Maria Luttjeboer, wife of our media staff-person Jared, rounded off the musical contributions with a beautiful soprano solo.

Following the conclusion of the service, the newest alumni of Mid-America gathered in the fellowship hall to receive the congratulations of and enjoy refreshments with all who had come to witness this joyful occasion.

Commencement Address

by Dr. Eric Watkins

God is the giver of good gifts, though sometimes the gifts that he gives are not what we would ask for. In 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Paul describes two things that God gave him. First, God gave Paul extraordinary access to heaven by way of a beatific vision. But this revelation, along with the gifts for ministry already given to Paul, were enough to make any man conceited, including Paul. So God gave Paul a painful thorn in his flesh to humble him. Three times Paul prayed to the Lord that it might be taken away, and yet the Lord's answer was, "My Grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." In this context, "grace" should be understood as the power of God that upholds us throughout our Christian life. Rather than take the thorn away, God intended that Paul should find fellowship with his Lord. Jesus prayed a similar prayer, and yet submitted to the cross on our behalf. This is the path of grace that all of God's servants must walk. He who calls us and also gives us good gifts, also gives us providences (even painful ones) that display his strength and power on the stage of our weakness. The thorns we experience in life and in ministry indicate his love, kindness, and care for us, as we learn to trust less in ourselves and more in Him. As with Paul, so also for us—God's grace is more than sufficient.



The President's Message: "The Holy Spirit's Work in Conversion"

by Dr. Cornelis P. Venema



"You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. . . . And this word is the good news that was preached to you." 1 Pet. 1:23, 25.

The fourth main point in the *Canons of Dort* focuses upon the Holy Spirit's work in regeneration and conversion. In the estimation of B.B. Warfield, the heart of the gospel of God's invincible work of grace lies in this point: God the Father will unfailingly achieve His gracious purpose to save those whom He elects in Christ, and He does so in time by the ministry of Christ's Spirit.

The Canons begin their treatment of the work of the Spirit in the application of redemption by stressing that the gospel must be published to all the nations. In this publication of the gospel, God "seriously and most genuinely . . . makes known in his Word what is pleasing to him: that those who are called should come to Him. Seriously he also promises rest for their souls and eternal life to all who come to him and believe" (Art. 8). The blame does not belong with Christ or the gospel, when sinners refuse to believe and repent when called to do so through the gospel. God sincerely calls everyone through the Word of the gospel to believe, promising salvation to all without distinction who answer this call through faith and repentance. The fault for the unbelief and impenitence of many is, therefore, entirely their own.

But what about those who do believe and repent, who are converted, at the preaching of the gospel? Are they to be credited for their faith and repentance, as though these were their own doing? The authors of the Canons answer this question, first, by denying that such faith and repentance are human works that merit salvation, and second, by affirming that they are the fruit of the Spirit's working through the gospel. The conversion of those who are called through the ministry of the gospel must not be credited to the one who believes, "as though one distinguishes himself by free choice from others who are furnished with equal or sufficient grace for faith and conversion (as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains)" (Art. 10). Not at all. For just as God from eternity chose His own in Christ, "so within time he effectively calls them, grants them faith and repentance . . . in order that they may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into this marvelous light, and may boast not in themselves, but in the Lord, as apostolic words frequently testify in Scripture."

In several articles of the fourth point, the Canons provide a biblical account of the manner of the Spirit's working in the heart and life of the believer. Speaking of the Spirit's work with the gospel Word, the Canons affirm that God by the Spirit powerfully enlightens the mind of believers "so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God" (Art. 11). Furthermore, by "the effective operation of the same regenerating Spirit," God also "penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised." This work of the Spirit includes: giving to the sinner's will, otherwise captive to sin, the readiness to do good; making the will, otherwise dead and lifeless to the things of God, begin to live and become receptive to the gospel's call; making the will, otherwise unwilling because unable, begin to desire the right; and activating and enlivening the will, otherwise inactive and lifeless, to produce the good fruits that come from a tree that has been made good. In so doing, the Spirit of God effectively moves sinners, who are by nature spiritually dead and in bondage to sin, to turn willingly in repentance and faith to God: "As a result, all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God but in being activated by God is also itself active. For this reason, man himself, by that grace which he has received is also rightly said to believe and to repent" (Art. 12).

What an encouragement this is for all proclaimers of the joyful message of the gospel! They may go with confidence into the harvest field, earnestly and compassionately desirous that all would respond in faith to the gospel call. And they may do so, expecting the Spirit to do what no preacher can do—effectually persuading unbelievers to believe and to come freely and joyfully to Christ.

Board of Trustees Holds Spring Meeting

by Keith LeMahieu

The Board held its Spring meeting on Mid-America's campus on May 9-10. Board President, Rev. James Sawtelle, convened the meeting Thursday afternoon and, after dispensing with some initial matters of business, oversaw an extensive long-range planning discussion. The aim of this discussion was to assess how the work being done by Mid-America is benefiting the health and welfare of the church. The Board discussed a wide range of ideas intended to enhance the Seminary's effectiveness. The Board then recessed for dinner before attending graduation ceremonies at Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Lansing, IL, which took place later that evening.

The Board began Friday morning with devotions and then a reappointment interview with Dr. J. Mark Beach, Professor of Doctrinal and Ministerial studies. The Board is pleased to announce that it approved Dr. Beach for another four-year appointment.

The Board made an amendment to replace some archaic language in the By-Laws. There is a provision in the By-laws that allows a meeting of the Board to be called by "letter or telegram." The Board voted to change this to "letter or email" to better reflect current methods of communication.

Several decisions regarding elections and appointments to the Board were also made. A slate of new candidates was approved for presentation to the Mid-America Association for election to the Board. This election will take place this summer. Existing Trustees Rev. Todd Joling and Mr. Ben Sybesma were interviewed and reappointed to the Board for another 3-year term per the recent change approved by the Association. Finally, the Board appointed Rev. Lou Slagter to fill the unexpired term of Rev. James Folkerts, who resigned from the Board upon accepting a call to the mission field.

The Board received a variety of reports from committees and individuals who oversee various aspects of the work of the seminary. One such committee is the Finance Committee which brought a budget recommendation for the 2019-2020 fiscal year. The Board approved a budget of \$1,987,680 – a 2.3% increase over the current fiscal year.

The Board concluded its business by acknowledging its appreciation of those men who completed their service – Mr. Scott De Jong, Mr. Douglas Disselkoe, Rev. James Folkerts, and Rev. Phil Vos.

Summer Assignments by Rev. Mark Vander Hart

We are pleased that a good number of our students are going out on summer internships. Their classroom learning is enhanced by field education activities, particularly in the summer months when they are exposed to the variety of activities that belong to ministry (e.g., leading worship, pastoral calling, teaching, evangelism, etc.). This is the list of the students going out in the summer of 2019:

Student	Assignment	Location
Jonatan Azpilcueta	To be determined	
Elijah De Jong	Concho Valley Orthodox Presbyterian Church	Concho, Arizona
David Dick	Borculo Christian Reformed Church	Zeeland, Michigan
Daniel Flinn	Covenant Presbyterian Church (OPC)	Buford, Georgia
Cristian Garcia	Lynwood United Reformed Church	Lynwood, Illinois
Carl Gobelman	Westminster Orthodox Presbyterian Church	Indian Head Park, Illinois
Daniel Hamstra	Calvary United Reformed Church	Loveland, Colorado
Arnold Lavaire	El Pacto de Gracia Fellowship (URC)	Chicago Heights, Illinois
Andrew Pinson	Phoenix United Reformed Church	Phoenix, Arizona
James Stafford	Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church	Columbus, Ohio
Aaron van der Heiden	Cornerstone United Reformed Church	Edmonton, Alberta
Luke Walkup	Mission Church (OPC)	Merrillville, Indiana
Scottie Wright	Covenant Orthodox Presbyterian Church	Saint Augustine, Florida

Paragraphs Floating Through Space by Michael Deckinga



A number of weeks ago, my kids dressed up as Jedi people and walked through downtown Lansing, IL.

Before you attempt to vote me out of the running for “Father-of-the-Year,” allow me to explain. The road was closed to traffic to allow for the annual Lansing “Good Neighbor Day Parade.” The theme was “Star Wars” because the parade was held on May 4 (“May the Fourth be with you”). It is a little corny and unoriginal, but it worked. Lansing Christian School (where we send our kids) had a float, and we participated as “walkers.” Maybe I should say, “Skywalkers!” Okay, that’s enough.

This was met with some reluctance. Naturally, my kids wanted to sit on the sidewalk and watch the parade go by. For the next hour or so, candy would be flooding the streets and filling repurposed grocery bags held by beaming kids (and maybe a few adults). What fun! I explained to them how much more fun it would be to give away candy to other kids than to receive it. They were excited to make other kids happy, and so was I. In the end, they received a little candy themselves, and a lesson in what it means to be generous.

This is a simple illustration, and it wasn’t difficult to get my kids to go along with the idea. Why? It was fun! It gave them joy!

Why do you give of your time and resources to others? Have you ever really stopped to think about it? Perhaps you give because you know you should – it’s the “right thing to do.” Perhaps it is because your parents did, and so you do likewise. Perhaps it is in response to what you’ve been given by the Creator of generosity – “Morning by morning, new mercies I see” – we don’t earn our mercies, they’re given. Well, all of those reasons do help motivate us to give. But don’t forget joy! I hope you experience a child-like joy in sharing from what has been given to you.

Mid-America Reformed Seminary is blessed beyond words through your faithful support. When we give gifts to the Seminary, we are serving as a constant source of humility and encouragement. Whenever we lift the Seminary’s work up in prayer, the Lord is faithful to answer our request.

I recently failed to recall the Lord’s ability and desire to sustain us – thank you for reminding me so powerfully. The budget shortcomings I wrote about last month have disappeared! We still need **\$130,000** by the end of June to reach budget, but we are back on pace to do so. May our Lord bless and keep you as you seek to joyfully serve Him and His kingdom as generously as you are able!

To make, or plan for a gift today, contact Michael Deckinga, VP of Advancement at mdeckinga@midamerica.edu



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Mid-America's 15th Annual Golf Outing

Saturday, September 7, 2019
8:00 am shotgun start, scramble format
SPG Green Garden Country Club
in Frankfort, IL
Lunch buffet and awards to follow.
Register online at www.midamerica.edu.

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CAMPUS UPDATES

Senior Awards

by Jared Luttjeboer



Our Spring semester concluded with the Senior awards. Each year senior students are selected as recipients of awards reflective of their time of study. This year, the Biblical Studies Award was given to Jon Key, and the Doctrinal Studies Award was shared by Bryce De Zwarte and Ryan Swale. The Ecclesiastical Studies Award was given to Kelvin Tiemstra, with Ryan Swale receiving the Ministerial Studies Award. These awards are mostly based on the highest GPA in each division.

Retiring Board Members by Jared Luttjeboer

This Spring we bid farewell to four of our Board members:

Doug Disselkoen, a farmer from Momence, IL, who served on the Long-Range Planning Committee for 6 years, is thankful “for the privilege of serving on the Board.” He enjoyed his time serving, “and will continue to uphold [the Board] in prayer.”

Phil Vos, pastor of Covenant URC (Hudsonville, MI), who also served on the Long-Range Planning Committee, is “tremendously grateful to God and humbled to have had the opportunity to serve once again on the Board.”

James Folkerts, who has been serving Faith URC of Telkwa (BC) for 13 years, recently accepted a call to serve as a URCNA missionary on loan to the OPC in Karamoja, Uganda. Having served as Secretary on the Faculty Development Committee, he says “It has been a great joy to serve with the faculty and fellow board members and tell the old bear stories. I am going to miss you all!”



Left to right: Phil Vos, Doug Disselkoen, Scott De Jong

Finally, **Scott De Jong**, from Tillsonburg, Ontario, served on the Finance Committee and the Executive Committee as Treasurer. Scott says that it “has been a real blessing to serve on the Board and to work with the gifted staff and faculty of the Seminary.”

We thank the Lord for these brothers and the service they have given to the Seminary.