

MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY: AN ACADEMY WITH A VOCATIONAL AIM¹

by Cornelis P. Venema

REVEREND BLAUW, MEMBERS OF the Board of Trustees, fellow faculty members, staff of the Seminary, students, distinguished guests and delegates, family and my good friends, I would like to begin my comments this evening, as is customary on an occasion such as this, with a few expressions of personal gratitude. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, asks, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7) All that we have is a free gift of God’s grace toward us in Christ. We are to give thanks to God in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ for all things—including the opportunities he affords us to serve him and his people. Tonight I am profoundly grateful for your presence here and the opportunity given me to address you regarding the special service of Mid-America Reformed Seminary to the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Allow me to express to you, members of the Board of Trustees, my gratitude for your trust in granting me the opportunity to serve as the first president of Mid-America Reformed Seminary. As you are aware, this was not a position to which I aspired or for which I readily made myself available. My greatest aspiration and privilege in life were to serve as a minister of the Word and sacrament in a Reformed church. I believe it was Archibald Alexander who once expressed what is the testimony of any true minister of the gospel—“Preaching Christ is the best, hardest, sweetest work, on this side of

¹The following is the text of Cornelis P. Venema’s inaugural address as the first president of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, September 27, 2001.

beholding him.” When Alexander first began to serve at Princeton Theological Seminary, he also remarked, “As I have been so accustomed to preach, it does not seem pleasant to be altogether silent.”² My sentiments exactly! For this reason, when I was first approached to teach at Mid-America, I hesitated to do so because I enjoyed immensely the wonderful calling of serving as a pastor in a congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ. But I agreed to teach since it seemed at the time the next best thing to serving as a pastor.

But what of serving as president of a seminary? That might seem to be one step further removed from the pastoral ministry—a position fraught with the fearful prospect of endless committee meetings, administrative responsibilities, and promotional activities. Perhaps that’s why another seminary president greeted me recently with these words of congratulation: “you have my sympathy.” Apparently, he knows something that I do not yet know! I thank you, Board of Trustees, nonetheless, for giving me this opportunity, and especially for permitting me to be the kind of president whose duties include preaching and teaching, as well as others more peculiar to the office of president. If teaching at a seminary is the next best thing to being a pastor, perhaps serving as a president is the next best thing to being a full-time professor—at least I’m still involved in the all-important business of helping to prepare pastors for service in the churches.

Allow me also to express my gratitude to you, my faculty colleagues. Throughout the brief history of Mid-America, we have worked together, not only in teaching, but also in a wide range of administrative duties and responsibilities. The day-to-day working of Mid-America has been, quite literally, a team effort. We had a Dean of Faculty whom we elected to a two-year term. But we had no CEO, not even a *primus inter pares* (“first among equals”). We were jointly and corporately responsible for the administration of the Seminary. But now the Board, in its wisdom (or folly) has determined that we should have a president. That could produce a subtle anxiety regarding our future, particularly when you consider whom they have selected for this position! God forbid that I should become the kind of president faculty members have reason to fear! You, however, have been gracious in accepting and supporting the Board’s decision. For that too I am profoundly grateful. Let me

²Quoted from David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, vol. 1: *Faith and Learning, 1812-1868* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), 59.

assure you that I come to this position as someone who is first and foremost a member of the faculty, and who believes that our prosperity as an institution demands that we work together in a collegial manner, each one placing the interests of the other above his own (Phil. 2).

I have chosen to speak on this occasion on the topic, “An Academy with a Vocational Aim: Training Pastors for Service in the Church.”³ Though we are often tempted to play these off against each other—as though a seminary has to be *either* an academy *or* a vocational training school of the church—I would like to argue that what will best serve the church in our time is seminary training of her pastors that is rigorously and properly academic, yet not merely academic. Rather, a Reformed seminary like Mid-America needs to be a school, an academy, where the theological formation and learning that takes place has a governing focus, a particular telos or end that shapes and characterizes everything. If I understand the unique place and service of Mid-America, it is that it seeks by God’s grace to combine the best of the academy with a singular focus upon preparing her students for the pastoral or preaching ministry in the church. We are an academy in the proper sense of the term, but one that is responsive to the church in its aim to train students who aspire to the pastoral ministry.

The Seminary as an Academy

It might seem strange to begin by emphasizing that the seminary is an academy. On the one hand, it seems too obvious to require emphasis. A seminary is, if anything, a school, an academy. But on the other hand, it might seem somewhat problematic, even an emphasis strangely at odds with Mid-America’s particular history and distinctive focus upon preaching. You do not have to read long or listen much to the kinds of criticisms that are registered against seminaries and seminary training to find that many of them are aimed at the academy model. These criticisms are of two distinct kinds: first, there is the concern that the seminary as academy works at cross purposes with the interests of the church; and second, there is the concern that an academic training is ill-suited to the practical demands of the gospel ministry.

³Cf. Richard J. Mouw, “The Seminary, the Church, and the Academy,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (1998): 457-68.

John H. Leith, for example, in his recent searching criticism of theological education in the main-line churches of North America, expresses well the first criticism:

Seminaries . . . were established by the church to prepare pastors for the church. Contemporary faculties coming out of graduate schools tend to pressure the seminaries in another direction; namely, that of an academic institution. Seminary faculties increasingly like to think of themselves as centers for thought, for research, for the writing of articles and books and creative theological enterprises.⁴

The academy model for seminary training, as this comment of Leith intimates, threatens to divorce the seminary from the life and ministry of the church. It represents the loss of what was once known as the “study of divinity” in which students were formed theologically and spiritually for the sacred ministry.

The idea of the seminary as an academy has come for many to be associated with the illegitimate separation between seminary and church, theology and piety, theory and practice. Seminaries as academies, especially when their faculties labor under the influence of post-Enlightenment modernism, are, in the judgment of many, the last thing we need. Consequently, when Lester De Koster wrote a pamphlet in support of the founding of Mid-America Reformed Seminary some years ago, he argued that a theological school, in distinction from a seminary, exists for the express purpose of calling into question “for purposes of rational examination the affirmations which underlie a seminary.”⁵ In this view, there is great gulf fixed between the seminary as an academy on the one hand, and the seminary as a school of the church on the other.⁶

⁴*Crisis in the Church: The Plight of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 17.

⁵Lester De Koster, *Crossroads: Seminary Or Theological School* (Blue Island, IL: Marden Marketing, Inc., 1981), 12.

⁶In the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, a vigorous debate whether the seminary is an academy or an institution of the church took place at the end of the nineteenth century. Abraham Kuyper and the reformatory movement known as the “Doleantie” advocated the view that the seminary belonged in a university setting, as an academic institution distinct from the sphere of the church. The churches stemming from the secession of 1834, however, argued that the seminary belonged to the church and was not, strictly speaking, an academic enterprise. For a recent treatment of this history and its significance, see Richard J. Mouw, “The

This criticism no doubt expresses a legitimate concern, and therefore we will return to it at a later point. Indeed, one of the chief notes sounded by the founders and supporters of Mid-America from the beginning was the theme of the seminary's intimate relationship with and service on behalf of the church. Nonetheless, the concern to emphasize the seminary's close relationship to the church ought not to be used to deny the obvious—that it is an academy, a school.

However, there is another, equally pressing and perhaps even more influential, challenge to the idea of the seminary as an academy. The trend in seminary education in North America, which is especially pronounced among many evangelical institutions, is to reduce theological training to the mastery of pastoral techniques or mechanics. Richard Muller, in his *The Study of Theology*, tells the story of his discomfort at a graduation ceremony at Fuller Theological Seminary, when a D.Min. graduate was asked to say a few words:

Dressed in his new robe and elegant doctoral hood, he mounted the podium with words of praise for the seminary, words that, by his own admission, were as much a surprise to himself as to anyone else. He had always frowned on seminaries and seminary education. He had warned dozens of young people about the 'ivory tower' of academic study and its irrelevance to the 'real work' of ministry. . . . Why, then, was he graduating from a seminary? He was there because of the practical, 'how-to' approach of the Doctor of Ministry degree. He was there because this degree was different—it demanded no theological speculation, no academic, ivory-tower critical thinking, no retreat from the nitty-gritty reality of daily ministry. In fact, the ivory-tower courses—courses dealing with critical exegesis, the history of Christian doctrine, and philosophical and systematic theology—had not been a part of his program of education. He had studied only useful, relevant subjects.⁷

This incident reflects a long history of anti-intellectualism and anti-clericalism in North American culture, which has profoundly influenced the shape of theological education at many seminaries.⁸

Seminary, the Church, and the Academy," *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (1998): 457-468.

⁷Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991, vii.

⁸For a documentation of this anti-intellectual and anti-clerical spirit in American Christianity prior to the Civil War, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The*

The titles of several recent diagnoses of the evangelical church and the state of theological education in North America amply confirm the consequences of this history: *Fit Bodies Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to do About It*,⁹ by Os Guinness; *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology*¹⁰ by David Wells; and *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*,¹¹ by Mark A. Noll. The common theme of these studies is captured well by the memorable opening line of Noll's book: "The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind."¹²

Accordingly, many seminaries in North America have increasingly shifted their curricular focus to what is called "practical" theology. More practical courses mean fewer courses in biblical exegesis, history, systematic theology, and the like. Furthermore, students are presented in seminary with a smorgasbord of options, depending upon their career and vocational interests. Gone are the days when you could assume that a seminary student was preparing for the gospel ministry, or that he would be taking courses in the biblical languages, exegesis, theology, and history. Is it any wonder, then, that we have succeeded in preparing a generation of ministers whose sermons, as I believe Os

Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁹Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

¹⁰David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

¹¹Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

¹²Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 3. I am reminded, in this connection, of the first book I was asked to read as a college student in an introductory course on Christian philosophy—Harry Blamires's *The Christian Mind* (London: SPCK, 1966). Blamires' thesis was a simple one (and note: he offered it long before the books mentioned a moment ago): "Except over a very narrow field of thinking, chiefly touching questions of strictly personal conduct, we Christians in the modern world accept, for the purpose of mental activity, a frame of reference constructed by the secular mind and a set of criteria reflecting secular evaluations. There is no Christian mind; there is no shared field of discourse in which we can move at ease as thinking Christians by trodden ways and past established landmarks." Blamires was prophetic. Sadly, seminaries today are often as much a part of the problem as its solution.

Guinness once quipped, are a mile wide and 1/16th of an inch deep? Nowhere more, he suggests, than in America are the churches fuller and the sermons emptier. Or that Eugene Peterson, somewhat with tongue in cheek, has observed that he “could take a person with a high school education, give him or her a six-month trade school training, and provide a pastor who would be satisfactory to any discriminating American congregation”? In this trade-school, exclusively practical approach to seminary training, the traditional four-fold division of the curriculum could be replaced, Peterson adds, with four courses: “Creative Plagiarism, Voice Control for Prayer and Counseling, Efficient Office Management, and Image Projection.”¹³ When you add to this mix the new approaches to seminary education—distance education, the virtual classroom, off-campus teaching, and the like—the pressure to diminish the academic character of seminary training is intensified.

However necessary it is for a seminary to serve the church, and however important it may be to equip students with the practical tools necessary to be effective in the ministry—a seminary must be, if anything, a place of teaching and of learning. Careful, rigorous scholarship must mark the work of a theological school. The study and mastery of languages, particularly the biblical languages; the study of texts, biblical, confessional, and theological; the sympathetic and sensitive listening to the history of the church in her reflection upon the teaching of the Word of God; critical engagement with the intellectual currents and fashions of the present day—these are the “stuff” of which a seminary education is made. Though this is not the place to present the full curriculum of a good seminary education, suffice it to say that it must be “classical” in the sense that it works with the intellectual resources and tools inherited from the great tradition of Christian theological scholarship. Reformed seminaries ought to understand this as well as any. If the ministry is primarily a ministry of the *Word*, then the “stock in trade” of the minister is the study of the Word.

My point is one that J. Gresham Machen made in his address, on the occasion of the opening of Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929: “We are not conducting a school for lay workers at Westminster Seminary, useful though such a school would be, but a theological seminary; and we believe that a theological

¹³Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 5.

seminary is an institution of higher learning whose standards should not be inferior to the highest academic standards that anywhere prevail.”¹⁴

An Academy That Honors Scripture and Confession

But, I hasten to ask, what kind of academy? As I suggested earlier, one reason the emphasis upon the seminary as an academic institution is challenged is that, when this is all a seminary seeks to be, it does not serve the church. When I speak of the seminary as an academy, however, I do not mean to separate it in any inappropriate manner from the church. A seminary, unlike a theological faculty in a university setting or a school of religious studies at a state institution of higher learning, exists for the benefit of the church. Though it must be a place where serious theological study occurs, in the best tradition of Christian scholarship, employing the texts and theological writings of the Christian tradition and church, its mission is to serve the churches by preparing her students for the ministry. Lest my emphasis upon the seminary as an academy be misunderstood, then, let me mention those characteristics of its academic work that are essential to its fruitfulness in serving the church. These characteristics are a necessary antidote to the scourge of seminaries, which as academies serve to undermine rather than bolster the ministry of the Word of God in the churches.

Biblical in its Basis

First of all, the discipline of theology in the seminary as an academy must be thoroughly biblical in its foundations and content. The science of theology, when it is pursued upon any other basis than an unswerving commitment to the inspiration, authority and infallibility of the Word of God inscripturated in the canon of the Old and New Testaments, can only degenerate into “talking about man in a loud voice” (to use a quaint expression of Karl Barth in his criticism of Protestant liberalism). Seminary education that does not spring from an uncompromising respect for and devotion to the Holy Spirit’s speaking in the text of Scripture is of little or no use to the church. Unless the Word of God in Scripture is regarded as the

¹⁴J. Gresham Machen, “Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Purpose and Plan,” in *What is Christianity?*, 226.

source and standard for the theology and the preaching of the church, seminaries, and the pulpits that reflect their teaching, can only echo the culture and society of the present day. Indeed, theological education that does not “believe without a doubt all things contained” in the Scriptures (Belgic Confession) can only harm the church.

This was brought home to me recently, when I read in the *Chicago Tribune* a report about the debate within the PCUSA over the issue of the ordination of practicing homosexuals. The report noted that, recently, 33 of 58 Bible professors at Presbyterian seminaries had signed a statement advocating a lift in a ban upon this practice. One of their spokesmen, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, was quoted to say, “they [biblical texts condemning homosexual practice] are words out of a particular context. Our context is so significantly different that I don’t think the words are any longer living, but dead words if we try to teach them without contextually understanding them.”¹⁵ So much for the idea that the grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord lives forever (Isa. 40:8)! Or that the Word of God is “living, and active, and more powerful than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12)!

Unless a seminary builds upon the solid foundation of the vitality and truth of the Word of God, it can only become like that house built upon sand of which Christ speaks in Luke 6:43-49. The flood tides of the present culture will undoubtedly overwhelm it.

Confessional in its Commitment

Moreover, theological study in a Reformed seminary must be confessional. Contrary to the now generally discredited notion of dispassionate inquiry, which is warranted by universally accessible and incorrigible first principles of reason, the academic work of a Reformed seminary must be carried out in self-conscious submission to the great confessional symbols of the Christian faith.

One of the unfortunate tendencies of some Protestant views of *sola Scriptura* is that they often encourage a kind of biblicism. “No creed but Christ” means, in effect, that I need not bother with the great traditions of biblical study and theological scholarship of the

¹⁵Richard N. Ostling, “Gay debate put in biblical terms,” *Chicago Tribune* (July 29, 2001), Section 2, 8.

one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. I can contentedly approach the text of Scripture, as though I did so without the company of a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before me. There is a kind of craving for the “contemporary” today that inevitably produces a faddishness. When he witnessed this phenomenon in the middle of the last century, C. S. Lewis quipped, “fashions come and go, but mostly they go.” Os Guinness terms this the “Generation Hex”: the penchant to label generations (“Baby busters,” “The New Lost Generation,” “Twentysomethings,” “Generation X,” “13ers” [13th generation since Benjamin Franklin!]), as though there were periodic seismic shifts in the makeup of people requiring a new approach to effective communication with them. How often have we not read articles or books calling for a radical change in the message and medium of the church. New times demand, so it is said, a new and more fashionable gospel. Invariably, these calls are rooted in the conviction that the historic confessions of the Christian church no longer serve as an adequate basis for the ministry of the gospel today.

Mid-America Reformed Seminary, however, if it is to be an academy that serves the church, must engage the study of theology in a “collegial” spirit, in concert with others who have gone before or who are contemporary with us. As a school that subscribes to the great confessions of the continental Reformed churches (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort) and the British isles (the Westminster Confession of Faith), we stand in a rich and catholic tradition. This means that we are obliged to embrace the fullness of the Reformed faith. We may not succumb to the parochial spirit of those who would oppose these Reformed confessions to each other. Rather, we have the blessed opportunity in God’s providence to serve students who represent the full range of the Reformed and Presbyterian family of churches, whose confessions we share and to which we commonly subscribe.

Catholic in its Reach

Because it is biblical and confessional, the training of a Reformed academy will also be catholic in its reach. Herman Bavinck, in his address on “The catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” defined catholicity as follows:

The catholicity of the church, as the Scriptures portray it for us and the early churches exemplify it for us, is breathtaking in its beauty. Whoever becomes enclosed in the narrow circle of a small church or conventicle, does not know it and has never experienced its power and comfort. Such a person shortchanges the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit and incurs a loss of spiritual treasures that cannot be made good by meditation or devotion. Such a person will have an impoverished soul. By contrast, whoever is able to see beyond this to the countless multitudes who have been purchased by the blood of Christ from every nation and people and age, whoever experiences the powerful strengthening of faith, the wondrous comfort in times of suffering to know that unity with the whole church militant that has been gathered out of the whole human race from the beginning to the end of the world, such a person can never be narrow-minded and narrow-hearted.¹⁶

When we confess “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” we are committing ourselves to embrace the whole of what properly belongs to the church, excluding nothing that ought to be included (and, of course, including nothing that ought to be excluded). This has profound implications for the service of Mid-America Reformed Seminary on behalf of the church. The seminary as an academy may not neglect the wisdom of the past for the passing whims of the present. Before students are asked to read contemporary theologians, they need to become conversant with the great theological literature of the catholic Christian church. Because catholic theological study embraces past, present, and future, it requires balance. It also recognizes the absolute claims of Christ and the gospel upon the whole of life within God’s creation and all areas of Christian scholarship. Conversely, theological study that is characterized by a simple-minded repetition of the past, or a studied indifference to the intellectual currents and challenges of the present day, is not catholic in its reach.

I purposefully stress this feature of the confessional commitments of a Reformed seminary because there is today, especially among conservative Reformed communities, the temptation to resort to a kind of “Reformed fundamentalism.” Reformed fundamentalism narrows the reach of the faith to a few

¹⁶Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, in *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 227.

key fundamentals. Because there are some critical pressure points at which the faith is under attack, these become the all-consuming focus of attention and interest. The Christian faith, in this context, is reduced to a few key doctrinal fundamentals. Such fundamentalism also forms its position in reaction, rather than in responsible engagement with the best of the Reformed theological tradition. For example, because institutions of higher learning within the Christian community have not always consistently upheld the highest standards of biblically-faithful scholarship, scholarship as such is disparaged. This kind of Reformed fundamentalism does no credit to the gospel and offers little help to the church in her ministry of the gospel of the kingdom. Reformed fundamentalism is unable to offer an informed alternative to what it rejects. Such fundamentalism can only blow the trumpet of retreat in the face of contemporary challenges.

An Academy with a Vocational Aim

Mid-America, however, is more than an academy. It is more than an academy that seeks, by God's grace, to be biblical, confessional and catholic. It is a school that exists for the specific purpose of training its students for the pastoral ministry. No one familiar with the history of Mid-America should be surprised when I say that it is a school, yes, but one whose training and program have a vocational aim. As an institution, we recognize the legitimacy of the lament of John Leith regarding many seminaries: "The consequence is that theological seminaries are no longer seen as primarily institutions for the training of pastors, but as institutes for the discussion and study of religion."¹⁷ The singular aim of this Seminary is to train its students to be faithful, effective ministers of the Word and sacrament.

But what does that mean as a practical matter?

Focussed on Preaching

For Mid-America it means that the focus of seminary education and training is the equipping of our students for the ministry of the Word. Not "ministry" in some vague and ill-defined sense, but the ministry of the Word and sacraments as that has been understood

¹⁷Leith, *Crisis in the Church*, 10.

historically in the Reformed tradition. If I may use a spatial analogy, the preaching of the Word of God is to other aspects of the pastoral calling—pastoral care and counseling, church education, evangelism and missions, etc.—what a point at the center of the circle is to all the points on the circumference.

As a Reformed seminary that wants to live up to its name in practice, we are committed to the conviction that the principal means of grace is the official preaching of the Word of God by ordained ministers. We subscribe to Calvin’s conviction about preaching:

He [Christ] alone should rule and reign in the church as well as have authority or pre-eminence in it, and this authority should be exercised and administered by his Word alone. Nevertheless, because he does not dwell among us in visible presence, we have said that he uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honor, but only that through their mouths he may do his own work—just as a workmen uses a tool to do his work.¹⁸

The Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 65, expresses succinctly this fundamental conviction of the Reformed churches: “Since, then, we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits by faith only, whence comes this faith? From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments.”

One of the primary reasons, ironically, for the loss of a proper appreciation of the seminary as an academy is the loss of a proper respect for the unique calling of the minister of the Word. Where an anti-intellectual and especially anti-clerical spirit takes root, there the emphasis upon seminary training that prepares students to be faithful ministers and preachers tends to be diminished. When every form of Christian ministry is given equal billing with the ministry of the Word, the focus of the seminary is blurred and its academic quality diminished.

D. G. Hart, in an article entitled, “Overcoming the Schizophrenic Character of Theological Tradition,” argues that many seminaries, for this reason, though quite “successful” in terms

¹⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV.iii.1.

of numbers of students, are at a loss regarding their peculiar identity and purpose. He maintains that “evangelical seminaries may be suffering from a state of schizophrenia where they encourage more and more students to enroll in their institutions and hire better and more widely published faculty, and yet all the while they are less certain about their reason for existence.”¹⁹ Though seminary education is a growth industry, at least in terms of numbers of students at evangelical institutions, this growth is often at the expense of a clear focus. Various degree programs are offered, student body numbers are artificially inflated, but the particular purpose of the seminary is uncertain.

Unified in its Curriculum

This kind of focus upon preaching as the pastor’s vocation has profound implications for a seminary’s curriculum or course of study. One of the courses I have taught in seminary through the years, “Theological Foundations,” addresses the questions of theological encyclopedia. Theological encyclopedia considers questions like, what is theology? What is its object of study? Is it a science? How are its various disciplines related? As you can tell, a tedious list of formal questions! One of the common complaints today, however, is that the theological curriculum in many seminaries is fragmented. The curriculum lacks unity, either in terms of its distinct subject matter or its aims.²⁰

One of the more important measures, however, of any seminary is its curriculum. A seminary curriculum is always shaped by convictions regarding the nature of the discipline of theology, and the purpose that theological education serves. If, for example, you have a low view of Scriptural authority, why bother to study the original languages of Scripture, the issues of biblical hermeneutics, or the steps required to move from biblical text to sermon? If you do not believe one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, which has been gifted with the Spirit’s presence and leading throughout its history now of some twenty-centuries, why take the trouble to pore

¹⁹In *A Confessional Theology for Postmodern Times*, ed. Michael Horton (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 114.

²⁰See Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); and David C. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

over ancient texts, to read the great books of the tradition of Christian theology? And if you are persuaded that system means artificial unity, why bother to see the unity and coherence of God's revelation?

The benefit of a clear institutional focus is evident in the way it undergirds and unifies the seminary's curriculum. Biblical studies are foundational and indispensable since they provide the "stuff" of biblical preaching. Ecclesiastical or historical studies are necessary since they acquaint the aspiring pastor with the wealth of the church's historic understanding of the Scriptures. Doctrinal studies are essential since they acquaint the would-be minister with the system of biblical teaching in all of its depth and breadth. And ministerial studies are, building upon the other divisions, indispensable to equipping the student with the tools to minister the Word of God in worship and preaching, pastoral care and counseling, evangelism and missions.

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield expressed it this way in his article, "Our Seminary Curriculum":

But, if the minister is the mouth-piece of the Most High, charged with a message to deliver, to expound and enforce; standing in the name of God before men, to make known to them who and what this God is, and what his purposes of grace are, and what his will for his people [is]— then, the whole aspect of things is changed. Then, it is the prime duty of the minister to know his message; to know the instructions which have been committed to him for the people, and to know them thoroughly; to be prepared to declare them with confidence and exactness, to commend them with wisdom, and to urge them with force and defend them with skill, and to build men up by means of them into a true knowledge of God and of his will, which will be unassailable in the face of the fiercest assault. No second-hand knowledge of the revelation of God for the salvation of a ruined world can suffice the needs of a ministry whose function it is to convey this revelation to men, commend it to their acceptance and apply it in detail to their needs.... Nothing will suffice for it but to know; to know the Book; to know it at first hand; and to know it through and through.²¹

²¹B. B. Warfield, "Our Seminary Curriculum," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, edited by John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970-73), I: 372.

Professors as Pastor/Preachers

One further feature of a seminary course of training which, though academically rigorous, aims to prepare the student for the pastoral ministry, is the kind of instructor needed.

In John Leith's exposé of what's wrong with theological education at many seminaries, one of the most serious problems that he identifies is the graduate school ethos that prevails. Professors are hired and ranked according to strictly academic criteria—have they gone to the best graduate schools? Are they published in their discipline? What is their reputation academically among their peers and peer institutions? Little or no attention is given to their affiliation with the church the seminaries ostensibly serve.

Since its beginning, Mid-America's Board has insisted that its full-time professors be, without exception, ordained pastors who have served the church for a period of years. This is not something altogether unique, of course. Many seminaries appoint professors in the area of practical theology, who have a reputation for excellence and effectiveness in their particular fields. What is rather unusual, however, is our insistence that this is as important a qualification for teaching biblical studies in a seminary setting, as it is for teaching historical studies or doctrinal studies. Consistent with the desire to have a unified focus throughout our course of instruction, and to arrange for a seminary curriculum that supports this focus, Mid-America believes that a seminary instructor ought himself to be an ordained minister of the gospel.

It is rather interesting, if you reflect on the question of the seminary's relationship to the church, that many seminaries, including seminaries that are established, owned and administered by the churches, do not have such a requirement. Or, if they have the requirement, they are rather quick to make exceptions to it. Though such denominational seminaries might appear to be more legitimately seminaries of the church—and judge a school like Mid-America to be an "independent" seminary—they do not insist that those who are directly engaged in the preparation of the students for the ordained ministry be themselves ministers of the gospel. But what better way to insure the seminary's intimate association with and service to the churches, than to insist that its instructors be ministers of the Word themselves?

Conclusion

Having said what I wished to say about the kind of seminary Mid-America claims and seeks to be, let me close on a little different note—with a simple prayer, really. And that is, “may God bless Mid-America.”

In response to the events of recent days, the horrific attacks by terrorists upon the World Trade Center and Washington, D.C., you have no doubt noticed that the landscape is dotted with signs and posters that say, “God bless America.” Now admittedly, those words are often used in a trivial way, tossed off unthinkingly the way people conclude a conversation, saying, “I am praying for you.” But used properly, they are three of the most profound words. When used properly by individuals, nations or institutions, they are a heartfelt confession of complete dependence upon and need for the Triune God’s favor and blessing.

Mid-America is not a seminary that can “rest on its laurels.” We have few if any laurels on which to rest. Nor is it a seminary that can boast a long and proud history of extraordinary accomplishment and achievement. Measured by some standards, it is a little and weak thing.

But there is an advantage in that. It reminds us of something we may never forget—that our future is in entirely in God’s fatherly hand. That “little is much when God is in it.” That our service to the church will be only as he pleases. And surely he doesn’t need Mid-America to accomplish his purposes! And so we need to make it our prayer that God would bless this school to the benefit of his church, for the glory of his name. As the Psalmist puts it, “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; do confirm for us the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands” (Ps. 90:17). Thank you very much!