

THE MESSENGER

MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY

Ezekiel by Glenda Mathes



Ezekiel's vision of a bright Being on a sapphire throne, towering above moving multi-eyed wheels and multiple-faced creatures, may seem surrealistic to readers and intimidating to preachers. Mid-America's interim elective brought understanding to a prophetic book people sometimes avoid.

Rev. Andrew Compton, Assistant Professor of Old Testament Studies, taught the course on Ezekiel from January 9-17. The class considered the book's prominent theological themes, its textual structure, and its literary shape.

"While the book showcases vivid visionary prophecy and fierce oracles of doom to rattle the proud Judeans," he says, "it also uses visions of the future and oracles of hope to soothe the fears of those who had trusted the Lord's promises all along."

Rabbinic Judaism viewed Ezekiel's opening vision as a mystic glimpse into proper worship of God. Such mysticism has been furthered by groups ranging from the Nation of Islam to UFO cults. "We used that bizarre reception history to help understand why the average Christian is often afraid to read Ezekiel," Rev. Compton said, "and moved toward more traditional ways the church has interpreted and preached the book."

The course examined New Testament expansions on Ezekiel's ideas, as well as themes found earlier in Israel's history. Rev. Compton said, "Ezekiel's quotations show his understanding of earlier books as canonical and authoritative, and model a faithful and inspired interpretation of earlier Scripture."

Ezekiel's identity is crucial to understanding the book. Although many believe Ezekiel exchanged his priestly task for a prophetic one, Rev. Compton advocated an alternative approach. "I proposed we think of Ezekiel's identity in terms of a Priestly-Prophet," he says, "a temple priest whose priestly identity and career are expressed through his prophetic ministry. He is the model temple priest in exile, when there is no temple at which to serve. This more robustly explains the many priestly themes and focus of the book."

The course dealt in depth with Ezekiel's "macro structure." Many commentators arrange the chapters into three sections: Messages of Woe for Judah/Jerusalem (1-24), Messages of Woe for the Nations (25-32), and Messages of Hope (33-48). But Rev. Compton believes a better way to understand the outline of the book is: Opening Vision (1-3:15), Ezekiel made a watchman against covenant presumption (3:16-32:32), and Ezekiel made a watchman against covenant despair (33:2-48:35). Students explored how the book's "dating schema" contributes to this arrangement.

"All of this aimed at understanding how the visions God showed Ezekiel might challenge the hubris and presumption of those who felt God would continue to bless them regardless of whether they worshipped him exclusively or not," he said. "The course also showed how the visions might comfort those in exile who had lost hope and feared that God had abandoned his covenant promises altogether."

Ezekiel's warnings and hope apply as much to Christians today as to the Israelites in Babylon. And Rev. Compton hopes modern believers discover the book's treasures. "Though many Christians neglect—or even avoid—this challenging book, my prayer is that this elective equips our students to share its riches with the people in the churches they are preparing to serve, enabling believers to read the book with greater confidence and interest while pointing them to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Ezekiel's message."

Evening class on Dead Sea Scrolls

by Glenda Mathes

Ever since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls by a Bedouin shepherd in 1947, questions—even conspiracy theories—have swirled about the fragments. Do the scrolls challenge the claims of Christianity? Do they indicate that the Old Testament is unreliable? Rev. Compton will answer those and other questions during an evening class in March, which will be open to the public.

According to Rev. Compton, the discovery affected biblical studies like "nothing before." The scrolls provide "scholars with a window into the oldest copies of the Old Testament" and "historians with a glimpse of the beliefs and customs of an Essene Jewish sect in the last centuries before the coming of Christ."

Although the slow acquisition of the scrolls created an air of mystery, Rev. Compton believes, "Christians do well to know about these texts and the community that wrote them." He has read extensively regarding the scrolls and led a group to view their exhibit at the California Science Center in 2015.

"Unlike anything found prior, they show us a glimpse of beliefs and ideas common in Judaism just before the time of Jesus and help to fill in the details surrounding the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes not provided by the New Testament," he said. "Furthermore, the biblical scrolls from Qumran show us just how ancient and just how stable is the Hebrew text standing behind our modern Bible translations."

Rev. Compton's evening class will be held on campus on March 16, 23, April 6 & April 13. To register for the class, go to midamerica.edu or call the Seminary at 219-864-2400.

President's Message: "The Use of Catechisms (and Confessions) in Preaching"

by Dr. Cornelis P. Venema



Since its inception, the M.Div. curriculum of Mid-America has included a required course in "Catechism Preaching." The presence of this course in our curriculum is not surprising. Among the churches Mid-America serves, there are many that require ministers ordinarily to preach a catechism sermon at one of the two services on the Lord's Day. In order to prepare students from these churches to fulfill this church order requirement, the course in catechism preaching aims to provide them with an account of the history of this practice, as well as guidance in how such preaching can best be carried out.

During the spring term of this academic year, I have been asked by the Faculty at Mid-America to teach this course to the middler and senior students. In the context of my preparation for this course, I decided that it might be profitable to offer some reflections on the practice of catechism preaching in this column. I do so in part out of an awareness that this practice is often neglected today, even in churches that require it in their church orders. I also do so out of an awareness that this practice is not uniformly embraced among Reformed and Presbyterian churches. To put it a bit more bluntly—it is a practice that is frowned upon by some who fear that it substitutes the church's catechisms for the Word of God in Scripture, which must be the sole standard and source for a minister's preaching.

Though I do not have the space to offer anything like a fulsome defense of the practice of catechism preaching, I would like to offer some general comments on the use of catechisms (and the other confessions as well) in preaching. In my judgment, there are three legitimate ways the church's catechisms may play an important role in the preaching ministry of a Reformed pastor.

First, the catechisms (and confessions) of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches are properly regarded as "rules of faith" that govern the teaching ministry of the church. All ministers in confessionally Reformed churches are expected to subscribe to them as faithful summaries of the teaching of the Word of God. Such ministers promise to preach and teach in a way that conforms to the confessions. They promise as well to refute any form of preaching or teaching that is out of accord with them. In these respects, the catechisms of the church provide a church-authorized litmus test for taking the measure of a preacher's exposition and application of the teaching of the Word of God. They offer a sort of "hermeneutic" or "rule of interpretation" by which Reformed pastors handle the Scriptures in preaching. Even in Reformed churches that do not require the practice of catechism preaching, church members may legitimately expect that the preaching of the Word of God from specific biblical passages will be clearly consistent with the church's catechisms and confessions.

Second, I would also suggest that the catechisms ought to be used in preaching in a more direct and overt manner. Though Reformed preachers need not expressly quote the catechisms (or confessions) in every sermon (or even in the majority of their sermons), they should make grateful use of the confessions where appropriate. To give an obvious illustration—why would a Reformed preacher choose to ignore what the catechisms say about one of the ten commandments or a petition of the Lord's prayer, when preaching on a biblical passage that treats these commandments or petitions? But this also holds true when the exposition of a biblical passage can be clarified through an appeal to the catechism or confession. For example, when a preacher is dealing with a passage that has implications for our understanding of the Trinity, he would be advised to call the congregation's attention to the confessions' summary of this doctrine.

And third, the catechisms of the church may also be used in a most direct and explicit fashion in preaching. Though there remains considerable debate regarding how best to use the catechism's summary of Scriptural teaching in determining the theme and outline of a catechism sermon, such a sermon may be crafted in a way that ensures that its content is thoroughly biblical and edifying. Provided the so-called "catechism sermon" bleeds "bible"—to use an expression I recall Spurgeon used to describe John Bunyan's writings—it may be an edifying way of teaching and preaching the Word of God in Scripture. So long as the catechism sermon communicates faithfully the teaching of the Word of God that the catechism summarizes, it remains an appropriate way to use the church's confessional understanding of Scripture in its preaching ministry.

Sustained!

by Aaron Warner (2015)

Sustained! This one word describes my long journey from recognizing God's internal call to experiencing the church's external call.

I knew I'd have to return to school and the work would be hard, but I didn't realize how difficult and humbling it would be. My pride sustained damage, which was just what I needed. In university, students younger than I were of greater intellect. In seminary, teachers and other students observed things in five minutes that I'd missed in sermons I took weeks to prepare. My sinful flesh sustained injury as I sat under teachers who wielded the Word's double-edged sword, exposing my weaknesses and inabilities.

I sustained God's intensive training during over seven years in higher education, two years back in the workforce to pay off loans, and a year vicariate in New Zealand. Many people sustained me with their prayers and support. Most of all, my Father in heaven has sustained me. He has been my help and my shield.

On July 8, I sustained a preliminary examination and became eligible for a call in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. I accepted a call to the Reformed Church of Palmerston North, and my final exam took place on November 4 & 5. By God's grace, this examination was also sustained!

I was ordained to the gospel ministry on December 10. The internal call I expressed over eleven years ago has sustained (incurred) some injury to push out pride, but it has also been sustained (confirmed) by the church and sustained (upheld and supported) by God's gracious hand. Praise be to God!



Click, Like, and Share by Jared Luttjeboer

Did you know you can keep in touch with MARS between Messenger publications?

As part of Mid-America Reformed Seminary's marketing strategy, multiple digital and social media platforms are utilized to effectively communicate both the goings on here at the seminary, as well as its Reformed values. Beginning with brainstorming sessions, the development of a content calendar, production, and post-production, a whole variety of moving pictures have been a means by which our friends of Mid-America can stay in touch with, and even become a part of, the tight-knit seminary community here.

Platforms such as Facebook and YouTube have displayed recent projects, beginning primarily in September of 2015. Some of the main themes that have run throughout the past year with these projects is growth, the essence of a seminary education, and the importance of its Reformed foundation, all spoken through the voices of donors, professors, and alumni/pastors alike.

Three of our most recent film productions have focused exclusively on these thematic subjects:

(1) Partnering with Woldhuis Farms and Sunrise Greenhouse, we developed the idea of communicating the "Essence of a Reformed Education" through the language of planting and growing seeds for the Kingdom, with seminary instruction as a means by which men may be trained for the sowing of those seeds. What was exciting about this project was the opportunity for us to travel to Woldhuis Farms from the months of February through the summer in order to capture both the dreary landscape prior to planting and the beauty of creation as plants and flowers blossom for the spring and summer season.

(2) Over the reading break this past October, 2016, an interview with Rev. Andrew Compton (Assistant Professor of Old Testament Studies) was filmed, detailing his journey from being behind the pulpit to being in front of students, as he recounted his time in the pastorate and how it prepared him for his time in the classroom as a professor at Mid-America. The underlying theme of this video was that of "growth," which was kick-started by a Junior class introductory video that was published at the beginning of this school year as each new incoming student expressed where they would like to see personal growth throughout their seminary career.

(3) Lastly, "The Quality of Reformed Education" was a short piece which saw Rev. Doug Barnes, pastor of Covenant URC in Pella, IA, reflecting on his seminary training at Mid-America and the value of a Reformed education and foundation which paves the way to ensure Christ-centered preaching to the church and its congregants.

You can stay updated with other projects and more by visiting our Facebook page and YouTube channel.



jenə'rāsədē by Mike Deckinga

Gen-er-os-i-ty. It's a noun. According to Merriam-Webster, it can be defined two ways: "the quality or fact of being generous", or, "a generous act." To be generous is to be "characterized by a noble or kindly spirit." To be generous is also to be "liberal in giving." There is another word that has been on my mind lately. That word is stewardship. The dictionary defines stewardship as, "the conducting, supervising, or managing of something; especially: the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care."

My thoughts transitioned to the relationship between the two. If I am generous, does that mean I am a good steward? If I am a good steward, is my generosity directed in such a way that it benefits the recipient adequately enough? Who has entrusted to my care the things I possess? What do I possess? Do I really possess them? Is there anyone who can help me be a good steward of my resources? I have now exhausted the dictionary's usefulness.

What does the Bible say about all of this? Dr. John Thornton is a CPA with a Ph.D. in Accounting from Washington State University. In preparation for his book, *Jesus' Terrible Financial Advice*, he read through the Bible in its entirety and highlighted every verse about wealth. To his amazement, he found over 1,300 verses! God gives us deliberate instructions on how to steward our resources. He tells us throughout the Old and New Testament how to be generous. He warns us against idolatry. In fact, the whole of scripture points to the most undeserved act of generosity ever made – "That while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8b).

Over the next few editions of The Messenger, I plan on covering a variety of topics regarding wealth, stewardship, and generosity. It is a journey I am on, and I ask you, "Will you join me?" I pray the discoveries we make together will greatly impact not only our lives, but also the lives changed daily by God's grace through the kingdom causes we support. *Soli Deo Gloria!*





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2017 Spring Evening Class

with Rev. Andrew Compton

The Dead Sea Scrolls:

What are they? Why are they important?
Why are they thought to be contentious?

March 16 & 23, April 6 & 13 at 7:30 pm

For more information and to register, visit midamerica.edu

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CONFESSIONALLY SOUND
PASTORALLY FOCUSED

◆ CAMPUS UPDATES

Ron Verburg (1953-2017)

by Keith LeMahieu



Mid-America Reformed Seminary lost a member of the seminary family on January 3, 2017, when Mr. Ron Verburg of Munster, Indiana, died from complications of colon cancer. Ron

was 63 years old and presently serving on Mid-America's Board of Trustees. Ron is survived by his wife of 36 years Debra (Huizenga), and children Lauren Verburg and Alicia (Brian) Van Baren. Together Ron and Deb have two grandchildren.

Ron was the eldest son of Rev. Art and Trudy Verburg (who served congregations in the

Christian Reformed Church in North America). Ron lived in Iowa and Michigan before moving to the Chicago area as a young man. Ron attended Calvin College for one year before transferring to the University of Illinois where he graduated with a degree in Urban Planning. Ron worked for the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission in Chicago and most recently as Vice President at Great Lakes Distributing in Lansing, IL, a company specializing in commercial cleaning equipment.

Ron served as both a deacon and an elder, most recently completing a term as elder at Oak Glen United Reformed Church in Lansing, IL, in June, 2016. He also served on the missions committee for many years. Ron was elected to the Mid-America Board in 2014. He was a very

effective Board member, providing excellent advice and leadership to the Board's Long-Range Planning Committee. He was always well prepared for the meetings. Ron showed a keen interest in others, and he enjoyed getting to know his fellow Board members and meeting students and professors. Because of his dependability and love for others many people considered him a pillar in the church.

It was a privilege for me to work with Ron as a board member. I found him to be a wonderful example in his service to Christ. Even after his diagnosis and treatment began, Ron continued to take his board responsibilities seriously, and he remained joyful in the Lord. We will miss him.