

the messenger

Mid-America Reformed Seminary

Commemorating the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)

by Dr. Cornelis P. Venema



The years of our Lord, 2018-2019, mark the 400th anniversary of the convening of the Synod of Dort in Dordrecht, the Netherlands. The Synod of Dort was convened in order to settle the ongoing controversy in the Dutch churches regarding the teaching of Arminius and his followers on the topic of election. The 400th anniversary of this great Synod and the confession it produced, the Canons of Dort, ought to be an occasion for thanksgiving for the rich inheritance in the gospel that the Synod bequeathed to the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. In a

period of history when many evangelical believers are rediscovering the “doctrines of grace,” it would be ironic were the Reformed churches to miss the opportunity to celebrate the Synod and its achievements.

The most important work of the Synod was the formulation of the Canons of Dort, which consist of five main points of doctrine that provide a biblical response to the five opinions of the Arminians or Remonstrants. Though these points are commonly associated with the acronym, TULIP (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints), this acronym alters the sequence of the points adopted by the synod and provide a somewhat misleading summary of their teaching. The points in their proper sequence and meaning teach unconditional election, particular or definite redemption, radical depravity, effectual grace, and perseverance. The burden of the Canons is that the salvation of sinners depends wholly upon the gracious purpose of the Triune God: the Father who unconditionally elects his people in Christ, the Son who provides and secures the salvation of all those for whom he died, and the Holy Spirit who unfailingly and effectually calls believers through the Word of the gospel into saving communion with Christ. Salvation is God’s work from first to last, and does not ultimately depend upon any human merit or work.

Though the Synod of Dort is widely known for its formulation of these doctrinal points, it is important to remember that its work included actions that were decisive for the preservation of the Reformation in the Netherlands and elsewhere. These actions were of lasting significance, not only for the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, but for the Reformed churches throughout the world that find their historical roots in the continental Reformed tradition. Among these actions, several were of special importance.

- The Synod appointed a translation committee, which eventually produced the Statenvertaling (“state translation”) or Dutch version of the Bible. This translation would prove to be the Dutch equivalent of the King James Version in English, as it served the Dutch church throughout much of its history until recent times.
- The Synod adopted a revised Form of Subscription, which continues to be used to this day by Reformed churches that take seriously their adherence to the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort).
- The Synod adopted a Church Order that continues to serve as the basis for the church orders of Reformed denominations that subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity.

In my view, the Synod of Dort completed the Reformation of the church in the Netherlands, and provided an enduring legacy for the ministry of Reformed churches throughout the world. In the first place, the Canons offer a beautiful, pastoral defense of the simple gospel truth that “God saves sinners.” God does not simply make salvation possible. He actually saves, and he does so out of the depths of his eternal purpose of election. And in the second place, the Synod made several far-reaching decisions that have contributed to the well-being of the Reformed churches throughout their history. After four hundred years, these gifts of the Synod continue to preserve the church’s testimony to the gospel and to govern her ministry in an edifying manner.

Evening Class

by Dr. Cornelis P. Venema

This year’s spring term evening class, taught by Dr. Cornelis P. Venema, will focus upon the Synod of Dort. The class will treat several key features of the Synod’s work. The first class will focus on the history, background, and acts of the Synod. The second class will provide a summary of the five main points of doctrine, which were formulated as a response to the “five opinions” of the Arminians or Remonstrants. The third class will consider the key role the doctrine of the assurance of salvation played in the deliberations of the Synod. And the fourth class will address the implications of the five points of doctrine for the preaching of the gospel. Contrary to the Arminian accusation that these points undermine the indiscriminate and compassionate preaching of the gospel to all lost sinners, the Canons provide a solid foundation for gospel preaching and evangelism.

The class will meet on four successive Thursday evenings in February (21st and 28th) and March (7th & 14th), at 7:30 p.m.



Spirituality of the Church

by Dr. Alan D. Strange



I believe that D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was correct when he said that when the church seeks to be most like the world she does the world the least good. The doctrine of the spirituality of the church, rightly constructed, cries out, “Let the church be the church.” Let it be given to proclaiming the everlasting gospel, as Paul did to Philemon. Paul did not command the liberation of Onesimus. Rather, he urged his freedom as a consequence of the gospel. He clearly distinguished the gospel (the person and work of Christ), our response to the gospel (faith and repentance) and the consequence of the gospel (faith working through love). To confuse these is to lose the gospel. To deny the consequences of the gospel renders it powerless. This is the core of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church.

Many Christians came to find the doctrine of the spirituality of the church (SOTC) repellent, since it was often employed to still the voice of the church against the monstrosity of American chattel slavery. I maintain, however, that the doctrine of the SOTC, rightly understood and employed, need not support an evil like slavery, but may help maintain a vigorous ecclesiology that is the best enemy of all immorality, including racism.

Though the Bible distinguished between church and state (between priest and king), the kind of separation of the institutions of which we are all aware was a post-Reformation (initially American) phenomenon. In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church claimed that the church was over the state, and the emperors in the East asserted that the state was over the church. After the Reformation, some Protestant civil rulers espoused Erastianism, in which they claimed that the state was over the newly-Reformed church. The way that the Scots particularly opposed Erastianism was with what they called, “The Spiritual Independency of the Church,” especially as enunciated in the Second Book of Discipline (1578), which came, over time, and particularly in the 19th c. American context, to be called “The Spirituality of the Church.”

Sadly, the doctrine of the SOTC came to be abused in the American context, both being misused in the defense of slavery, on the one hand, and abandoned, in the promotion of partisan politics, on the other. With respect to the latter, the history of the PCUSA from the reunion of 1869 to the formation of the OPC in 1936 discloses not only a liberalizing church embracing higher criticism but a politicized church more interested in deeds than creeds and one in which the social gospel came to displace the gospel of salvation in Christ alone. It reflects a church that forgot its calling to be the church, lost its way spiritually, and jettisoned the doctrine of the SOTC.

What we need is a rightly constructed SOTC that caters neither to the left or to the right in the details of public policy that Scripture doesn’t prescribe. The pulpit and the church as church should speak where Scripture speaks and be silent where Scripture is silent. Scripture does have something to say not only about same-sex marriage, abortion, and private property (historic concerns of the “right”) but also about equity for the poor in our midst, racial equality, and justice for all (especially widows, orphans, the most vulnerable; historic concerns of the “left”). The Bible provides no detailed blueprint for civil society (the Old Testament, as a primitive agrarian society, is certainly not such for capitalism, as many on the right seem to argue) but tells us how sinners may find acceptance with a holy God through the active and passive obedience of our mediator, Jesus Christ. This is what the church must preach, not low taxes or anti-health care messages (more likely in our circles) any more than it should socialism or LGBTQ+ rights.

Dr. Strange recently taught a new elective in Interim 2019, which he developed out of his doctoral research and published dissertation, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge*. The course, entitled “The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church,” was taught as a weeklong intensive (five hours each day, from January 7-11), bearing this description: *A study of the relationship of church and state in the history of the Christian church (with a brief look in the beginning at its relationship in biblical times); focusing significantly on church and state in America, with a view to understanding the distinctness of the spiritual character of the nature and mission of the church, seeing how the church both distinguishes itself from the world and gives itself to the world.*

Sabbatical: A Time to Replenish

by Dr. Marcus Mininger

So much of a professor’s job is about productive output: formulating and delivering lectures, counseling with students, administrating aspects of seminary life, serving on a local consistory or session, preaching in area churches, serving in classis or presbytery. All of that output draws upon an existing storehouse of learning in an effort to meet people’s needs. But when do those storehouses of learning get replenished? Not usually during a busy school semester, which is why Mid-America provides faculty with one semester of sabbatical every seven years.

This past fall I received my first sabbatical, which allowed time for replenishment through more focused reading, thinking, prayer, and writing. In particular, my sabbatical meant opportunity to study topics that I often do not have time for and topics that are inherently more difficult and so require sustained reflection.

Having just spent several years researching and writing a book on Romans, my sabbatical provided welcome opportunity to broaden back out and give renewed attention to other parts of the New Testament, such as the Epistle to the Hebrews. This was especially with a view to producing a major study of Heb 6:4-6 and what the “impossibility” of restoring some apostate sinners to repentance means. Not surprisingly, this is a complex topic, and my sabbatical allowed extended time for researching and writing a lengthy manuscript that is now close to completion.

Another complex topic concerns the place of the Law in Paul’s letters. My sabbatical gave me time for deeper research, especially regarding the controversial phrase “work(s) of the Law” (Rom 2:15; 3:20, 28; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10) for the sake of a future article.

Then I also spent time reading widely about New Perspective and apocalyptic interpretation, participatory soteriology and ethics, republication of the covenant of works, and ancient views of grace and benefaction. That may sound like Greek to some. But those topics all exert great influence on New Testament studies today, and a Reformed professor must understand them to help future ministers have discernment about current trends of thought.

Clearly then, a sabbatical is not a vacation; it is full of work. But that work still helped replenish the storehouses I rely on in other areas of service, for which I am very grateful.

Half-Time Report by Mike Deckinga



Words on a page. Sentences on my screen. There. Now I'm getting somewhere. For three days now, I've had writer's block. This is rather unusual for me. A new struggle? I hope not for long.

Two sentences down. Fantastic! 960 words to go.

Ok, I'll level with you. I try to make the development report enjoyable to read. Sometimes I start things off with a story, or an analogy – something to draw you in. I have no idea if that is effective. Some of you have said it is – others have accused me of being too flowery. The problem is, I don't think I have a creative bone in my body today. Or yesterday. Or the day before. We're just going to have to roll with it. Forgive me?

That's right. No cute story, or playful banter. We're heading straight to the financial results of 2018. The books are officially closed, and we have much to be thankful for, as well as a bit to be concerned about. When I analyze our financial reports, I predominantly focus on three different areas: The General Fund, the Canadian Foundation, and how that all ties together to form our budget. As we look at these numbers together, we should keep in mind that we budget for and operate on a fiscal year. That year begins July 1, and ends on June 30.

General Fund contributions (US Donors) have increased by \$8,000, year to date. For this, we are thankful, but it should be noted that this is all that remains of our increased revenue after two straight months of significant decline in General Fund contributions. The month of December is the most significant month for donations, so much so, that it tends to set the trajectory for the rest of the year. This past December, we saw contributions hit a five year low, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Let's take a look at year-to-date giving from our Canadian constituency. Figure 2 brings to light a steep decline in giving this year compared to the four year average. The Seminary receives installments of \$44,000 each month from the Canadian Foundation, but only when sufficient funds are available; therefore, the budgeted portion of revenue from the Foundation annually is \$528,000. I should note that at times, the Seminary receives less than \$44,000 in a given month. In other words, it is not "all or nothing." We receive what we can, when we can. As mentioned, we are half-way through our fiscal year. The budget calls for \$264,000. In actuality, it is \$196,000. Figure 3 shows the significant gap in budgeted vs. actual revenue from the Canadian Foundation.

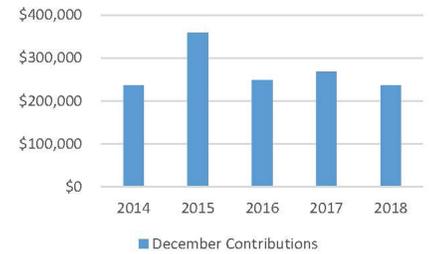
Now that we've covered US and Canadian contributions separately, we can take a look at the big picture. Figure 4 illustrates the gap between our budgeted contributions, and actual contributions. As you can see, the difference continues to grow each month. Currently, we are a little over \$95,000 behind pace. History would lead us to conclude that any deficit generated by the end of the calendar year, would leave us with a deficit at the end of the fiscal year. Does this have to be the case? I don't think so.

Giving to Mid-America Reformed Seminary accomplishes several things. It provides for effective preaching, teaching, disciple-making, and evangelism all over the world – advancing the Lord's kingdom. It ensures that an excellent classroom experience is taking place. We need to be able to provide for our professors, as well as have the ability to source and fund adjunct faculty. The Faculty is our mission embodied – in other words – they are our boots on the ground. They help prepare our students for a lifetime of service to our Lord in ministry. It also allows for maintenance and repairs to be made on our building. Simply put, we can keep the lights on. Additionally, we are able to maintain our commitment to be an affordable place to study. Mid-America's tuition is at an industry low – by design. Our graduates are able to enter the ministry without being shackled by additional educational debt. Raising tuition to satisfy the budget is not on our "to-do" list, and we know you're committed to that as well.

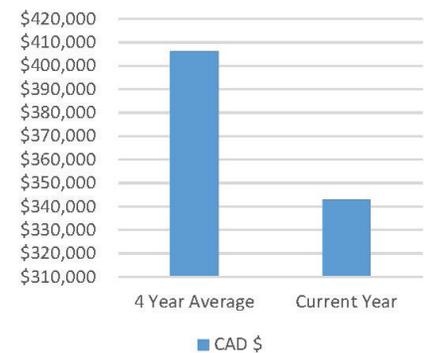
The Lord has shown us time and again through your generosity that He will provide what we need, when we need it. We owe you all a debt of gratitude and we are very thankful for all you've done for us. We remain faithful to our calling as an institution and strive to be good stewards of the resources you have provided. Will you remain faithful in your financial and prayerful support? Without the Lord's blessings given to us through your generous hearts, we cannot accomplish our work. I humbly ask you to reinvest yourselves in your partnership with Mid-America – not for our honor and glory – but for His!

To discuss ways you can help, or to discuss planned giving, contact Mike Deckinga at mdeckinga@midamerica.edu.

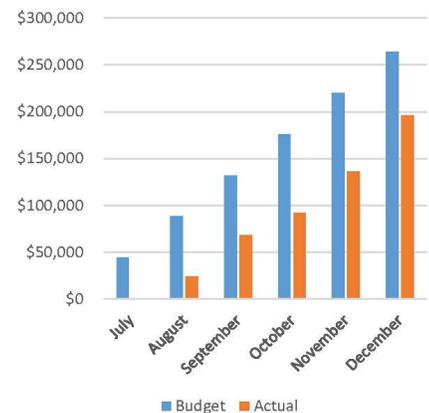
December Contributions
Figure 1



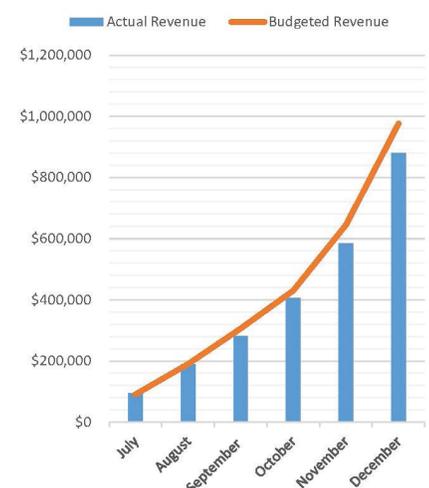
Canadian Contributions
(CAD \$)
Figure 2



Foundation Grants
Figure 3



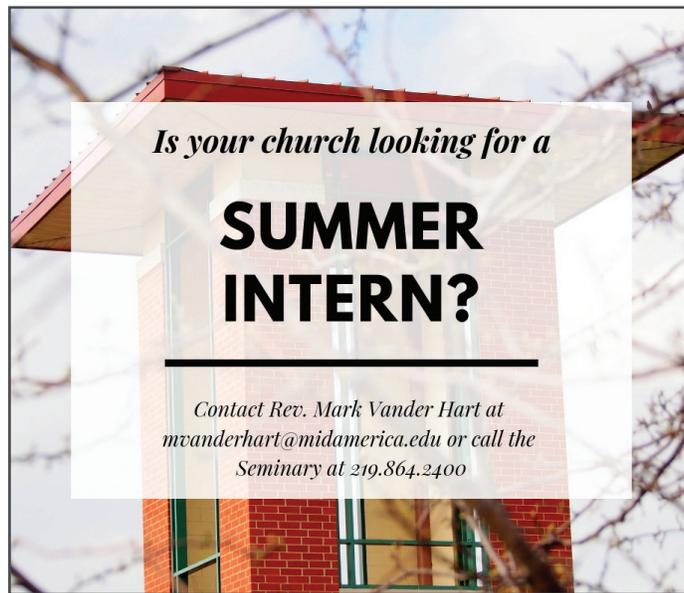
YTD Actual vs. Budget
Figure 4





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Stay Tuned

by Jared Luttjeboer



Assembled Seminary professors: check. Microphone: check. Recording software functioning: check. For all our friends of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, this is “Round Table,” Mid-America’s first ever podcast. For any-

one unfamiliar with the term, a “podcast” is, by definition, “a digital audio file made available on the Internet for downloading to a computer or mobile device” (Google definition). We’re calling it “Round Table” simply because our professors take time out of their normal schedules to sit down and discuss theological and pastoral issues of our day. We’re classifying it as a podcast because it functions as a digital audio piece available on the Internet, either for streaming or downloading. Here is what you can expect this year regarding this media endeavor.

Firstly, as we start out, we’ll be releasing two additional podcasts this Spring semester. The objective is to record once more in February for a

launch in early March, with a further episode produced for late April or early May. Our hope is - as we continue to learn about pressing matters in the church - to produce consistent releases throughout future semesters and summer months.

Secondly, not every single professor of Mid-America will be featured on each episode. As the episodes are planned and thought out, the Faculty will deliberate on who participates, particularly as the topics of the episodes change. The Faculty is careful when considering items to discuss, being mindful of those who take time to listen – not only pastors and theologians with considerable knowledge of the Bible and theology, but the everyday layman in the pew who faces cultural and ethical issues in this volatile world around them.

Thirdly, every episode will be available to listen through social media and email. You can download each episode through our Sermon Audio page. If you have any topics that you would like to hear addressed, please email me at jluttjeboer@midamerica.edu. Thanks for listening, and stay tuned!

Spring Conference

by Ryan Swale

On March 12th from 1:00-4:00 p.m., Mid-America will welcome Dr. James Berry of West Virginia University to give a two-part lecture on “Understanding the Insanity of Addiction,” followed by a time of Q&A. Dr. Berry will draw from his experience as a licensed physician, university professor, and Orthodox Presbyterian elder to equip our students on ministering to those suffering from addiction.



Too often it’s assumed that addiction is merely a matter of wrong choices, and sincere Christians, therefore, must simply will themselves to stop. But Dr. Berry contends that while on this earth we are bound by physical limitations which, not absolving individuals of responsibility, must be kept in mind as we minister to them. This should prove useful for ministers, elders, and deacons, who will inevitably find themselves ministering to such persons. But everyone holding the general office of believer is encouraged to attend. This event is free of charge and open to the public. It will also be live-streamed at midamerica.edu, where you will also find further registration information.