

THE MESSENGER

MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY

Inside/Outside Conference

by Rev. Jeff DeBoer



“When we know God to be our Father, should we not desire that he be known as such by all? And if we do not have his passion . . . is it not a sign that his glory means little to us?” John Calvin

What about those outside?

On March 4 and 5, Dr. Cornelis Venema, Dr. J. Mark Beach and Rev. Jeff De Boer traveled to Brantford, Ontario for the first Inside/Outside Conference. The conference was about two groups

of people: those on the inside of the church who know the gospel, and those outside who do not. The three men spoke about how to use the gospel gifts God has given the church for the benefit of those outside.

On Friday evening Dr. Beach encouraged preaching that is accessible. Accessibility may mean to communicate the gospel truth in an understandable language. Even more, accessibility grows when reaching outsiders is an expected part of our church culture.

Attendee Anthony Schimdt said, “It was great instruction on preaching so that those inside the church are fed, while remembering the importance of presenting the message so those not initiated in the church can still be reached.”

The next morning Dr. Venema encouraged the use of hospitality for those outside in a way similar to the exercise of that kindness inside. Moving from the “one another” passages in the New Testament to specific texts about hospitality, Dr. Venema demonstrated the biblical call to hospitality as well as providing good advice about how hospitality might be practiced.

Following Dr. Venema’s presentation, Rev. Jeff De Boer spoke about discipleship. “Discipleship is the central calling of the church according to the Great Commission. To make disciples means to bring others to know Jesus as well as be an active part of their maturing,” he said. The final part of his presentation was a practical guide to the process of discipleship.

The final speaking period belonged to Dr. Beach. He encouraged the attendees to turn the inside outside. The primary boundary against this turn is the inside’s view of those outside. “I was challenged most when Dr. Beach talked about being an accidental Pharisee and seeing others with a sense of presumptive reprobation . . . assuming there is no hope for others,” said Samuel Verdonk. “Instead I must be reminded that as Christ died for me, so he able to save those he calls.”

Following each presentation was a time for questions and answers. About 175 people were blessed by the hospitality of the Living Water Congregation for the weekend. We give a special thanks to Rev. Greg Bylsma and his congregation for their kindness.

If you are interested in a similar conference to your area, please contact the seminary.

Inside/Outside Conference

by Rev. Jeff DeBoer

Following the conference, the brothers from Mid America were invited to lead worship and preach at various churches on Sunday. In the morning Dr. Beach traveled to Zion United Reformed Church in Sheffield, and in the afternoon he was in Rehoboth United Reformed Church in Hamilton. During these services he preached from Revelation 5, encouraging the congregation in the assurance that Christ is worthy and able to affect the will of God for us.

Dr. Venema led worship and preached in Immanuel United Reformed Church in Listowel. In the afternoon he traveled to Bethel United Reformed Church in Woodstock. In his sermons he preached from John 19:26-27, ministering the gospel from the the third word of Jesus from the cross.

In the morning Rev. De Boer preached at the conference’s host church, Living Water United Reformed Church of Brantford. His sermon was taken from Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, and addressed the futility of work apart from Christ and the joy of that work as part of following after him. In the afternoon he led worship at Providence United Reformed Church in Strathroy. Rev. De Boer spoke from 1 Corinthians 1:4-9 about giving thanks for each member of the church—even while seeing weaknesses and sins—because of our identity in Christ.

Following the afternoon services Rev. Bylsma and his wife hosted Dr. Beach, Dr. Venema and Rev. De Boer for an evening of good food and fellowship. Rev Richard Bout, missions coordinator for the United Reformed Churches, was a welcome part of the conversation.

The President's Message: "Given to Hospitality"

by Dr. Cornelis Venema

"Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." Rom. 12:13

At a recent conference in the province of Ontario, Canada, I had the privilege to speak about the importance of the practice of hospitality to the church's calling to disciple those "inside" the church and to enfold those who are "outside." My thesis was a simple one: without the practice of Christian hospitality, the church will be greatly hindered in its ministry of the gospel to those who are within, or to those who are being enfolded into, its fellowship.

The biblical exhortation to practice hospitality is among the most remarkable rules for proper conduct within "God's household," the church (1 Tim. 3:15). I say "remarkable," because this rule is so often overlooked or neglected among God's people. But I also say "remarkable," because this rule is one most frequently mentioned in the Scriptures. You have to work hard to miss it!

Already in the Old Testament code for the conduct of God's covenant people, the requirement of hospitality is clearly stated. Leviticus 19:34, for example, says: "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God."

But the exhortation to hospitality is also sprinkled throughout the New Testament. Our Lord, in his well-known words regarding the final judgment and separation of the sheep from the goats, speaks of those who will be sent away to judgment because, as He strikingly remarks, "I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in" (Matt. 25:43). The apostle Paul in Romans 12 encourages all believers, in view of God's mercy, to "pursue hospitality" (v. 13). In the lists of qualities required of officebearers in the church, being given to hospitality is prominent among them (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8). The writer of Hebrews alludes to the incident when Abraham and Sarah entertained three heavenly guests at their tent, when he encourages believers, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it" (13:2). Just as believers are to give without "complaint," so the apostle Peter says, "Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Pet. 4:9-10).

But what does it mean to be hospitable? The answer lies close at hand, in the word itself. The biblical term for "hospitality" is really a combination of two words, "love" or "friendship" and "stranger." Hospitality is not first of all a matter of offering a perfunctory word of welcome to someone whom we do not know. Nor does it consist simply in entertaining guests or furnishing a richly spread dinner table, though these may be very important ways of showing hospitality. In its simplest and most basic meaning, hospitality means *showing a regard, an interest in, a special affection and favor toward, those who are strangers or aliens*. In the life of the church, it means that all the members, but especially the officebearers, should make it a point to welcome and receive in a kind and gracious way those who are strangers to us or our fellowship.

Now, if you were to ask, why does our heavenly Father want His children to be hospitable?, the answer is clear: *because the gospel is all about God's gracious hospitality toward us sinners*. Were we not strangers to God and His covenant? And yet, God took us in! Were we not outside the fellowship of Christ, by nature objects of God's wrath? And yet, God embraced us in His favor. Were we not aliens in the earth, like our father Adam, banished from God's presence? And yet, God came to us, invited us to sit at His table, dressed us in the garments of royalty, and furnished that table with the finest of foods.

How then could a believer, toward whom God has shown such extraordinary hospitality, refuse hospitality toward a brother or a sister who is a stranger?

Reformed churches and believers, especially pastors and elders, should not be, as so many allege, "xenophobic," that is, characterized by an unnatural fear of strangers. They ought to be, by God's grace, hospitable, known for their warm welcome and kindness toward strangers. Is this true of you? Of your congregation? Within the context of a church community that pursues hospitality, the proclamation of God's gracious welcome to us in Christ will have the ring of authenticity.

Taking Hold of That Which is Truly Life

by Keith LeMahieu

I love Paul's letters to Timothy. There is much wonderful instruction to glean. Now I know *all* Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness (as Paul tells Timothy), but I find Paul's inspired advice to Timothy to be especially practical.

Paul encourages Timothy to guard the gospel message against those who would teach a different doctrine and to do so out of love that issues from a pure heart (1 Tim. 1:5). These are love letters to the church urging godliness that imparts blessing for not only this life, but the life to come.

In 1 Timothy 6 Paul specifically instructs Timothy about riches. No doubt Paul understood this young pastor would encounter tenth commandment sin in his life and ministry. Paul tells Timothy to "charge" those who are rich in this present age. Timothy is to order or command those who have been blessed materially to be both generous and rich in good works. The result, according to Paul, is that we store up treasure as a "good foundation for the future" and thus "take hold of that which is truly life."

What is your hope? Is it on the uncertainty of riches or on God who richly provides us with everything to enjoy? Are you generous and ready to share? If you are, the Word of God says you are laying a good foundation for the future so that you may take hold of that which is truly life. We value your generosity toward Mid-America which makes it possible for us to prepare men to declare these riches of true life.

You are invited to the 2016
Commencement, which will be held
at Bethel Christian Reformed Church
in Lansing, IL, on
May 12, 2016 at 7:30 p.m.

Seniors Poised for Service by Glenda Mathes

Almost three years ago, seven men entered the Seminary to be rooted in God's Word and nourished for the gospel ministry. Their anticipated graduation in May will transplant them into far-flung fields where the harvest is ripe.

Teaching public school in Phoenix, AZ, **Jeremy Baker** felt increasingly frustrated by his inability to address the root of students' problems with the gospel. "I felt that the Lord may be calling me to ministry and with the blessings of my family and church, I sought out a confessional Reformed seminary to attend in order to be as well equipped as possible for whatever role in the church the Lord had for me." After receiving his M.Div, Jeremy and Gwen, with daughters Daisy (14), Lily (11), and Dahlia (5), will return to Arizona, where he will complete an internship at the OPC's Yuma church plant.

Joshua Flinn grew up in New Zealand as the son of a Reformed Churches of New Zealand minister. Prior to attending seminary, he trained as a teacher and has worked in upper-level schools in both London (United Kingdom) and New Zealand. "As time progressed, I realized that although students might get high grades in class and maybe later a high-paying job, I was unable to teach them about things of true and everlasting value." He now aspires to lead lost souls to Christ.

He hopes to utilize his M.Div. as a pastor in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. He and his wife, Hannah, have an infant son, Asher.

Robert Holda, who worked for nearly a decade in various educational contexts within the Chicago area, didn't travel far when his pastors prompted him to attend seminary. He and Grace have an infant daughter, Elaina. He will receive his M.Div. and plans to seek a call within the OPC. "I hope the Lord will use me to bring people into contact with the message and Spirit of our risen Savior through the ministries of Word, sacrament, and prayer. I hope that, in my person and my ministry, I am used by God to reveal the person and ministry of Jesus Christ more than anything else."

Daniel Ragusa hails from West Islip, NY, where he grew up in Pentecostal churches, but was drawn to the Reformed faith in high school. He studied the Bible and led Bible studies, even while pursuing a business degree in finance. But he felt an increasing desire to preach and teach God's Word, which his pastor and elders encouraged him to do. After graduating with an M.Div., he hopes, "To shepherd a congregation of Christ in the URCNA and possibly in the future to teach at the seminary level to train men for ministry." He will likely attend Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia for further

study.

Arjen Vreugdenhil planned to teach in the Netherlands, until he met Jodi and moved to Michigan to marry her. The couple now has three children, Ethan (6), Elliot (4), and newborn Simon. After teaching college Physics for nine years, Arjen felt called to ministry. "My decision to go to seminary was mostly driven by the desire to use my teaching skills in the service of God's Kingdom, in the church." After receiving his M.Div., he hopes to pastor a North American congregation of the URC, but is open to other calls. He is interested in eventually continuing theological studies and possibly teaching at a seminary.

Jaap Vreugdenhil will receive the MTS degree with a Biblical Studies concentration. He and Henny moved here from the Netherlands so he could attend seminary. "After an early retirement, I saw this as an opportunity to work for the Kingdom, and at the same time enjoy being closer to our eldest son and his family." Although unsure how God will use them in His service, they plan to return to the Netherlands. "There is for sure a need for more biblical and doctrinal knowledge in those churches that want to be Reformed. We trust that God will show us the path we have to go."

Martin Peter Van't Hoff owned a successful company that used 3D modeling software to help other companies develop their ideas. But serving as an elder in his Leduc, Alberta, church awakened within him a deep desire for pastoral ministry. "God's people are important to me. I'm drawn very much to the practical, the pastoral side of the ministry." He desires to love God and His people, while working to advance the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. After receiving his M.Div., he hopes to receive a call within the URCNA. Pete and Cheryl have five children: Niesje (12), Mitchell (11), Lynzie (9), Elijah (7), and Katie (5).




Seniors: (Back, left to right) Jeremy Baker, Pete Van't Hoff, Dan Ragusa; (Front, left to right) Arjen Vreugdenhil, Bob Holda, Josh Flinn, Jaap Vreugdenhil



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For more information, visit:
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Student Conference by Dan Ragusa



The Student Body welcomed Dr. Derek Thomas of Reformed Theological Seminary Atlanta as the 2016 Spring Conference speaker. He brought both his theological prowess and pastoral sensitivities to bear upon the problem of pain. If God is all-powerful, He should prevent evil. If God is all-good, He should desire to prevent

evil. But evil exists; therefore, it is thought, either God is not sovereign or good. This so-called problem is known as theodicy.

Dr. Thomas' first lecture looked for a solution from Job. Following a bird's-eye view of the book, he concluded that the answer couldn't come at the expense of God's sovereignty. Rather, the answer comes in part when we consider the cosmic battle between good and evil, between God and Satan. In his second lecture, Dr. Thomas considered the suffering of Christ, especially His cry of dereliction from the cross, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?". The answer to Christ's question is not that there is no justice in the universe, but that He was making satisfaction for the sin of His people as their substitute.

The final lecture concluded the conference on a pastoral note as Dr. Thomas expounded upon Paul's exhortation in Romans 5:1-5 to rejoice in our sufferings. As we live between the now and not yet, between the reality of what we are now as justified and adopted sons of God and the glory that awaits us, there lies the reality of a valley in which we must journey as pilgrims, where there is trouble, trial and difficulty. Within this tension we can rejoice if we first learn the basic principle Paul is operating with here: only crushed grapes produce wine. My suffering is not meaningless, but working to produce something glorious—it's always going somewhere by God's providence and according to His sovereign plan. God will stop at nothing to produce in us the real, lasting thing. So if you will embrace the cross of Christ, it will embrace you and lead you to far-surpassing glory of eternal weight.