College Life

• For many years we’ve been praying for more men to train for pastoral ministry in our supporting churches. Last week we saw an encouraging answer to those prayers as thirteen men gathered to take a new Intensive unit we’ve developed called, “Pastoral Ministry in Reformed Churches.” These students are all in various stages of preparing for ordained ministry, and they came together from WA, Queensland, NSW, Tasmania, Victoria and New Zealand. Over the week we had lively interactions on topics ranging from life as a pastor, burnout in ministry, leadership paradigms, and passing on the faith to the next generation, to the Church Order, the Reformed confessions, and the history of Reformed churches. It was a great week together and most encouraging to see who the Lord is raising up as the next generation of pastors.

• This week Dr Bernie Power is speaking at RTC on “Christian Responses to Islam.” Dr Power, an expert on this theme, is from the Centre for the Study of Islam and other Faiths at the Melbourne School of Theology. We look forward to welcoming many guests to consider this important issue.

• From time to time we are asked about how we are overseeing the theology department of the RTC since we currently have no full-time theology lecturer. Needless to say, having a strong theology department is critical to our life as a College, and the teaching of theology is central to our curriculum. Since the retirement of Dr Bill Berends at the end of last year, Dr Martin Williams has been appointed as Head of Theology. Martin has studied and read extensively in biblical, systematic and historical theology. He now oversees a small team of theology lecturers that this year has included himself, Bill Berends and Peter Adam. The team will continue to grow as we head into Melbourne next year. In this way, we can ensure high quality teaching across the four main theology units we offer. Bill Berends also continues to teach Worldview and Ethics.

RTC Preaching Conference

It is less than a month to the 2016 Preaching Conference but it is not too late to register. This year we tackle the foundational book of Genesis, exploring the very beginnings of the world, the human race and God’s redemptive plan. The program is structured so as to consider preaching from each main section of the book, and there is a bonus session by Mike Raiter on “Lively Communication”. Register online here or call the RTC Office.

MTS Survey

We have recently partnered with MTS (Ministry Training Strategy), in a survey that examines training patterns for people preparing for gospel ministry, and in particular, the use of apprenticeships as part of a person’s training. A survey was sent out to our current students and RTC Alumni. While the survey questions may not all be relevant to the experience of RTC graduates, we believe it is valuable to be part of this wider survey and in this way help with strategizing effective ministry training in the future. If you have studied at the RTC in the past, we’d encourage you to take the survey. There’s a free ebook as a thank you if you do so.
Book Recommendation
(by Dr Murray Capill)

On the cover of “The Imperfect Pastor,” by Zack Eswine (Crossway, 2015), there is a clever word change from “I’m Perfect” to “Imperfect.” Sadly, many pastors feel the need to be perfect, or to act as if they are. The reality is, pastoral ministry is always done by sinners, with limited knowledge, limited capacities and most often, very ordinary ministries. Eswine speaks into that reality, powerfully exposing the temptations of wanting to be a celebrity pastor and instead, calling ministers to faithfulness in ordinary ways.

One of the theme tunes of the book is that pastors feel they have to do large things, famously, as fast as possible. They need to fix everything, know it all and be everywhere for God all the time. In contrast, Eswine asks, “Tell me, when did it happen that a life purposed to help ordinary people in their ordinary struggles locate God became too small a thing?”

As Eswine addresses a non-celebrity approach to regular ministry, he writes with great honesty and vulnerability. His approach is reflective and somewhat poetic. He is calling us to march to the beat of a different drum, and the book forces us to slow down and think about what ministry is really about, and what it has too often become.

Embedded in the pages are some great pearls. He addresses the heart desires of pastors, maps what it looks like in practice to care for the sick and the sinful, gives a helpful outline of how his church trains elders, and constantly goes into bat for ministry that embraces local limitations and focuses on ordinary people in ordinary places, as Jesus did.

I found this book tremendously refreshing and somewhat disturbing. Church leaders will do well to read it.

Faculty News

- Last week Dr Martin Williams took part in a Two-Views event held at La Trobe University, Melbourne, hosted by the Christian Union. The two views being debated were Young Earth Creationism (the view that God created the earth and everything in it over the space of six twenty-four hour days, around six thousand years ago) and Theistic Evolution (the view that God uses evolutionary processes to bring about biological life on earth). Each side of the debate was represented by a theologian and a scientist. In his talk, Martin defended Young Earth Creationism from a theological perspective, demonstrating how Theistic Evolution undermines the apostolic message of the cross by placing death and disease prior to the Fall, making them the result of God’s creative activity and not of sin. He demonstrated from Genesis and the New Testament that the apostolic gospel teaches that Christ came to redeem us from sin and its penalty, which includes death and disease.

- Phillip Scheepers will visit India straight after the Preaching Conference. He will participate in a seminar to help equip the church planters of the Christian Reformed Fellowship of India (CRFI) for their task of proclaiming the Gospel in western India.

Ministry Spot: Engaging with Contemporary Issues
(by Rev. John de Hoog)

From time to time issues are thrust on us that we have no choice but to interact with, whether we want to or not. Currently, the same-sex marriage debate is one such issue. We may wish it would just go away, preferring to focus on other things, but the reality is, Christians have to address this issue that is so prominent in the media, in politics and in the moral landscape of our nation.

So what is needed? My question is not, what position should we take (though that, obviously, is a key question), but rather, how should we process this issue and others like it? How do we, as Christians, engage with contemporary moral, political and ethical concerns like this?

Informing the mind

It would be much easier to limit our Christian thinking to devotional topics and insights, but God calls us to examine everything in the light of the truth of his Word. To avoid being “conformed to this world,” we are called to be “transformed” by the “renewal” of our minds, so that we might
increasingly “discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

Such a commitment involves asserting that the biblical story is in fact the true story of the world. A few weeks ago at the RTC we enjoyed a week with visiting guest lecturer from Canada, Dr Mike Goheen, who taught an engaging introduction to biblical theology. Mike encouraged us to take up the whole biblical story as the story that defines the true origin, current state and eternal future of the world we live in, and to find our place in that story.

For most people, the great story that defines our country at the moment is that of secular humanism. In the secular humanist story, truth is found in ideas that can be accessed by human thought, and advancement comes from progressive development as people master technology and science and head towards a world of freedom and material prosperity. In that dominant story, Christianity is just another “ism” that might work in the private realm but is no more comprehensive than all the other competing “isms.”

But if the Bible is the true story of the one who made the world, who is redeeming the world through Jesus Christ, and who has final and sure end-time purposes for this world (and it is), then we must learn to embrace the biblical story as the true and comprehensive one, and to understand our current situation in the world from within the biblical story. And since the biblical story has something to say about every aspect of life, we need to understand what the Bible has to say about marriage and relationships. The biblical story and its perspectives will set our agenda.

Enflaming the heart

The Bible doesn’t make easy distinctions between the mind and the heart; in both the Old and New Testaments words in the original languages that are translated “mind” or “heart” can be used interchangeably. The transformation of the mind that Romans 12 talks about is never a simple intellectual matter, it always involves a heart change as well. When the disciples on the road to Emmaus unwittingly heard the Lord Jesus opening up the truth of the Old Testament to them in a way they had never heard before, but in a way that struck strong chords of truth with every word, they felt that their hearts burned within them (Luke 24:32). How did the timid disciples after the Ascension of Christ become valiant witnesses for truth after Pentecost? It was a work of the Holy Spirit, and part of his work was to kindle a fire in their hearts that could not be contained.

What would it mean to have our hearts kindled when it comes to the issues that are flying through our culture in the matter of marriage?

We cannot generate such burning hearts ourselves. But we can pray that the Holy Spirit would make us hungry for truth and hungry for how the truth should grip us and change us. We can put ourselves “in the way” of the Holy Spirit’s work by using Scripture and Christian community. As we read God’s Word and the strong warnings in such passages as 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11, and the marvellous convictions in passages like Ephesians 5:22-33 and 2 Timothy 3:10-17, we should take time to meditate on such passages, using our imagination to place ourselves as the receiver of God’s word. Imagine what it would be like to obey. Our imagination is powerful; with it we can open and close the door of our heart. As we practice doing that, asking the Holy Spirit to guide and lead us, our hearts can be set ablaze.

We don’t only need a mind that knows what is true; we need hearts that love the truth. And so as well as studying the issue, we should give thanks to God for his design and purpose for human relationships. We should thank him for the great models of Christian marriage that we have witnessed, and praise God for people who demonstrate what the kingdom of God looks like in human relationships.

Engaging the world

We won’t actually realise the importance of informing the mind and enflaming the heart until we begin to engage the world. There is a feedback mechanism at work here. As we engage the world on this issue, we encounter tremendous challenges and may well make some terrible mistakes. I know I have. But those mis-steps make us hungry for more truth and more conviction, and they send us back to the Bible’s story, and to wise counsel and helpful books, hungering after the work of the Spirit to make us wiser.

But we are not to lord it over others with our consolidated arguments. Most people do not really care about the substance and consistency of our doctrine; what they want is care and love and
humble service. One of the most important attitudes we must display when we engage the matter of a Christian view of marriage is deep humility. It is so easy to feed the idea that Christians are people who think they’ve got it all together and who are simply out to condemn what they disagree with. But we are all sinners in need of forgiveness. We all stand in need of God’s grace, offered to us through the work of Jesus, so that through faith in him we can experience forgiveness and renewal. We need to embrace this, not just as doctrinal truth, but with minds that have been transformed and hearts that have been enflamed so that the gospel itself floods all our attitudes and relationships.

Sometimes the world can look very dark. The cultural changes that have come into Australian society around the same-sex marriage debate have happened incredibly quickly. But we must not lose heart. Os Guinness once said, “The story of Christian reformation, revival, and renaissance underscores that the darkest hour is often just before the dawn, so we should always be people of hope and prayer, not gloom and defeatism. God the Holy Spirit can turn the situation around in five minutes.”

Pray that as our minds are informed and our hearts are enflamed, we might engage the world in hope, knowing that the true story of the world is in God’s charge.