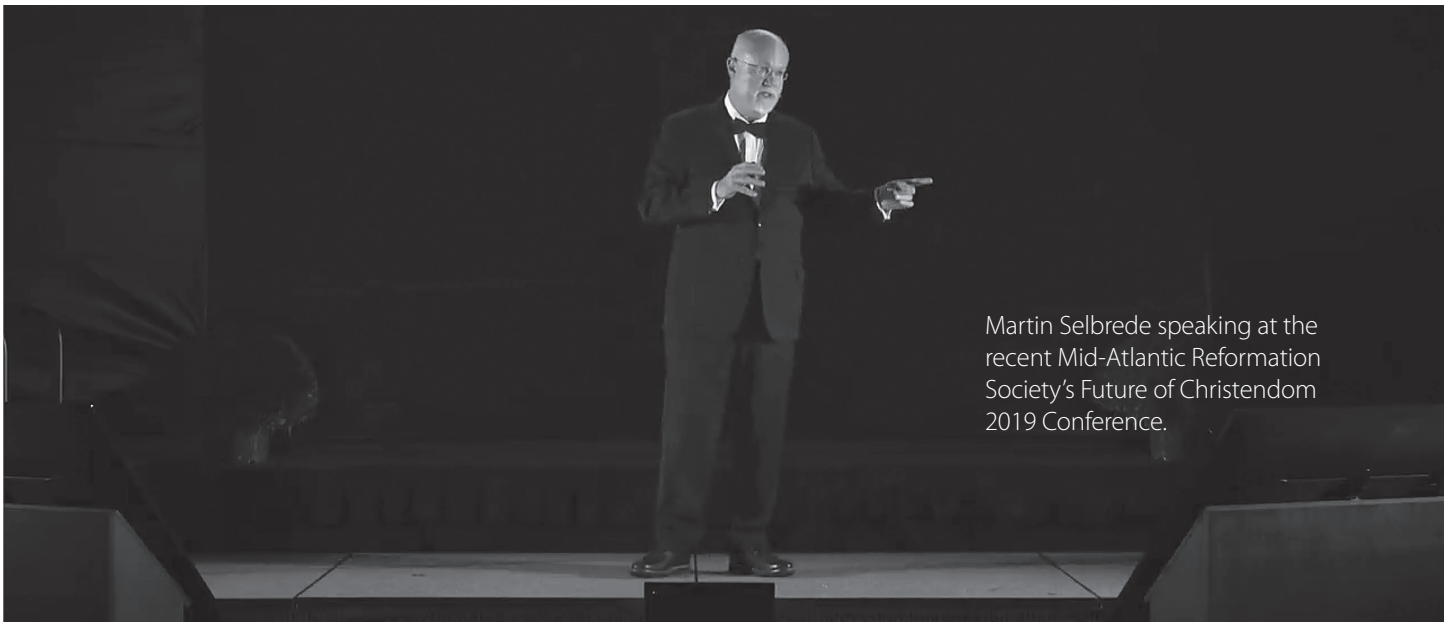


ChalcedonReport

MINISTRY NEWS FROM THE CHALCEDON FOUNDATION® DECEMBER 2019

Martin Selbrede: Chalcedon's Scholar

by Lee Duigon



Martin Selbrede speaking at the recent Mid-Atlantic Reformation Society's Future of Christendom 2019 Conference.



It would take some time just to list all the things that our executive vice president and editor-in-chief, Martin Selbrede, does

for the Chalcedon Foundation—not counting everything else he does in the service of Christ's Kingdom: like composing symphonies, serving as a technical assistant for a movie about the only doctor in America who seems to know how to deal with our country's opioid addiction crisis, and writing a science fiction novel. Look at how long a sentence it took to say all that.

But Martin embodies faithfulness to our Lord's injunction to "Occupy until I come" (Luke 19:13); and the range of his occupation is exceeding broad. He also embodies the spirit of

Christian Reconstruction: in the words of Abraham Kuyper, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"

With a Visit to a Christian Bookstore...

So Martin edits and writes for our bimonthly newsletter, *Arise & Build*, attends and lectures at Christian conferences (one of them in Australia), produces "Question and Answer" videos for our website (www.chalcedon.edu), and pretty much everything else that needs doing.

It started in 1978 with a visit to a Christian bookstore.

"By 1978," Martin recalls, "I had become a Calvinist after encountering Loraine Boettner's *The Reformed Doctrine*

of Predestination, and then learned that Dr. Boettner was a postmillennialist. My interest in this 'dark horse' eschatology, which Warfield espoused, grew to the point that I went back to the bookstore that carried Boettner and asked if they carried any systematic theologies written by postmillennialists. They should have directed me to either Hodge, Strong, or Shedd, but instead handed me *The Institutes of Biblical Law* by Rousas John Rushdoony.

"I was skeptical. The book didn't appear to be a systematic theology—it wasn't!—but I bought it anyway, became transfixed by it, and went back to purchase some light blue paperbacks called *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*. Becoming engrossed in the power of the gospel when unleashed upon every human concern, I dialed

411 to get the phone number for the Chalcedon Foundation—which, like every newbie, I mispronounced—and called it. A man with a deep, deliberate voice answered, ‘Kal-SEE-dun, R.J. Rushdoony speaking.’ We spoke, and I ended up inviting him to The Valley Vineyard, which I then attended, to deliver a message on Christian education.”

“The power of the gospel when unleashed upon every human concern”—this was the concept that fired Martin’s spirit and has inspired all his work to this day. It is a truly revolutionary concept, thoroughly Biblical, which has been with us since God spoke to Adam in the Garden.

“The most important thing that attracted me,” Martin says, “was that the faith was taken seriously—and seriously across the board. Rather than capitulate to humanism, Reconstructionists were standing toe-to-toe against it. They were unwilling to give up one square inch of ground to the enemy—and moreover intended to gain more ground for Christ. Despite that being an obviously uphill battle, they engaged without fear. They confronted the enemy at every stronghold, particularly at intellectual strongholds that many thought were impregnable. They were willing to go down fighting, and not merely congregate in a ghetto and let the enemy go unchallenged.”

Friendship with Rushdoony

Martin and Rushdoony became friends. “He invested time in me,” Martin recalls. “I remember vividly the two of us standing in the parking lot by his beige diesel VW Rabbit while he opened up his small Bible and showed me Isaiah 19:18-25, explaining the significance of the passage to me.”

“In that day shall five cities in the land of Egypt speak the language of Canaan, and swear to the Lord of hosts ...” KJV). “He took time out to share with me treasures old and new out of the Scriptures.”

Their friendship grew; and in 1982, two of Martin’s essays appeared in *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*.

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In 1983 he was chosen to speak at Chalcedon’s Conference on the Media and the Arts in Sacramento.

“I’ll always have a soft spot in my heart,” Martin said, “for Rushdoony’s commentary on Daniel—primarily because, being my first Rushdoony book, it was so difficult to read. I had no trouble reading Warfield or the Puritans, but Rushdoony might as well have been writing in a different language altogether.

“His commentaries didn’t seem like commentaries, and he was bringing apparently alien ideas into the mix, and this created cognitive dissonance for me. Repeated reading allowed the lights to go on: he wasn’t bringing in something new. It was the other commentators who were omitting crucial elements of the text. Nobody popped the hood on the



socio-political context of the Scriptures like R.J. Rushdoony did, and the effect of unleashing the Word of God was altogether jarring—but necessarily so.

“Finally the Bible was becoming applicable—not merely at a shallow level, but across the board both extensively and intensively. To this day I can think of no other major commentator who would think that a key verse in Daniel 9 involves ‘confusion of face,’ but Rush set me straight on that. The other expositors gloss over it, but Rush actually opened up the Scripture.”

A Path to Theology

Martin’s path to theology led him through the realms of classical music and the physical sciences. At the age of sixteen he was offered a full four-year scholarship in musical composition at California State University Northridge.

But—“My father forbade me to accept the scholarship, citing the German maxim that music is the breadless art, a profession that leads to poverty. He preferred that I stick with physics.”

Martin was a National Merit Scholar who represented California at the National Junior Science and Humanities Symposium at West Point, New York.

“But God,” he said, “having a sense of humor, sent me down a third path. I continued to compose music as an avocation, and served as a chief scientist at a flat panel display company until the economy imploded in 2008.”

Before that, in 2000, “I was one of four candidates for the post of assistant conductor of a Los Angeles-based orchestra,” he said. Competing, with only a high school diploma, against three candidates who had degrees in conducting (including two with master’s degrees), Martin won the votes of “the maestro, the board, and the orchestra, and I was awarded the post—a post I’d still hold,” he added, “if I hadn’t moved to Texas in 2001.”

Music, he says, has helped teach him an important lesson.

“I will never stray from Dr. Gary North’s dictum: never do anything second-rate in the name of Jesus.

“Unfortunately,” he said, “on all sides, we are awash in Christian mediocrity. Worse, we’re unaware of the legacy of Christian excellence that we’ve inherited. I’ve drawn attention to this on the musical front in respect to the work of Johann Sebastian Bach, the pre-eminent example of Christian excellence. How we’ve withdrawn from these high-water marks is one of the great tragedies of the march of pietism across the theological landscape.

“And let’s be honest here: it won’t be Christian mediocrity that will win over the world. We’ve allowed the foundations for excellence to be destroyed on our watch, so now it’s time to rebuild those foundations—difficult but needful work. Faithful men and women will engage, but the slothful will not bother. Only the hand of the diligent shall bear rule.”

The Importance of Rushdoony’s Thought

So how important is Rushdoony’s thought? According to Martin, “He delivered theology from the ivory tower and poured it out onto the world at large.”

“In an egocentric era like our own,” Martin says, “the revival of a kingdom-centered, or basileo-centric, faith is a major development. This key orientation also appeared among some European thinkers; but Rushdoony will, with some justice, be credited as one of the pioneers in this area.

“I find it intriguing that so many people will say something like, ‘If Rushdoony had limited himself to doing only X, he would still be remembered today as an influential thinker.’ Except each of those people mentions a different X, thereby illustrating how broad his contribution to our modern Christian reawakening really is.

“Everyone is energized in a different direction when they read Rushdoony. Few thinkers deliver a true worldview that’s operational and applicable across the board like that. Look at his *Systematic Theology*: it covers topics like the doctrine of work, of time, of the land, of authority, etc., that cannot be found in

“In my view,” Martin says, “scholarship is still the linchpin for Christian Reconstruction because it informs our course of action. Scholarship done on a sound foundation equips laymen with the confidence to stop walking by sight, which always cripples our personal and collective efforts. There is a place for scholarship that is geared toward action and which confronts errors that sap our strength and derail us.”

other systematics. The absence of these loci from the other systematics raises the question of who is really being systematic here. My vote has to be with Rushdoony on that point.”

Martin’s Role in Chalcedon

Martin became Chalcedon’s vice president in 2002 and continues to carry out a wide range of duties for the foundation.

He serves as technical director for books by Rushdoony that are entering print for the first time or being reprinted. He edited our print magazine, *Faith for All of Life* (and now *Arise & Build*), and now works on preparing the launching of *The Journal of Christian Liberty* for which he will serve as supervising editor.

He regularly represents Chalcedon at various events and conferences as both a writer and a speaker. In 2017 he traveled to Australia to speak at the Daniel 2:44 Conference, at which he took on “eight very different topics to show how the Christian faith applies regardless of the subject matter.

“God’s Kingdom embraces them all,” he says. “Moreover, like Mark

Rushdoony (Chalcedon’s current president), I am solely interested in extending Rushdoony’s legacy, not hijacking it for personal gain.”

The Role of Scholarship

There are many ways of extending R.J. Rushdoony’s legacy. Continuing scholarship is one of them.

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“There is no place for scholarship that degenerates into glorified navel-gazing. There is perhaps no better example of true versus false scholarship than Rushdoony’s insightful article on “preaching that stinketh,” in which he illustrates how different theological traditions would preach on the text, ‘Man, your house is on fire!’ Only one kind of scholarship actually dealt with the fact that the man’s house was on fire and that we immediately need to extinguish the fire.

“That kind of scholarship, geared to action, has a future. And it is the kind of scholarship that Christian Reconstruction should be promoting with vigor.”

Scholarship, he says, is part of Christian Reconstruction’s future—a bright future, Martin declares.

“If I didn’t think Christian Reconstruction was a faithful application of the Bible, I would see no future in it,” he says. “But because it is premised on God being faithful to His own Word, and is premised on standing on His authority rather than a human usurpation of His authority, it has a bright future.

“Whether our *current* generation will recognize this is the pressing question. We’re culpable before God if we lust after theologies that justify being so slothful that we end up being spoon-

fed, left to wander in the wilderness for forty years, and finally ending up with our bones bleaching in the sun. But I'm persuaded of better things.

"One thing I do know: a future without Christian Reconstruction in play will be all the bleaker for it. But despite premature announcements of the death of Christian Reconstruction, its influence is still at work—like the leaven, where it cannot be seen—informing and transforming everything it touches."

This, he maintains, is what fuels the work of the Chalcedon Foundation today, as it always has.

"At Chalcedon we're aware that selling increased responsibility is a hard sell, but it is the only way forward out of the darkness," Martin says. "Like Rushdoony said, there is a way out of our problems: God's way. Man's way will only compound the problems.

"We put the Bible forward as the answer because His Word, the anvil that has worn out many hammers, is the key to the future. And that is what Christian Reconstruction entails and why it is consumed with zeal for the Lord's house."

A Multiplicity of Callings

If you ask Martin, "What is the most important thing that Christian Reconstructionists can focus on right now?", the answer may not be what you expect.

"If I believed there was just one thing that we should all collectively focus on," Martin says, "I would say so; but the reality is that each of us has a sphere of influence in which God has placed us to labor. Our King is in heaven, so the effects of His Kingdom need to be felt everywhere, in everything, in every direction.

"The body is not all eye, or all ear, or all hand or foot: the multiplicity of callings is the arena in which God is to be glorified through us. Many are frustrated when they read Rushdoony and learn that A is important, and B is important, and C, and D, ad infinitum. Which one is important? They are all important.

"Life is big, and serious, and poisoned by sin, and needs the salt and light that we bring to the table in each area. Be faithful to your calling, your vocation, and rest in Him as our acknowledgement that He too works through us and through His Spirit in us. Progress comes not by might nor by power, but by His Spirit; and when the capstone is at last put in place, the angels then will shout 'Grace, grace unto it!'" (Zechariah 4:6-7)

As a bonus, so the reader can see and hear Martin in action, we provide the links to videos of two short lectures he recently gave at the Mid-Atlantic Reformation Society's *Future of Christendom 2019 Conference*.

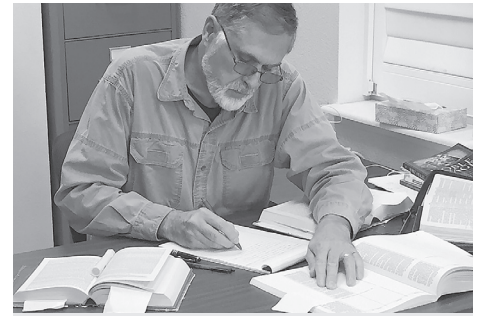
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In "How the Gospel Shapes Economics," Martin corrects the error of "putting economics first" and shows that, opposed to humanism's vision of a perpetual conflict of interests, the gospel describes a harmony of interests. But humanists choose conflict while in the Bible, for instance, the poor tithe will abolish poverty. As a historical example, Martin shows that the Maccabees actually succeeded in raising the people out of poverty—something which no humanist government's multi-trillion-dollar "war on poverty" has ever come close to achieving.

In "Big Bank Theory: Distortion to Doom," he discusses the abuses of modern "big bank" finance ("Living for the moment harms the future") and how these continue to frustrate economic progress—as humanists went "from 'Fiat lux' in Genesis to 'Fiat bucks' today."

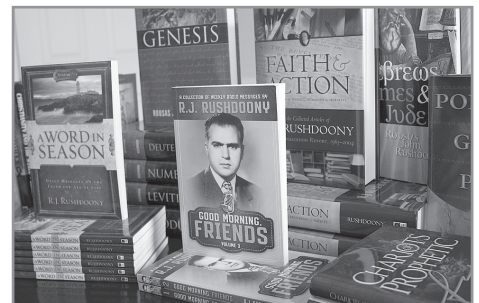
Lee Duigon is the author of the Bell Mountain Series of novels and a contributing editor for Chalcedon's periodicals. Lee provides commentary on cultural trends and relevant issues to Christians, along with providing cogent book and media reviews. Lee has his own blog at leeduigon.com.



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