



“The gift of scholarship h  
distracted from significant  
allowed me to move de  
Seminary—engaging wit  
in my classmates, partic  
serving in local church

—*Coleman Greene, MDiv '25*

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Join Covenant in our mission to train pastor-minded students committed to the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, the Reformed faith, and obedience to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ.

as freed me from the financial burden and deeper into the life of the church through my professors, investing in ministry on campus, and ministry.”



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COVENANT  
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY



**Covenant Magazine** is a publication of Covenant Theological Seminary, the denominational seminary of the Presbyterian Church in America. For nearly seventy years, Covenant Seminary has equipped thousands of pastors, counselors and ministry leaders to lead and serve the church globally. This magazine is a testimony to the Lord's work in and through the people associated with Covenant Theological Seminary.

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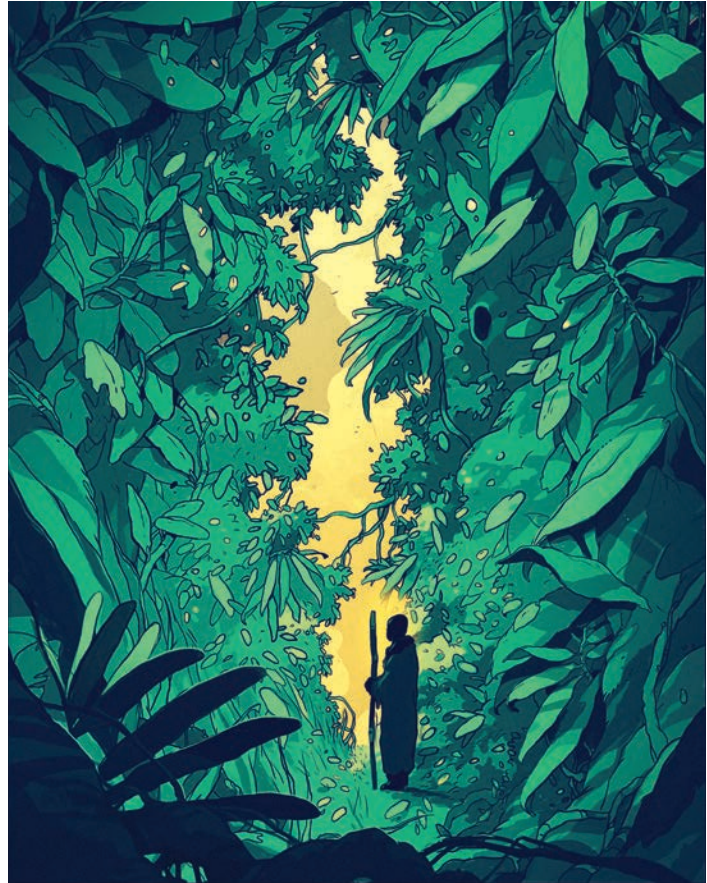
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## *Sharing the Gospel in a Time of Disenchantment*

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A world less open to Christianity presents many challenges for believers, yet our calling to evangelize remains the same as always. How can we share our faith effectively in such a time as this?

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# FROM THE PRESIDENT

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Rev. Dr. Tom Gibbs

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As noted last time, Covenant Seminary recently implemented a new Strategic Plan titled *Centered on Christ's Mission to Train the Next Generation*. Created in part to help us address some of the cultural, demographic, and economic challenges of the last decade, the plan also enables us to build on the recent renewed growth of our pastor-minded degree programs. We are excited to share some of the details of the six main “pillars” of the plan (see p. 26) and ask you your prayers for God’s continued guidance as we seek to serve him and our denomination faithfully.

This issue also offers several other features highlighting ways we fulfill our pastoral training mission:

- Director of Homiletics Dr. Thurman Williams shares exciting news about a Compelling Preaching grant from Lilly Endowment that will help us further equip effective preachers for the church (see p. 34).
- Mission to the World Coordinator Dr. Irwyn Ince offers a powerful example of compelling preaching on the far-reaching breadth and scope of God’s redemptive mission (see p. 40).
- Pastor, author, and apologist Dr. Gavin Ortlund, who spoke at our 2024 FSI Conference, offers some encouraging thoughts on evangelism in a world less receptive to the claims of Christianity (see p. 46).
- You’ll also find several examples here of how our alumni and faculty have an impact for God’s mission far beyond the local church and even beyond the PCA.

We praise God for the blessing of co-laboring in the gospel with all our faithful partners, supporters, and friends. We’re grateful for each of you and for the privilege of training the next generation of Christ’s servants.

All for Jesus,

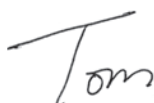


ILLUSTRATION BY STÉPHANE MANEL

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**The ratio of new pastors to open  
ministry positions is an astonishing**

**1 : 5**

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COVENANT  
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# NEWS & EVENTS

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## “Where Two or Three are Gathered..”

**Doing seminary life together is the heart and soul of Covenant.**



Community life is an essential part of the Christian experience. At Covenant, we seek to be a living, learning, worshiping community of grace that reflects the biblical values of care for neighbor, service to one another, and the development of deep personal relationships that exemplify the love of Christ and prepare us for a lifetime of fruitful ministry. These values play out in the rhythms of daily campus life and through the many campus and community events that take place here each semester. Here is an overview of notable events and activities from the last several months, along with some upcoming items.

ILLUSTRATION BY VALERO DOVAL

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## Congratulations to Our 2024 Graduate Award Recipients

● The Covenant Seminary family is proud of all our graduates. We look forward each year to seeing them complete their studies and move out into the ministries the Lord has prepared for them. Each year we also honor certain graduates with awards in specific areas. For our 2024 graduating class, we celebrated the following award recipients.

→ The Robert G. Rayburn Homiletics Award is given annually to a graduating student who has demonstrated special zeal and competence in the field of homiletics. This year's prize was awarded to **Tristan Admiraal**. Graduating from Covenant with a Master of Divinity, Tristan was called to Midtown Atlanta, Georgia, to serve as the inaugural pastoral resident at Ponce Presbyterian Church (PCA).

→ The J. Oliver Buswell Theology Prize is given annually to a graduating student who has demonstrated special zeal and competence in the field of historical or systematic theology. This year's award went to **Paul Frederick**. Graduating with a Master of Divinity, Paul plans to pursue a PhD in biblical and theological studies at Wheaton College before teaching God's Word and training the next generation of leaders for God's mission.

→ The Exegesis Prize is given to a graduating student who has demonstrated special zeal and competence in the field of biblical exegesis. This year's recipient was **Mitchell Penning**. Graduating with a Master of Divinity, Mitchell has been called to serve on staff at Chesterfield Presbyterian Church (PCA) in St. Louis, Missouri, working with the next generation.

→ The Belz Christian Education Award is given to a graduating student who has demonstrated special zeal and competence in the field of Christian education. The 2024 award went to **Stephanie Lewis**. Graduating with a Master of Arts in Ministry (Counseling Ministries), Stephanie plans to use her degree in ministry

for counseling, support groups, and any other counseling opportunities that may arise.

→ The Grant for Graduate Theological Studies is a grant given to a graduating student to be used toward tuition in a graduate program of theological studies. This year's recipient was **Sándor Molnár**. Graduating with a Master of Arts (Biblical & Theological Studies), Sándor continues at Covenant as he works toward a Master of Theology (ThM) before returning to Hungary, where he will preach and one day establish a center to train and teach ministers in a local setting.

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## CTS at PCA GA 2024 — Renewing Friendships, Preparing for the Future

● The Presbyterian Church in America held its 51st General Assembly the week of June 10–14 in Richmond, Virginia, drawing over 2,000 registered commissioners—pastors and elders—alongside hundreds of family members, guests, and exhibitors. Eighteen Covenant Seminary faculty and staff members were in attendance.

Rev. Dr. Thomas C. Gibbs, President of the Seminary, presented an update on the institution's health status through enrollment updates and operational reports. Most notably, he unveiled the Seminary's 2024 Strategic Plan, titled *Centered on Christ's Mission to Train the Next Generation*, which outlines six key "pillars" that directly reflect Covenant's core mission and values. These pillars were met with enthusiastic endorsement from the Assembly, signifying strong support for the Seminary's direction. (See more about the CTS Strategic Plan elsewhere in this issue and on the Seminary's website at <https://www.covenantseminary.edu/strategic-plan>.)

Dr. Gibbs reflects, "The annual meeting of the Presbyterian Church in America is always an important and strategic opportunity for Covenant Theological Seminary. In addition to being pleased with the Assembly's approval of all of the Seminary recommendations and our candidates for trustees, I was especially encouraged by many and diverse voices, all offering their support and encouragement to hear from pastors and leaders across the denomination."

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*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.*

EPHESIANS 2:19

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Beyond official proceedings, a highlight for Covenant Seminary was reconnecting with its alumni base. Over 500 former students actively participated in the Assembly, with a remarkable 275 alumni and their families gathering for a special dinner and fellowship evening. This annual tradition fosters a sense of community and shared purpose. Year after year, alumni express how these gatherings rekindle their love for Covenant Seminary and for their ministries, strengthening their commitment to spreading the gospel and building God's kingdom. They leave the Assembly feeling renewed and equipped for another year of service.

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#### **Fall 2024 Chapel Speakers Focused on the Theme To Glorify the Triune God**

● As the Covenant Seminary community gears up for classes each semester, it also looks forward to a new series of weekly Chapel services and messages. Drawing inspiration from a phrase in the Seminary's mission statement, the overarching theme for the fall 2024 Chapel series was "To Glorify the Triune God."

The schedule of preachers featured several members of Covenant's faculty and staff—such as President **Dr. Tom Gibbs**, **Rev. James Dickson**, **Dr. Aaron Goldstein**, **Dr. Robbie Griggs**, **Dr. Drew Martin**, **Dr. Jay Sklar**, and **Dr. Thurman Williams**—as well

as guest preachers from around the PCA and beyond, including **Dr. Ed Dunnington**, President of the PCA's Geneva Benefits Group; **Rev. Ronnie Garcia**, Senior Pastor, Denver Presbyterian Church (PCA), Denver, Colorado; **Rev. Josiah Green**, Lead Pastor, Crossroads Presbyterian Fellowship (PCA), Maplewood, Missouri; **Rev. John Trapp**, Senior Pastor, Christ the King Presbyterian Church (PCA), Houston, Texas; and **Rev. Mike Werkheiser**, Lead Pastor, City Church STL (EPC), St. Louis, Missouri.

A particular highlight of the series was a visit to Covenant in November 9 by renowned recording artist, author, and CTS graduate **Laura Story**, who led music during Chapel that day and shared her expertise by conducting a special Ministry Lunch program for students on planning and leading worship music. Laura serves as Executive Director of Worship Environments and Resources at Perimeter Church (PCA) in Atlanta, Georgia, and is the author of the books *So Long, Normal*; *When God Doesn't Fix It*; and *I Give Up*.

The fall series kicked off with the annual Convocation service on Wednesday, August 28, featuring guest speaker **Rev. Dr. Bob Flayhart**, Founding Pastor at Large of Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Birmingham, Alabama, and a member of the Seminary's Board of Trustees, who challenged and encouraged the Covenant community with his message "The Heart of a Seminary Education."

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Held in Covenant's Rayburn Chapel every Wednesday throughout the semester, Chapel is a treasured time for students, faculty, staff, and their families to come together as a body for worship, prayer, exhortation, and fellowship. The broader community around the Seminary campus is also invited to attend.

The Chapel theme for the upcoming Spring 2025 semester will be "Walking in God's Grace."

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### **2024 FSI Conference Explored *Evangelism in a Disenchanted World***

● The Francis Schaeffer Institute at Covenant Theological Seminary, in partnership with The Gospel Coalition, was pleased to present the 2024 FSI Conference in Rayburn Chapel on the Seminary campus Friday, September 27, and Saturday, September 28, 2024. The conference explored the theme *Christ and All His Hallows: Evangelism in a Disenchanted World*.

Featured speakers for this timely and challenging topic were:

→ **Jake Meador**, Editor-in-Chief of *Mere Orthodoxy*, a resource devoted to helping believers think Christianly about the world around them through a print magazine, a website, multiple podcasts, and video. His writings include the books *What Are Christians For?: Life Together at the End of the World*, *In Search of the Common Good: Christian Fidelity in a Fractured World*, and numerous articles and posts.

→ **Dr. Gavin Ortland**, pastor, speaker, apologist for the Christian faith, and author of several books, including *What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always-Reforming Church*, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage*, *Humility: The Joy of Self-Forgetfulness*, and others. He serves as President of Truth Unites and as Theologian-in-Residence at Immanuel Nashville.

Building on the foundation of the Bible and drawing on some of the recent insightful work of philosopher and social commentator Charles Taylor, the conference addressed the ongoing cultural hardening to Christian revelation and the unique evangelistic challenges and opportunities this cre-

ates. Because the modern age allows people to live in a buffered way, cut off from the spiritual realities of their own existence and the world, Christianity seems to come from an entirely foreign world that makes no practical or emotional sense. The core claims of Christian theology are often met with a shrug, while some of its moral claims are met with outrage. The conference looked at ways in which believers engage a disenchanted people to portray a dynamic experience of Christ that breaks through the buffered self.

Recordings of the presentations from the conference are available in the Resources section of our website.

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### **Covenant Seminary Preaching Lectures Examined *The Life of the Preacher***

● Every year, the Covenant Seminary Preaching Lectures present a renowned pastor speaking on a topic relevant to the role the preacher and the importance of preaching in the life of the church. The October 2024 edition of the lectures featured **Rev. Dr. Trent Casto**, Senior Pastor of Covenant Church (PCA) in Naples, Florida, discussing the theme *No Greater Calling: The Life of the Preacher*.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once described preaching as "the highest, the greatest, and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called." In this series of lectures, Dr. Casto delved into the profound responsibility of those who are set apart by God to proclaim his Word, and explored three key aspects of the preacher's life: the craft of preaching itself, the common pitfalls that can undermine a preacher's ministry, and the essential pursuit of personal holiness. The goal of the lectures was to equip those called to this sacred task with the zeal, diligence, and reliance on the Holy Spirit necessary to fulfill their calling. Recordings of the lectures are available in the Resources section of our website.

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### **Lifetime of Ministry Conference 2024: *Renewed Hope in Kingdom Ministry***

● Covenant Theological Seminary was pleased to host the 2024 edition of its Lifetime of Ministry Conference in October, which focused on the

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theme *Renewed Hope in Kingdom Ministry: Sustaining Grace for a Life of Ministry*.

Besides exploring the unique challenges of pastoral work, the gathering provided a place of rest, retreat, and encouragement for pastors and their spouses with a view to equipping them for their next season of ministry. Topics covered included pastoral leadership, the complexity of congregational life, and more.

Featured speakers for the event were:

→ **Dr. Dan Doriani**, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Covenant Seminary. Dr. Doriani served alternately as Academic Dean or Vice President at Covenant for 15 years while teaching nearly a full course-load. An experienced leader and teacher, Dr. Doriani has been a pastor or interim pastor for several churches, including serving as Senior Pastor of Central Presbyterian Church (EPC) in Clayton, Missouri, for 11 years. Currently, he is the Interim Senior Pastor of Briarwood Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Birmingham, Alabama. He holds multiple degrees, including an STM from

Yale Divinity School and a PhD from Westminster Theological Seminary.

→ **Dr. Thomas C. Gibbs**, sixth President of Covenant Seminary. Dr. Gibbs also serves as Associate Professor of Applied Theology. An MDiv and DMin graduate of Covenant, he became President in 2021 after working in pastoral ministry for 24 years. Dr. Gibbs previously served for 19 years as the Senior Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church (PCA) in San Antonio, Texas, a church he planted. Before planting Redeemer, he also planted a Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) campus ministry at Baylor University.

Covenant hosts the Lifetime of Ministry Conference each fall as a way of encouraging, equipping, and energizing pastors and other ministry leaders for a lifetime of faithful ministry to Christ's church and kingdom. Recordings of the presentations from the conference will be available through the Resources section of the Seminary's website.



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## Seminary Hosted ATS Accreditation Reaffirmation Visit in October 2024

● Covenant Theological Seminary hosted a comprehensive evaluation visit for reaffirmation of its accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) Commission on Accrediting on October 28–31, 2024. Evaluators from peer institutions visited the campus to verify that the school has met all applicable Commission Standards of Accreditation (available at <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/standards-of-accreditation.pdf>). ATS also solicited comments in advance from those with relevant knowledge regarding how well the school met those standards and/or generally demonstrated educational quality. These comments were shared with the on-site evaluation committee, which met extensively with students, faculty, and staff before reporting its findings. As of this writing the official report was not yet available, but initial feedback from the team was positive.

ATS accredits Covenant Seminary, with the following degree programs being approved: Master of Divinity (MDiv), MA (Biblical and Theological Studies) (MABTS), MA in Ministry (MAM), MA (Theological Studies) (MATS), MA in Counseling (MAC), Master of Theology (ThM), and Doctor of Ministry (DMin); and with teach-out programs in the MA in Missional Theology (MAMT). The Seminary is also approved for a Comprehensive Distance Education Program.

Covenant is also accredited by The Higher Learning Commission (HLC). The institution has been approved under Commission policy to offer all its degree programs. Additionally, the Seminary's 75-credit hour Master of Arts in Counseling is fully accredited by CACREP (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs), which enables graduates with the 75-credit hour degree (since 2022) to enjoy the portability of a CACREP counseling degree when seeking licensure in states other than Missouri.

For full details on all of the Seminary's various accreditations, see the Legal Information page of our website at <https://www.covenantseminary.edu/legal-information>.

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## Celebrating Our 2024 Founders Scholars and Women's Scholarship Recipients

● A special breakfast event in August honored this year's recipients of the Founders Scholars Award for men in their last year of pastoral training, as well as women who received the Women's Endowed Scholarship and the Deborah M. Robins Legacy Scholarship. Congratulations to the recipients! Our deepest gratitude goes to the generous donors who make these scholarships possible.

### **Founders Scholars**

Patrick Andrews (MDiv)  
Mike Caponigro (MDiv)  
Coleman Greene (MDiv)  
Lucas Mooibroek (MDiv)  
Noah Rinehart (MDiv)  
Ebenezer Sudhaharan (MDiv)  
Adam Wang (MDiv)  
Sterling Webster (MDiv/MAC)  
Gentri Williams (MDiv)  
Matt Williams (MDiv)

### **Women's Endowed Scholarship**

Tess Badamo (MDiv)  
Bekah Marsh (MDiv)

### **Deborah M. Robins Legacy Scholarship**

Lauren Batzli (MDiv/MAC)  
Mary Buxcel (MDiv/MAC)  
Paty Glory Canto (MABTS)  
Marie Fennema (MDiv/MAC)  
Karis Halley (MDiv)  
Raven Martin (MDiv)  
Sophie Rooks (MDiv/MAC)  
Stephanie Smole (MDiv)  
Laura Vanderhaar (MABTS)

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## Other Campus Happenings

- Faculty and Staff enjoyed a worship service and lunch together to start the fall '24 semester.
- The President and Faculty's Welcome Reception in August greeted new students to our campus in style and introduced them to some of our faculty and staff.
- Students new to Covenant and the St. Louis area had the opportunity to meet representatives from a number of local churches at our third Annual Church Fair in September.
- Students, faculty, staff, and their families enjoyed food, fellowship and fun at the Fall Seminary Picnic.

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# FACULTY & STAFF

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## “For We Are God's Fellow Workers...”

**Our faculty and staff enjoy the privilege of co-laboring together for the sake of the gospel.**

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One of the Lord's greatest gifts to Covenant Seminary is the people who serve as faculty, staff, or trustees. Whether they're here for a short time or a lifetime, we are grateful for each of them and for the blessings they are to the Seminary, our students, and the Body of Christ. Their hard work on behalf of the Seminary, their care for one another and our students on a daily basis, and their godly lives and service in their churches and communities make them powerful examples to each other and the world of Christian faithfulness and love. Here are some faculty and staff updates since our last issue.

ILLUSTRATION BY VALERO DOVAL



**Rev. John Chung** (MDiv '09) earlier this year was named **Vice President of Enrollment** for the institution. Rev. Chung, who had been serving as Senior Director of Enrollment Management since April 2022, assumed his new role July 1, 2024. In his expanded capacity, he continues to oversee and coordinate the functions of the Admissions, Financial Aid, and Institutional Retention teams, while providing strategic leadership and direction for all the Seminary's initiatives related to student recruitment, enrollment, and retention. John's experience as a pastor, his expertise in team leadership and staff development, his extensive work with nonprofit organizations, and his many relationships in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and beyond have all enabled him to guide the Seminary's enrollment team forward in exciting ways over the last two years. Under his leadership the Seminary's enrollment has increased significantly and continues to rise in all degree programs, especially those particularly aimed at pastor-minded students.

Prior to his role at Covenant, John worked with the PCA's Mission to the World and as Institute Director for Next (formerly Global Youth and Family Institute); served as a Youth Minister and Pastor with the Korean Presbyterian Church of St. Louis (PCA); as Executive Pastor of Christ Central Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Centreville, Virginia; as an Associate Pastor at The Journey–Tower Grove (Acts 29) in St. Louis; and as a Visiting/Adjunct Professor at Covenant. He holds a BA in speech communication from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and an MDiv from Covenant Seminary. He and his wife, Saras, have two children.

Of his expanded role, Rev. Chung notes, "As I said when I assumed the Senior Director role two years ago, the Lord used Covenant Seminary to shape me greatly during my time as a student. Here I learned the depths of God's grace and the beauty of Reformed theology. I was excited then, and I am excited now to be part of fostering an environment where men and women can be equipped for the vital work of ministry by engaging with the Lord through biblical, theological, and practical ministry studies for the building up of the body of Christ. I am humbled and grateful for this new opportunity to serve the institution that I love."



**Sarah Bobell** (MAEM '08) assumed the role of **Coordinator of The Scribe Writing Center**, Covenant's resource center for theological writing housed in the J. Oliver Buswell Jr. Library, over this past summer. A Covenant Seminary alumna with previous university teaching experience, her goal with the Writing Center is to support students' learning by helping them grow as thinkers through the process of writing. Sarah also holds a BS in human ecology from Cornell University. She enjoys running, reading, coaching kids' sports, and homeschooling her three children with her husband, Mike, also a Covenant grad (MDiv '08).



**Tara Gibbs** joined the Advancement Team as **Events Coordinator** in July 2024. In this role, Tara works between departments on campus and

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*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ.*

EPHESIANS 4:11-12

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with outside vendors to plan, prepare, and execute key events for the Seminary community, including a variety of annual conferences hosted by Covenant throughout the year, and donor events and seminars led by the Development Team. Additionally, she oversees a Master Events calendar, helping to coordinate events taking place among the various campus departments. Tara brings a wealth of experience to this position, having served in similar roles in local churches for many years, and in her student days at Covenant. She is married to Dr. Thomas C. Gibbs, President of the Seminary.



**Aaron Vossen** (MAC '24) joined our Development Team full time as **Major Gift Officer** this year after serving as a part-time student worker with Development since December 2023. Before coming to Covenant to pursue his Master of Arts in Counseling, Aaron worked on staff with a college ministry at Truman State University, then as a high school teacher and coach at Westminster Christian Academy in St. Louis. As a student worker in Covenant's Development office, Aaron experienced firsthand the importance and joy of partnering with others to ensure that the Seminary can remain faithful to its calling to train pastors, counselors, and other ministry leaders for the next generation. The blessing of being able to attend Covenant because of a scholarship made available through the generosity of faithful donors had a profound impact on him and his family and is one of the reasons he is excited to now be part of the Development team full-time. He considers it a great privilege and a joy to invite the broader church community to partner with Covenant in raising up the next generation of kingdom workers. Aaron and his wife, Riley, a school administrator, have two children.

# BOOK RELEASE

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## “Take Up and Read...”

**A selection of recent faculty and alumni publications for the growth of the church.**

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Our faculty’s influence reaches far beyond the classroom as professors mentor and disciple students, serve in local congregations, share their teaching and preaching abilities with the larger church in the US and around the world, and engage with the culture of our day from a biblical, gospel-centered perspective. Their books, journal articles, blog posts, conference and seminar talks, and other online resources are a great blessing to the church. The same is true for our growing number of alumni who serve as pastors, church planters, missionaries, counselors, and other ministry leaders in churches and other settings in all 50 states and 51 countries.



*In an increasingly secular twenty-first century that wants the people of God to look to anything and everything besides the Christian faith for personal meaning, value, and purpose, Christian contentment must be learned to spiritually thrive. . . . Learning contentment will lead others to ask about “the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15).*

DAVID KAYWOOD, *A Call to Contentment: Pursuing Godly Satisfaction in a Restless World*

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## Faculty Releases

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### “Why the Cross?”

*Orthodoxy & Orthopraxy: Covenant Seminary Theology Blog, March 2024*

● By Dr. David Chapman. Every Christian knows the centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus for faith and redemptive history, but why did God choose a cross for the Messiah’s sacrificial death? In this article, Dr. Chapman looks at some key biblical strands concerning the significance of the cross.

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### “God’s Unhindered Mission: Acts 28:23–31”

*Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review 50, no. 1 (Spring 2024)*

● By Dr. Bradley J. Matthews. This sermon was part of a semester-long series by various preachers given in the Seminary’s Rayburn Chapel on the theme of “All for God’s Mission.”

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### “Biblical Authority and Human Origins: Reading the Hebrew Bible”

*Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review 50, no. 1 (Spring 2024)*

● By Dr. C. John Collins. Part of a special section of articles on “Origins, Evolution, and Scripture,” this article argues that our doctrine of Scripture will affect how we understand and interpret the content of Scripture, so it’s important to get our starting point right.

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### “The Crushing Burden of Choice”

*Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review 50, no. 1 (Spring 2024)*

● By Dr. Thomas C. Gibbs. The problem of choice is profoundly

human but has been exacerbated by technology and historical developments related to individualism. Here, Dr. Gibbs offers some biblical principles for how to navigate the sometimes overwhelming number and seemingly infinite possibilities of the choices we face every day.

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### “Pastor, Your Ministry is a Noble Task”

*The Gospel Coalition, August 25, 2024*

● By Dr. Thomas C. Gibbs. In this post at TGC, Dr. Gibbs offers encouragement to pastors facing criticism and disappointment in their ministries, and shares reminders of the many ways in which this most difficult of callings is also a noble and blessed one.

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### “‘One’ as in ‘One and Only’ in Deuteronomy 6:4”

*Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review 50, no. 1 (Spring 2024)*

● By Dr. Jay Sklar. The “oneness” of our triune God is a difficult concept to grasp. In this brief look at the language of Deuteronomy 6:4 (“Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God is one”), Dr. Sklar shows how these words are to form and shape our understanding of God—and ourselves.

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### Credo Colloquy: Why We Love the Bible (and Read It with the Great Tradition)

*Credo Magazine, August 2024*

● By Dr. Robert W. Yarbrough and Dr. Michael Barrett. This video discussion between two noted biblical scholars offers excellent insights on the es-

sential need for Christians to be thoughtful disciples, intertwining their Bible reading with theological contemplation.

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### “Is Jude’s Soteriology Pre-Pauline?”

*Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review 50, no. 1 (Spring 2024)*

● By Dr. Robert W. Yarbrough. Some scholars have questioned the authenticity and soteriology of Jude’s epistle, but Dr. Yarbrough here “argues the plausibility of understanding the composition of Jude as neither spurious nor slur-ious but as authentic and primitive (in the sense of early in origin) as any of Paul’s epistles.”

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### “A Road Paved with Books”

*Orthodoxy & Orthopraxy: Covenant Seminary Theology Blog, April 18, 2024*

● By Dr. Dan Zink. Helping people heal as a counselor requires keeping up with the advancements in our understanding of people and their problems. Dr. Zink offers a list of books that have been important to him in seeking to care well for others.

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## Alumni Releases

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### The Reason for Church: Why the Body of Christ Still Matters in an Age of Anxiety, Division, and Radical Individualism

*Zondervan, Forthcoming in 2025*

● By Brad Edwards (M.Div. ’11). Over 40 million Americans have dechurched in the last 25 years, and “follow your heart” has become the religion of multiple generations. Yet, so-

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ciety is hitting record levels of loneliness, stress, and anxiety. This book connects the dots of our current church crisis and provides compelling reasons to come back.

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**“How to Train Young Worshipers”**  
*The Gospel Coalition, September 1, 2024*

● By Cynthia S. Fischer (MAEM ’14). Scripture teaches that all of us, including children, are made in God’s image and are invited into corporate worship. This article show us how we can help them do that well as we nurture them in biblical faith and include them in the communal gathering of God’s people.

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**A Call to Contentment:  
Pursuing Godly Satisfaction  
in a Restless World**

*Christian Focus, 2024*

● By David Kaywood (MDiv ’19). The Bible both encourages and commands contentment, but that often feels like a vague, fleeting, unachievable goal. This book helps mold our understanding of what it means to be content and invites readers to focus on Jesus, the God who became poor for us, suffered for us, and calls us to work for him.

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**“A Counterfeit Idol: Resignation  
and Faith in Timothy Keller’s  
Counterfeit Gods”**

*Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary  
Review 50, no. 2 (Fall 2024)*

● By Trey Martin (MDiv ’20). This review essay on Tim Keller’s classic work on the idols of our hearts offers a re-examination and re-evaluation of some key points made in the book.

**ONLY WHEN HUMAN FREEDOM  
IS SITUATED WITHIN THE LARG-  
ER COVENANTAL AND MORAL  
FRAMEWORK PROVIDED FOR  
US IN THE SCRIPTURES CAN WE  
BEGIN TO EXPERIENCE THE JOY  
OF OUR CHOICES.**

DR. THOMAS C. GIBBS, *The Crushing Burden of Choice,*  
*Presbyterian (Spring 2024)*

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**“From Punk Rocker to  
Reformed Pastor”**

*byFaith Online, July 17, 2024*

● Feature article written by Tim Nicholson about Covenant grad Matt Morginsky (MDiv ’11), former lead singer of the Christian ska band O.C. Supertones and now the Lead Pastor of Grace and Peace PCA in Northeast Denver, Colorado.

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**God’s Extraordinary Grace: Auto-  
biography of Gareth Tønnessen**

*Independently published, 2024*

● By Gareth Tønnessen (MDiv

’70). Now 80 years old, Gareth has seen God’s undeserved grace demonstrated abundantly in his life. This autobiography recounts several life-threatening events; character deficiencies; spiritual struggles at seminary, as a pastor, and on the mission field in Kenya; timely answers to prayer; and more.

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**Abide With Me**

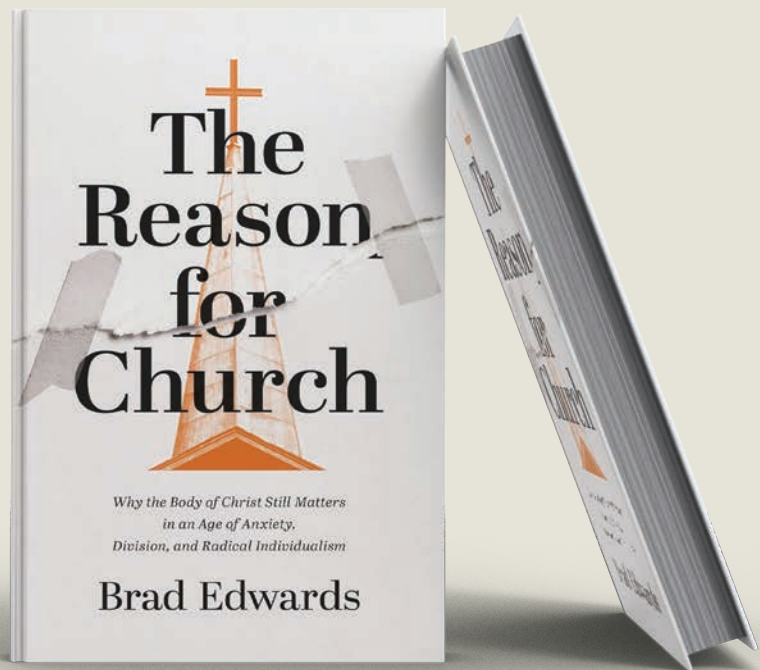
*Indelible Grace Music, 2024; avail-  
able on Spotify*

● By Kevin Twit (MDiv ’95) and Indelible Grace. Check out this new version of a classic hymn.

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*Over 40 million Americans have dechurched in the last 25 years . . . With radical individualism tearing us apart, we need compelling reasons to fall back in love with Christ's bride, now more than ever.*

From publisher's description for *The Reason for Church*, by BRAD EDWARDS.



# When the Lord Calls, We Follow: Getting to Know Dr. Bob Yarbrough

*The Lord's plans for us may be different than our own, but that's okay  
—if we're willing to listen and follow him faithfully wherever he leads.*

By Rick Matt



**F**ROM LUMBERJACKING IN MONTANA to PhD studies in Scotland to training pastors at Covenant Seminary and in sometimes-dangerous countries around the world, Professor of New Testament Dr. Bob Yarbrough's journey of faith is a powerful testimony to the amazing grace and faithfulness of God. He shares some of his story in this recent interview.

**Rick Matt (RM):** Thanks for agreeing to talk with me. Can you first give us a bit of personal background and a glimpse of how you came to know the Lord?

**Bob Yarbrough (BY):** Sure. There is a little Christian heritage in my family background, but not much. My paternal grandfather was a Baptist layman, a subsistence farmer in the Ozarks, and was a deacon and song leader in his church. He would pray for me and my siblings, and my mother often took us to church, but I never saw my father pray. I wouldn't say I grew up in a Christian home.

I was 9 when I first heard the gospel during an evangelistic weekend at the Baptist church we attended. I knew I was a sinner, I believed that Christ died on the cross for my sins and that I owed him my life, and I was willing to offer it to him. But I didn't really know what being a Christian meant except going to church. I never heard about discipleship until I was 20.

Through my teen years I did all the things teens usually do, but I worked a lot too. I got married at 19 to Bernie, a Catholic girl I knew in high school, and we moved to Montana to attend the University of Montana. We went there broke and both had to work. On Sundays, we attended a Catholic church one week and a Baptist church the next. One week, the Baptist pastor invited us home for lunch, and he led my wife to Christ. That really began our spiritual pilgrimage together.

I started serving in that Baptist church, working in the nursery and teaching the youth, even though I didn't really know much myself. I also drove the church bus and shoveled snow. A year or two later they asked me to be a deacon. I read the Bible a lot but didn't know much about Bible scholarship or study resources. Still, in the first five years of our marriage, my wife and I both grew a lot as Christians.

I had started a forestry degree at college but ended up working as a logger for four years while my wife got her nursing degree. But the Bible was always on my mind and I struggled with my spiritual direction. Our plan at the time was to buy some land in northwest Montana and live out our days there. But one day after church, I had this distinct impression that God was speaking to me. His question was, "Are you willing to devote your life to spreading the gospel?" Well, if God asks you to do something, there's really only one answer. I didn't have a choice. I said yes. I tentatively shared this with my wife not knowing what she would think. But she was on board with it, and that began a new phase for us. We had followed Jesus thinking he'd help us with the plans we set for ourselves, but now I realized my life was not really my own anymore.

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**RM:** Where did that clear sense of a call from God lead you?

**BY:** Not where I initially thought it would! I worked as a logger until Bernie graduated, then we moved back to Missouri, where she worked as a nurse while I went to a Christian college to finish my degree. An English major, I also studied Greek and as much Bible as I could. When I graduated, we moved back to Montana. I thought I'd be a bi-vocational pastor or church planter. I worked as a logger four days a week and worked in the church three days a week, but soon realized I still didn't know the Bible very well. After a year, we moved to Illinois so I could attend Wheaton College grad school, where I did my MA while serving as interim pastor at two different Baptist churches in the Chicago area. I did tree work in the summer to make money. By then, we thought we would be missionaries in Europe.

Around this time, my professors encouraged me to pursue a PhD, so we went to Scotland for three years to do that. I eventually became a deacon at a little Scottish Baptist Union Church where Bernie and I also served as the youth leaders. In 1985, we came back to the US and I accepted a teaching appointment at Liberty University, while continuing to raise support to serve as missionaries at a seminary in Germany. After two years we hadn't raised even half of what we needed. Then in 1987 Wheaton called me to fill a New Testament position. I taught there for four years and also served as an adult ed teacher at College Church. Near the end of that time, I was attracted to an ad for a New Testament professor at Covenant Seminary, and even though my ordination at that point was still with the SBC, they offered me the position—with the proviso that in two years I would have to be a Teaching Elder in the PCA.

So, I read up on the Reformed faith. I realized I was a Reformed Baptist. I had also realized from my years of study up to that point that I was a covenant theologian. As I re-read the Westminster Standards, I became convinced of a covenantal understanding of baptism. In April 1991 I moved my ordination to the PCA, and I taught at Covenant—the first time—from 1991 to 1996.

**RM:** What happened to draw you away from Covenant?

## **If God asks you to do something, there's really only one answer.**

**BY:** Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, contacted me—three times—about teaching there. The third time, my wife said, “You should check it out.” I interviewed, but for several reasons, we initially did not want to go. But this was one of those times where God said, “You should go.” How do you know God is telling you something? One clue is you don't want to hear it. You can't always make decisions based on listing all the pros and cons. We had our list, and the only pro was, “We think this is what God wants us to do.” So, we went. We were there 14 years.

**RM:** And what brought you back to Covenant?

**BY:** We decided we needed to be in St. Louis to care for my aging mother and stepfather. Covenant had a New Testament opening and was willing to bring me back. We moved here in 2010, and I taught at Covenant while my wife left nursing to care for my mother and stepfather. She did that for the next 14 years. Both have passed away now. I was blessed to be able to do both of their funerals.

**RM:** I'd like to pick up on another thread of your story. I know you have for many years done annual teaching trips to train pastors in Africa and other places. How did that come about?

**BY:** When I was at Wheaton they had a program called the Wheaton Faculty Missions Project, which got requests from overseas for all kinds of teachers, especially Bible teachers. I started going on some of these trips, first to Cairo, Egypt, in 1989, then to Romania in 1990 and 1991. I came to Covenant in '91, so missed a couple years, but beginning in 1994, since I had this established relationship with the Romanians, Wheaton sent me back. I went twice a year for one week each time from 1994 to 2007 and helped them start

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Emanuel University there. In 1995, I went to Khartoum, Sudan, to Nile Theological College, a school supported and staffed mainly by Reformed and Presbyterian churches in the US. Sudan was unbearably hot and my students suffered terribly from malnutrition and living in refugee camps. There I saw the real hunger for the Word of God in developing nations. The Christians in Khartoum were persecuted and had nothing to eat, but they wanted training to become pastors!

From 1999 to 2012, I taught twice a year in Khartoum in addition to Romania. The sponsoring church was Presbyterian, the Khartoum Evangelical Church, founded over a hundred years ago. In 2012, we got shut out of Sudan, so in 2013, we went to South Sudan to train pastors for a week. Then a civil war started in South Sudan. So, in 2014, we started going to South Africa, and we still go every October for a week in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**RM:** And this is all through the Wheaton project?

**BY:** Not after 1999. It's too complicated to explain how it all evolved. It has to do with a trust fund in Britain, some generous Christian donors, and a Lutheran church in Chicago where I have connections and I preach occasionally. They put up a considerable amount of money each year to support this. It's really just God raising up people who keep putting money in this fund, so we keep going. One of those donors is a doctor, a retina specialist, who went to Sudan in conjunction with our conference 13 times to provide cornea transplants for people who needed them. I once told him I couldn't believe how the money kept coming. He said, "People keep giving because they know you'll use it for what they give it for."

His own Christian generosity was evident even beyond his medical expertise. One time as he headed back to the States, he handed me \$400 and said, "Do something good with this before you leave." That night I met with a group of recent Christian converts, among whom was a little girl who looked to be three or four years old but was actually eight. She had chronically infected tonsils and adenoids and could barely swallow. An operation to fix this would cost about \$400, which was an absolute fortune for these people. Through my friend, the Lord had provided the funding. That

had a powerful impact on the community. It was a blessing to be part of that.

**RM:** God certainly does some pretty amazing things through the generosity of his people.

**BY:** We've seen him do it many times. He's also brought us through many close calls. Once in Khartoum my companion and I were confronted by four guys who saw us go through customs and knew we had money and computers. They were pretty threatening, but I didn't see any weapons, so we pushed our way through to where people were waiting for us. That was a tense moment. Another time we were almost arrested at the airport because an informer told police we had been baptizing Muslims, which we had not. As we boarded the plane, we heard the loudspeaker call our names to come to the security desk. We got on the plane because the passport agents didn't speak good English or recognize our names, but the plane was held while security came looking for us. They photocopied our passports and then, for reasons I don't understand, let the plane go with us aboard. Shortly after that the persecution of Christians in Sudan increased dramatically. It turned out to be significant that the Presbyterian church in Khartoum had been able to encourage so many pastors in those conferences over the previous 13 years. Things are worse now, with the Christian minority caught in the middle of an ongoing war between rival Muslim armies. Some have fled to other countries but others aren't able to get out.

**RM:** It sounds like God has greatly used those pastoral training conferences to encourage and build up his church for hard times.

**BY:** God never wastes the making of disciples. When you really connect with the people you're helping to equip, it has a ripple effect—probably more than we know. God has ways of multiplying the effects of his work through us that we're not able to plan for or foresee. ■

*Rick Matt is Senior Writer and Editor for Covenant Seminary and loves to tell the stories of what God is doing in and through the lives of CTS students, graduates, and faculty. He also serves as a ruling elder in the PCA.*

EST. 1956 | ST. LOUIS, MO

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# Covenant.



At The Center  
of God's Mission.



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# Centered on

Covenant Seminary's new Strategic Plan provides vision and guidance for our ongoing mission of preparing pastors, counselors, and other ministry leaders for Christ's church and Kingdom.

# Christ's Mission to Train

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the



Next

# Generation

by Dr. Thomas C. Gibbs

*We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.*  
— Psalm 78:4

*You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.*  
— 2 Timothy 2:2

**N**OW ON THE CUSP OF seven decades of ministry, Covenant Theological Seminary remains centered on Christ's mission. We are thankful for the stewardship vested in us by the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and exult in God's grace, which has sustained our more than 4,800 graduates who serve in all 50 states and in more than 50 countries.

Grateful for God's past provision for the Seminary, we also seek his blessing as we remain fully committed to the future and to the mission he has given us. The passages quoted above from Psalm 78:4 and 2 Timothy 2:1–2 capture this dedication well. While the psalmist describes the importance of passing on to God's covenant people the essence of a lived faith, the apostle Paul shows us that the task of raising up the next generation of ministry leaders first entrusted to Timothy and others like him is now a holy and cooperative stewardship of the whole church. Pastor and teacher R. Kent Hughes describes this as a "living chain of truth."

To that end, Covenant Seminary recently adopted a new Strategic Plan, titled *Centered on Christ's Mission to Train the Next Generation*, that will help to guide and define our institutional progress in the years ahead. Growing in part from an earlier plan approved in 2021 and informed by a two-year period of institutional self-evaluation and reflection, the new strategic plan aims to further advance the Seminary's mission and steward well its relationship with our denomination and other

partners in the face of rapidly changing social, economic, and educational realities.

The plan incorporates insights gained from extensive dialogue between faculty, staff, students, our Board of Trustees, and alumni from various periods of the school's history, as well as with denominational leaders, agencies, committees, and ministry partners. The process ultimately identified six priorities that we termed the "pillars" of the strategic plan:


- Prioritize Pastor-Minded Students.
- Strengthen Theological Preparedness.
- Renew Focus on Spiritual Formation.
- Strengthen Local, Intercultural, and Global Mission.
- Steward Relationship with the PCA.
- Foster Financial Stability.

These pillars are the core concepts of the plan and will drive its implementation. None of these pillars is entirely new; all have been part of the Seminary's mission in some form from the beginning. The new plan is in part an effort to sharpen and refine our focus on these primary areas so we can carry out our mission even more effectively. You can read more about each pillar and why they are important for our future on Covenant's website (see link at end of this article).

A plan such as this can only come about after much careful thought and prayerful deliberation in the face of great need. The Strategic Plan is meant to help us participate in the living chain of truth to effectively steward our blessings for the next generation.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGING OUR MOMENT**

Our culture is presently characterized by significant and rapid change in higher education. To name only a few of these changes, the political landscape, the COVID-19 pandemic, technological innovation, the rise of the religiously unaffiliated "nones," and unprecedented dechurched have made the traditional, residential delivery of



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education—especially theological education—more difficult. Among the most important effects of these historic headwinds are rising costs, declining enrollments and student load, and increased demand for fully online and hybrid degree programs. The landscape of theological education is indeed changing in dramatic ways.

Theological institutions that have denominational oversight face the added pressures of conflictual denominational politics, changing ordination standards and pathways—including comparatively affordable unaccredited ones—higher student support requirements in the face of reduced biblical literacy, and greater training expectations to be realized within shorter timelines. At a time when more theological training is needed, students are unfortunately often receiving less preparation.

Taken together, the internal and external headwinds bearing down on Covenant have been most acutely revealed in declines among pastor-minded students. For some years, there has been a steady decline of students enrolling at Covenant Seminary with the aim of serving as ordained pastors. With the addition of our MABTS program, the online and hybrid degree programs, and the widely experienced COVID-19 “bump,” at times the pace of that decline has slowed, but it was never reversed.

That our declines have been concentrated among pastor-minded students indicated to us that this challenge and the associated impacts were among the most pressing issues facing the Seminary and required the institution to respond rapidly and boldly, yet without reducing any of the existing services or instruction offered to students. It is a testament to the dedication, professionalism, and adaptability of our excellent staff and faculty that the Seminary has been able over the last few years to meet these challenges head-on and implement innovative changes—some technological and some methodological—that have increased our ability to serve well the students we already have while also opening new pathways for others seeking theological education to get the training they need.

Throughout these challenging years, the Seminary has continued to enjoy strong support from our donors. In the past decade, Covenant has conducted two successful capital campaigns



which have bolstered our financial health by strengthening our endowment dramatically, increasing funds available for scholarships for both men and women students, funded endowed faculty chairs, enhanced our technological infrastructure, and much more. More recently, the Seminary posted two record years for undesignated contributions, further strengthening financial reserves to catalyze efforts to increase enrollment. The expansion of online and hybrid degree programs, such as the hybrid MDiv and the MA in Biblical and Theological Studies (MABTS), have enabled Covenant to extend its reach even further to train the next generation of gospel-led pastors, counselors, and ministry leaders. All this not only mitigates financial pressures due to declining enrollment, but also testifies to the goodwill of our supporters and the enduring legacy of God's ongoing faithfulness.

Additionally, over the last two years we have seen the declining enrollment trends beginning to reverse. In the fall of 2023, our student headcount (actual number of registered students) broadly was up by 43%. Even more encouraging, we saw a 28% increase among pastor-minded students—those seeking to enter some form or ordained pastoral ministry. Similar gains were seen in the Master of Arts in Counseling degree program. The MABTS program saw a year-over-year increase of 67%.

Yet, while there are many ways in which Covenant is indeed flourishing, we cannot slacken our pace or think that all the challenges are behind us. Taking into account the surrounding cultural environment and its effect on theological education, internal and external financial pressures, the need to strengthen upward enrollment trends for continued viability, and the need to address the concerns and criticisms from some of our alumni and our denomination, what emerged from the Seminary's two-year self-evaluation and planning process was a renewed emphasis on our core priorities and a sharpened focus on strategies for recruiting, training, and sending out qualified candidates for pastoral leadership.

#### **THE VALUE OF AN INTENTIONAL STRATEGY**

It is generally acknowledged that a large percentage of strategic planning initiatives—especially in higher education—ultimately fail for a number of

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effectively.*



reasons. Institutions of higher education are notoriously resistant to change, and strategic plans can sometimes set lofty, unrealistic goals. Others may set more realistic goals, but with no mechanism in place to measure whether those goals are being met. Often, the tediousness of these efforts and their all-too-common failure to carry out intended ends result in frustration and cynicism towards strategic plans. As we began the planning process, we thus asked ourselves how we were to proceed if we were to avoid this kind of dead-end approach. Are five-year strategic plans truly necessary, or should we simply react to institutional challenges and cultural headwinds as they come along? Are we called to “let go and let God?”

We recognize that the demands of our moment are great. Accordingly, so are the opportunities. As believers in the providence and sovereignty of God, we are called to respond to our obstacles in bold ways that reflect this hope. If Covenant is to continue building on its strong legacy of training pastors, counselors, and ministry leaders for a bright future of leadership in the PCA and beyond, we must face the challenges before us with fresh and innovative responses.

Strategic planning doesn't have to be a stuffy, bureaucratic process bereft of a dependence on the Lord to provide for institutional needs. Rather, strategic planning done well can and should reflect a radical trust in God and a commitment to walking in his provision and grace. Thus, after two years of thinking, asking questions, dialoguing both internally and externally, and a whole lot of praying, we think we have developed a plan that is not merely a flurried, anxiety-driven response to surface-level problems, but a principle-based, careful yet bold step forward that reflects the desire to be faithful to our history and heritage while also seeking improved ways to carry out our primary mission.

**CONTINUITY OF FAITHFULNESS:  
AN EMBODIED VISION**

At its core, the new strategic plan is not designed to help Covenant do something completely new. It is, rather, designed to help us strengthen and build on what we have always done. The name of the plan, *Centered on Christ's Mission to Train the Next Generation*, suggests as much. As the PCA's denom-

inational seminary, we recognize that this work continues to be the primary purpose for which we were founded. Even as we refine the focus of our institutional priorities, our mission and values have not changed and still serve as guideposts and guardrails for everything we do.

Our Mission Statement says: *“The purpose of Covenant Theological Seminary is to glorify the triune God by training his servants to walk in God's grace, minister God's Word, and equip God's people—all for God's mission.”*

Additionally, our seven Core Values undergird our institutional ethos and inform the way we carry out our mission. These are: *Christ-Centered Ministry, Biblical Authority, Grace Foundation, Relational Emphasis, Pastoral Training, Church Leadership, and Kingdom Perspective.*

This Mission Statement and set of Core Values are foundational for the work of Covenant Seminary and inform all our planning and vision-casting processes.

Be that as it may, creating a new Strategic Plan entails an element of real growth, adaptation, and forward-looking vision for the challenges faced by organizations like ours. That is, we didn't want our plan to be confined to the pages of a document or locked away in a filing cabinet and eventually forgotten. We see this initiative as actively shaping our community. Institutional health and effectiveness require Covenant to communicate our mission clearly to all stakeholders, to be guided by this mission in all endeavors, and to execute this mission with integrity in all facets of institutional performance.

Thus, as we have begun to implement the plan over the last several months, one of our goals has been to make sure that our own staff and faculty are all on the same page with regard to its main themes and ideas. Just as we sought their active involvement in the information-gathering and input-seeking phases of the planning process, we now encourage their active participation in helping to turn into reality the ideas written down on paper. Just as our primary way of training men and women for Kingdom service is through a community of faithful believers who embody the gospel-centered way of life, so we seek to be a community of faithful believers who embody the principles, practices, and purposes laid out in the Strategic Plan. By embracing both

the challenges and the opportunities God has presented to us in our current moment, and by living boldly into the future trusting in his grace and providence, we look forward to seeing how the Lord will bring to fruition—for his glory and for the benefit of his church—the various aspects of this Strategic Plan.

### **TRUSTING IN GOD'S FAITHFULNESS FOR FUTURE BLESSING**

Though much work remains to be done, we have already seen some of that fruit in each of the strategic pillars of the plan. I've already mentioned the recent encouraging trends in recruitment and enrollment of pastor-minded students. But significant developments are under way in each of the other pillars as well.

For example, as a further step to ensure the greater theological preparedness of our students, we have developed a comprehensive theology exam for pastor-minded students in the MDiv and MABTS programs. Much like the Bible content exam that all these students must pass before they can graduate, the theology exam is a rigorous overall test of students' theological knowledge that helps prepare them more thoroughly for licensure and ordination exams. Additionally, the return of our David C. Jones Theology Lectures in 2024 and the annual lectures and other programs put on by our student-led Theological Fellowship provide important opportunities for deepening students' understanding of and appreciation for the Seminary's Reformed theological heritage.

In the area of spiritual formation, our goal is for students not only to know the Bible better but to be transformed through a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Incoming students are told, "You are not the end of your own education." This means that their training and spiritual formation is not for themselves alone but for the benefit of those they will be called to lead and serve in ministry. That kind of transformation occurs best within gospel-centered community. Thus, our renewed emphasis on weekly chapel services is bearing fruit in increased attendance and a more prayerful frame of mind as we live and learn together throughout the week. Cohort groups for students in most degree programs pro-

vide safe zones for personal sharing, encouragement, and prayer. Professors give of their time generously outside the classroom to meet with and pray for students. And these are only a few examples of how our campus life fosters Christian fellowship and the development of deep and lasting relationships.

An emphasis on missions has also been part of Covenant's DNA from the beginning. We have trained hundreds of missionaries who now serve around the world, as well as hundreds of church planters who are busy building new local churches in cities across the US. Our partnership with Mission to the World (MTW), the PCA's global missions sending agency, is mutually beneficial in many ways, as is reflected in our establishing the Paul D. Kooistra Chair of World Missions, named for the former Coordinator of MTW (and a former President of Covenant Seminary). Now that the chair is fully funded thanks to generous donors, we are searching for a missiologist to fill the position and guide our students in living and thinking with a missional mindset.

We are continually grateful to be the denominational seminary for the PCA and value our partnership in ministry with other PCA agencies and churches. It is a blessing to serve our denomination with them. Besides recent collaboration with MTW, we are coordinating with Reformed University Fellowship (RUF), the Committee for Discipleship Ministries (CDM), Mission to North America (MNA), and Covenant College to cultivate their readiness to send students to us and our willingness to send them graduates to serve faithfully in their various spheres of endeavor.

And finally, stewarding our resources wisely even as we make progress on enrollment challenges is a top priority. Our staff has been diligent in focusing on clear financial goals and practicing prudent fiscal discipline. Our tireless Development team is continually working to strengthen relationships with existing donors and cultivate new ones as we seek to provide well for the Seminary not only now but for the future. We are grateful for each person who supports us prayerfully and financially, for every prayer matters and every gift—no matter how large or how small—makes a big difference.

*The best strategic plans become an “embodied vision”—not a distant goal, but a lived reality, guiding us faithfully in our mission today and for the future.*



As we take stock of where we have been and look down the road we believe the Lord would have us follow, our deepest desire is to seek and to do his will in all things, and to be faithful to the mission which he has given us—training new generations of gospel-centered, Christlike leaders for God’s people. In every classroom, every chapel service, every internship program, and every faculty and staff meeting, we want to see our mission coming to life through the values we hold dear and the elements of our Strategic Plan being lived out daily. Our faculty embody this as they model servant-leadership and pastor-scholarship to our students. Our staff embody it as they collaborate with one another to create a healthy, viable organization that cares about our students. Our students embody it as they engage in the educational process and real-life ministry work that prepares them to teach, preach, and live the gospel.

This is how the best strategic plans become an “embodied vision”—not a distant goal, but a lived reality, guiding us faithfully in our mission today and for the future. ■

*To learn more about the Seminary’s Strategic Plan and read the full document, visit our website at [www.covenantseminary.edu/strategic-plan](http://www.covenantseminary.edu/strategic-plan).*

*Dr. Thomas C. Gibbs is the sixth President of Covenant Theological Seminary, having previously planted and served as Senior Pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church (PCA) in San Antonio, Texas. He also planted an RUF campus ministry at Baylor University and was a youth director in Birmingham, Alabama. This article is adapted from a presentation about the Seminary’s Strategic Plan that Dr. Gibbs delivered at the 51st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America in Richmond, Virginia, in June 2024.*



## *Compelling Preaching and*

*If it is true that “faith comes by hearing,” as the apostle Paul said, then preparing church leaders to preach the Word in compelling and powerful ways is a vital part of the ongoing mission of God.*

*the Mission of God*



*By Dr. Thurman Williams*

**I**N THE FALL OF 2023, Covenant Seminary announced that the institution had received a \$1.19 million grant from the Lilly Endowment as part of Lilly's Compelling Preaching Initiative. The primary aim of the initiative, as stated in its official documents, "is to cultivate practices among aspiring and active preachers that can help them to proclaim the gospel to a variety of audiences in more engaging and effective ways."

For the Seminary, this grant is an amazing gift and a great blessing that will enable us to further develop our emphasis on preaching as a primary element of pastoral ministry for the Seminary's Master of Divinity students. Even more, as we work to equip future preachers, we hope to instill in them (and all our students) a greater sense of how vital preaching is to the larger mission of God to proclaim his Word to the ends of the earth and to bring his gospel of grace to a world in need of hope and restoration. This has long been a major focus for Covenant, and we are grateful for the opportunities the grant provides for enriching and deepening this aspect of our pastoral training mission.

Over the past year, as we have begun to implement the various components proposed in the grant, we have grown more and more excited to see how the Lord will use our efforts to raise up compelling preachers who can engage the church and the world in new and powerful ways. This of course raises three important questions: (1) What exactly is compelling preaching? (2) How is Covenant Seminary shaping and equipping compelling preachers? (3) Why is compelling preaching a vital part of God's mission?

#### **WHAT IS COMPELLING PREACHING?**

The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14–15, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (NIV). The basic meaning of the word "compels" is "to press together, constrain." It is the pressure applied not so much to control as to *cause action*. It is *motivational* rather than directional in force.

In the 2 Corinthians text, Paul finds the love of Christ moving him to action. He cannot ex-

perience this love and remain the same. What compels must be acted upon. That is the sense of what is meant by "compelling preaching": it is preaching that moves us to action, that motivates us, that doesn't leave us the same as we were before we heard it.

Within our Reformed theological tradition, we believe that compelling preaching begins with a clear understanding of God's work of grace done for us in and through Jesus. While it is easy for preachers to motivate through guilt or exhort people towards moralism, the most compelling preaching is rooted in God's lavish love for us shown in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, making clear to people that we do not act obediently to *earn* God's love; we are obedient *because* of God's love.

Covenant has long held a focus on training Christ-centered, gospel-focused preachers as a central means of pastoral ministry, beginning with our founder, Dr. Robert Rayburn, and continuing through many of our dedicated homiletics faculty and adjunct instructors, all of whom are seasoned ministers of the gospel and experienced pastors in local churches. Former Covenant President Dr. Bryan Chapell, for instance, who also served as Director of Homiletics at the Seminary for more than twenty years and is still considered one of the leading homileticians of our day, has had a major impact in this regard. His classic book *Christ-Centered Preaching*, now in its third edition, is a standard homiletics textbook in seminaries across the country and continues to form a solid theological foundation for our preaching program. This foundation not only covers the basic elements of good preaching but also stresses the importance of rooting the life of Christian obedience not in moralism or self-effort but in the grace God makes available to us in Christ. To use the language of the Lilly grant, this approach helps preachers learn how to compel people to godliness through a focus on the indescribably deep mercy and grace found in Christ.

Covenant's next Director of Homiletics, Dr. Jimmy Agan, continued this tradition of emphasizing the importance of Christ-centeredness and a grace-filled life of faithfulness as necessary for an effective preaching ministry.

Building on this firm foundation, Dr. Zack Eswine then expanded the approach by asking

the question, “How do preachers take this Good News of God’s love in Christ and explain it in a compelling way to a world that is rapidly secularizing?” In his book *Preaching to a Post-Everything World* (which won *Preaching Today’s* Book of the Year award in 2009), Dr. Eswine explored different practical ways preachers can be both expositional and mission-minded as they preach.

In a similar vein, in my own tenure as Director of Homiletics, I have attempted to further expand on the insights of Drs. Chapell, Agan, and Eswine by pressing them forward into new cultural spaces. My doctoral dissertation, *Christ-Centered Preaching in Hip-Hop Culture*, explores the question of how preachers can be more compelling in their approach to a specific cultural segment (in this case, young African American males) that is largely unreached and unmotivated by standard approaches to preaching. Principles derived from my research into this topic are being integrated into our preaching curriculum to parallel our solid theological foundation with an important cross-cultural foundation that aims to help students wrestle more fully with what faithful preaching looks like in the face of cultural injustices endemic to society and cultural idols commonly worshipped in our current age.

From a cultural perspective, compelling preaching has to be able to connect with listeners by building bridges from where people are to the Good News of Jesus Christ. When preaching in Jewish synagogues, the apostle Paul built bridges by starting with texts from the Hebrew Scriptures (see Acts 13); when preaching in polytheistic Athens on Mars Hill, he started by recognizing their acknowledgment of an “unknown god” and quoted their own Greek poets to begin making theological connections (see Acts 17). In each case, Paul began with the listeners’ own world and moved from there to show how Jesus best answered their deepest questions, longings, and needs. Compelling preaching today must do the same.

In short, compelling preachers will be those who learn to motivate people to live the Christian life in response to God’s love shown in Jesus, and who learn to connect with people by building bridges from where they are to the gospel. We have designed our curriculum at Covenant in such a way to achieve these goals and to build on the decades of work that we have already been do-

ing in these very areas. We have found that while some students come with a clear understanding of this idea of preaching, many others do not; they find this approach revolutionary for their spiritual lives in general and their preaching in particular. Our prayer is that it will be transformative as well for their future congregations and beyond.

#### **HOW IS COVENANT SHAPING AND EQUIPPING COMPELLING PREACHERS?**

Through the Lilly grant, we aim to build on the solid foundation and existing infrastructure of homiletics training as established by our forebears. The goal is to better equip and support both aspiring and current pastors in their callings to proclaim the unchanging, eternal gospel in a variety of ways to a variety of audiences in a changing world. The grant enables us to do this through three primary activities: (1) preaching cohort groups, (2) preaching conferences and workshops, and (3) the development of preaching resources for the broader church. These program elements will help us to encourage and revitalize seasoned preachers, prepare young preachers and those aspiring to preach, and provide opportunities for preachers of all experience levels, ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities to learn from each other. The program also opens pathways for bi-vocational pastors who may not have previously had access to seminary-level education to learn and grow as preachers as well.

Three types of preaching cohort groups, implemented in phases over the course of the next several years, are a major component of the program. One is a multid denominational, multiethnic group designed for aspiring preachers from local churches in the St. Louis area (identified and invited by their pastors), who will be trained in the Compelling Preaching curriculum. A second group is made up of Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) campus ministers from different parts of the country who are members of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). A third group is composed of Doctor of Ministry students from Covenant Seminary focused specifically on compelling preaching, which will require a dissertation on a topic of the students’ choosing that will eventually become part of the compelling preaching resources available to the

wider church. The curriculum for these cohort groups will include instruction and research on such topics as preaching Christ in all of the Scriptures, preaching Christ with apologetic sensitivity, preaching Christ in ways that address core cultural concerns of marginalized ethnic groups, preaching Christ while navigating and utilizing technology, preaching to address pivotal moments of crisis in our culture, and preaching as an act of worship in itself. Other topics may be added as needed.

Program participants in all cohorts will have opportunities to learn from experienced practitioners who are themselves compelling preachers. Participants will also get to preach as part of the program, and they will be encouraged to provide structures for constructive feedback within their home congregations.

The second means of equipping and supporting aspiring and current preachers is through a series of preaching conferences, one in the spring and one in the fall each year. The spring conference is conceived as a two-day event held in St. Louis to take advantage of the presence of the large number of compelling preachers who live and minister in this area, many of whom are Covenant Seminary graduates. Eventually, we hope to grow the conference to bring in outside speakers as well from the ranks of more nationally known compelling preachers. The fall conference already exists as our annual Covenant Seminary Preaching Lectures, a one-day, on-campus event featuring a prominent speaker on homiletics topics and primarily aimed at the Seminary's Master of Divinity students. The preaching cohort groups would be invited to participate in both conferences, which will be livestreamed and recorded for those not able to attend in person.

The third major element of the program is to develop preaching resources for the church, one of which would be the creation of a Compelling Preaching website specifically designed to house sermons, articles, podcasts, recommended books, online preaching course material, preaching conference recordings, and other preaching-related resources. While some of the content on the website will be designed exclusively for the preaching cohort participants, much of it would also be available to anyone who would care to use it. The website is currently still in the planning stage.

In addition to the immediate benefits of Compelling Preaching for those participating in it, our current MDiv students will also benefit as the resources developed and the insights gained from the various cohort groups are applied and incorporated into our existing preaching curriculum. Thus, the program is not only directly in keeping with our institutional mission, history, and strengths, but also will allow us to push our own learning in these areas both deeper and broader to equip many more compelling preachers than we are currently able to do.

#### **WHY IS COMPELLING PREACHING A VITAL PART OF GOD'S MISSION?**

To answer this question, we once again turn to the apostle Paul, who, in Romans 10:14–17, said:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!?. But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So, *faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*

Additionally, the Westminster Shorter Catechism question and answer 155 says:

*Q. How is the Word made effectual to salvation?*

A. The Spirit of God makes the reading, but *especially the preaching of the Word*, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.

All through the book of Acts we see the importance of the Word of God preached as the apostles move out from Jerusalem to Samaria

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**Compelling preachers are those who learn to motivate people to live the Christian life in response to God’s love shown in Jesus, and to connect with people by building bridges from where they are to the gospel.**

and to the ends of the earth. And down through the centuries we see again and again the power of the preached Word of God, especially as the early Reformers and their spiritual children began to re-emphasize strong expository preaching and clear gospel proclamation after the dimmer light of the Middle Ages. It is the power of the Word preached that spread the gospel first throughout the Mediterranean world, then across lands and seas and continents to reach our spiritual ancestors across the globe and in modern America. And it is the power of the Word of God preached that alone can bring the same gospel hope to a society and a world that now more than ever seems to have lost its moral and spiritual moorings.

Though today we have almost unlimited access to the Bible in printed and electronic forms, and more resources for studying the Bible than at any other time in history, the Lord still chooses to work most mightily through his Word as

it is preached by local pastors, church planters, and missionaries, and proclaimed informally by friends, neighbors, family members, coworkers, or even strangers. He loves to work through human instruments to accomplish his great goals. Thus, the more we as educators can emphasize the power of preaching and the better we can prepare those who will be bringing God’s Word to people in local churches and other ministry settings to do so in compelling and life-transforming ways, the more we—and our students and those to whom they minister—participate in God’s ongoing mission to redeem lost souls and ultimately restore his beautiful creation.

Covenant Seminary’s long history of shaping and equipping compelling gospel preachers for this purpose is exemplified in the quality of our pastoral graduates and the effectiveness of their preaching ministries. We routinely hear from donors and others in churches pastored by Covenant alumni about how greatly those churches—and they personally—have been impacted by our graduates’ preaching. Pastoral search committees often tell us that they look specifically for Covenant grads because there is just something different about them, an air of grace and gospel-heartedness that informs the way they approach not only the sacred task of preaching but their entire ministry. We praise God that this is the case and are grateful for how he has worked through Covenant over the decades to prepare these servants for his church. We look forward to seeing how the Lord will continue to use us and our graduates to bring his gospel message to the world, not for our sakes, but for his glory and, as our mission statement notes, “all for God’s mission.” ■

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*<sup>1</sup>At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, <sup>2</sup>a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. <sup>3</sup>About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." <sup>4</sup>And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. <sup>5</sup>And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. <sup>6</sup>He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." <sup>7</sup>When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, <sup>8</sup>and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.*

*<sup>9</sup>The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. <sup>10</sup>And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it,*

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Our biases and prejudices often threaten the spread of the gospel, but God loves replacing barriers with bridges as he moves his Kingdom forward.

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BY  
DR. IRWYN INCE





he fell into a trance<sup>11</sup> and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth.<sup>12</sup> In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.<sup>13</sup> And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”<sup>14</sup> But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.”<sup>15</sup> And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.”<sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

<sup>17</sup>Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon’s house, stood at the gate<sup>18</sup> and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there.<sup>19</sup> And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you.”<sup>20</sup> Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.”<sup>21</sup> And Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?”<sup>22</sup> And they said, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.”<sup>23</sup> So he invited them in to be his guests.

— Acts 10:1–23a



**S**EVERAL YEARS AGO, I went to see the movie *Lincoln*, directed by Steven Spielberg. The movie’s concern was the latter part of President Lincoln’s life, and it centers on his great push to get both the 13th Amendment to the Constitution passed and to bring the Civil War to an end. Ample footage depicted the debates taking place in the House of Representatives at that time to get the two-thirds majority needed for the amendment to pass. Lincoln needed every Republican and four Democrats to vote in favor of it. One of the Democrats he was trying to get was Kentucky Representative George Yeaman. But here’s what Yeaman initially had to say during one of the debates on the House floor: “Although I am disgusted by slavery, I rise on this sad and solemn day to announce that I am opposed to the amendment. We must consider what will become of colored folk if 4 million are in one instant set free and we will be forced to enfranchise the men of the colored race. It would be inhuman not to. Who among us is prepared to give Negroes the vote? And what shall follow upon that? Universal enfranchisement? Votes for women?” The House floor erupted with shouts, members on both sides unable to fathom allowing blacks or women to vote.

It might be hard for us to put ourselves in their place. Imagine living at a time where the thought of allowing black people or women in this country to vote would have been so appalling. Of course, we know the 13th Amendment did pass, with every Republican and four Democrats—including Representative Yeaman!—voting in favor of it. But even though Lincoln was successful in his quest, the movie ends with his assassination. I knew that’s how it would end, but I still found tears welling up in my eyes when the credits rolled. Those tears welled up because my heart was struck again by the reminder of the immense price that is paid in the pursuit of justice and righteousness: It often costs those engaged in that pursuit their very lives.

And of course, we cannot help but think of the One who embodies justice and righteousness and holiness himself—Jesus Christ—and the price that he paid for universal enfranchisement to bring people from every tribe and tongue and nation into the family of God. And yet the prac-

tical outworking of that has been difficult. The struggle against ethnic discrimination, even in the church, finds its roots in the Book of Acts. We might even say the struggle begins right here in our passage, Acts 10:1–23.

The promise of Jesus’s kingdom is not limited to any ethnic or socio-economic or political or other type of group, and the Holy Spirit has to make this clear to Peter in this passage. We can summarize what happens here using three C’s: comfort, correction, and courtesy. These represent (1) *God’s message of comfort to Cornelius*, who is outside of and excluded from the covenant promises and therefore disenfranchised; (2) *God’s message of correction to Peter* so that he better understands the gospel; and (3) *the courtesy—or the hospitality—that results from this understanding*.

#### **GOD’S MESSAGE OF COMFORT FOR CORNELIUS**

Luke tells us in verse 1 about a man named Cornelius. He was a Roman centurion stationed in Syria, about 32 miles north of Joppa, the town where Peter was then staying. As a centurion, Cornelius was in command of about a hundred soldiers. Centurions were men of great power. In a blink of an eye, those soldiers could have been flogged or killed if they did anything wrong. But Cornelius was not a ruthless commander who led his soldiers by fear and oppression. The opposite, in fact, is the case. Luke describes him in verse 2 as “a devout man who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.” He wasn’t a Christian. He wasn’t a disciple. He didn’t even know who Jesus was. But it is clear that the Spirit of God was at work in him, creating in him a desire to know God.

We can see an interesting comparison in acts between Cornelius and the woman Dorcas, who is mentioned back in chapter 9. Dorcas *is* a disciple, a follower of Jesus, and Cornelius is not. They are both people of means with wealth, and both were rich in mercy to those who had need. Yet, though he wasn’t a believer, Cornelius was someone who didn’t discriminate about who received his charity, as we see in verse 22 when the men sent by Cornelius to Peter describe Cornelius to him. They tell Peter that the whole Jewish nation can

testify that Cornelius is an upright and God-fearing man. He was known in his household, among his cohort, and in his community as a reverent, God-fearing man. He was known for mercy and not oppression. The point here is that Cornelius was outside of God’s covenant promises, but God was even so working on his heart.

There was a practical outworking of his seeking that extended into to his charity, to those in need, but his heart was unsettled. He prayed continually to God. He was making his request, beseeching God out of a real need for help. He doesn’t need financial help. He doesn’t need physical help. He wasn’t sick. He needed *comfort*. He needed a settled heart. He needed to know Jesus. But he didn’t *know* that’s what he needed. The idea is that we have no idea how God has been working on people’s hearts independently of us. Cornelius had never heard about Jesus or the Holy Spirit, but God was creating a need in him, a need to hear the comforting message of salvation through Jesus Christ. We do not know who God is working on. But we do know that he’s still working in people even today.

Our confidence as Christians is that the issues of the heart are unsettling people. God has written his law on our hearts. He’s at work preparing the hearts of people to hear and receive the message of comfort. God is here concerned to bring comfort to Cornelius. He gives him a clear vision of an angel with a clear message. In verse 4, the Angel of God appears and calls Cornelius by name. And Cornelius asks, “What is it, Lord?” The angel says, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. God is well aware of your prayers and your family.” The message is that God is going to answer his prayers by bringing him some good news. And the angel says, “Send men to Joppa and bring Simon Peter here.” So, Cornelius sends his two servants and a devout soldier on this mission.

#### **GOD’S MESSAGE OF CORRECTION FOR PETER**

But the problem in the text is not just with Cornelius’s need of comfort. The problem is that God needs to work on Peter, too. He’s been working on Cornelius, unsettling his heart. But Peter needs to be unsettled, too. Cornelius stands in need of comfort, and Peter stands in need of

some radical theological correction. He needs to have his theology adjusted. Verse 9 tells us that as the men Cornelius sent were on their 32-mile journey from Caesarea to Joppa, and when they approached the city, Peter went up on the roof top of Simon the tanner's house around noon to pray. As he was praying, he got hungry, and as lunch was being prepared for him, Peter fell into a trance. He had his own vision, beginning in verse 11: "he saw the heavens opened and an object like a great sheet coming down, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds." Then a voice speaks to Peter: "Rise, Peter. Kill and eat." Peter resists at first. He is hungry, but he isn't hungry enough to eat foods that the law said were unclean. So, he responds in verse 14, "By no means, Lord. I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." The voice speaks a second time to correct Peter, and this is what I call *Jesus's non-discrimination clause*. The voice says, "What God has made clean, you do not call common," or in other words, "unclean."

We have to understand how disrupting this was for Peter. It happened three times, Luke tells us in verse 16. Peter has to be told three times to rise, kill, and eat. He has to be told three times not to call unclean what God has made clean. And what's happening here is clearly about more than food. Peter's whole life had been one of discriminating about who had a right to the promises of God. What is deeply ingrained in his head as to who is included in the Kingdom of God had to be surgically removed.

While Cornelius needed to be confident that the message of Jesus's kingdom was for him, too, Peter needs to be corrected to expand his understanding of who this gospel message was for. When God comes in to correct your theology, it can leave you in a state of confusion. That's what Luke says happened to Peter. He was perplexed about the vision and what it meant. Here's the question: What are the things that are so deeply ingrained in us about who the Kingdom of God is for that the Holy Spirit needs to explode? Who are the people that we say, if not with our lips but with our actions, should not be included in it?

I doubt that any of us here would sound like Congressman Yeaman and say no to universal enfranchisement in the church for those people.

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**We have no idea how God has been working on people's hearts . . . We don't know who he has been working on. But we do know that he's still working, even today.**



But who are those whom our hearts struggle to engage with? And who, by our actions, do we give the message that "we don't really want you"?

You can have a church that has knock-it-out-of-the-ballpark worship music. You can have every bell and whistle that Christians think make

us attractive and appealing to others. But if we miss this, if we miss Jesus's non-discrimination clause—that no one, regardless of background or ethnicity or financial status or struggle with sin (whether that be in the area of sexuality or drugs or consumerism or greed or vice) is excluded from being welcomed in to receive and to live out the implications of God's grace—if we miss that, we have missed the very heart of the gospel. If we miss that, the Spirit of God wants to do for us what he did for Peter—bring ongoing correction to our theology so that the comforting message of God's grace in Jesus is not withheld from anyone by word or action.

#### **THE COURTESY THAT RESULTS FROM A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL**

Just as there was a practical outworking of God's work in Cornelius's heart, we see that there is also a practical outworking for Peter of this correction that he receives. It results in a courtesy—and by courtesy, I don't mean politeness. What I mean is a *radical hospitality*: the inviting of these Gentiles into a Jewish home. We see Peter still on the roof, perplexed about the vision, when the three men show up outside of the gate of Simon's house. They call out, "Is Simon, who goes by the name of Peter, staying here?" And as Peter continues to ruminate over the vision, the Spirit says to him, "There are three men looking for you. Get up, go down off the roof, and accompany them without hesitation, because I have sent them."

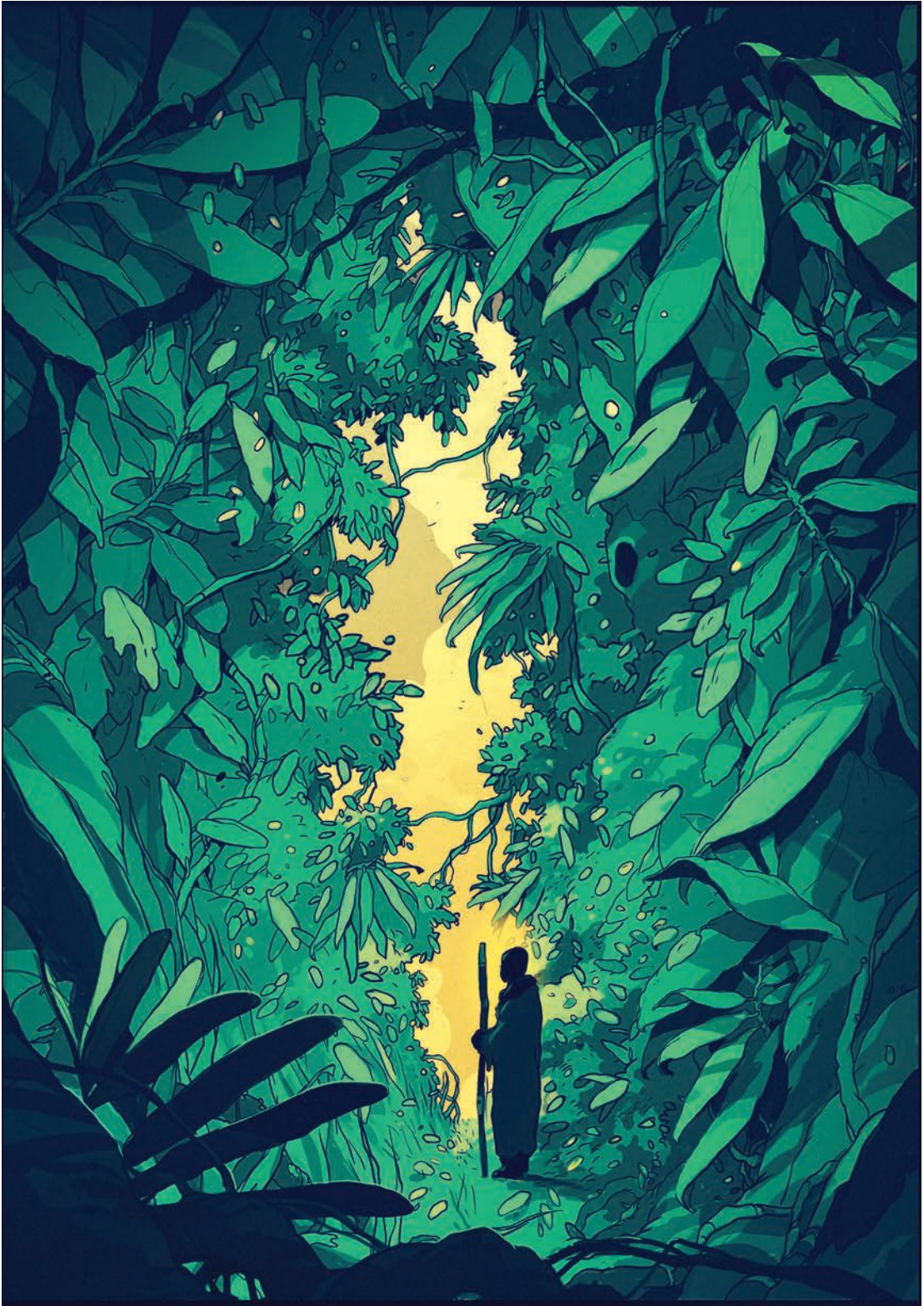
Now there's something we often miss here. Many translations use the word "hesitation" here, and some have a note or asterisk after that word indicating an alternate possibility. The better translation in this context, in my opinion, is "discrimination." Follow these men "without discrimination," the Spirit says. "Do not discriminate against them because they are Gentiles. Do not make a distinction or prejudice them, because I sent them." So, Peter goes to the gate and says, "I am the one you're looking for. Why are you here?" They tell him about Cornelius and his testimony as a just and God-fearing man who doesn't discriminate against Jews but is generous to them. And then our text ends with this amazing sentence: "So he invited them in to be his guests." A simple statement, really, but also the expression

of the gospel being lived out by Peter through hospitality. Hospitality, biblically speaking, is the act of welcoming strangers. We can talk about being hospitable, but if we're only welcoming into the church or into our lives people we know or who are like us, then we can't call what we're doing biblical hospitality.

This text ends with the outworking of the message that the Spirit gave to Peter: When it comes to the gospel, we are commanded toward a *radical inclusion*. What that inclusion looks like is hospitality that rubs against the grain of our cultural biases. It looks like a hospitality that rubs against—that is the opposite of—our own biases. You see, hospitality is messy and it's uncomfortable. But the Angel of God didn't preach the comforting message of the gospel to Cornelius directly. God could have just dropped the good news of Jesus out of the sky into Cornelius's lap by including it in the vision. But he did not do that. He told him, "Go get Peter." Why? Because the Lord wanted Peter to share the good news with Cornelius. In the communication of the message, God desired the expression of that message to be lived out practically, even though it was messy. Cornelius needed his vision to know that there was good news for him, and Peter needed his vision to know that there was good news for the Gentiles.

God gives these visions. As a result, Cornelius is afraid, and Peter is confused. Cornelius receives comfort. Peter receives clarity. And the overt exclusion of certain people from the promise of the gospel has been replaced through faith in Jesus Christ by overt radical inclusion. May God give us the power to live this out as he overturns our categories, as he destroys our discriminations, and as he corrects our theology. Amen. ■

*Dr. Irwyn Ince is Coordinator of Mission to North America (MNA), the mission agency of the Presbyterian Church in America, and served as the first African American Moderator of the PCA's General Assembly in 2018. He is the author of The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best (IVP, 2020). This article is adapted from a sermon delivered at Covenant Seminary in February 2024 as part of a series (by various preachers) on the theme "All for God's Mission."*



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# Sharing the Gospel

by Dr. Gavin Ortlund

*A world less open to Christianity presents many challenges for believers, yet our calling to evangelize remains the same as always. How can we share our faith effectively in such a time as this?*

# in a Time of Disenchantment

## **HOW THE MODERN WORLD IS ACHING FOR ENCHANTMENT**

The last few decades have been a time of radical change in our world. Many of the basic cultural markers and boundaries we used to take for granted have broken down, and large numbers of people are feeling that we now live in a time of intense uncertainty and struggle. Former believers are “deconstructing” their faith in huge numbers. Recent research shows that forty million Americans have stopped going to church—that’s 15% of the overall US population. Thirty percent of the population is now religiously unaffiliated. We find ourselves in a time of immense anxiety, loss, and disintegration, and we’re not sure what to do about it.

The word I use to describe this state of things is “disenchantment.” We’re living in a time when people everywhere are experiencing a great sense of disenchantment with just about everything. They have lots of questions but not a lot of solid answers, and they’re looking for answers in all the wrong places.

How did we get here? There are lots of complex reasons, but here are four simple concepts that can help us answer that question: distrust, division, distraction, and despair.

We *distrust* authority and institutions because we’ve seen so many failures of those in positions of power, heard so many stories of fallen leaders, experienced so many broken relationships, especially in the church, that we’re leery of trusting again. We also find ourselves living in one of the most polarized times in history, with political and social and religious *divisions* pulling us further and further away from each other. And in the midst of that we’re *distracted* by so much technology, so many choices, so much busyness that we are overwhelmed. We also sometimes use all these distractions to avoid dealing with the difficult issues of life. All of which tempts us toward *despair*, toward living in a state of what philosopher Charles Taylor, in his book *The Secular Age*, termed “the malaise of modernity,” an uneasiness that permeates our lives but that we can’t quite put our finger on. It’s hard to navigate all that.

Yet, as Christians we have—or should have—reason for hope even in such uncertain times. But many of us are struggling too. We want to help but

don’t know how. We wonder how we can share the good news of our faith when so many around us no longer seem to have even the most rudimentary concepts of morality, or sin, or civility, or God. We need our hearts to be awakened afresh to Jesus and how beautiful he is. We need to catch a glimpse of the sun shining out from behind the clouds and be re-energized, compelled forward with the love of Christ to lean into this world with the gospel—because we have access to the hope that people are looking for.

How do we begin to do this? How can we bring a sense of “re-enchantment” back to a world that seems to have lost its soul? My goal here is to provide some encouragement toward that end.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF “DECHURCHING” AND “DECONSTRUCTION”**

The first thing we need to know is that there is no “silver bullet,” no easy step-by-step description for how we do this. Rather, I want to provide some basic pastoral counsel that I hope will help us see some pathways forward.

I mentioned “deconstruction,” which, like “disenchantment,” is a big and complicated term that can mean different things. Here I use the term primarily to refer to people who have “dechurched” or “de-converted.” Those are not exactly the same thing. The first refers to people who say they are still Christian but who have stopped going to church for various reasons. The second refers to people who describe themselves as having left the faith altogether. In their book *The Great Dechurching: Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Zondervan, 2023), Jim Davis and Michael Graham note that the movement away from the church in the United States is greater than the numbers of people who came to faith in the First and Second Great Awakenings, and every other revival in our country, *combined*. That is a startling statement. And we also see a great surge of de-conversions—people who no longer identify themselves as Christians. In 1989, when Tim Keller planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, the percentage of religious “nones”—those who don’t identify with any established religion—was roughly 5% of the U.S. population and 25% of Manhattan. As of 2021, the “nones” made up 30% of the en-

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**Kindness and a caring attitude will go a long way toward opening doors to deeper conversations, but we also have to have something useful to say when we get those opportunities.**

tire U.S. population. What happened in Manhattan 35 years ago, is now happening in the entire country, and moving more and more in that direction. Some researchers predict that Christians will make up less than half of the population by around the year 2070.

This is a great challenge, and over the last several years, God has put a deep burden on my heart to spend myself doing whatever I can to try to help address this state of things and to pray for renewal in the church and in the culture. I know many others feel this sense of urgency because they have seen it happening at a personal level. Many have seen former pastors and leaders, mentors and friends, children and grandchildren experiencing a crisis of faith and moving away from Christianity. We know that Francis Schaeffer himself at one point struggled mightily with the nature of his own faith, wondering if Christianity was a viable answer for the modern world. He went all the way back to the beginning, looking at the foundational basics of Christianity piece by piece before he was re-convinced by the truth of what he knew and was able to bring that truth effectively to others again through the ministry of L'Abri Fellowship. Another great pastor, G. Campbell Morgan, was raised in a Christian home, but

went through a terrible season of deconstruction and doubt. At the worst point of his crisis of faith, Morgan came to a moment where, he said, "I was sure of nothing." A lot of people are in that position these days. Many of us know people in this position. Perhaps you've even been there yourself.

I want to invite us to humble ourselves before the painfulness of this topic and approach it in the most pastoral way possible. We want to have the heart of Christ, who at one point wept over Jerusalem because the people there were like sheep without a shepherd. If we want to help others get past these feelings of anxiety and hopelessness and uncertainty, we have to have a heart to bless and serve them. I'd like to suggest two main strategies for doing this, drawn mainly from the work of Francis Schaeffer, who stressed (1) the importance of personal kindness, and (2) the necessity of honest answers.

#### **THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL KINDNESS**

Schaeffer observed that there were four things necessary to meet the challenges in his own day, and I think these same four things are relevant to our time. He said there are *two contents* needed and *two realities* needed. The two contents are *sound doctrine* and *honest answers to honest questions*. We'll look at honest answers separately below. And the two realities he noted, without which the content is incomplete, are *true spirituality* and *the beauty of human relationships*.

In his own experience amid a church constantly at war with itself, Schaeffer saw how destructive a loveless orthodoxy could be. If you have sound doctrine but ugliness in your personal relationships, this can repel people from Jesus. That insight is still valid in our own day. One of the most common factors influencing why people have left the church in recent years is relational incompetence by Christians, particularly an inability to listen well and/or to disagree charitably. The person leaves not primarily because he or she did not receive an answer to valid questions, but more frequently because their concerns did not even get a hearing by those in the church.

Often, someone struggling with doubts or anxieties about their faith reaches out to a Christian in the church, but that person may feel threatened by the question or feels inadequate to answer it. In-

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stead of simply saying, “I don’t know the answer to that. Let’s look for it together,” the Christian offers some pat answer that isn’t helpful at all, or worse, ends up making the questioner feel embarrassed or scolded for having even asked the question. Sometimes a loved one is going through doubts and deconstruction—maybe a college student who returns home with questions about their faith—and the parents’ first thought is that somehow they have failed in raising their child. They take the situation personally instead of simply realizing that it’s okay to have questions. Instead of responding with calmness, compassion, and kindness, their own anxiety causes relational damage and the questioner turns away from the faith.

We must acknowledge that these situations can be difficult to navigate, and some of the criticisms leveled against Christians are appropriate. But we must also acknowledge that sometimes the criticisms are not fair and occasionally the person with questions is simply looking for a fight. We must realize that it’s okay to have boundaries; we don’t have to take every situation personally or try to respond to every question with the same level of openness. There’s a complexity here that requires a measure of discernment.

At the same time, we have to be careful that our overall attitude as followers of Jesus doesn’t become defensive. The New Testament calls us to exhibit kindness even when we are being maligned. First Peter 3:15, tells us to answer those who question “with gentleness and respect.” Titus 3:2 speaks of having “perfect courtesy to all.” Colossians 4:6 speaks of “gracious speech seasoned with salt.” We are called, even when being attacked, to have love for the other person. That doesn’t mean we allow ourselves to be abused, but in every situation, the other person must feel the love of Jesus from us. From my own experience, I have seen how time and time again intentional kindness toward the other person can open up doors for gospel ministry.

I believe there’s a hunger for kindness right now, as our culture continues to escalate toward outrage about almost everything. We see this in the enduring popularity of TV characters like Mister Rogers or Ted Lasso—kind people who are non-retaliatory even in situations where they could easily be so. Many in our culture are interested in this. I see the effects of outrage in social

media all the time. As one who uses YouTube as a major platform for what I do, I resolved from the beginning to have an irenic disposition, aiming for peace with people and wishing them well even as I debate with them about important issues. I have not done that perfectly, of course, but it’s amazing how an attitude of kindness can clarify a disagreement and open doors for pathways of positive discussion.

Three very simple practical things we can do in this regard are:

1. *Pray for people and invite them to church.* I am amazed at how rarely people are offended when we offer to pray for them, even people who don’t seem to have a relationship with Jesus. Some are more resistant, but it’s surprising how many are open to it, especially if they have something challenging going on in their lives. Simply committing them to the Lord in prayer can strike a chord that makes a big difference. It’s also surprising how many people are open to being invited to church. One of the main reasons that a large percentage of the population has stopped attending is not that they’ve suddenly become hardcore atheists. Many just got out of the habit during COVID and never went back. Some moved away and never found a new church. Others just drifted away and no one bothered to check on them or invite them back. One of the biggest needs today is simple hospitality. This goes a long way toward building relationships and opening doors for the gospel.
2. *Practice intentional encouragement.* In the midst of all the emotions we’ve identified already, people are aching for encouragement. A few years ago, I started to practice intentional, deliberate encouragement of others by putting it onto my Google calendar to text certain people and just offer them an encouraging word. I was astounded by how frequently I got responses like, “That came at just the right time,” or “I really needed that today.” It took 15 or 20 seconds for me to send a text, but for the other person that simple message might have gotten them through a difficult morning. People around us need encouragement all the time. We need to be intentional about

practicing it more often. This can be a big help to our evangelism as we seek to reach those struggling with confusion and pain.

3. *Practice listening.* This may be the most important thing of all. It was Schaeffer's main approach. He often talked about how, if he had just one hour with someone, he would listen for most of that time before responding for a shorter time. We need to be able to hear exactly where people are coming from, give them space to express their anxieties, their struggles, their doubts, before we just jump in with advice or platitudes that won't really help at all. This often means we need to lay aside our assumptions and have an open mind and an open heart. Someone once said that you're not really listening until you're willing to be changed by what you hear. We can't begin to offer help until we hear what the other person really needs and see how the gospel can address that specific need.

In addition to these practical things we can do, there are three assumptions we often make about those going through a deconstruction process—assumptions that are not necessarily true and that we should be wary of as we enter into these kinds of conversations.

1. *All deconstruction is intense rather than casual.* Not true. As we have seen, many people who left our churches did so not because of major theological issues but simply as the result of drifting away and not being invited back. We need to be able to distinguish the real reasons behind someone's dechurching.
2. *Someone struggling with doubts about faith must not have been a sincere believer to begin with.* This is not necessarily true, and it's often unhelpful to bring that assumption to your conversation. Many experience such doubts as a complete surprise and a source of pain. True Christians—like Francis Schaeffer and G. Campbell Morgan—can experience real doubts, and the Lord can use this process of questioning to strengthen someone's faith. We must be careful about making assumptions about the genuineness of people's belief.

3. *Mature Christians don't experience doubts and deconstruction; only immature Christians go through that process.* Again, not necessarily true. We have so many testimonies from church history, and the Book of Psalms itself, which teach us that you can be a devout believer who goes through a period where the clouds cover the sun and you can't see the light. We must be aware that mature Christians can struggle too.

#### **THE NECESSITY OF HONEST ANSWERS TO HONEST QUESTIONS**

Kindness and a caring attitude will go a long way toward opening doors to deeper conversations, but we also have to have something useful to say when we get those opportunities. This is where Schaeffer's idea of honest answers to honest questions comes in. Our posture here should be as it is in other areas of ministry: We know we are not sufficient in ourselves but are pointing people to Jesus and the beauty of the gospel.

Here are a few very practical ways in which we can do that.

1. *Start with the basic gospel message.* One thing we discover when we're interacting with those who have doubts about the faith is that often they have never truly responded in a personal way to the message of the gospel. They have never come to the point of receiving Christ's offer of forgiveness. Another thing I see frequently is that people deconstruct their faith because they fail to do what I call theological triage—ranking different theological doctrines by their relative importance. Of course, all doctrines are important in one sense, but not all doctrines are of primary importance for saving faith. Sometimes people will make a second-level or even a third-level doctrine of prime importance, and if something causes them to question that doctrine, they begin to question everything else about their faith as well. One way we can help here is to point people to the Apostles' Creed and other great historical standards of the church. These expressions of our faith emphasize the matters that are of prime importance for Christians

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**No matter how confused the world gets or how anxious we ourselves may feel . . . it's a privilege for us to help others face the important questions of life in love, with gentleness and respect.**

to believe and adhere to. Other matters—like varying views on the end times or church government or other issues not directly related to salvation—are not matters to take so seriously as to deconstruct one's faith over.

2. *Learn some basic apologetics strategies and techniques.* The word “apologetics” can have negative connotations for some people, but it is a valid concept that comes straight out of Scripture. “*Apologia*” simply means “defense,” and we see this used in 1 Peter 3:15, which says, “In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do it with gentleness and respect.” Those words “gentleness and respect” are vitally important, as we have seen. You can have the most airtight apologetic arguments ever constructed, but they will be meaningless and ineffective if you don't present them with gentleness and respect, with genuine love for the other person. The church has too often done this poorly. One simple and effective way to practice apologetics is to share your personal testimony. It's a powerful defense of your faith to show how the Lord brought you

from where you were to where you are, and it humanizes the process rather than making it about arguments and proof texts. That doesn't mean we shouldn't be able to offer good arguments based on Scripture, but we must remember Schaeffer's own concept that “love is the final apologetic.”

3. *Pray for open doors of opportunity.* Even if you know someone well and have a good sense of where they are spiritually, it can be hard to get around to talking about the gospel. It helps me to remember that three times in the New Testament, Paul prays for an open door or asks others to pray that God would open the door. He did not just speak the same way in every situation. He was responsive to openness. And he was patient. We have to be willing to play the long game; that is, we may have to talk with someone multiple times over a long period before we see any real fruit from the discussion. It takes time to build trust and establish relationships that are safe for honest conversation. It takes time to really care for someone and not see him or her as a project to be undertaken or a victory to be won. In the end, the timing is up to God, not us. Our job is to be open to his leading and to let ourselves be used for his purposes.

Once we have the opportunity to speak, how do we do it? Here are three strong appeals we can make.

1. *Christianity has a good explanation for our world.* This is a wonderful basic appeal. Why is our world here? Why is it so exquisitely well ordered? Can all of that really be explained by mere chance? One doesn't always need to get into the nitty gritty intellectual side of classical arguments about first causes or intelligent design in order to pursue this line of thought, but you should definitely know something about those arguments because they can often be useful and helpful to people you're talking with. Many people today, having imbibed the basic atmosphere of modernity in which we live, have the innate perception that somehow the idea of a creator just makes less sense, given all our scientific advances. Other people posit that we live in one of a multitude of uni-

verses where there are infinite possibilities for how things could be and we just happen to live in this one. Everybody has to explain the origin of the universe in some way, whether by some mysterious force we can't explain or study, or by purely material means that leave out the possibility of a creator. Our own reflection on some of these classic arguments might help us to invite people to consider the real truth, which is that the more you study the world, the more human knowledge grows, the more you see that the idea of a creator makes the most sense of all.

2. *Christianity has a good explanation for the human heart and the human experience.* Many who doubt Christianity or reject it outright still have a tremendous interest in love and justice. They're not willing to part ways with the innate perception that love and justice have transcendent value. But in a secular worldview, it's extremely hard to see where they get that value. They are reductively explained as the products of evolutionary psychology: we value love and justice because they helped our animal ancestors survive. Love and justice have no objective referent in the non-biological world, so they will have no final resolution or significance. That, ultimately, is a very dehumanizing idea. We have the opportunity here for stepping into what Charles Taylor refers to as "the unquiet frontiers of modernity." Simply put, even unbelievers still long for certain religious qualities. We can press people on this point of inconsistency—with love and gentleness, of course—and move toward getting them to ask themselves, "Can I really live with this kind of worldview? Isn't Christianity a much more satisfying way to explain the experience of being human?"

3. *Christianity has a good explanation of history.* Noted atheist Richard Dawkins shocked the world recently when he spoke of being a cultural Christian. Other atheists have said similar things. The reality is that many atheists recognize the tremendous amount of good Christianity has done in the world and that our culture, especially in the West, has lived off the fruits of this largest and most diverse

religion in history that was founded by the intriguing figure of Jesus of Nazareth. There must be some explanation for that fact. Most of the time we're not going to be talking with outright atheists but with people who claim to have at least some sort of spirituality. We can make a good appeal to them both from the claims of Christ and from the claims of his followers, that he rose from the dead, and that the best way to explain this is that he actually *was* God, he actually *did* rise from the dead. These are historically plausible claims that explain so much about the modern world.

Let me close with one final thought that addresses an anxiety we experience as we try to make progress in speaking to a world that is not very receptive to the claims of Christ. In addition to expressing kindness and supplying honest answers to honest questions, it's important to remember that everybody needs God. Everybody is curious about God. Everybody is curious about what happens when we die. These are standard questions about life. Everybody asks them. They are not going away any time soon. No matter how confused the world gets or how anxious we ourselves may feel, these are *the most important questions everybody faces*. It's a privilege for us to help others face them, bringing the truth to them in love, with gentleness and respect, and with a whole lot of prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray that the Lord would give us compassion for those who are struggling, and may he use us in his own time and in his own way to draw others to the glorious truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. ■

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# “We’re There to Show Them Jesus”: Campus Ministry That Changes Lives

*Chad Brewer found a lifeline to faith through campus  
ministry; now he helps others do the same.*

By Rick Matt



**M**OST COVENANT READERS are familiar with Reformed University Fellowship (RUF), the Presbyterian Church in America's (PCA) campus ministry that has impacted countless people in our denomination and beyond.

What may be less known is that through its RUF International (RUF-I) arm, the organization has, since the late 1980s, been expanding its unique brand of college outreach specifically to international students studying at American colleges and universities. There are currently 25 RUF-I ministries on US campuses. Over the last decade or so, RUF has also branched out even further through RUF Global (RUF-G), which, in partnership with the PCA's Mission to the World (MTW), the ministry of Serge, and several national denominations, has begun ministries to college students on 8 campuses in other countries. All of these growing ministries provide an essential Reformed Christian presence in the lives of young people during some of the most formative and challenging years of their lives.

Covenant Seminary grad Rev. Chad Brewer (MDiv '00) knows all about the challenges college students face and the difficulty of struggling with life's hard questions without much of a framework for answering them. For him, as for many others, college campus ministry became a safe harbor for asking honest questions, helped him to experience true Christian fellowship and real spiritual awakening, and planted the seeds of his future life calling. Chad now serves with RUF as Assistant Coordinator for RUF International and RUF Global, overseeing and equipping teams to start and run the individual campus ministries under these names. Before stepping into this role, he spent 21 years as an RUF Campus Minister himself, serving first at the existing RUF ministry at the University of Missouri–Columbia, then starting new ones at Penn State University, the University of Minnesota, and the University of California, Irvine. He loves to speak about how the Lord used such a ministry so powerfully in his own life.

#### **ASKING QUESTIONS—AND MEETING CHRIST —ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS**

“I grew up in a small city called Westminster, Maryland, on the Maryland-Pennsylvania border,” Chad says. “I did not grow up in a Christian home, and for college I went to Shippensburg University, in South Central Pennsylvania. Like many students, I started wrestling with the meaning of life and asking questions I had never really wrestled with before. I was getting depressed. One day I just started walking and ended up at a nearby church, sitting in the back listening. I bought a Bible and tried to read it, but it didn't make all that much sense to me.”

After about three months Chad grew more discouraged. One day he saw a sign on campus that said, “Christian Fellowship—Come and be loved.” He wanted to go, but he also thought it sounded a little weird. He convinced some friends from his dorm to go with him, and

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they went the last week of the semester. They were surprised to find 70 or 80 people in attendance, all of whom were friendly and welcoming. Chad decided he would come back after Christmas break and keep coming until he could decide whether what he was hearing at the group was true or not.

The second meeting after the break turned out to be a three-hour prayer party. “I thought, ‘Three hours!’ But I had promised myself to do everything they did until I believed it or not, so I went. I sat there for the entire three hours listening to people pray. Afterwards a guy asked me if I would like to do a Bible study with him. So, I did. We read the Bible twice a week. It was the book of James. I became a believer a few months later.”

Chad notes that this group was not like the campus ministries most of us are familiar with, such as RUF, Cru, the Navigators, or InterVarsity. This one was entirely student-led and it was the only such group on campus. After he became a believer, he got deeply involved. A year and a half later, he was President of the group, even though, he says, “I was still a very immature Christian, very young in my faith. I didn’t have a lot of older people in my life to guide me. I went to church a little, but I was church hopping. I made all these decisions pretty much on my own.”

Chad began to rethink what he wanted to do with his life. He had intended to become a high school teacher and sports coach, but by the end of his sophomore year, he wasn’t so sure. He thought God might be calling him to the ministry. “I really loved talking to people about Jesus. In my senior year I began to explore ministry options. There was a campus ministry based in Pittsburgh called Coalition for Christian Outreach that sounded good. I interviewed with them and got a job. But I ended up not taking it because I thought I needed more training. I needed to go to seminary. The question was: where?”

A friend gave him a magazine advertising a large number of seminaries. It had pullout cards to mail in for more information. He knew nothing about any of them or the various denominations they were associated with. He chose nine of the info cards, filled them out, and sent them in. Another friend advised him to be cautious since not all seminaries are alike. Chad decided to only apply to seminaries that emphasized one’s relationship to Jesus, and not all the other benefits of at-

## **Campus ministry is a beautiful way to make the gospel real and tangible during a time when many students are wondering what matters most.**

tending that school. As the responses came back, one by one he opened the envelopes. One by one he read, “We have great professors,” or “We have wonderful classes,” or “We have a high placement rate.” One by one he tossed them in the trash—except for the one response that began, “We believe that a seminary education is successful only if—at its end—the student knows Jesus Christ more intimately than at the beginning.” That one school was Covenant Seminary. Chad had never heard of it but he decided that that’s where he would go. He began the application process.

### **FACING CHALLENGES—AND FINDING GRACE—IN SEMINARY**

Meanwhile, he graduated from Shippensburg, went back home to Maryland, and got involved with a church there Chad asked the assistant pastor if he had heard of Covenant Seminary. The pastor laughed, “Of course. We’re a PCA church and Covenant is the PCA seminary.” Chad had no idea. The pastor asked if he wanted to meet the then-President of the seminary, Dr. Paul Kooistra, who would be speaking nearby for a fundraising event in two weeks. Chad jumped at the chance. That meeting sealed the deal for him. But the Lord’s mysterious way of working brought about a slight detour first.

“I have a brother who is eight years younger than me,” Chad says. “He was not a believer, and he didn’t have any other people in his life who were. He looked up to me and I felt like I couldn’t go off to Covenant and leave him that way.” Chad decided to defer seminary for a year and spend time with his brother, a sophomore in high school at the time. “We hung out together and did a Bible study for about year. By the end of that time, my brother became a believer. God

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is good. Then I went to Covenant Seminary.”

The first semester was challenging, to say the least. He began with intensive summer Greek, often referred to by students as “suicide Greek,” and rapidly found himself floundering. After a week and half he called the professor, Dr. Jack Collins, to tell him he was dropping out. “Dr. Collins talked with me for 45 minutes. He was very understanding. He calmly talked me down off that emotional ledge. I did finish the course and things got better after that, but it was rough going at first.”

The next few years were a whirlwind of learning, challenge, growth—and immense blessing. Chad came to understand the meaning of God’s covenant, the fullness of God’s sovereignty, the depth of God’s love, the caring way that Jesus did evangelism, and, most importantly, the power of God’s transforming grace in ways he never had before. “Dr. Phil Douglass’s class on Spiritual Formation was especially helpful for me,” Chad said. “He introduced me to Jerry Bridges’ book *Transforming Grace*, which was a life-changer. And his teaching on divine design showed me how the Lord made me in specific ways for ministry.” A recommendation from Dr. Douglass also gave Chad the opportunity for an internship at a church in Palo Alto, California—an opportunity that would help set the course of his ministry life.

Though the internship gave him opportunities to preach, the major part of it was teaching a six-week summer class on evangelism and pursuing young people to get them more involved in the church. Chad enjoyed it all, but he especially loved working with young people, reaching out to them, encouraging them, sharing Jesus with them. He loved helping a group develop and begin to grow. The experience was wonderful, but he still had no clear idea of what he would do after seminary.

As graduation time loomed, advice came from an unlikely source. “I worked on the grounds crew at the Seminary to help support myself,” Chad notes. “My boss was a man named Eric. I was talking with the other guys on the crew about how I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t really want to pastor a church. I had been impacted by campus ministry but had already turned down a job with one. I was at a loss. Eric overheard this and said almost casually, ‘Chad, why don’t you just go do RUF?’ Something clicked for me and I knew that that was what I was supposed to do.”

## **GATHERING PEOPLE—AND MAKING DISCIPLES—IN THE US AND BEYOND**

So, after graduation, he went to the University of Missouri to take over the existing RUF ministry there. He stayed for five years, and the experience simply confirmed for him that he was doing what God meant for him. As with his internship in California, in the midst of all the teaching and preaching and seeking out potential new leaders, the part he enjoyed most was pursuing people who were not yet in the group, not yet believers. After Mizzou, he went to start an RUF chapter at Penn State, and again after five years went to start another one at the University of Minnesota, then another at the University of California—Irvine. In every case, he says, “What I really loved was gathering and connecting with people who were not Christians and sharing Jesus with them. That’s been the pattern of my ministry with RUF: gathering the group and helping it develop to sustainability. Then I’m ready to do something new.”

The most recent “something new” was accepting the role as Assistant Coordinator for RUF-I/RUF-G in 2019. That move developed out of a couple of mission/vision trips with the PCA’s Mission to the World (MTW), and out of MTW’s Global Missions Conference in 2017. In 2005 Chad visited Riga, Latvia, then, in 2014, he went to Italy, where MTW was exploring partnership possibilities with a Reformed Baptist denomination. The Italians were especially interested in RUF as they had nothing like it. In the course of conversations, Chad met an American graduate student from Ohio studying at the University of Trent. The man led a Bible study for about 12 students there (out of approximately 16,000 at the time), but he was graduating soon and concerned about finding someone to lead it after he left. Chad was taken aback to learn that this was the only such ministry on the entire campus (unlike some American universities that often have twenty or more), and that none of the participants were Italian; all were international students from other countries. Through these experiences, “the Lord stirred my heart again for reaching underserved people with the good news of the gospel.”

In 2017, Chad attended MTW’s Global Mission Conference in Dallas. He came back energized, feeling that familiar movement of the Lord

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in his heart toward some new ministry opportunity, but he didn't yet know what. Soon after this, RUF approached him with a proposition: "How would you like to coordinate the efforts of RUF International for us?" Chad and his wife, Christie, both loved the idea, so, he began his new role with RUF-I in 2019.

At that time 16 American campuses hosted RUF-I chapters; today there are 25. But with 1.1 million international students studying at American universities, there is still significant work to be done to reach more of them. "There's never been a time in history when the nations of the world have sent this many students to another nation to be educated. We have a unique opportunity to welcome international students, the majority of whom are black. Many come from places where we can't send missionaries. It's a wonderful grace that the Lord in his kindness is sending so many people to us." Of the 25 RUF-I chapters, 20 are on campuses that also have a standard RUF ministry; though RUF typically ministers to American undergraduates and RUF-I is aimed more at international graduate students, leaders seek opportunities for cooperation and collaboration between the groups, which benefits everyone.

Chad also coordinates RUF Global, which functions similarly to RUF or RUF-I ministries with ordained ministers serving as shepherds for and connecting links between college students and local churches. There are currently eight RUF-G ministries—four led by PCA teaching elders as missionaries with MTW (in Colombia, Ukraine, West Africa, and Japan), and four led by men ordained in their respective national churches (Mexico, Uganda, Gambia, and Australia). These leaders are trained in the US by Chad and his staff, and he and others from RUF and MTW hold monthly Zoom meetings and sometimes visit in person to ensure that they stay well connected and well resourced for their various ministries. Chad notes that ongoing conversations with several leaders could possibly double the size of the ministry in the next few years.

#### **SHARING THE HEART—AND THE HOPE —OF CAMPUS MINISTRY**

From experience, Chad knows how crucial campus ministry can be for young people.

**There's never been a time in history when the nations of the world have sent this many students to another nation to be educated. We have a unique opportunity to welcome international students.**

"Campus ministry is really strategic," he says. "In 2022, the Pew Research Center said that 31 percent of people in the US ages 15 to 29 will either move into the church or, if they're already there, walk away from it. People are going through big transitions during those years. They're making life-changing decisions on their own for the first time. They're easily influenced by those they know and those they choose to follow. So, there's this very narrow window where we have the best possibility of reaching them. It only gets harder after that.

"Ministries like RUF provide a safe haven to ask questions, experience fellowship in a non-threatening environment, and be guided by trained ministers who care about you, point you to Jesus, and help connect you with a good local church. Without that kind of influence, it's no wonder so many young believers are tempted to turn away from their faith. And without that kind of influence, there would be fewer opportunities for unbelievers to hear the gospel. People are longing for relationships, longing to be loved, longing for Jesus, though they may not know that's what they need. Campus ministry is a beautiful way to make the gospel real and tangible during a time when many students are wondering what matters most. We're there to show them Jesus." ■

*Rick Matt is Senior Writer and Editor for Covenant Seminary and loves to tell the stories of what God is doing in and through the lives of CTS students, graduates, and faculty. He also serves as a ruling elder in the PCA.*

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# CLASS NOTES

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## “Go Therefore and Make Disciples”

More than 5,000 Covenant alumni serve Christ’s church and kingdom in 50 states and over 50 countries.

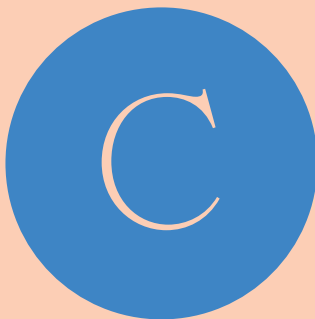


ILLUSTRATION BY VALERO DOVAL

Connections made in the Covenant community extend well beyond the time spent on campus or in classes together. We celebrate the joys and share in the sorrows of our alumni by highlighting some of their life and ministry milestones in each issue of *Covenant*. Additionally, to access the ongoing care and resources we offer alumni, contact Director of Alumni and Career Services Dr. Joel Hathaway at [joel.hathaway@covenantseminary.edu](mailto:joel.hathaway@covenantseminary.edu). From job placement assistance to vocational discernment, we are always happy to assist our graduates as they seek to serve the Lord for a lifetime of fruitful ministry.

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## *Ordinations, Installations, & Transitions*

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**Britt Bajier** (*MAC '17*) to Urgent Care Intake Specialist with St. Louis University Hospital, St. Louis, Missouri.

**Rob Corwin** (*MDiv '18*) from Assistant Pastor, Faith Presbyterian Church (PCA), Wilmington, DE, to Assistant Pastor, New Covenant Presbyterian, Virginia Beach, VA. Rob and his wife, Hannah, have three children.

**Chris Crain** (*MDiv '98*) from active-duty US Army Chaplain to Associate Professor of Historical and Pastoral Theology, Erskine Theological Seminary, Piedmont, SC. The Crains have three adult children.

**Frank Ells** (*MDiv '10*) from itinerant pastor to Pastor, Grace Presbyterian (PCA), Watertown, NY. Frank's wife Jane was promoted to glory in January 2023.

**Jeff Fritsche** (*DMin '15*) from Lead Pastor, White Rock Fellowship, Dallas, TX, to Lead Pastor, The Alpine Chapel, Telluride, CO.

**Zacchary Harrison** (*MDiv '22*) from ministry in Indiana to Associate Pastor, First Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA), Lynden, WA. Zac and his wife, Alicia, have one daughter.

**Chris Huntley** (*MAET '22*) from the Market Street Church of Christ, Salem, OR, to teaching Biblical Studies at Florida College, Temple Terrace, FL.

Chris and his wife, Julia, have five children.

**Adam Lopez** (*MDiv '20*) from Assistant Pastor, Emmanuel Presbyterian (PCA), Cedar Park, TX, to church planting in San Antonio, TX. Adam and **Kindell** (*MAM '23*) have four children.

**Tom McCort** (*MDiv '93*) retired from the US Army chaplaincy after 25 years. He and his wife, Rachel, have three grown children and currently live in Fleming Island, FL.

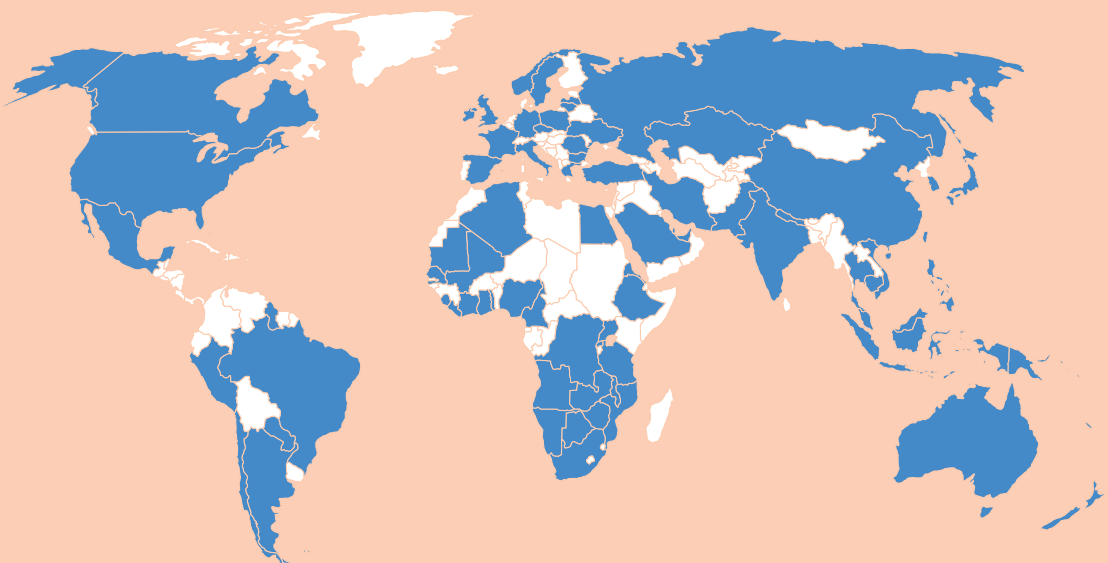
**Wes Martin** (*MDiv '15*) from Heritage Presbyterian (PCA), Oklahoma City, OK, to Pastor of Equipping, Calvary Presbyterian (PCA), Raleigh, NC. His wife, Kaitlin, works as an RN. They have four children.

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## *Where Our Graduates Go*

■ ALUMNI PRESENT

■ TO BE REACHED



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**B. J. Milgate** (*MDiv '12*) from Senior Pastor, Lake Nona Presbyterian (PCA), Orlando, FL, to Senior Pastor of Bradenton Christian Reformed (CRCNA), Bradenton, FL. B. J. and **Andrea** (*MAET '9*) have two children.

**Kirk** (*MDiv '12*) and **Anna Norris** (*MATS/MAC '11*), from MTW in Lviv, Ukraine, to RUF-International, Washington University, St. Louis, MO. They have four children.

**Andrew Perkins** (*MDiv '20*) from Assistant Pastor, Covenant Presbyterian (PCA), Issaquah, WA, to church planting in Richland, WA. Andrew and his wife, Jillian, have three girls.

**Charles Plant** (*DMin '06*) from pastoral ministry in Wyoming to growing a small church and community Bible study in Peel, AR.

**Ryan Storch** (*MDiv '22*) from Hilton Head Presbyterian (PCA), Hilton Head, SC, to Assistant Pastor of Student Ministries, Trinity Presbyterian Church (PCA), Tuscaloosa, AL. Ryan married Ashton on June 1, 2024.

**Harrison Spittler** (*DMin '08*) officiated the ceremony.

**Patrick Tebbano** (*MDiv '07*) from lead pastor, University Presbyterian (PCA), Las Cruces, NM, to Associate Pastor, Northwest Presbyterian (PCA), Dublin, OH. Patrick and his wife, Nicole, have three children.

**Juan Vasquez** (*MDiv '21*) from Oak Mountain Presbyterian (PCA), Birmingham, AL, to Assistant Pastor of Young Adults and Outreach, New Covenant Presbyterian (PCA), Aiken, SC.

## Celebrations

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**Kevin Ball** (*MDiv '05*) received his PhD from The Catholic University of America, writing his dissertation on “The Parables of Matthew in the East Syriac Exegetical Tradition.” Kevin and Erin (*MA '06*) live near Washington, DC, where Kevin works in the Office of the Provost at Catholic University, and Erin is the Executive Director of a non-profit organization. They have three children.

**John Franks** (*MDiv '03*) received his DMin from Reformed Theological Seminary, writing his dissertation on “Cultivating Gospel Culture in Church Leadership Teams.” John and his wife, Erin, live in Augusta, GA, where John serves as a pastor at First Presbyterian (PCA).

## Family Updates

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**K. J. Drake** (*MDiv '12*) married Heather Reed, July 13, 2024. **Billy Boyce** (*MDiv '11*), **Eric Tonjes** (*MDiv '12*), and **Bo Collins** (*MDiv '12*) were involved in the wedding. K. J. is Associate Professor of Historical Theology and Academic Dean at Indianapolis Theological Seminary.

**Kathryn and Matthew Winenger** (*MAM '20*) welcome James Dittrich, May 1, 2024. The Winenger's live in Madrid, Spain, serving with MTW and RUF-International.

## Condolences

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To the family of **Jon Maas** (*MDiv '84*), promoted to glory June 29, 2024. He is survived by his wife,

Marti, and his three sons and their families.

To the family of **Paul van Horn** (*MDiv '78*), promoted to glory June 25, 2024. He is survived by his wife, Janice, and their children and grandchildren.

To the family of **Cathryn “Cat” Flowers Ritchie** (*MA '77*), promoted to glory February 11, 2024. She is survived by her husband, Steve, their four adult children, and many grandchildren.

To the family of **Kim Stanley Payne** (*MDiv '84*), promoted to glory April 27, 2024. Kim is survived by his wife Becky, and their daughter and her family.

To the family of **Don Clements** (*MDiv '74*), promoted to glory June 6, 2024. He was preceded in death by his wife, Esther.

To the family of **Bob Woodson** (*BD '60*), promoted to glory March 6, 2024. He is survived by his wife, Shirley E. Woodson of Duluth, GA, their four children, and several grandchildren.

## Publications

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See the Book Release section of this magazine for a list of Alumni publications.

*Covenant Seminary's Alumni and Career Services staff provides ongoing care and resources for alumni. To share updates or access alumni support, contact Dr. Joel Hathaway at joel.hathaway@covenantseminary.edu.*

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## *Called to Serve: Celebrating the Ministries of Covenant Graduates—Past, Present, and Future*

THE YEAR WAS 1974. Dr. William B. Leonard Jr., pastor of Village Seven PCA, Colorado Springs, Colorado, challenged that year's Covenant Seminary graduates with his sermon titled "The Agony and the Ecstasy: The Joys and Sorrows of the Pastor." Scattered among the graduates were future senior pastors, missionaries, teachers, worship leaders, and those pursuing graduate studies. *The Covenant Seminary Newsletter* (Summer '74 edition) reported on the "largest class in the history of the school" that included now-longtime PCA pastors Don Clements and Bill Greenwalt, chaplain Stephen Leonard, and missionaries Bruce Young (Japan) and Hilarion Gus-to (Philippines).

On Friday, May 10, 2024—50 years later—Dr. Philip G. Ryken, President of Wheaton College, gave a charge titled "Gifts That Keep on Giving" to a new class of more than 100 graduates receiving degrees from Covenant Seminary. Some of those grads already know their next roles, while others are still discerning and deciding where they will be serving. The Seminary's accreditor, The Association of Theological Schools, requires a report of this information by November of each year, so as we wait for a full record of where our 2024 graduates are being placed for ministry, let's look back at the class of 2023 and where some of them are today.

In May 2023, 108 graduates entered roles in churches,



*Dr. Philip G. Ryken delivered the commencement address for Covenant Seminary's 2024 graduating class. (Photo: Kelly Park Photography.)*

counseling centers, campus ministries, and missions. If you overlook the differences in class size between 1974 (25 grads) and 2023 (108 grads), the work to which these men and women were and are called looks very similar. Many churches then and now hired recent male graduates to serve as senior ministers. This reflects the need for qualified senior leaders and the willingness of churches to hire candidates younger than their historic peers. Many of these men had significant ministry experience prior to coming to seminary, reflecting a trend to serve in ministry before being further equipped in seminary.

Sean Collins (MDiv '23), a senior pastor in Bogata, Texas, reflected on his time at Covenant Seminary: "The education and training that I received while at Covenant shaped me to understand the why and the how of ministry. And by God's grace, it transformed me, enabling me to 'do' ministry as I shepherd God's people."

Another difference between the two classes is the number of graduates today who serve in next-generation and college ministry, emphasizing the necessity of reaching younger people with the gospel.

In 1974, only Tom Kennedy intended to serve in a youth ministry role. Today, that number is much higher. Matt Horne (MDiv '23), serving with Crosswater PCA in Chesapeake, Virginia, says, "Just as pediatric medicine is vital for developing good physical health in the next generation, so is next-gen ministry for developing good spiritual health of our covenant and non-covenant children."

In 2023, 27 graduates received a Master of Arts in Counseling, and four others work in counseling ministries. Emily Seligson (MAC '23) reflects: "While the challenges we face today in the mental health world can feel daunting to consider, the root of these issues remains the same: things are not the way they are supposed to be. The need for highly trained therapists is significant, because the need for care will continue to exist this side of eternity."

Please pray for the graduating class of 2024 as they move into the ministries and vocations for which the Lord prepared them during their season at Covenant Seminary. ■

*Dr. Joel Hathaway is Director of Alumni & Career Services and Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Covenant Theological Seminary. This article originally appeared on the Seminary's News & Events blog in May 2024.*

“Covenant Seminary is committed to the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, the Reformed tradition, and the embodiment of our theology to reach those around us with the gospel. Your generous support provides us with the needed resources to impart these commitments to the next generation.”

Tom

—Rev. Dr. Thomas C. Gibbs, President



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