



WHEREVER THEY ARE CALLED,



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MDiv '98
PCA Pastor & Church Planter
Kindred Hope Church



Rev. Dr. Bryan Chapell
MDiv '78
PCA Stated Clerk
PCA Administrative Committee



Rev. Dr. Ligon Duncan
MDiv '86, MA Historical Theology '87
Chancellor
Reformed Theological Seminary



Rev. Dr. Ed Dunnington
MDiv '98, DMin '16
President
Geneva Retirement & Benefits



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MDiv '98
Church Planter & PCA Pastor
Lead Pastor
Denver Presbyterian Church



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WHO WILL SERVE GOD'S KINGDOM
AROUND THE WORLD.

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Covenant.



At The Center of Pastoral Calling.





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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MANAGING EDITOR: Rick Matt

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CONTACT

Covenant Theological Seminary
 12330 Conway Road
 St. Louis, MO 63141
 314.434.4044
 1.800.264.8064

REFERENCES

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We are not the first generation among God's people who have found the task of ministry leadership challenging, both for leaders and for their followers. Indeed, it has always been hard. But God's grace enables flawed leaders to keep leading and flawed followers to keep following.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

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Rev. Dr. Tom Gibbs



An important part of our stewardship at Covenant Seminary is to help students discern prayerfully, worshipfully, and in close community with one another how they are gifted and called to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. If we're doing this well, at the end of their time here students will not only have a better understanding and mastery of God's Word, but they will also be better able to understand their own hearts and their ongoing need for the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

Among the many tasks and priorities which occupy us at Covenant, none are more important than this one.

As we continue to strengthen our ability to train and shape the next generation of pastors, counselors, and ministry leaders for Christ's church, we are especially grateful for how the Lord has grown our pastor-minded degree programs, particularly the residential MDiv. For much of the past decade various factors converged to put us, along with many other seminaries, on a downward trend in this regard. But God's grace and the hard work of our dedicated staff and faculty have been the catalysts for an encouraging turnaround over the last two years. We are not where we want to be yet, but our numbers are rising steadily, and we are in a much healthier place than we have been in a long time. We'll share more about these and other trends in our fall issue.

We praise the Lord for his goodness in all this! We also praise him for the gift of our many friends and donors, whose powerful prayers and generous support are absolutely essential to this ministry. We are grateful for every one of you and do not take your friendship for granted.

As we look to the future, please join us in praying for the Lord's continued guidance and blessing on Covenant Seminary. It is a joy to labor together for the good of his church and the building up of his kingdom.

All for Jesus,

ILLUSTRATION BY STÉPHANE MANEL

The Lifetime of Ministry Conference

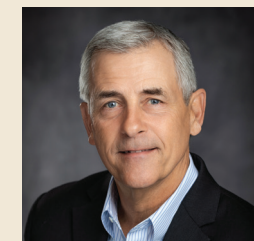


Renewed Hope in Kingdom Ministry

OCTOBER 16-17, 2024



Dr. Thomas C. Gibbs
President, Covenant Seminary



Rev. Randy Pope
Founding Pastor, Perimeter Church, and President of Life on Life Ministries



Dr. Dan Doriani
Interim Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church



NEWS & EVENTS

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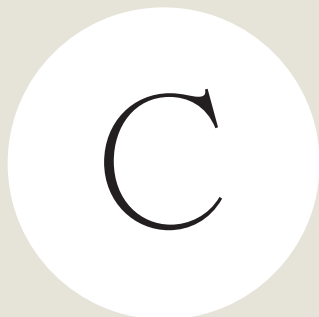
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ISSUE 1



“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

A New Strategic Plan for Greater Future Effectiveness

● As widely acknowledged, our current cultural moment is characterized by significant and rapid change affecting theological institutions like Covenant Seminary. The political landscape, the COVID-19 pandemic, technological innovation, the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, so-called “nones,” and social media have made the traditional residential delivery of theological education more difficult. Among the most important impacts arising from these historic headwinds are rising educational costs, declining enrollments and student load, and increased demand for fully online and hybrid degree programs. The landscape of theological education is changing in dramatic ways. These headwinds have been well-documented, and Covenant has not been immune.

Consequently, if we are to continue building on our 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. The last few years have seen significant growth in online and hybrid learning options, as well as the development of several other degrees that allow for greater educational opportunities for men and women not headed into pastoral ministry but who desire more training to serve in the church or in other vocations in a more biblically informed way. We have also re-examined our institutional priorities to assess where we have been and where we need to go to be more effective at our mission.

All this culminated in the development of a new Strategic Plan that was adopted by our Board in January 2024. Informed by our institutional identity and the current challenges before us, and in consultation with many of our alumni, ministry partners, and key denominational figures, the planning process identified six strategic priorities essential to institutional health, alignment with our vision, and overall impact on our students and the wider church. These six priorities serve as the guiding 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 Sustainability

Look for more information about how we’ve already begun making strides in each of these strategic areas in our next issue of *Covenant*.

A Lilly Grant for Equipping Future Preachers

● In keeping with our goal of recruiting and preparing pastor-minded students, we were pleased and excited to receive last year a \$1.19 million grant from Lilly Endowment toward equipping future preachers. This grant will further develop an emphasis on preaching as a primary means of pastoral ministry for the Seminary’s Master of Divinity students.

Covenant has long held a focus on training preachers as a central means of pastoral ministry, beginning with its founder, Dr. Robert Rayburn, and continuing through many of its faculty, including President Emeritus Dr. Bryan Chapell, whose book *Christ Centered Preaching* remains a standard homiletics textbook at seminaries around the world to this day.

The Lilly grant will equip preachers by enabling three primary activities: (1) preaching cohort groups, (2) preaching conferences and workshops, and (3) developing preaching resources. The goal of these programs will be to encourage and revitalize seasoned preachers, better equip and support young preachers and those aspiring to preach, and give opportunity for preachers of all experience levels, ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities to learn from each other. This will also provide opportunities for bi-vocational pastors who may not have been able to previously access seminary-level education due to lack of accessibility and/or affordability. Covenant Seminary is one of 81 organizations receiving grants from Lilly Endowment through a competitive round of its

national Compelling Preaching Initiative.

The grant also enabled us to bring Dr. Thurman Williams, who had been serving in a part-time adjunct capacity as our Director of Homiletics, into a full-time position in this role starting in spring 2024. Dr. Williams will also serve as the project lead in further developing the preaching program to benefit those aspiring to pastoral ministry. See more about Dr. Williams in the “Faculty & Staff” section of this magazine.

2023 Covenant Seminary Preaching Lectures Featured Dr. Thurman Williams

● To further emphasize the importance of preaching and his enhanced role in teaching future preachers, Dr. Thurman Williams was also the featured speaker at the October 2023 edition of the Covenant Seminary Preaching Lectures. Focusing on the topic “Worshipful Preaching: Preaching Before the Lord as Lead-Worshipper,” Dr. Williams noted that preaching is both an act of worship by the preacher and an invitation to the congregation to enter into worship for the purpose of transformation. He led attendees through an exploration of the questions: What can preachers learn from worship leaders about leading the people not only to learn about God but also to meet with God in worship? What can preachers learn from educators about how people learn in ways that transform their lives outside of the worship service? What can preachers of every race, background and denomination learn from the African American preaching tradition that can more powerfully and deeply impact the lives of all our people?

The Return of the David C. Jones Theology Lectures

● We were pleased to host the return of the David C. Jones Theology Lectures in February–March 2024. The lectures are named in honor of the late Dr. David C. Jones, long-time Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics at Covenant, to celebrate his legacy and that of the Seminary’s Reformed theological heritage by providing an important service to our students, faculty, and

community. The Jones Lectures each year focus on a particular area of theological study featuring presentations by a contemporary academic authority in that area.

The 2024 edition featured Dr. Steven J. Duby, Associate Professor of Theology at Phoenix Seminary and author of several books, including the recent *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism* (Baker Academic, 2022). Dr. Duby’s two lectures reflected on the relationship between Christ’s person and work and some of the recent Christological debates over the hypostatic union. Lecture 1 covered “Hypostatic Unity and the Saving Work of Christ,” and considered the connection between Christ’s person and work broadly through three key theological points and in light of recent debates about Chalcedonian Christology and its bearing on our understanding of the one hypostasis or person of Christ. Lecture 2 focused on “Life-Giving Flesh: Deity, Humanity, and the Efficacy of the Atonement,” and zoomed in more closely to examine the ways in which the life-giving power of Christ’s flesh and the efficacy of his atoning death are grounded in his deity and how the empowerment, support, and infinite worth of his redemptive death are articulated in dialogue with patristic, medieval, and early modern theologians.

A *Festschrift* Honoring Dr. Michael D. Williams

● The rich theological heritage and lasting influence of our faculty is evident in many ways, not the least of which is how many of them are beloved by alumni who have been shaped and transformed by their teaching, mentoring, and friendship. Dr. Michael D. Williams, who retired in 2022 after 26 years of teaching systematic theology at Covenant (first as Associate Professor from 1996 to 2004, then as Professor from 2004 to 2022), is one of those who continues to have an impact on many. To honor his legacy at Covenant and the tenor of his entire academic and pastoral life, the Seminary devoted the bulk of the fall 2023 issue of our academic journal, *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review*, to a *Festschrift* for Dr. Williams, with contributions from a wide array of his students, former students, colleagues, and friends each offering theological essays or personal reflections that get at the heart of Mike’s interests, life, and

Campus life is a reflection of the brotherhood we have in Christ as we live, work, play, study, worship, and pray together in a covenantal community of grace and faith.

ministry. We are grateful for him and happy to be able to honor him in this way. The volume was guest-edited by Dr. Mark Ryan, formerly Director of the Francis Schaeffer Institute, and included contributors such as C. John Collins, Gregory R. Perry, Michael Goheen, David W. Chapman, Jessie Swigart, William E. Boyce, Mary Schieferstein, W. Brian Aucker, Victoria Tatko, Christopher J. H. Wright, Aaron Goldstein, and Daniel W. Zink.

The 13th Annual Theological Fellowship Conference

● This year’s edition of our annual student-led theology conference took place in January 2024 and featured plenary speaker Dr. Scott Manetsch, Professor of Church History, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL. Hosted by The

Theological Fellowship at Covenant Seminary, a student group devoted to theological discussion, the conferences also featured presentations of papers from Covenant students on a variety of theological topics, with an award given for the best paper as judged by the group. Theological Fellowship also brings in other speakers during the year for the benefit of the student body. Dr. Mark Noll, Research Professor in Church History at Regent College, spoke in September 2023. Faculty mentors for Theological Fellowship include Dr. Robert W. Yarbrough, Dr. Robbie Griggs, and Dr. Brian Aucker.

Theological Fellowship's 2024 Spring Lectures Featured Reformation Scholar Dr. Paul Lim

● The Theological Fellowship at Covenant Seminary hosted annual spring lectures on Wednesday, April 3, and Thursday, April 4. The featured speaker was award-winning church historian and author Dr. Paul Lim, Associate Professor of the History of Christianity at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Associ-

ate Professor of History at Vanderbilt University, and Interim Director of the Nashville Institute for Faith and Work. The free event featured two lectures on the topics "Calvin: Ethics of the *Imago Dei* and Its Discontents" and "Augustine: From Shaking Pear Trees to a Philosophy of History."

Dr. Paul Lim is an award-winning historian of Reformation and post-Reformation Europe. He earned his PhD in ecclesiastical history from Cambridge University, with further training in Latin, archival research, and the history of biblical exegesis from Université de Genève. In addition to his teaching duties at Vanderbilt University and Divinity School, Dr. Lim serves Scholar-in-Residence at Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville and as Interim Director of the Nashville Institute for Faith and Work. He is the author of *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2012), which won the 2013 Roland H. Bainton Prize as the best book in history from the Sixteenth Century Society and Conference. Other works include *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge, 2008) and *In Pursuit of Purity, Unity, and Liberty: Richard Baxter's Puritan Ecclesiology in Context* (Brill,



2004). Dr. Lim was the PhD supervisor for Covenant Seminary's own Associate Professor of Systematic Theology Dr. Andrew "Drew" Martin when he studied at Vanderbilt.

The Return of the Lifetime of Ministry Conference Addresses Timely Pastoral Issues

● The fall of 2023 saw the return of our annual Lifetime of Ministry Conference, which is designed to help pastors and church leaders understand and address some of the challenging issues of our day from a biblical perspective. The first installment of the revived conference took place in November 2023 and was titled "The Changing Self and the Challenge of Ministry." The two-day event featured renowned historian Dr. Carl Trueman, author of *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* and *Strange New World*, and our own Dr. Robbie Griggs, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology. Drs. Trueman and Griggs addressed the current cultural turbulence surrounding the issue of sexuality and offered some historical and pastoral insight to help church leaders seeking to shepherd others through this challenging topic in our cultural moment. The 2024 edition of the Lifetime of Ministry Conference will take place in October and will be focused on the theme "Deepening Ministry Resilience." Speakers and more details will be announced soon.

Austin Harrington Counseling Lectures Offered Wisdom for Pastors and Counselors

● To assist counselor, pastors, and ministry leaders in growing in their work, and to help them help others grow in their lives and faith, our Counseling Department annually offers the Austin Harrington Counseling Lectures. The May 2024 edition of the lectures was titled "Practicing for Heaven: Counseling, Neuroscience, and the Wisdom of the Kingdom of God" and featured renowned counselors, authors, and speakers Curt Thompson, MD, and Richard Winter, MD. The lectures explored:

→ The opportunities and challenges facing Chris-

tian counselors in the twenty-first century.

→ Biblical perspectives on advances in neuroscience and emerging treatments.

→ How they have personally and practically integrated faith and evidence-based resources in their private practices.

Dr. Thompson is a board-certified psychiatrist and the founder of Being Known, an organization that develops resources for hope and healing at the intersection of neuroscience and Christian spiritual formation. He is also the author of *The Soul of Shame*, *The Soul of Desire*, *Anatomy of the Soul*, and his newest book, *The Deepest Place*.

Dr. Richard Winter trained in medicine at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London, and then in psychiatry in Bristol. He is a past-member for The Royal College of Psychiatrists in the UK and was a counselor, teacher, and leader at the English L'Abri before moving to St. Louis in 1992 to lead the counseling program at Covenant Seminary. He is now Professor Emeritus in Counseling. Dr. Winter is the author of *When Life Goes Dark: Finding Hope in the Midst of Depression* and *Perfecting Ourselves to Death: The Pursuit of Excellence and the Perils of Perfectionism*.

Preparations for ATS Site Visit in Fall 2024

● An important aspect of the Seminary's stewardship of our ministry to our denomination is the maintenance of our accreditation credentials. Even as we have been going through our own assessment and re-evaluation of priorities for strategic planning purposes, we are deeply involved in preparing for a visit later this fall from representatives from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), one of our accrediting agencies. This is part of the ongoing process of reviewing and renewing our official accreditation as an institution of higher learning based on specific standards as outlined by the accreditors. We will be reporting on the various aspects of our academic and communal life and meeting with peer reviewers who will help assess and identify areas of strength and any areas that may need improvement. Please be in prayer for this process.

FACULTY & STAFF

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ISSUE 1



“For We Are God's Fellow Workers...”

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



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



Dr. Dan Doriani, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, was selected in December 2023 to serve as **Interim Senior Pastor for Briarwood Presbyterian Church** in Birmingham, Alabama. The choice was the result of a months-long search by a team appointed by the church's session following the unexpected passing of Briarwood's long-time Senior Pastor, Dr. Harry Reeder, in May 2023. Dr. Doriani has been serving part time in the Interim Senior Pastor role during the spring of 2024 while continuing with a full slate of teaching commitments at Covenant Seminary. This summer, he will assume a full year of interim pastoral responsibilities at Briarwood with a reduced teaching load at the Seminary. His interim duties will continue through May 2025 or until a new Senior Pastor for Briarwood is named. He plans to return to full-time teaching duties at Covenant when the interim role concludes.



Mr. Stephen Griffin joined our staff in May 2024 as **Director of Communications and Marketing**. He steps into the role previously filled by Mr. Kent Needler, who took another position last fall (see below). Mr. Griffin comes to us from Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, where he has served as Communications Content Manager since 2022, having previously been Social Media Manager (2020–2022) and Communications Assistant (2017–2020) for RTS. Mr. Griffin holds a BS in mathematics, with minors in communication and history, from Mississippi College, and is experienced with print and electronic publications, social media, and digital marketing. In his new role he will oversee all aspects of the Seminary's internal and external communications and marketing efforts and work with all departments of the institution to ensure that their communications needs are met and that branding and messaging are consistent throughout the organization. Mr. Griffin, a lifelong resident of Jackson, is recently married to Avery, and they are looking forward to exploring and getting to know St. Louis and the Covenant Seminary family.



Mrs. Megan Jung joined our Student Life staff in April 2023 as **Associate Dean of Women**. In this position, she focuses on working with and nurturing female students and student wives, both on campus and online. She has a love for people and desire to see Christ formed in them more deeply. A 2011 graduate of Covenant's MAC program, Mrs. Jung has been practicing therapy for the past 13 years. Before coming to Covenant as a student, she served as an intern with Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. With her previous knowledge of the Seminary and her extensive professional experience, she brings a wealth of relational expertise to her role in caring for Covenant's students. Of her appointment, she said, "Covenant Seminary has solidly taken up real estate in my heart, mind, and story over the past 15 years. At Covenant, I began to taste freedom in the gospel—living through brokenness and restoration while learning about my own sin and experiencing gracious care. It was there that I learned the value of

being curious for the sake of God's kingdom. Time at Covenant primed me to do work that I deeply love: working with people to help them heal and grow." Megan is married to Jason, who serves as a ruling elder at South City Church (PCA) in St. Louis. They have three children.



Dr. Robert Kim was recently promoted to **Associate Professor of Applied Theology and Church Planting**, moving up from Assistant Professor in the same disciplines, a post he has held since 2019. Dr. Kim also serves as the Philip and Rebecca Douglass Chair of Church Planting and Christian Formation for the Seminary and oversees the Church Planting Track for Covenant's Master of Divinity and Master of Arts (Biblical and Theological Studies) degree programs. Dr. Kim brings wealth of experience as a church planter and pastor makes him an ideal mentor and trainer of missionaries, church planters, and other mission-minded church leaders. He planted Gracepoint Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which he pastored for 12 years while also overseeing the planting of a daughter church. He later served as Coordinator of the Metro Philadelphia Church Planting Partnership, where he provided guidance, training, and resources for church planters in five presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church in America. In 2019 he came to Covenant Seminary to direct the Church Planting Track, which offers focused training, mentoring, and internship programs for pastoral students called to church planting. Dr. Kim holds a BA in sociology from the University of California, Irvine; an MDiv from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; a ThM in intercultural studies from Fuller Theological Seminary; and a DMin in church development from Reformed Theological Seminary. He also serves as a board member for Serge, the independent mission organization formerly known as World Harvest Mission. CTS President Dr. Thomas C. Gibbs noted, "Our students, faculty, and staff have been greatly blessed by Robert's love for the Lord and immense enthusiasm for planting and growing new churches. We are excited to see how God will continue to use Robert's work here to shape a new generation of mission-minded pastors and church planters for the PCA and beyond."



Dr. Paul Loosemore, Associate Professor of Counseling, stepped into the additional role of **Director of the Counseling Department and the Counseling Center** in January 2024. He succeeds Dr. Mark Pfuertze and Dr. Jeremy Ruckstaetter, who have co-led the department very well since 2020. Dr. Pfuertze indicated his desire to rotate out of the co-Director role to focus more on teaching, while Dr. Ruckstaetter will continue his excellent oversight of CACREP Accreditation by transitioning from co-Director of the department to become Director of CACREP Accreditation within the department. Dr. Loosemore previously taught counseling courses as an adjunct professor of counseling at various institutions. He is active in the broader academic discussion surrounding counseling and has published articles in the *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, the *Journal of Psychol-*

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.

ogy and Christianity, and the *EMCAPP Journal*. His PhD research focused on the impact of a relationship with God and how it relates to character growth and well-being. As a counselor, he has experience working with individuals, couples, and groups, with special focus on marriage concerns, trauma and abuse, relational distress, and grief and loss. He completed a PhD in counselor education and supervision from Regent University, is a graduate of Covenant Seminary's Master of Arts in Counseling program (MAC '15), and

holds a Bachelor of Advertising from Gloucestershire University and an MA in Interior Design from Portsmouth University—both in England. Dr. Loosemore has worked as a professional counselor since graduating from Covenant's program, including co-founding the St. Louis Counseling Center.



Mr. Kent Needler, who had served as Senior Director of Communications and Media for Covenant, stepped down from this role in the fall of 2023 to pursue a new professional opportunity. Prior to this, Mr. Needler served the Seminary in a variety of roles. As Associate Director of Admissions from 2006 to 2013, he oversaw the campus visit process for prospective students and helped those potential students discern their call to ministry. As Communications Director (2013–2019) and then Senior Director of Communications and Media (2019–2023), he oversaw all aspects of the Seminary's communications and marketing processes, including print and electronic media publications, social media, advertising, and website development (including the most recent upgrade to the Seminary's main site, resources site, and online store), and assisting all departments of the institution with information and communication needs. His knowledge and expertise helped the institution make wise and appropriate use of new developments in the media and communications fields to more effectively serve the mission of the Seminary and tell the stories of its students, alumni, faculty, and staff for the glory of God and the advancement of his church. Mr. Needler, a 2006 MATS graduate of Covenant, serves as a ruling elder at Kirk of the Hills Presbyterian Church (PCA) in St. Louis, MO.



Dr. Thurman Williams, who had been serving in a part-time role as Adjunct Professor of Homiletics since 2014 and as Director of Homiletics since 2021, **joined our faculty full-time in spring 2024**. His appointment is the result of the Seminary's receipt of a \$1.19 million grant from Lilly Endowment toward equipping future preachers (see more in "News & Events"). Dr. Williams will also serve as the project lead in further developing the preaching program to benefit those aspiring to pastoral ministry. Dr. Williams serves as Pastor of New City Fellowship—West End, a church plant of New City Fellowship, St. Louis, and was previously Associate Pastor at Grace & Peace Fellowship (PCA) in St. Louis and Pastor of New Song Community Church (PCA) in inner-city Baltimore. He was Minister of Outreach and Youth for five years at Faith Christian Fellowship Church (PCA), also in Baltimore, and served four years on staff with the ministry of Young Life. Thurman holds a Master of Divinity (MDiv) from Chesapeake Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Ministry (DMin) from Covenant Theological Seminary. He was Adjunct Professor of Homiletics at Covenant since 2014. Thurman has also served as Chairman of the PCA's Mission to North America Committee.

Covenant.



At The Center
of Biblical Truth.



Of Sabbaticals, Scotland, and Saving Grace: Getting to Know Dr. Brian Aucker

God uses all our experiences to shape us for ministry—and he never wastes a thing.

By Rick Matt



ILLUSTRATION BY JORDAN ANDREW CARTER

DR. BRIAN AUCKER BEGAN his professional life as a nuclear medicine technologist helping doctors diagnose and treat ill people. Today, as Professor of Old Testament at Covenant Seminary, he helps prepare pastors and ministry leaders to bring hope and spiritual healing through the gospel. In this recent interview, he shares some of his remarkable journey.

Rick Matt (RM): Brian, thanks for agreeing to take time from your sabbatical to share your story with us. What have you been doing with your time while you've not been teaching this spring?

Brian Aucker (BA): Mostly, I'm working on a commentary on First Kings and trying to make progress on that. I've outlined it in detail and now I'm inductively firing questions at the text as I walk through it. I'm hoping that will help me make connections with things that come up later in the book so I can address them more thoroughly. It's going well but slowly. That's the main project right now. But I'm also trying to do some renovation work around my house. It needs a lot of help! It's a huge undertaking; like a second job, really. We'll see how it goes.

RM: Sounds like you'll be very busy for the next several months! Like all our profs, I know you spend lots of time with students outside the classroom and often form deep friendships with them. But not everybody gets to hear the details of profs' personal stories and how the Lord brought them to where they are today. Can you give us a sense your own story? How has God been working in the life of Brian Aucker?

BA: It's hard to know where to begin, but I'll start with this. A couple of years ago, my mother had an unexpected, extended illness which led to her death. I was one of her primary caregivers. One day she was particularly distressed, and I asked what the matter was. She said, "When you were born, I struggled with post-partum depression. I was concerned that I might kill you. So, I prayed that God would help me through that and if he did, I would dedicate you to him." That was a strange thing to hear, especially since I didn't grow up in a Christian home. We didn't attend church at all. So this was news to me and got me thinking about how I got where I am.

I was a pretty good student as a kid and seemed to enjoy school, but for various reasons, I went off the rails in my high school and college years. There was absolutely no reason I should have gotten into college with my academic record. But I had played lacrosse in high school, which got me noticed by a college coach, so I ended up going to college based on that. I never really played because I was so off the rails at that point. But the Lord got hold of me in my sophomore year and began to straighten me out.

I was a biology major and I decided to pursue something called nuclear medicine. This was the early 1980s. Nuclear medicine is basically a branch of diagnostic radiology, using radiopharmaceu-

ticals to help diagnose and treat various illnesses. Then in the mid-1980s magnetic resonance imaging became more clinically available as well. So, after college I worked for a company that did nuclear medicine and MRI, while my wife Pam and I got married and started our family. I did that all through my twenties.

I also worked at my church, doing some small group leadership and Sunday school teaching. I enjoyed it. I had been thinking about seminary and did some classes through a local seminary in Maryland called Chesapeake Theological Seminary. It had been started by a Covenant Seminary alumnus. At that time there weren't any online or hybrid options, so the school was a way for people to continue to serve in their local congregations but also get better prepared for ministry. I also visited Covenant in 1986. One of the guys I stayed with on campus, Khen Tombing, had an incredible impact on me in such a short time. I was also deeply impressed by the sense I had of full-orbed, fully organic care for the students and community, for the whole family. My pastor at home had graduated from another seminary but he encouraged me to come here, which I decided to do.

Soon after that, though, I got a call from a physician I had trained with who was planning to build an MRI facility. He asked if I would be the technical director of that facility, which I agreed to do. So that led me in a very different direction for a couple of years. I didn't get back to Covenant until 1992. By that time, I was 32 years old, but that's the trajectory the Lord had me on. Of course, I needed a way to support my growing family while in seminary. It so happened that Missouri Baptist Hospital, just up the road, had a desperate need of someone with nuclear medicine experience. They hired me per diem, and I worked for them as much as I could all four years I was at Covenant.

RM: It sounds like the Lord took you on quite a roundabout path before bringing you here to study. How did you go from being a Covenant student to being a Covenant professor?

BA: That same kind of irregular path continued while I was a student. Early on, my parents went through a difficult divorce that impacted me, my brothers, and my mom for many years. But

The really big lessons come not from the classroom but from just living life and trusting God and facing with him whatever is thrown your way. That's the real preparation for ministry.

again, the Lord knew what he was doing. My first class here was summer Greek taught by Dr. Bob Yarbrough. There were many guys in that class who are now or were at some point professors and colleagues of mine, people who had a huge impact on me: Jimmy Agan, Zack Eswine, Mike Higgins, to name a few. Dan Doriani, Jack Collins, and Hans Bayer started teaching here near the end of my student years. But Dr. Phil Long really impacted me greatly with his Old Testament Historical Books class. His teaching on Samuel was remarkable. I had no idea this kind of narrative existed or that it was so rich. I hadn't been raised in the church and I didn't know the Bible well at all. How I even passed the Bible Content Exam I don't know. It was definitely a Holy Spirit thing.

Phil was good friends with Iain Provan, who taught at Edinburgh and had written an excellent commentary on Kings, in which he talked about the need for the church to recapture the Old Testament. I had never heard that idea stated the way he said it. It grabbed me. Providentially, he happened to be coming to the States at one point, so Phil took a bunch of students to lunch with Iain and we got to know him a bit. Through that I decided I wanted to go to Edinburgh to study with him. The question was, how to make it happen financially. There was no way we could do it ourselves and my parents' marriage was completely dissolving at this point. Then God providentially stepped in again. My wife had a "chance" encounter in the library on campus with someone who had heard about my interest in studying overseas and our need for financing. He said he

knew someone who might be able to help and if we could get him a budget, he would see what he could do. We gave him that information, and then one day not long before I was set to graduate, our phone rang. It was this man and he said—and I quote— "I don't know if you have a fattened calf but if you do you ought to slaughter it. I have someone who's willing to give you \$75,000." And he came over and gave us a check for \$25,000, with the promise of \$25,000 more for the next couple of years. With no strings attached. To this day I have no categories for that. And that's how I ended up going to Edinburgh to study.

RM: So, you got to study with Iain Provan, the guy who wrote that commentary you liked?

BA: Yes, but only partly. After the first year, Iain took a call to Regent College in Vancouver, which was a bit disheartening to me at the time. He eventually also convinced Phil Long to go to Regent, which is another twist in the story, because Phil then called me and asked if I'd like to come back to Covenant and teach his classes as an adjunct. I was thrilled to have that opportunity, so I said yes, and came back here in August of 2000. I had finished my classwork in Edinburgh, but my thesis wasn't done yet, so that made things a bit challenging, having to prep for and teach all Phil's classes while trying to finish the thesis. It was a hard time, but it taught me that I liked being in the classroom teaching. But around the time that school year was finishing up, there was a ministry opportunity at Covenant Church near the Seminary and I went to serve there as an assistant pastor. I did that for three years while looking for other academic positions. I felt increasingly that I was called to be in the classroom.

Then, once more through a connection I had with someone at the Seminary, I found out about the need for a Bible teacher at Westminster Christian Academy nearby. It was a great experience teaching high school students. They are remarkable. They don't let you get away with anything. Adults will figure out ways to check out in the classroom without letting you know they've checked out. High schoolers just say, "You're boring," and put their heads on their desks. But it was a good experience. It certainly gave me a lot more practice in classes and grading and all of

that. Then after about three years at Westminster, I got a call from the dean of academics at the Seminary asking if I'd be interested in applying for an OT position at Covenant. I said yes. That was in 2007 and I've been here ever since.

RM: It's been quite a wild ride, hasn't it?

BA: It certainly has. God has taken me on a remarkable journey to get to this point where I can use whatever gifts he's given me for his glory. In the midst of that, I'm conscious of a sense of obligation and gratitude, of what we owe the Lord for his mercies and what he invests in us. Hardly a week goes by that I don't think of the fact that someone, by God's grace, had the funds to help me get to Scotland with no strings attached. That just doesn't happen! But if you hang around Covenant long enough, you'll find many people with similar stories of God's amazing grace.

RM: I love hearing how God does his work in people's lives. He never wastes anything, any experience.

BA: Yes, that's true. All that experience in the medical world helped me as a pastor to know how things work so I was able to be a help and comfort to sick people and their families. Other people have similar stories of how the Lord somehow used their previous experience to benefit a new calling.

One of the great things about working at Covenant is that, when it's appropriate, I can share with students the stories of God's grace and providence in my life. I never take for granted the fact that I'm here or they're here. I don't deserve to be here and neither do they. I'm just a guy trying to do the job God brought me to using the gifts he gave me. I don't know what he's doing in their lives but I can encourage them with what he's done in mine. They need to know that it's not only the classroom stuff you need. The really big lessons come from just living life and trusting God in whatever is thrown your way. That's the real preparation for ministry. ■

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.



Equipped for the Challenges of Ministry



The Compelling
Preaching Cohort,
January 2025

Dr. Thurman Williams
*Dir. of the Homiletics Program,
Covenant Seminary*



Leadership in
Ministry Cohort,
Summer 2025

Dr. Thomas C. Gibbs
President, Covenant Seminary



BOOK RELEASE

VOL. 35

SPRING 2024

ISSUE 1



“Take Up and Read...”

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



ILLUSTRATION BY VALERO DOVAL

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, 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 100 countries.



When a leader misuses power, they have misunderstood and misrepresented God and the gospel. . . . Authors from a variety of Christian backgrounds and traditions help frame a biblical and theological understanding and practice of power use.

About *Not So With You*, featuring a chapter by DR. TASHA CHAPMAN

Faculty Releases

Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online

Brill, orig. pub. 2018 with continuing updates.

- Articles by Dr. David Chapman. This extensive online resource on early Christianity features recent entries by Dr. Chapman on “Anaphora Pilati,” “Paradosis Pilati,” “Pilate Cycle,” and “Vindicta Salvatoris.”

Not So with You: Power and Leadership for the Church

Wipf & Stock, 2023

- Chapter by Dr. Tasha Chapman. This volume edited by M. Stirling and M. Meynell features Dr. Chapman’s chapter titled “Pastors Empowering Women to Flourish.”

The Covenant with Moses and the Kingdom of God: Thomas Hobbes and the Theology of the Old Covenant in Early Modern England

Brill, 2023

- By Dr. Andrew J. Martin. Explains the interest in the old covenant with Moses in early modern England and why Thomas Hobbes and others debated biblical theology as they fought for legitimate political order.

Leviticus: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the OT

Zondervan, 2023

- By Dr. Jay Sklar. Designed for the pastor and Bible teacher, the series carefully analyzes the discourse of each OT book, showing how each passage contrib-

utes to the development of the whole in the original Hebrew.

Additional Notes on Leviticus

Gleanings Press, 2023

- By Dr. Jay Sklar. Contains further notes and commentary on Leviticus not included in the Zondervan volume above.

Numbers, The Story of God Bible Commentary

Zondervan, 2023

- By Dr. Jay Sklar. This commentary for today’s world explains and illuminates each passage of Scripture in light of the Bible’s grand story.

Additional Notes on Numbers

Gleanings Press, 2023

- By Dr. Jay Sklar. Contains further notes and commentary on Numbers not included in the Zondervan volume above.

Paul’s Letter to the Romans: Theological Essays

Hendrickson Academic, 2023

- Chapter by Dr. Robert W. Yarbrough. This volume edited by Douglas J. Moo and others features Dr. Yarbrough’s chapter “The Centrality of the Gospel in Romans: The Importance of Getting It . . . and Getting It Right.”

Alumni Releases

Stories, Statistics, Solutions: Toward Understanding and Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities

Resource Publications, 2023

- Edited by Luke Bobo (*M.Div.* ’03) and Angie L. Fuoco. Pro-

vides a peek inside the lives of eight people with a disability and offers solutions for achieving access justice.

2 Corinthians, Reformed Expository Commentaries

P&R Publishing, 2023

● By Trent Casto (*MDiv '09*). Paul's most intensely personal and pastoral letter helps suffering men and women trust God's unchanging promises as they walk by faith in hope of heaven.

On Spiritual Abuse: Twenty-one Lessons From the Frontlines

Independent, 2023

● By Michael Coggin (*MAC '00, MDiv '02*). Drawing on research, testimonies, and years of experience, Coggin describes clearly the nature of spiritual abuse and the best ways to respond.

Reform: The Church at the Birth of Protestantism & Renewal: The Church That Expands Outward

CF4Kids, 2023

● By Luke H. Davis (*MDiv '96*). Part of the Risen Hope series, these volumes introduce key people and events from the last 2,000 years of church history in an engaging style.

Apocalypse: Then, Now, and Soon

Storied Publishing, 2023

● By Brent Lauder (*MDiv '05*). This introduction to the book of Revelation helps interested readers clear away some of the mysteries of the Apocalypse and simplify the complex.

Humility: The Joy of Self-Forgetfulness

Crossway, 2023

● By Gavin Ortlund (*MDiv '09*). Shows that humility is not just an abstract virtue but a mark of gospel integrity and provides practical examples of ways to cultivate it.

Exporting Progressivism to Communist China: How New York's Union Seminary Liberalized Christianity in Twentieth-Century China

Wipf & Stock, 2023

● By Christopher D. Sneller (*MATS '07*). Using new archival research, this book shows the influence of union in bringing progressive Christianity to Communist China.

Beauty Is Oxygen: Finding a Faith that Breathes

Eerdmans, 2024

● By Wesley Vander Lugt (*MDiv '07*). Isolating individualism, rank injustice, and everyday monotony threaten to suffocate our souls, but beauty can breathe life back into us.

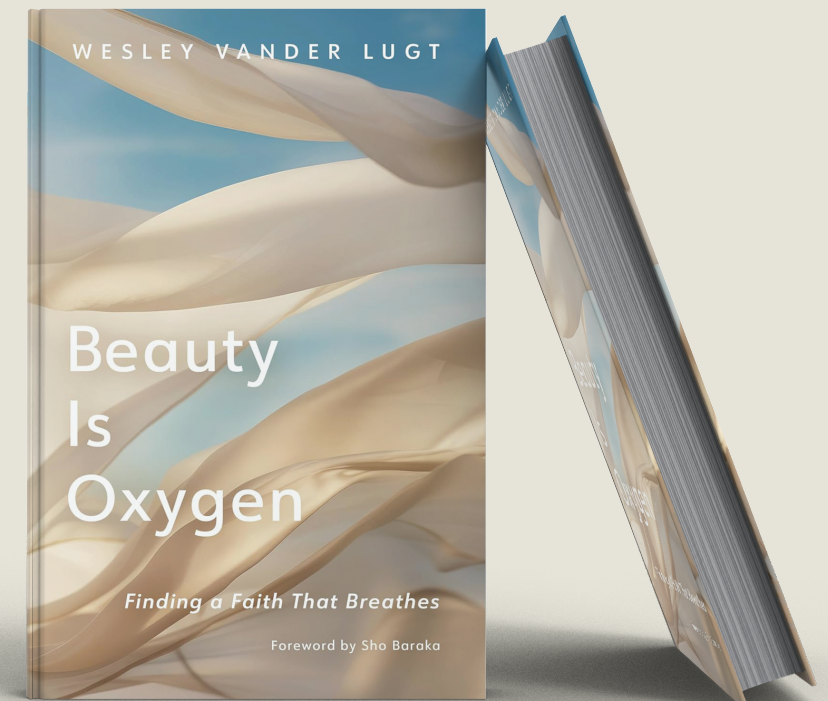
The Deep, Deep, Love of Jesus: 50 Reasons for the Cross of Christ

Renew Books, 2022

● By Nate Walker (*MDiv '09*). Explores how the cross offers God's ultimate answer to our deepest longings: from healing sin and shame to providing the pattern for relationships and lasting social change

Beauty is as essential to our souls as oxygen is to our bodies. As readers encounter these traces of divine glory . . . they will find how Christ will “make all things new.”

WESLEY VANDER LUGT, *Beauty is Oxygen*



Covenant.



At The Center
of A Life of Purpose.



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Grace



for Leaders

from Numbers

Who is sufficient for the challenges
of ministry? No one! But God's grace
meets us in our weakness.

by Dr. Tom Gibbs

20:1-13

THE DIFFICULTIES associated with being called to pastoral ministry have been well documented of late. Given the polarizing politics of both the world outside and inside the church, ministry leaders more and more are looking for the door. On the opposite side of this equation, studies reveal that those in Generation Z are leaving organized expressions of Christian faith even more rapidly than did Millennials a generation earlier. Consequently, the church today is struggling both with backed-up exit ramps filled with those leaving the ministry and empty on ramps for those seeking to become ministry leaders.

As the President of Covenant Seminary, I'm particularly attuned to this situation facing the church. We give thanks to God for those students who are studying with us at the Seminary, both residentially and through our online programs. Despite these broader trends, we are also especially thankful that Covenant is seeing a resurgence, particularly among students who desire to serve as pastors in the church. So, as we look back on 68 years of the Lord's faithfulness there is much about which to be encouraged!

But the challenges are real. Not surprisingly, a careful analysis of their complexity is beyond the scope of this article. However, I would like for us to recognize that we are not the first generation among God's people who have found the task of ministry leadership challenging, both for leaders and for their followers. Indeed, it's always been hard.

As a case and point, we need look no further than Numbers 20. In this passage of Scripture, we witness the people of God grumbling yet again in the face of their wilderness wanderings. This time, however, the people of God are not the only ones whose faith falters. You may recall that in this passage Moses's faith also falters—and does so spectacularly.

But God's grace shows up in this passage too, reminding us that it's God's grace that enables flawed leaders to keep on leading and flawed followers to keep on following.

When I look back on my own ministry journey, I cannot help but remember the many times I have found myself in the proverbial shoes of Moses. I shudder over my failures. Truth be told, all Christians and all ministry leaders are deeply

flawed. Those flaws take their toll and reap dividends that do harm. None of us are strangers to those wounds that affect both leaders and followers. For Moses, his failure meant that he would forgo the privilege of leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land. For some of us today, the discipline of the Lord can be no less painful.

CONTEXT FOR MINISTRY FAILURE (VV. 1-6, 10)

There is no way we should ever excuse ministry or moral failure. But gaining a better understanding of why leaders do the things they do can help us behave differently. Our failures never occur in a vacuum; they are always embedded in certain circumstances. Not surprisingly, Moses's ministry failure also has a context. Let's look again at the passage.

Fatigue (v. 2). Israel had been wandering for almost 40 years. After having been so close to the Promised Land so long ago, can you imagine the fatigue of a journey that never seemed to end? Moreover, the sheer fatigue of ministry makes us especially susceptible to mistakes. I recall one wife asking her pastor-husband as he spiraled out of control, "Are you ready to stop trying to *save* the world?" Fatigue challenges our ability to lead because it drains our reservoir of emotional strength. Fatigue can tend to lead us to minister on proverbial "fumes" instead of a well-filled tank of fuel.

Frustration (vv. 3-5). It is no wonder that Moses gives into fatigue and reveals his frustration. The people are grumbling again:

³And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! ⁴Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? ⁵And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink."

One commentator notes that God's people are given to catastrophizing their situation. Things

We are not the first generation among God's people who have found the task of ministry leadership challenging, both for leaders and their followers. Indeed, it's always been hard.

are difficult, but they are not as dire as they pronounce. In their frustration, they are making things out to be worse than they really are.

In the face of that frustration, leaders often crumble. "Fix it," their people say. "Stop it," they say. "Make it better," they say. "You stink," they say. Leadership is not for the faint of heart. There be real arrows in the bows of the sheep!

Family (v. 1). There's one more contextual issue we need to pay attention to here. Moses has just

lost his sister, Miriam. Of course, people have been dying on the journey every day for 40 years. Nevertheless, when death strikes our own family, it touches us more deeply. Surely the fact that Miriam has died and Aaron was soon to die made Moses aware of the toll his calling in ministry was having. The promise of 40 years earlier has ended in a wilderness of waiting and longing. "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" (Ps. 13:1).

When fatigue, frustration, and familial loss converge, it makes for the "perfect storm" in life. No wonder Moses's worst self comes out now. Circumstances were tough.

The same is true in our lives. Our "old ways" and our "old self," the one we sometimes refer to as the "shadow side" of our personality, is nurtured by the circumstances of fatigue, frustration, and loss. These circumstantial realities are the beginning of the "downward spiral" that always precedes ministry and moral failure.

How aware are you of your surrounding circumstances and the impacts they may be having in your life? How is your sense of intimacy and dependence on the Lord? Do you feel a sense of entitlement related to your position or previous sacrifices you have made? Have you been weighed down by your experience of loss—by things not working out the way you thought they were supposed to? These are questions we must constantly be asking ourselves.

MINISTRY FAILURE (VV. 6-12)

Next, let's talk about Moses's failure. He arrives at the bottom of the downward spiral. He acts out of his worst impulses. Rather than being an example of faith, Moses here reveals what it means to fail in our faith. Having said that, I think we must admit that God's response seems a little severe to us. What's the big deal? Was Moses's failure really that bad? We need to dig a little deeper that it was, in fact, a very big deal. Why?

→ *Moses does not speak to the rock as God had instructed him; he speaks to the people.* Moses's prophetic ministry was restricted to "rock," perhaps because the Lord knew Moses's weakened state. Regardless, Moses assumed a privilege that was not his. As a result, he angrily indicts the people: "Hear now: you rebels . . ." What this

suggests is that *God* is angry at the people. Yet, nothing in the passage suggests that. God simply shows that he is eager to grant the people their request.

→ *Moses claims a power that is not his; he suggests that it is by his power that water will flow to the people. “Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?”*

This question betrays where Moses has now placed his confidence—in himself. Yet, Moses was only an instrument to reveal the Lord’s power. Sadly, he has now begun to see himself as wielding the power of the Lord at his own accord.

→ *Moses disobeys the specific command the Lord had given to him.* He strikes the rock twice instead of speaking to the rock. Again, why is this such a big deal? My colleague Dr. Jay Sklar and I were discussing this recently. He noted that the Hebrew in the passage gives us two clues that reveal just how big Moses’s sin was.

- *Moses lifted up his hand (v. 11).* The Hebrew word here, *וַיִּשָׂא*, is the same word used for the Israelites who sin with a “high hand” or “lift up their hearts” in pride and forget God (cf. Num. 15:30; Deut. 8:14).
- *Moses did not believe God.* See what God says to Moses: “Because you did not believe in me . . .” (v. 12). This indictment is typically reserved for the people of Israel, as in Deuteronomy 1:32, but now Moses has shown himself to be just like everybody else.

Moses failed horribly. Leaders often mistakenly believe, “If it’s to be, it’s up to me.” Clearly, Moses thought it was time to seize the reins. He was in charge. He needed his turn in the “captain’s chair.” So, what did he do? He said the wrong things. He claimed the wrong things. He did the wrong things. Sound familiar?

In what ways are you “out of heart and life alignment” with the Lord and his will? Have you been saying the wrong things—such as expressing exaggerated anger, criticism, fear, and anxiety? Have you been claiming “more” than the Lord has said or revealed? Have you disobeyed God’s clear instruction in unbelief,

The most powerful thing we bring to the organizations and people we lead is not our talent, knowledge, or experience, but our transparent willingness to acknowledge our sin and weakness.

taking things into your own hands? If so, are you ready to repent?

I would venture to say that the most powerful thing we bring to the organizations and people we lead is not our talent, knowledge, or experience. All of those are important, but they are not the most important. The most important thing we bring is our *transparent willingness to acknowledge our sin and weakness*. As Jack Miller, pastor and founder

of World Harvest Mission (now Serge), liked to say, our call is to be the “Chief Repenters” in our organizations.

GOD’S FAITHFULNESS (VV. 11–13)

Where is the enabling power to do that—to become the chief repenters? It comes from God’s mercy and grace, of course. We see that grace given to Moses and the people in verses 11–13. Moses failed. The people failed. Yet, God blessed anyway. How? By the waters that gushed from the rock even though Moses had disobeyed. Yes, there were consequences for Moses’s behavior, but those consequences did not prevent God from showing grace to both Moses and the people in spite of their failure. The people’s thirst was satisfied!

How is this? You already know the answer to that question. As Paul reminds us, the rock which quenched the thirst of the Israelites in the wilderness “was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). In him, we discover the fountain of living waters that quenches the guilt of our sin and corrals our wayward hearts. It’s by his grace that we can move forward in ministry and in life.

Friends, this is what we need to hold on to in this ministry moment.

→ *There is not a leader out there who is not profoundly flawed.* That goes for all of us reading this or serving in our churches. Jesus reminds us that there is grace for flawed leaders.

→ *While there are disqualifying acts that I do not want to minimize, flawed leaders are called to keep on leading.* Only by grace do we keep pressing on in life and in our callings.

→ *As followers, we will all be disappointed by the leaders of our organizations.* They will fail us. They are not Jesus. But, because of Jesus, we can keep on following and serving together.

CONCLUSION

Leadership in life and in ministry is a complicated subject. Character, gifts, skills, and resilience are all essential to effective leadership. I remember my junior season of football practice. A lot of guys were on the field for the spring tryouts. The

coach’s greatest desire was to find out who really wanted to play. Drills were designed to weed out those who weren’t serious. Each player was lined up opposite a partner. Then, the coach blew the whistle. The players were instructed to engage their partner with an aggressive hit. I thought the drill would never end. I thought my partner was killing me. He was bigger, faster, stronger, and just flat out better. Finally, the drill ended. However, it was the next day that provided the biggest surprise. My partner didn’t show up. I guess he was just a little more miserable than I was.

That day I learned a lesson—the lesson of perseverance. There can be no leadership without perseverance. As MTW missionary Tim McKeown once told me, “The key to ministry is showing up!”

There’s a lot of truth in that proverb. Nevertheless, in life and in ministry, things are more complicated. Perseverance requires more than willpower. In ministry, it is not so much our bodies that give out, but our hearts. Fatigue, frustration, and the loss to our families overwhelm us. Our shadow selves take over. While wanting to do our best, we end up being our worst.

With Paul, we ask, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:16). Certainly not us!

That’s why we need something stronger than grit. We need grace. Thankfully, Paul goes on, reminding us that our sufficiency is in God (2 Cor. 3:5), who, through Christ, “always leads us in triumphal procession” (2 Cor. 2:14). It’s God’s grace, then, that sustains leaders and followers in the midst of ministry failure.

We need a supernatural stamina. Such can only come by grace. We need the grace to persevere in the face of sin—our own and that of those we lead. We need repentance and forgiveness. If you want to lead and if you want to be led, we need all four.

Therefore, I guess we better all get to the river and drink up the life-giving waters of Christ. ■

Dr. Tom Gibbs is the sixth President of Covenant Seminary, having previously planted and served as Senior Pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, Texas. He also planted an RUF campus ministry at Baylor University and was a youth director in Birmingham, Alabama.

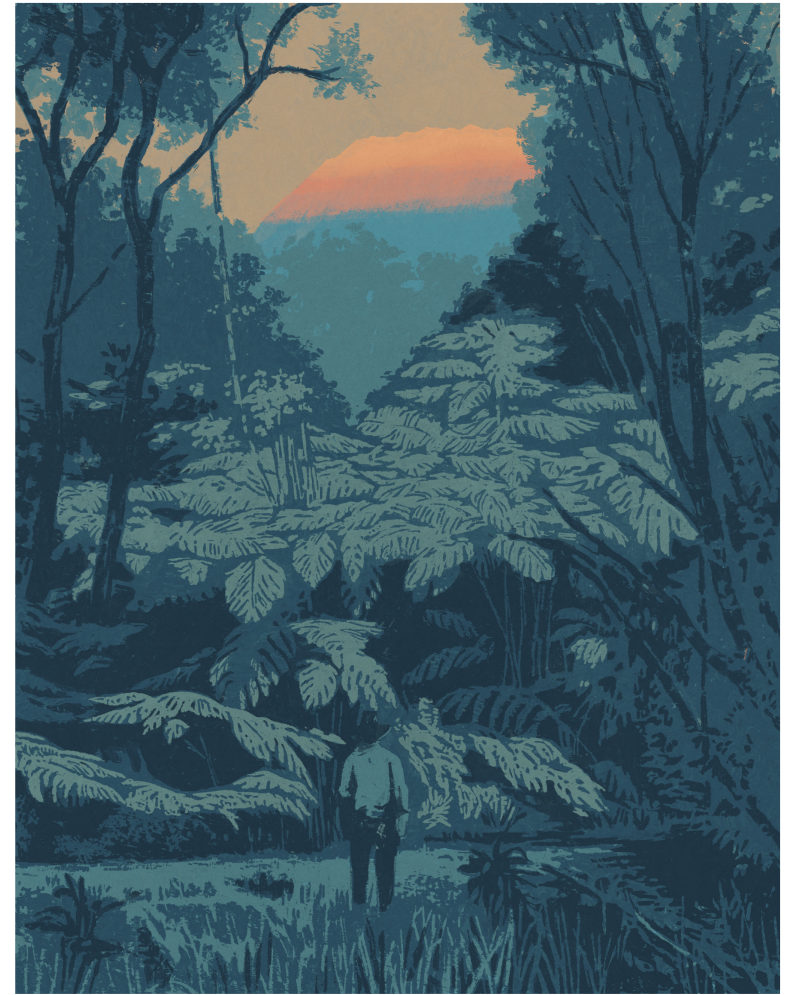
Calling

What is a “calling”—and how do
we know we’ve found ours?

by Dr. Dan Doriani

and

Gift-giving



When Brian started college, he had no plan for a major or a career. He dropped out after a year and followed a friend into construction. When a recession struck, jobs dried up, and because of his knack at connecting with people, Brian became successful at selling furniture. But sales didn't seem to fit him, so he finished college and got a position in medical technology. Brian constantly saw ways to improve his lab, so he earned a graduate degree in management. Before long, he administered a diagnostics lab at his hospital. After four years, he began to manage the labs at a city hospital. Finally, he applied his management skills by supervising a research team at a tech company. This recapitulates Brian's *career*, but have we touched his calling?

Let's define a *career* as a series of jobs that has an upward trajectory until it hits a plateau. A job is any *paid* position. Whether a job is a temporary gig or long-term employment, it is contractual. An employee does what he or she agreed, such as selling furniture. By contrast, a *calling* is work that flows from, expresses, and deepens our identity. A calling is our contribution to society, the labor that makes our lives matter. At best, it draws on our gifts and experiences and becomes our life's work, the task God prepared us to do. We are willing to endure nonsense and lower pay for decades for the sake of a calling.¹

Not everyone thinks of callings this way. In Roman Catholic tradition, priests, monks, and nuns have a "calling" to serve God in the church, but others do "secular" work. Protestants believe all honest work is sacred. Everyone—farmers, shoemakers, and judges—can dedicate their labor to God. Still, most people seek more than honest work and decent pay. We get an education, work hard, and make connections so that we can find a calling. Most of us are drawn to that ideal, but we need to remember nannies, clerks, and garbage collectors. Do they have a calling too?

Every society ranks its occupations, formally or informally, and we need to examine those rankings. About twenty years ago, a wealthy man ran for president. When reporters dissected his

financial disclosure statements, they discovered that he had donated only six hundred dollars to charity the previous year, although his annual income approached one million dollars. When questioned about his miserly ways, the candidate replied, "I have given my life to public service." Good politicians certainly serve the public, but what decent occupation *doesn't*? When a politician boasts that he has given his life to public service, does he imply that drivers and garbage collectors do not? If all truck drivers, garbage collectors, and politicians disappeared at the same moment, who would we miss first? What does that tell us about public service?

Society needs all of its legitimate workers. Nations need politicians who promote justice and the public good, but are politicians, physicians, or pastors uniquely noble? That question deserves a careful answer. First, no honest calling is *morally* superior to another. Second, while politicians have more influence than garbage collectors, both serve God and neighbor.

Looking at the question from God's perspective, the Bible says, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10). At that time, "each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12). The Lord will ask all of us to account for our work.

→ Did you honor me by honing the talents I gave you?

→ Did you honor the parents, mentors, and friends who invested in you?

→ Did you use your abilities to provide for your family? To serve your neighbors, mankind, and this world?

→ Did my people receive answers to their legitimate prayers through you?

Perhaps politicians have more talent than sanitation workers, but both can steward their gifts, so both have a call. The Bible supports this thought, although not quite as expected. So let's explore the Bible's teaching on calling.

THE CALL TO CHRIST, TO PLACES, AND TO ROLES

When believers use the word *calling*, they typically mean their work. But when Scripture speaks of a call, it normally describes God's call to believe the gospel. Thus, Paul told the Romans they were "called to belong to Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:6–7). Those who love God are "called according to his purpose . . . to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:28–29). Paul also told the Corinthians God "called [them] into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:9). He commands believers, "Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called" (1 Tim. 6:12). Believers must confirm their call, by holding to their convictions (Heb. 3:14; 2 Peter 1:10). This is the main sense of "calling" in Scripture, but Paul uses "call" another way in 1 Corinthians 7.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul uses "call" to describe the places and roles God appoints for his people. He says essentially the same thing three times, as he describes three problems: a Christian married to a non-Christian, a person who is displeased with his ethnicity, and a person who is enslaved. "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. . . . Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God" (1 Cor. 7:17, 20, 24). So then, whether

we face great difficulties in marriage, our life settings, or our work, we should believe God assigned that condition to us. That conviction allows us to endure difficult situations with peace.

This is teaching our restless age needs. Far too often, when life becomes painful, our first thought is escape. At worst, singles want to get married, and the married wish to be single again. At worst, the college president wants to teach, and the professors yearn to be president. Paul says, no, "each one should remain in the condition in which he was called."

This calls for discernment. It is imperative that *some* believers stay in difficult places.² Holding positions of influence, they can rein in the worst tendencies of compromised, even corrupted, businesses or governments. Nearly three thousand years ago, a godly man named Obadiah governed the palace of evil King Ahab. Serving from the outside, the prophet Elijah pronounced judgment on Ahab. Serving from the inside and risking his life, Obadiah protected dozens of prophets whom Ahab wanted to murder (1 Kings 18). In a similar vein, Joseph worked for his Pharaoh, saving many lives (Gen. 41–47). God can call his people to limit evil by serving in difficult environments. We may need to stay there for the sake of others, unless the circumstances corrupt us.

STAY, UNLESS, BECAUSE

Yet Paul doesn't blindly support the status quo. On each occasion the pattern of his teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 is the same: *Stay, unless, because*. That is, *stay* where you are, *unless* there is reason to change, *because* of an overriding goal. First, single adults should *stay* unmarried, *unless* they burn with passion, *because* it is better to marry than to burn (vv. 8–9). Second, Christians who are married to unbelievers should *stay* married, *unless* the unbeliever abandons the marriage, *because* no one knows if they can save their spouse by remaining in the marriage (vv. 10–16). Third, the enslaved should *stay, unless* they can gain their freedom, in which case they should do so, *because* Christ bought them and they should not be enslaved to men (vv. 20–23). Slavery is no part of God's original plan.

These principles provide a starting point for a biblical concept of calling. Most strikingly, Paul

says, “Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord’s freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ’s slave” (vv. 21–22 NIV). If we belong to Jesus, it changes everything. Even a slave has an inner freedom. If a *literal* slave, who has almost no legal rights, is free, much more are we free even if we *feel* enslaved by illness, frustrating jobs, or relational snares.

On the other hand, people who seem to be free live with bonds that resemble slavery. Indeed, Paul called himself a slave (*doulos*) of God (Rom. 1:1) and of the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 4:5). Elsewhere, Scripture calls Moses, David, and Jesus God’s slaves (Rev. 15:3; Acts 4:25; Phil. 2:7).³

In fact, everyone is free in some ways and captive in others. The administrative assistant belongs to the boss, the boss belongs to the CEO, and the CEO belongs to the stockholders and the board. A college student belongs to her professor, who belongs to the dean, who answers to the president. In public universities, the president answers to the voters, including the students. Everyone has a role that is binding in some ways and liberating in others.

CAN WE FIND FULFILLMENT AT WORK?

For millions, work is strictly a means to an end. People work to survive; many work to thrive, get rich, and enjoy the good life. Millions also hope to find fulfillment through work. When my daughter was young, I spoke at a retreat center nestled in verdant hills sprinkled with streams that fed a profusion of plants and animals. One afternoon, she burst into our cabin with a box of moss, twigs, crickets, and red efts and exulted, “I was *made* for this.”

“I was made for this” is the feeling that millions seek, but how many obtain it? Satisfaction is elusive since the day mankind rebelled against God. Labor is now frustrating, sweaty toil. But even when we achieve (or surpass) our highest dreams, we often think, “This is not as gratifying as I expected.” The Preacher of Ecclesiastes accomplished great things, yet he cried out, “Vanity” and concluded, “I . . . gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors” (2:19–20; see vv. 9–23).

But it is possible to find satisfaction in our labor. As Paul concludes his discussion of “gifts” and graces, he says leaders can serve “with zeal” and the merciful can act “with cheerfulness” (Rom. 12:8). So the leader can be passionate about the cause, and the merciful can know joy by helping others. We *can* take pleasure in our work.

You may recall the professor who said, “I teach for free; they pay me to grade papers.” If we let “grading papers” represent the vexations of work, everyone gets the idea. At best, work is like a delightful party, memorable for its food, conversations, and music. Still, when the party ends, the host has to wash dishes and take out the garbage. Work can be exhilarating; we might do it for free. And yet all work, paid and unpaid, has its griefs.

So, should we seek fulfillment at work? Or should we simply work and see if fulfillment follows? Should we keep looking for the job that fits, or should we accept whatever job we have, in God’s providence, and find ourselves in it? Both! We recall that in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul discusses three life situations: marital status (married, single, or divorced), ethnicity (Jew or Gentile), and work situation (enslaved or free). On each occasion, Paul directs each disciple to stay in his assigned place “to which God has called him” (v. 17). Notice that Paul views marital status, ethnicity, and work status as callings. A believer’s first goal is not to *find* a calling but to find himself or herself *in* the callings he or she already has.

Two years ago, Gerry, my beloved friend, learned that he had cancer, stage four. An elder in my church, Gerry taught children Sunday morning, taught prisoners Sunday afternoon, and co-led a crucial committee. We were also tennis partners for two decades. At fifty-seven, Gerry led our team to the St. Louis district championship (seniors) shortly before he fell ill. I joined him when the diagnosis arrived, and he asked, “Will you visit me every week till this is resolved?” My schedule was brutal, and he knew it, but I said, “Yes” and drove to his house Wednesdays for eight months. I bemoaned the traffic, but I *hated* watching my friend wither. Still, our visits kept stretching far past the recommended twenty minutes. We couldn’t seem to part. We read Scripture, prayed, discussed treatments, told stories, and laughed. I found joy and significance in an unexpected calling—companion of the dying—

“I was made for this” is the feeling that millions seek, but how many obtain it? Satisfaction is elusive since the day mankind rebelled against God. . . . But it is possible to find satisfaction in our labor. . . . We can take pleasure in our work.

that I would never have selected for myself. That is part of Paul’s message: we have many callings and should remain faithful in them, whether they appear to fit us or not.

Paul has a second theme: *stay, unless you are free to change*. Consider Emma, thirty-four, who has callings as disciple, wife, mother, sister, daughter, friend, and anchor of her cycling team (yes, it’s a calling too). Most of these callings are assignments. No one chooses their parents and siblings, and our children are never quite what we expected. She doesn’t *choose* these callings; she *finds herself* in them. But she may substitute soccer for cycling, and she can search for different work, since she is highly capable. She may even devote herself to motherhood while working part-time as a consultant. Ideally, Emma will find significance in both her chosen occupation *and* her unchosen life assignments.

UNEMPLOYMENT AND CALLING

We can also apply the principles of calling to the problem of unemployment. Unemployment is difficult for the poor, for the young who hope

to launch a career, and for those who find their identity at work. But unemployment can be a life assignment too. As much as the unemployed long to find a job, they can work without pay by helping their neighbors, gaining new skills, and looking for a job.

Upheavals can teach us about work too, whether the cause is war, disease, or economic recession.⁴ When life is calm, many assume they will always be safe. The loss of a job brings fear, anxiety, anger, even shame. It brings financial loss and emotional grief from lack of purpose, damaged self-image, and loss of work friends. Upheavals remind us how fragile we are.

Recessions register as random evils, but Christians believe the Lord brings good out of evil (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28). Hard times, including unemployment, are instructive. First, they teach us to “honor everyone” (1 Peter 2:17), including the unemployed. Yes, some bring job loss on themselves, but most are unemployed against their will, due to factors beyond their control. Second, we should have Christlike compassion for the unemployed. Third, we should humble ourselves, admitting that no one controls his destiny. James 4:14–15 declares, “You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’”

Western culture hears “calling” and thinks of fulfillment. This is a fruit of expressive individualism, which asserts that every person has a unique blend of capacities, experience, interests, and dreams that *dictate* the way they should live. This ideology whispers, “Dare to dream” and “Follow your heart.” The difficulty is that too many singers dream of becoming the star, but most stall about thirty feet from stardom. They are backup singers, sound technicians, or producers—good work but not headlining. Similarly, for every star athlete, politician, or business mogul, dozens *support* the luminous leader, and that probably doesn’t match *their* dream. In short, “Follow your heart” works better as film dialogue than as employment plan.

A PLAN

If a third of all boys dream of becoming professional athletes, we need to help them to question

their dreams. The standard “churchy” wisdom on this topic goes like this: God *may* be the source of our aspirations, but we need to see who agrees. In other words, the “follow-your-passion” ideal gives priority to our self-appraisal, and we usually overestimate our abilities. So objective realities must control subjective desires. If Olivia wants to become an actor but never lands a part, she may want to try film editing, if she wants to remain in the field. Henry can say, “I’m called to be an architect,” but that won’t get him into an architecture program, let alone make him an architect. Our aspirations entitle us to nothing. Standard wisdom says there is no genuine subjective call without a matching objective call, that is, a job offer.

The standard wisdom is correct but incomplete, since it forgets God. John Frame proposed a fourfold, God-centered way to find a calling to work: First, God *gives gifts* to humanity. Second, the Spirit helps people to *discern their gifts*, fallibly, through self-examination and the confirmation of other well-informed people. Third, God *provides opportunities to develop* and exercise those gifts. Fourth, God *grants wisdom to use gifts well*.⁵ Essentially, God gives talents, and they manifest themselves as opportunities arise.

Still, you can take steps to discover your callings. First, pay attention to your desires. You will probably be attracted to things you do well. But assess the match between abilities and desires. If you want to be a diplomat, do you pick up languages easily? Second, gather information about the work. A child, wowed by a presentation about the Milky Way, may want to become an astronomer. But astronomers focus on math, physics, and computers more than visible stars.

Third, sample challenging tasks, especially if they demand new skills, and see what happens, especially in the first working years.⁶ If a task is appealing, volunteer to do it again—without petitioning for relief from other duties. If you excel, a supervisor should notice. If not, the experience is still valuable.

Fourth, seek honest feedback. Ignore offers from anyone who is desperate to fill a slot. Their offers and compliments are meaningless. But listen to talent scouts who know mankind, you, and the field.

For example, an aspiring teacher will volunteer as a substitute. Afterward, she asks for a review

It is the destiny of every believer to become more like [Jesus]. That entails glory and suffering, pain and satisfaction. God calls us to these very things . . . and to the loving, often costly use of our gifts to serve God and neighbor.

from the class and an experienced teacher. She also notices what happens next. Does she hear “Thank you for your effort” or “Can you substitute for me again next month”? Does the aspiring teacher gain skill quickly? Can she handle tough questions? Disruptive students?

Young adults should ask, “Do I have a desire and ability that lets me meet a need? Remedy a deficit? In a setting that leads to employment?” Next, they should ask, “*Where* will I serve?” Even touring musicians have a home, a fan base. Next, “What people or cause will I serve?” If one can sell anything, what will it be? For what reasons? In all this, we inevitably think about ourselves, but we need not be *selfish*. The question “What can I do well?” can lead to “What will I get for it?” But it also leads us to ask, “What problems can I solve?” and “What burden will I bear?”⁷

These questions lead us to Jesus. It is the destiny of every believer to become more like him. That entails glory and suffering, pain and satisfac-

tion. God calls us to these very things—to faith, justice, and mercy, and to the loving, often costly use of our gifts to serve God and neighbor.

FAITH AND WORK PROJECTS

My book *Work That Makes a Difference*, is designed to prepare formal and informal leaders to tackle projects that will help to effect positive change in their workplaces. Formal leaders have a recognized position of authority that is officially stated in job descriptions and organizational charts. Informal leaders have a standing, a voice, and a skill set that cause people to look to them. For example, a part-time librarian with no official status transforms her school by consistently placing books that are true, stimulating, and beautiful into the hands of students. As a result, when she speaks on library and reading policy, people listen to her, whether she knows it or not. Most leaders downplay the extent of their influence. Formal leaders minimize their power by emphasizing the power of the *other* formal leaders, who allegedly hem them in. Informal leaders forget that their wisdom, expertise, and character give them a voice that few will oppose and many will follow.

Proposals for change typically *start* spontaneously, as the result of an observation. Faith and convictions transform the observation into a proposal. Then professional skill, together with access to resources, turn a proposal into plans and actions. Success depends on many factors, but this small book will identify and

focus on four essentials—principle, passion, position, and perseverance.

The *principle* is a biblical idea of a way to improve one corner of the world. The principle may touch any field of labor.

Passion is the drive to implement the principle. It includes infectious enthusiasm, a sense of urgency, and an ability to recruit a team. Passion is essential because projects are risky. They face closed doors, and sometimes we need to tear those doors off their hinges to achieve a goal.

Position is the formal or informal authority one needs in order to be heard, to obtain financial resources, to establish a gifted team, and to implement a new approach.

Perseverance is necessary because reforms rouse opposition, overt or covert. Change is messy and provisional at first. We make decisions on the basis of insufficient information. Missteps are inevitable, and we can’t afford to quit when they arrive. ■

For more on how to use these principles to effect positive change in your workplace, see Dr. Doriani’s book Work That Makes a Difference, which includes case studies and questions to help guide the process.

Dr. Dan Doriani is Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Covenant Seminary and Founder/Director of the Center for Faith and Work St. Louis. This article was adapted from chapter 5 of his book Work That Makes a Difference (P&R Publishing, 2021) and is used by permission.

Endnotes

1. This follows Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 66–70.
2. See Daniel M. Doriani, *Work: Its Purpose, Dignity, and Transformation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019), 117–27.
3. The term for Paul, Moses, and Jesus is *doulos*, and David is called a *paidos*—a common term for a beloved slave or house servant (Luke 1:69; Acts 4:25).
4. The roots of unemployment vary and include acts of terrorism, failures by regulators, wars, and epidemics. Certain
5. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 312–13.
6. David Epstein develops points
7. Dan B. Allender, *To Be Told: God Invites You to Coauthor Your Future* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2005), 114–16.

Navigating

a Quarter- or

When it comes to calling,
who we are becoming is more
important than what we do.

by Rev. Dr. Aaron Chung



Mid-Life Crisis

(Ephesians 4:1–8)

I therefore, prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore, it says,

*When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
And he gave gifts to men.*

– Ephesians 4:1–8

THE PAST FEW YEARS have been hard for seminaries across America, but I was encouraged to hear recently that here at Covenant Seminary, and at other seminaries around the country, the downward trend in enrollment seems to be turning around. This was particularly encouraging to me because seminary was such a seminal time for my theological and spiritual formation, as I’m sure it is for many of you.

I didn’t know anything when I went into seminary, and while my classmates were eager to graduate and go off to do ministry, I, when I was graduating, felt like I needed another three or four years to study. I felt like I was just getting my bearings. If there’s one word I’d use to describe myself at that time, it would be “lost.” I felt lost. I saw my friends planting churches. Some of them

became senior pastors right away. Other friends were working in the business world and making tons of money. As for me, I wasn’t sure what I was doing. I felt lost. And I found myself at the age of 30 experiencing what I call a “quarter-life crisis.”

EXPERIENCING THE CRISIS OF LOSTNESS

What do you do when you have a quarter-life crisis? Well, I learned how to ride a motorcycle. I got my permit and started riding a bike with a friend. And what’s the other thing that you do when you’re young and you have no idea what you’re doing with life? You go back to school. So I went back to school yet again, doing doctorate work at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia.

During that time that I was studying I also worked at my friend’s father’s warehouse mopping the floor after Hurricane Sandy. I was all by myself and this large warehouse. I was also a cashier for my friend’s car wash and I was terrible at it. Tuesdays were Senior Citizen Day where everyone over a certain age got discounts. You have no idea how many people I offended by giving them a discount. And on top of that, I was a sportswriter for *The Bleacher Report* and some other sites about the NBA. But I was lost. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do ministry. I just wasn’t sure of myself as a whole. And that was hard for someone like me who likes to plan things.

The majority of my life up to that point had been quite linear. I went to college, I moved overseas as a missionary, I went to seminary. Everything was going according to plan. But then after I graduated from seminary, things weren’t linear anymore. It was like this crazy roadmap, and I just couldn’t get my bearings. So I experienced what some people would call a crisis.

Maybe some of you here today feel the same way I did. You have no idea what you’re doing with your life. And chances are, if you feel like that you may think to yourself, “Well, I know I have at least one or two more years of school left. At least I know that much.” But you’re not sure what happens after that.

Eventually, at one point or another, all of us, will feel lost.

Someone once defined a crisis this way. They said a crisis is an internal experience of confusion and anxiety to the degree that formerly successful

A crisis is an internal experience of confusion and anxiety to the degree that formerly successful coping mechanisms fail us and ineffective decisions and behaviors take their place.

coping mechanisms fail us and ineffective decisions and behaviors take their place. As a result, the person in crisis may feel very confused, vulnerable, anxious, afraid, angry, guilty, hopeless, and helpless.

Do any of you feel that way today?

If so, the good news is that you’re not alone. All of us will feel that way at one point or another in our lives. But the even better news is that if you feel stuck in your lostness like a traveler always traveling but never arriving, you can get unstuck. You don’t have to be in that space forever. And I think that the key to stepping out of our quarter-life crisis or our mid-life crisis is to step into our calling.

TAKING ANOTHER LOOK AT “CALLING”

If you’ve grown up in the church, you’ve heard this word “calling” a lot. But there is a sense in which we need to demythologize what calling is, and to do that, I want to take a look at Ephesians 4:1–8. Take a look at verse 1: “I therefore a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

Years ago, Os Guinness wrote a book on calling which I found very helpful. He said that there are two kinds of calling. Both are important, but we

have to get them in the right order. The first is our primary calling—which is to simply be a beloved child of God. It is to simply have a healthy relationship with God and to reflect Jesus and walk with Jesus. Our secondary calling is not who we are in Jesus, but what we do for Jesus. Both callings are important, but again, we have to get them in the right order.

What’s very interesting that the word “calling” is used 51 times in the New Testament. And what’s surprising is that approximately 49 out of those 51 times that the word “calling” is used, it has to do with our primary calling to simply be with Jesus. Only two times is it talking about what we do for Jesus. What that means then, is that God cares far more about *who we are becoming* than what we are doing.

This is especially interesting to me because in the city where I live we tend to idolize work. I have people in my congregation who work 90 to 100 hours a week. That’s crazy! The first question that we inevitably ask one another when we meet each other is, “What do you do for a living?” And based on that, we measure and size one another up. As a society, we tend to care a lot more about what we do than who we are.

If you had asked me when I was in seminary what my metrics were for success, I would have told you things like: going to seminary, maybe getting some kind of doctorate, planting a church—and not just any church; it had to be a big church. Maybe writing a couple of books. Speaking in Chapel at Covenant Seminary. Then I would really be someone based on what I do.

But take a look again at verse one and then verse two: “I therefore a prisoner for the law, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.”

Paul’s metrics for success were not based on what he did. They were based on who he was becoming. Humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love—for Paul, that was success. That was his primary calling in life: who he was becoming. This is why I routinely say to my two daughters, “I love being a pastor, but what is one thing that I love more than being a pastor?” You know what they always say? “Being our daddy.” And that’s exactly right. I love being their

daddy far more than I love being a pastor. And this is also why I routinely remind our congregation, “If God called me to something else besides ministry, if he called me to become a high school basketball coach, if he called me to pursue my dream of being a B-list actor, would that be okay with you? Because that would be okay with me.”

Ministry never stops. But our primary calling is not to be faithful to ministry. Our calling is to be faithful to Jesus. That’s the primary thing. And we can’t make the secondary things eclipse the primary things.

Your most important call in life is not to the ministry. It is to the person of Jesus Christ.

WALKING FAITHFULLY WITH THE MASTER

Take yet another look at verse 1. I want to emphasize a different phrase there where Paul says he urges the Ephesians “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” It’s interesting to me that often the Bible describes our relationship with God as a walk.

We are told that Enoch walked with God. Noah walked with God. Micah 6:8 says to “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” It’s interesting that the Bible talks about a relationship with God as a kind of walk, and we use it in our everyday colloquial language as well. We say, “Don’t just talk the talk, but walk the walk.” The idea is that there has to be a match between what you believe and how you live. There can’t be a mismatch. There has to be some kind of connection between what you believe and how you live your life.

I got my driver’s license in the nineties. For those old enough to remember, one of the things that we used to do was to put fish logos on our cars. It was a way of saying, “I’m a follower of Jesus.” One of my close friends who would often take me to church, however, refused to put a fish logo on his car. The reason that he drove like the devil. He was a reckless driver. I don’t know how many speeding tickets got. He flipped over cars multiple times. One day we were talking about the fish logos and he said, “I would never put one on my car because I know that the moment I do, everyone around me will know I represent Jesus. And there’s a disconnect between what I believe and how I drive.”

What’s imperative for us, especially if we may have a lot of gifts, is that if we don’t have a straightforward relationship with God, we will have a crooked relationship with those gifts.

When you’re in ministry, you live in a glass house. Everyone can see into your life. And it is imperative for us as ministry leaders in particular that what we believe should match how we live our lives. This is why I’m emphasizing our primary calling to follow Jesus more than our secondary calling.

Some of you may have watched the memorial service for pastor Tim Keller earlier this year. One of the interesting things about the service was that Tim was such a colossal figure who did some colossal things. He wrote *New York Times* best-selling books. He planted a large church in New York City. He was not only one of the 50 best pastors in the world, but also one of the 50 best leaders in the world, period. He had the ears of presidents. He was just a titan, a mammoth of a figure. But during the memorial service not one person who spoke mentioned any of his accomplishments. Not one. They all mentioned who he was—as a father, as a friend, and for many of us, as a spiritual mentor. I think the reason for that is because Tim understood better than any of us the importance of making our primary calling primary and our secondary calling secondary. I say this to us in particular because there are many

of us here who are very gifted and talented. But if we don’t walk straight with Jesus, we will have a crooked relationship with our gifts. The only way to have a non-distorted relationship with your gifts, to have a straightforward relationship with your gifts, is to have a straightforward relationship with Jesus as well.

KEEPING THE PRIMARY THING PRIMARY

In this passage, Paul mentions seven “ones”: one faith, one baptism, one Lord, one hope, one body, one Spirit, one God and Father of all. There’s a lot of sameness here. But in verse 7, Paul talks about something different. He says, “But grace was given to each one according to the measure of Christ.” This grace Paul is talking about is not a saving grace. What he’s talking about here are the gracious gifts of God. For some of you, he’s given one set of gifts, for others of you, he’s given another set of gifts. We all have different gifts in the body of Christ. But what’s imperative for us, especially if we may have a lot of gifts, is that if we don’t have a straightforward relationship with God, we will have a crooked relationship with those gifts. These gifts are given to us not to build our own kingdom and platform. They are given to us to serve the greater kingdom and the body of Christ.

Nobody understood this better than Jesus himself, whose calling was not to be served, but to serve. His calling was to live a perfect life. His calling was actually not only to be born, but to die for us, for our sins. His calling was to rise from the dead. His calling was to ascend to the father. All of that was his calling. But Jesus understood better than any of us that that was not his *primary* calling. His primary calling was this: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God” (John 1:1). He was just with his Father. And the reason why he faithfully did everything for us was because he first was simply with his Father as a beloved son of God. He kept the primary things primary and he kept the other things secondary.

Similarly, we are called to do the same.

I’ll close with this story. When I was first getting a license to preach, the first question the leadership development team asked me was to compare Meredith Kline’s eschatology with Geerhardus Vos’s biblical theology. That was the softball question. It only got harder from there.

The first question my elder asked me when I got ordained in the Korean Northeastern Presbytery was: How are your quiet times? How is your devotional life? How is your private life? I remember walking out of that meeting thinking, “Why did I even study for this? That was such a joke.” But now, hopefully, I’m a little bit wiser and more mature.

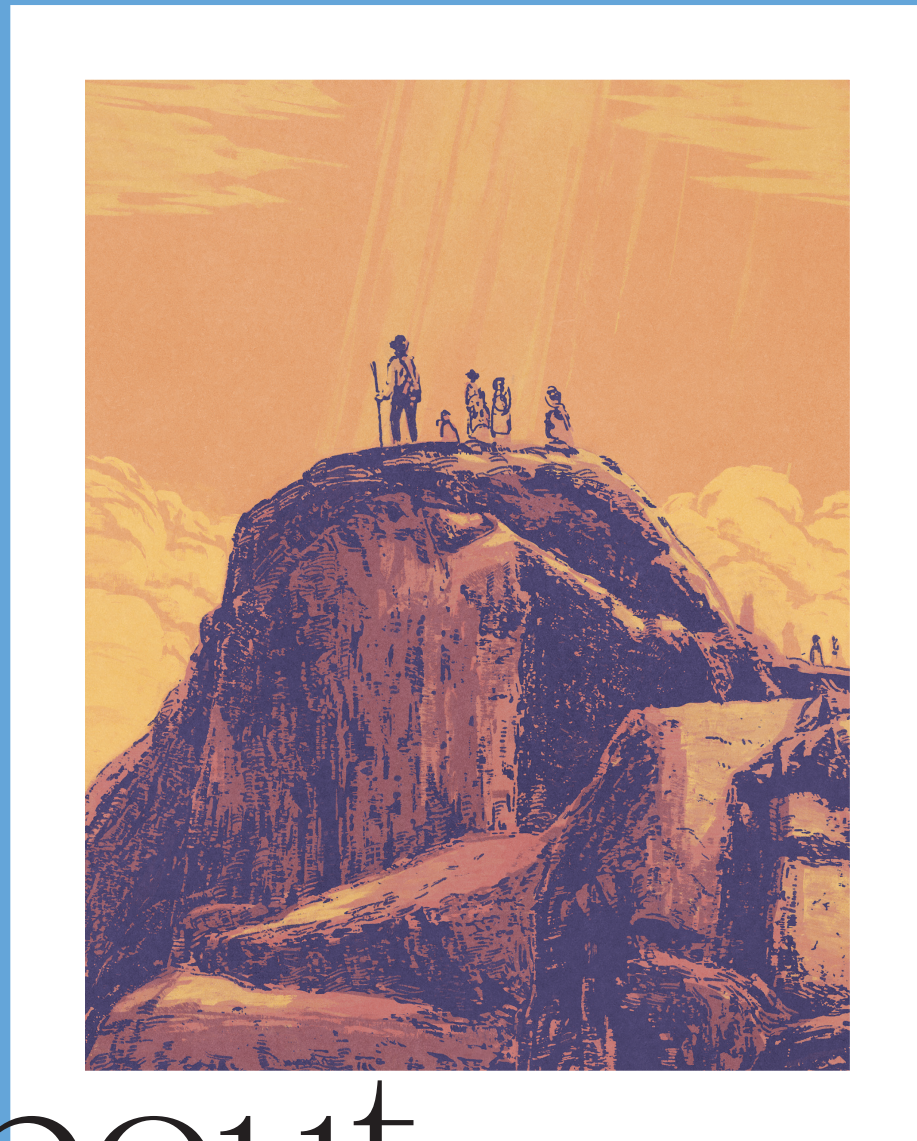
What do you think is the more important question for you in your life and ministry? Is it Meredith Kline’s eschatology and Geerhardus Vos’s biblical theology. Or is a more important question: How is your devotional life? How is your prayer life? Are you walking with Jesus? you tell me. What is more important?

For the students here, tuck this away in your heart. For those of us here who have been in the ministry game for a long time, tuck this in your hearts, too. And when Jesus finally says to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” may we be reminded that it’s not because we built a big church that he says well done, but simply because you walked faithfully with him to the end. Let’s pray.

Oh God, it is in our nature to do a lot more than to simply be. Sometimes being still and recognizing who we are can be very difficult. Often, we get caught up in worldly metrics instead of gospel metrics. So please give us clarity, discernment, and wisdom every day to know that our chief and is not only to glorify you and to enjoy you, but also to realize that we are deeply loved as sons and daughters of God. Imprint that on us every day, and thank you for simply letting us be your beloved sons and daughters. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen. ■

Rev. Aaron Chung is the Founding and Senior Pastor of Exilic Church (PCA) in New York City. A graduate of Westminster Seminary California (M.Div.) and Westminster Theological Seminary Philadelphia (D.Min.), he has experience as a church planter in America and as a missionary in Asia. He has written on a variety of subjects from theology to sports for websites including Relevant Magazine and The Bleacher Report. This sermon was delivered in the Robert G. Rayburn Chapel at Covenant Theological Seminary in November 2023 as part of a semester-long chapel emphasis on calling.

Kingdom



About

Something: Thoughts

Choosing a career path can
be a daunting task, but prioritizing
biblical principles can help.

by Dr. Paul Loosemore

Calling

How many times have you felt directionless, purposeless, or just plain lost in life? Alluring as “figuring it out” may sound, not many people really achieve it. Questions about vocation and calling come up regularly. What should I do? What can I do? What has God called me to? What has he repared me for? Honestly, who knows! Let us stop the pressured notion that there is one right path that you can’t miss *or else(!)* and you need the right prayer-faith-wisdom-balance to discern it. You are an acting person, an agent in your life. Choosing is part of your image-bearing and it’s a privilege in God’s world. But choosing is often an anxious affair. ¶ Even before we get to the Christian pressure on choosing, our culture of performance, achievements, and tower-building makes it even harder. Have you evaluated your school and vocational choices, asking if they provide enough, are interesting enough, have curb appeal, or will sustain you long enough? Add on inflation,

housing booms, 25 streaming services, smart-phone upgrades, the allure of bougie new restaurants, and an annual budget—that’s real pressure! Not to mention many of us feel the added pressure of our parents’ expectations of us—even if they are Christian expectations! How could we possibly balance the pressures and pick right? We end up with *choice anxiety*.

SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Forget how to choose for a minute. Have you ever noticed that *one thing* leads to the *next*? Consider these examples. When you took your first class in Algebra you realized you loved or loathed Algebra and your course sequence was informed. Perhaps you took the risk to say hello to someone you didn’t know and moved to the next fork in the road of building a lifelong friendship. When I admitted that I experienced my sales job as mind-numbingly painful I stopped to investigate my values and found a surprising store of compassion. This insight has altered everything for me. You can’t really know what will happen next until you start. One thing leads to the next. It evolves. “But that’s not carefully considered choice!” you cry. Exactly.

When Kevin DeYoung wrote *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God’s Will* (Moody, 2009), he helped thousands of people realize they can’t always know for certain what they should do. He wrote a book that normalized ambivalence and confusion. There was space for feeling torn and exploring anyway. The key that De Young provides to unlocking *choice anxiety* and the threat of *missing God’s plan* is a new orientation in the world. Notice that the solution isn’t shifting your perspective, getting choice coaching, and listening more effectively to God. Rather, De Young reminds us of what Jesus said: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). This doesn’t directly tell you where to go or what to do; rather, this pursuit reorients the interests of our heart. The pursuit of the perfect Christian ministry, or the cultural pressure for self-promotion, and even our lust for the goods of the earth start to wither when we are oriented to the kingdom; to justice and shalom (Ps. 97:2, Isa. 35:10). We change our path when we care deeply for the right order of things, dignity for all, and peaceful rest in our maker and sustainer.

I want to borrow the words of my colleague Kristen. While working on a book with me, she

wrote, “Place yourself back in Genesis 1–2. . . . Envision yourself as a kid in the sandbox. You’ve been told to play, and freedom is all you have ever known. Imagine that you don’t feel limited by the confines of the sandbox because you trust your parent who told you to govern just that one area. Your secure God-attachment allows you to be both fully curious and fully creative.” The child trusts the giver and together they explore.

But perhaps you can’t trust others, must take care of yourself, and figure it all out. Or perhaps you don’t know the Father’s delight in you, so you try to earn it from others by proving yourself. When we return to the Father who delights in us and receive his promises of protection and provision, we begin to desire to make this beautiful world known. His sandbox is quite fantastic! When this happens in our lives, we can *just do a kingdom something*—something that orders, that creates, that supports, that corrects, that feeds, that loves, that produces, that cleans. The choice of the something is wide; the heart orientation is narrow. Justice and shalom. This requires that we trust the bringer of justice and shalom.

MAINTAINING PEACE IN THE MIDST OF STRESS

Choosing becomes less anxious when the goal is less momentary and more eternal. However, let’s be honest, choosing is still tough because our culture is the already-and-not-yet hustle to feed our families and pay our medical bills. We don’t move from choice anxiety to bliss, but to peace *amid* stressful choice. For my family, moving to the USA so I could pursue a counseling degree was stressful, but peace rippled in the middle.

We must consider the feelings below the first level of anxiety. The first level of anxiety reminds us that we are never omniscient and can always get into trouble. The world of vocation isn’t a sure thing. It is a challenging thing with its toils, limitations, and disappointments. Mistakes are inevitable—if by mistake we mean experiencing something we don’t overly enjoy or flat-out hurts. As much as we might lament it, faithful pursuit of the kingdom doesn’t stop the impact of the fall in our lives. However, this heart orientation and action can mitigate some of the avoidable pain and sorrow, and it will certainly lead to rejoicing (Ps. 84:10).

The pursuit of the perfect Christian ministry, or the cultural pressure for self-promotion, and even our lust for the goods of the earth start to wither when we are oriented to the kingdom; to justice and shalom.

We must remember that earthly struggle will continue no matter the path we pursue. One might ask, “*In what general direction does this path head, and what is the disposition of my heart as I walk?*” Is the path one on which you can see shalom and peace? Is your heart oriented to the goodness of the King?

When we engage the sandbox with a heart oriented to the kingdom, we have many opportunities. We pursue what we enjoy, what delights, what energizes us, and this is good. We must also remember that God is aware that our economies and cultures have attached values and rewards to our labor. So yes, in our fallen moment we find disparity and futility in the sandbox. This brings us back to choosing things that provide, sustain, and move toward flourishing. Our full-embodied selves are implicated in the choosing process. This means we must account for our thinking, emotional responses, and relational nature. Let me highlight three ways these embodied processes of humility, discernment, and interdependence impact our choosing.

EMBODIED PROCESSES AND CHOICE

Humility is the ability to see ourselves and others rightly within the context of the kingdom. Our self-awareness and other awareness require complex systems of cultural knowledge, emotional attunement, attention, and synthesis. This critical virtue supports us to accurately assess our gifts, limitations, and needs. It also allows us to recognize what is happening, and what is needed, in the world around us so that humble acts lead to good outcomes.

Discernment is a similarly complex reality, but is more skill-based than awareness-based. We take information and make hypothetical predictions, while weighing the different variables. We do this all the time in our lives without realizing it, but we can also make this process overt and tangible.

Finally, a life lived with *interdependence* recognizes our personal limitations, dependence on others, and ability to provide for others. We can not make it on our own and must also consider others. Living interdependently requires a degree of trust in trustworthy others, while we also demonstrate trustworthiness for others. We live symbiotically. We need support physically, emotionally, relationally, communally, and more.

*I have learned
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that it requires.*

I want to show you these processes in motion—not because I am a perfect example, but simply to show the complexity of doing a *kingdom something* and how it draws on our embodied human experiences.

Humility emerged as I began to see myself as a limited, small, but valuable child of God. I also started to see the limitations, strengths, and diversity of others. I began to see myself more accurately and honestly, recognizing that I like to think and feel deeply in the presence of others who are seeking for more. I could also see my limitations, for example, my moodiness, perfectionism, and cynicism. This complex self-knowledge could be applied to multiple sandbox endeavors in ways that orient to justice and shalom, and counseling was on my radar. The dignity and depravity of my life, functioning, and interests made a career within the ministry of counseling viable. This also appeared to be a need within the church and something with which I might engage.

Next came the challenge of discernment. I faced the dual realities that counseling had developed further in the United States, and I had a young family with the beginnings of rich community in my home country, England. To play in the sandbox in the manner I hoped for, I was confronted with logistical and emotional challenges: the realities just named, finances, visas, loss, extended family, fear, resilience. Alone, it was hard to make sense of the capacities I had, the challenges I faced, and the likely cost of any direction. It became clear that discernment required emotional support and comfort so that fears and paranoia wouldn't overtake the choosing process. It was also true that ordering my thoughts against practical data was a way that I could honor and provide for my young family.

Finally, add into the pot the mixed desires and stories of a family. Weighing these complex factors takes time, and allowing others with wisdom to guide us was vital. It was not unwise to consider and organize our finances, relational needs, and our capacity for resilience in the face of an international move and a new career direction. The difference is that we considered these with existential safety to surround our momentary discomfort.

Interwoven relationships have paved the way for me and my family. When we moved to the United States, we were lost with how to make

the transition. We needed to live with my wife's parents for a short time, and friends connected us to housing and community in St. Louis. We leaned into help from those we had briefly known and were welcomed into their homes. Our then 2-year-old daughter was welcomed and played with, we were fed, our questions were answered. Over time, my family supported us from abroad, and we also developed rich friendships through school, work, and church. Our parenting changed, our worship deepened, and our understanding of grace solidified. Wonderfully, God has brought many people into our lives, and reciprocal love and provision have been experienced. School and work are hard, church was new, culture was interesting, and we walked alongside others through it all. Sustenance for ministry, counseling, a PhD, and now work at Covenant Seminary has all come through interdependence on community and Christ. No solo explorers here!

CHOICE AS INVITATION

Choosing was an invitation into these three embodied processes in our lives. We didn't know where we would end up, and we didn't realize how much the process would shape us. I have learned that we don't fully develop and then choose. Rather, we choose and grow through the embodied process that it requires. Choice often feels difficult and stirs up our anxiety. However, humility develops in the process, our capacity for discernment is challenged to grow, and our interdependence can deepen and provide joyful sustenance.

Do we question our choices? Sure. Do we doubt? I know we are all in on that one! Yet doing something with the stirring desire to enact ourselves has blessed us and invited our growth as children of God.

How are you doing in the sandbox? Will you engage, play, explore, and rest? I invite you to consider that you can do so knowing that you have a good Father watching over you. ■

Dr. Paul Loosemore is Director of the Counseling Department and Counseling Center and Assistant Professor of Counseling at Covenant Theological Seminary. He is also a co-founder of and the Clinical Director for the St. Louis Counseling Center.

What's in a Name? Everything—If the Name is Jesus

For Sam Ivey (MDiv'24), the path from pre-med to pastor led from Georgia to Peru to St. Louis—with lots of surprises along the way.

By Rick Matt



SAM IVEY NEVER INTENDED to be a preacher. Though his father and grandfather were both preachers, he just didn't see himself following in their footsteps. On the other hand, he didn't want to be a teacher either. There were lots of teachers on his mother's side of the family, but it wasn't something he thought he wanted to pursue. He did, however, have a pediatrician when he was growing up whom he thought was "a cool dude." Sam thus spent much of his childhood and young adult life wanting and expecting to be a pediatrician. He even began to prepare for that profession in college. But that was before the Lord got hold of his heart and, as often happens when the Lord is involved, Sam's plans took an unexpected turn.

But that's getting ahead of the story. As Sam tells it, everything began with his name.

"I was named after my mother's father, who passed away from a massive heart attack around the time Mom graduated from high school. She vowed then that her first son would be named Samuel, partly because he was such a significant guy. He was the first black assistant principal and head principal in Henry County, Georgia, where I'm from. He was well-known and well-loved, and his death sent shockwaves through the community. So I inherited his name, but with that I also inherited a lot of expectations."

People who knew the relationship weren't trying to put pressure on Sam, but, he says, "I definitely internalized it that way, and put a lot of pressure on myself to be great because he was great." Being the son and grandson of preachers also came with its own set of high expectations. In school, he was successful academically, and playing sports gave him another avenue for achievement. When his parents divorced it only added to his difficulty.

He tried harder and harder to be the "good kid" everyone thought he was and that he expected himself to be. He thought that's what God wanted from him too. But it never worked. He always failed in some way. Eventually he realized he could never be perfect, so he gave up on that and decided to be a "bad kid" instead. He started college at Georgia Southern in Statesboro with that attitude and threw himself into campus life in many ways, some good, some not so good. One night in his freshman year, after an important relationship fell apart, he found himself lying on his bed in pain and confusion, with nothing to fall back on but what he remembered from growing up in church. He prayed, "God, I know I'm not living right. Can you please send someone to show me the way?" Again, as is often the case with God, he showed up in an unexpected way.

At the start of his sophomore year, while helping new freshmen move into the dorms, Sam came across a young man standing by himself. Sam struck up a conversation with the man and discovered they had a mutual interest in soccer. When they met later to kick around a soccer ball the man told Sam that his name was Andrew, that he was not a freshman but had recently graduated from Georgia College and State University, and that he was on campus working

with a college ministry called Campus Outreach looking to develop young Christian leaders.

During a Bible study they did together, Andrew shared with Sam the evangelistic “bridge diagram” based on Romans 6:23 (“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus.”) and how even the best efforts of an unholy man could not bridge the gap between him and a holy god—only Christ could do that.

Suddenly, everything clicked for Sam. “I understood at that moment that this whole thing is about Jesus and not at all about anything I could do. I finally understood why Jesus had to die for my sin—because he was perfect and I was not, and he took my place so I could live. He is the only way. I would say I became a Christian from that conversation.”

From that day on, Sam’s life slowly began to change. He got involved with Campus Outreach. He started to question his life goals and wondered if he wanted to be a pediatrician after all. His involvement in a plethora of campus organizations and leadership activities was teaching him a lot about what he was good at and opening up new possibilities he hadn’t considered. He thought about becoming an epidemiologist instead of a pediatrician. He decided he really liked mentoring people. He even entertained the idea of maybe being a teacher. He still struggled with being motivated by perfection and achievement, but he was slowly learning to let God’s grace have its way with him.

Then one summer he went to a conference related to Campus Outreach and heard a Christian singer sing a song based on Isaiah 6, “Here I Am, Send Me.” “When I heard that I thought: There are lots of people around the world who don’t know Christ. Could I be a missionary? Could I do some other kind of ministry?”

During his senior year, a friend again brought up the idea of being a missionary. Sam at first said no—then qualified his answer with, “Unless I’d be going to a Spanish-speaking country.” He’d always had an affinity for Latino culture, ever since a teacher in elementary school introduced him to the Spanish language. He took Spanish classes in high school and did a minor in it in college.

God apparently took Sam’s off-hand comment a bit more seriously than Sam did. A week or two after the conversation, Sam attended a breakfast for

“I understood . . . that this whole thing is about Jesus and not at all about anything I could do. . . . He is the only way.”

graduating seniors that featured opportunities with various Christian organizations. One sounded particularly exciting: a two-year mission to Cusco, Peru, as part of a partnership between the PCA’s Mission to the World and Medical Campus Outreach.

The more he looked into it, the more attractive it sounded. “It involved a clinic in one of the poor areas of Cusco where they provide good medical care at reduced cost to people who wouldn’t normally have access to it. It would be a chance for me to shadow some doctors in actual practice and see if I still had any desire to be one. It would also give me a taste of serving in ministry. And it was in a Spanish-speaking country. It was one of those moments when you know God must really be listening to you!” In spite of some initial difficulty in raising financial support, Sam eventually made it to Cusco eager to dive into the culture and the work head-first.

His first surprise was that the Spanish he thought he knew so well was less help to him than he had hoped. The language in Peru was heavily influenced by Quechua (Inca) culture and many of the words are different than one might find in other Spanish-speaking countries.

The other surprise he encountered shocked him even more. He was unprepared for the level of internal conflict within the team he worked with. “It was crazy to me that Christians could not get along. I didn’t have a category for it. It was hard seeing these mature Christians, many of whom were well-established doctors, not getting along

well with each other. At the end of the day, we’re all still sinners. It was a formative experience for me.”

Near the end of his two years in Peru, Sam had the opportunity to do some additional leadership assessment and training, for which he and some others were sent to Thailand. During the training, he gained some insight into relational dynamics that he thought could be helpful with his team back in Peru. One of the trainers asked him, “Well, Sam, how do you fit into all this conflict?” Sam said, “It really doesn’t have anything to do with me.” To which the trainer responded, “You’re a member of the team. Even if you’re not directly involved in the problem, you could be directly involved in the solution. You can contribute to the healing and reconciliation.” That hit home—hard. “This challenged me to rethink my role as a team member. I went back to Peru with a newfound appreciation for how God had gifted me, and with a new vision for ministry.” Unfortunately, by the time he got back, the team had completely fallen apart and many members had to return home. Sam finished out his time in Peru serving as an interpreter for other doctors from Canada and the US who could not speak Spanish.

But God used even that as another piece in the puzzle of Sam’s preparation for ministry. One day during a medical campaign, he was helping the doctors with a man who had terrible aches and pains, which the man attributed to the trauma he had experienced growing up. At that moment, Sam says, “There was no audible voice, but I sensed God telling me, ‘Sam, you’re not going to be a physical doctor, but a spiritual doctor.’ I realized in that moment that physical medicine has its limitations. You can diagnose sicknesses based on the symptoms and often there are vaccines that can provide immunity or medicines that can help or cure the sickness. But there are times when someone has experienced something so traumatic that there’s a sin issue, and no physical medicine can deal with sin. Only the gospel can do that. I felt like that was where God gave me my internal call to ministry.”

Sam returned to the States and to the church that had been instrumental in supporting him in Peru, First Presbyterian (PCA) in Augusta, Georgia. He interned at the church while also working for Campus Outreach at Paine College, an historically black college. He talked with one of the pastors at First Pres about his interest in seminary.

The pastor said, “Sam, you could go anywhere for seminary, but Covenant Seminary produces great pastors. If you want to be a great pastor, that’s where you need to go.” So, Sam visited Covenant and loved it. “It just felt like a place with actual community life. It felt like a close-knit family.” He decided to start courses online part time and move to St. Louis later to complete his degree.

Meanwhile, the Lord continued working behind the scenes. Through a friend, Sam met Caroline, the woman who would soon be his wife. The relationship started slowly, but soon blossomed into the real deal. They talked early on about the inter-racial aspect of their relationship and both were willing to accept the challenges it might bring. Caroline was on board with Sam going to seminary and even had family members in St. Louis. So they married on June 12, 2021 (the anniversary of the date in 1967 when interracial marriage became legal in the US). Two weeks later, they moved to St. Louis, where Caroline now works as a teacher at a local school. Sam graduated with his MDiv in May 2024 and is now working on a Master of Arts in Counseling, which he’ll finish in 2026. Meanwhile, he is gaining valuable experience by doing a pastoral residency at a local church called New City Fellowship—West End.

Of his time at Covenant, what has most helped shape Sam for ministry? “Definitely the story work we do here—understanding that God is writing a story and seeing how your story fits into that, how all our past experiences shape us. Then learning to reconcile with that past and acknowledge the joys and growth and grace of God in the midst of the pain. Knowing myself better makes me better able to love others.”

Now that he has a seminary degree and some ministry experience under his belt, what advice would Sam give to others thinking about ministry? “Trust God. That’s the cliché answer, but it’s true. God really does care for his people. It’s been evident in my story. God provides everything needed along the way, and he grows us into the people he wants us to be. Trust him.” ■

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.

Covenant.



At The Center
of The Reformed Faith. 

CLASS NOTES



“Go Therefore and Make Disciples”

More than 5,000 Covenant alumni serve Christ’s church and kingdom in 50 states and 100 countries.

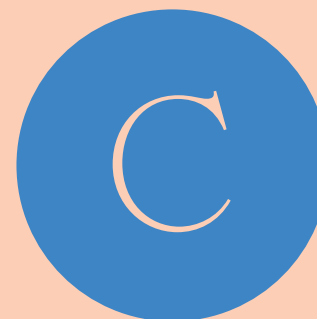


ILLUSTRATION BY VALERO DOVAL

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. 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.

Ordinations, Installations, & Transitions

Michael Anderson (*MDiv '18*) from Assistant Pastor of Youth & Families, Spring Hills (PCA), Byrnes Mill, MO, to Associate Pastor of Discipleship & Outreach, Christ Church (PCA), Grand Rapids, MI.

Jake Bennett (*MDiv '11, MAC '12, current DMin*) from Associate Pastor, Covenant Presbyterian, Chattanooga, TN, to Lead Pastor, Holy Cross Presbyterian, Staunton, VA. Jake and Rebekah have five children.

John Boles (*MATS '77*) honorably retired after 35 years of pastoral and music ministry in MO, TN,

and AL. John and Jan, his wife of 41 years, live in Surginer, AL.

Braxton Brady (*MA '14*) from Head of School, Evangelical Christian, Memphis, TN, to Head of School, Brook Hill School, Bullard, TX.

Cody Brobst (*MDiv, MAC '17*) to Associate Pastor of Discipleship, River Oaks Church, Lake Mary, FL. He continues serving the U.S. Navy as a reserve Chaplain. Cody and Courtney have three daughters.

Zack Carden (*MDiv '01*) from Church of the Apostles, Atlanta, GA, to Senior Pastor, Marietta Community (ECO), Marietta, GA. Zack and Tennyson have four children.

Grace Copeland (*MAC '20*) from Memphis, TN, to St. Louis, MO, practicing as a counselor at Karis House West County. Her husband, Stephen, is a current student.

Clark Cowden (*DMin '01*) from ministry in Indiana to transitional senior pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Hollywood, CA.

Jonathan Davis (*MDiv '11*) from assistant pastor, Downtown Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, to church planter, Resurrection Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC.

Joe Driewer (*MDiv '05*) to Assistant Professor of Engineering, Dordt University. Joe and Nicole have four daughters.

Will Esler (*MDiv '12*) from Assistant Pastor, First Presbyterian, Amarillo, TX, to Lead Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian, Amarillo, TX. Will and Anna three children.

Stephanie Formenti (*MA '08*) was promoted as Vice President of Student Development, Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, GA. Stephanie is married to Gustavo (*MDiv '09*)

Jordan Griesbeck (*MDiv '17*) from RUF Campus Minister, Austin, TX, to Postulant for Ordination in Episcopal Diocese of Dallas, Church of the Incarnation, Dallas, TX. Jordan is married to **Emily Killough Griesbeck** (*MAC '16*).

John Gullett (*MDiv '02*) appointed Vicar/Church Planter for All Souls Anglican Church, Concord, NC.

Addison Hawkins (*MDiv '16*) from Associate Pastor at Christ Church, Seventh Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, MI, to Small Groups Pastor, The Crossing, Columbia, MO. Addison and Lynette have three children.

Luke Irwin (*MDiv '17*) completed his PhD in Theology and Religion at Durham University and is Assistant Pastor of Biblical Studies, Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, GA. Luke and Bekah (*MAC '17*) have one son.

John Jones (*MDiv '03*) from Senior Pastor, Covenant Presbyterian, Chattanooga, TN, to Lead Pastor, King's Cross, Ashburn, VA. John and Karen have one son.

James Kessler (*MDiv '05*) from Senior Pastor, New City Presbyterian, Hilliard, OH, to Senior Pastor, North Short Community, Long Island, NY. James and Laura, a physician assistant, have two daughters.

Dale Kulp (*MDiv '03*) honorably retired after 20 years of ministry in IN and MD. Dale and Shelly now live in Harrisburg, PA. They have seven grown children and twelve grandchildren.

Mimi Larson (*MA '08*), Assistant Professor of Educational Ministries, was recently named Executive Director of the newly established Center for Faith and Children, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Mimi is married to Keith.

Tim LeCroy (*MDiv '06*) from Interim Pastor to Senior Pastor, New Life Presbyterian, Ithaca, NY. Tim and Rachel have two daughters.

Jared Lee (*MDiv '09*), after 13 years as Lead Pastor, Bismarck Community Church, to Teaching Pastor, Corinth Reformed Church (ARC), Grand Rapids, MI. Jared and Lyra have three boys.

Daryl Madi (*MDiv '97*) from service in the St. Louis metro area with EPC churches to Lead Pastor, Good Shepherd Presbyterian (PCA), on February 11, 2024. Darly and Merry have four children.

Brian Main (*MDiv '05*) to Associate Pastor for Teaching and Shepherding, Cherrydale Baptist Church, Arlington, VA. His

wife, Beth, serves as Children's Ministry Director. The Mains have three adult children.

John St. Martin (*MDiv '17*) from Reformation Heritage Books to Lead Pastor, Christ Church, Mankato, MI. John and Tara have four children.

Davis Mooney (*MDiv '19*) from Pastor for Students and Families, Hope Presbyterian, Winston-Salem, NC, to RUF Campus Minister, University of Tennessee-Chattanooga. Davis and Hannah have two sons.

Claudia T. Wootton (*MA '08*) from Assistant Head of School, Norfolk Christian Schools, to Head of School, The Highlands School, Bel Air, MD.

Jeana Roth (*MAC '18*) and family moved to Urbana, IL. Jeana works full time with a local practice as she prepares to launch a private practice for counseling and consulting.

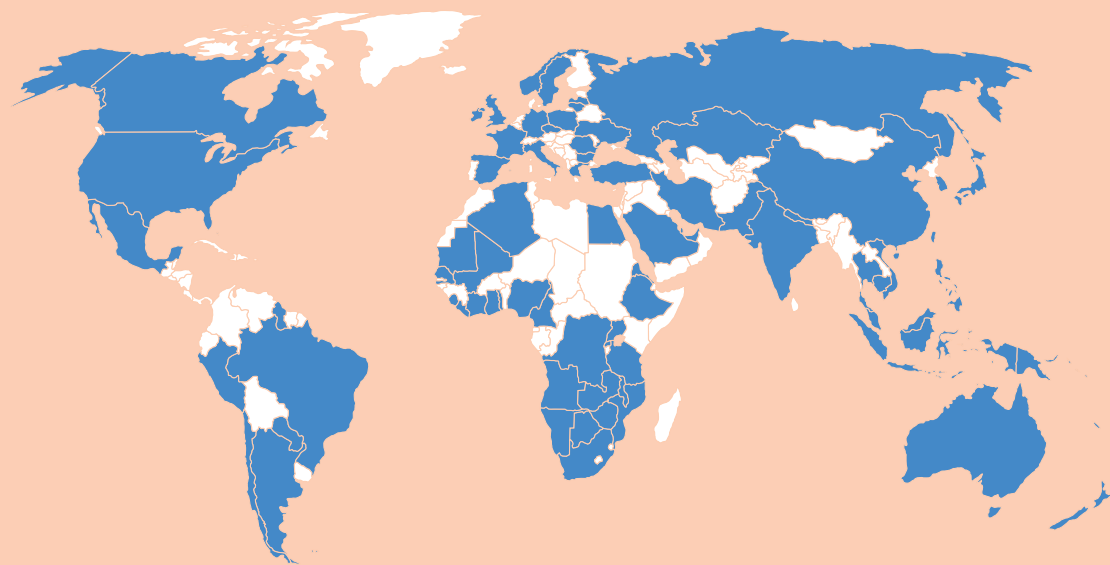
Eric Shrimpton (*MDiv '16*) from Assistant Pastor, North Cincinnati Community Church, to church planting in the Cincinnati suburb of Blue Ash. Eric and **Addie** (*MAC '16*) have two children.

Jon Storck (*MDiv '08*) serving as Transitional and Interim Pastor, New City Church, Palm Bay, FL. Jon and Jennifer have 3 children.

Frank Theus (*MAC '12*), after a career with the Diplomatic Security Service, U.S. Dept of State, received his LPC in 2017. He retired from private practice in 2024.

Where Our Graduates Go

■ ALUMNI PRESENT ■ TO BE REACHED



Jamie Peterson (*ThM '05*) from Associate Pastor, Cahaba Park Presbyterian, Birmingham, AL, to Assistant Pastor of Discipleship, Faith Presbyterian, also in Birmingham. Jamie and Michelle have four children.

David van Buskirk (*MAC '21*) received his Licensed Professional Counselor license in October 2023 and is counseling in private practice.

Celebrations

Josiah Hall (*MDiv '18*) received his PhD in New Testament from Baylor University in December 2022 and now serves as an Assistant Professor of New Testament at Grove City College. Josiah and Panayiota have three children.

Daniel Robbins (*MDiv '13*) completed his PhD in Theological Epistemology (titled "Authentic Epistemic Authority: A Dogmatic Study of the Canonical Epistemology of Testimony") at University of Aberdeen. Daniel, his wife, Bethany, and their three kids work for Serge Global Missions in Nkhoma, Malawi.

Pete Scribner (*MDiv '06*) elected Stated Clerk of the EPC's Midwest Presbytery, Fall 2023. He continues to serve as Lead Pastor, Calvary Presbyterian, Flint, MI.

Justin Sembler (*MDiv '11*) completed 4 Units of Clinical Pastoral Education and accepted a chaplaincy position at Methodist Hospital, Olive Branch, MS. He continues to pastor

All Saints Presbyterian (EPC), Memphis, TN. Justin and Wendy have three boys.

Dale Zarlenga (*MDiv '09*) awarded his MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling, Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA. The Zarlengas live near Atlanta, GA.

Condolences

John Michael Jones (*DMin '03*) promoted to glory, Monday, June 12, 2023.

Janet Sparkman, longtime Seminary library employee, wife of **Wayne Sparkman** (*MDiv '98, ThM '08*) and mother to **Heather Sparkman** (*MDiv '08*), promoted to glory September 24, 2023.

Stuart Cashman (*MDiv '11*) promoted to glory, November 28, 2023. He is survived by his wife Meriel and children.

Sean Davis (*MDiv '22*) promoted to glory March 7, 2024. Sean had served as Admissions Recruiter for Covenant Seminary since July 2023. He is survived by his parents, Pat & Mary Kay, brother Ryan and Drew, extended family, and countless friends and colleagues in the Covenant community.

Justin Donathan (*MDiv '10*), promoted to glory, January 5, 2024. Justin is survived by his fiancé, Adriane Tilton and five children.

Family Updates

Jonathan (*MDiv '17*) and **Caroline Clark** (*MDiv '17*) welcomed Margaret Haynes Hillis Clark, March 1, 2023. The Clarks work

with RUF University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, CO.

Leann and Shawn Dean (*MDiv '17*) welcomed Lewis Dean, February 8, 2024. The Deans live in Pensacola, FL, where Shawn serves with Pinewood Church.

Rebecca Giles (*MAEM '18*) married Joshua Diboll, July 2023. They reside in Birmingham, AL. Rebecca serves at Serge as the Associate Team Leader for Member Care.

Amanda and Andrew Goyzueta (*MDiv '15*) welcomed Miles Green, January 21, 2024, who joined his two big sisters. The Goyzuetas work with RUF Davidson, NC.

Matthew Pannkuk (*MDiv '13*) married Jessica Symes, June 11, 2022. Matt works at Twin Oaks Christian School, St. Louis, MO.

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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