

the messenger

Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE:

“THE CHRISTIAN AND POLITICS”



I was asked at Cross-Con 2026, where Mid-America was exhibiting, if I am optimistic, and I told my interlocutor that I don't know enough to be optimistic (what will happen with global markets? The midterms...?): the Bible has no focus on that sort of thing. I said, rather, that I had hope, hope in the coming world that has broken into this age and will be consummated when Jesus returns. I know that He is working all things for our optimal good and his maximal glory. And that is enough!

I've been especially keen, in the “interesting times” of recent years, to urge us to remember, amid the politicization of everything, including even sports, that the church, as the church, must maintain its spiritual mission. Those who know me are not surprised by that repeated emphasis. This has prompted some to wonder whether I think that there is any proper place for the Christian and/in politics. Indeed, there is.

While my plea remains for the church to be the church and to carry out her proper spiritual mission, which has as its central focus worship on the Lord's Day with the ministry of Word and Sacraments at its core, I still have a clear view of “The Christian and Politics,” and will be dedicating the Thursdays of March 2026 (7:00 pm) to talking about this.

We call this doctrine that the church as church has a spiritual mission, the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. This doctrine means that the church as institute is a spiritual body (whose symbol of rule is the keys), not a biological one, like the family (whose symbol of rule is the rod) or the state (whose symbol is the sword). The proper power of the church is ministerial and declarative (over against the Roman Catholic Church, which is magisterial and legislative), moral and suasive (over against the state, which is legal and coercive).

The church, as an organism, however, that is, the people of God as part of God's kingdom, given primary expression in the visible church, may, and should, as they live their lives, bring their Christian faith to bear in every part of their lives. Thus, I believe that Christians, having a variety of callings in this world, not only in the church as special office-bearers (ministers, elders, and deacons), or even as bearing the general office of believers, also have callings as mechanics, chefs, carpenters, doctors, lawyers, etc. In those callings, they are to bring to bear and live out their Christian faith, including the calling that we all have as citizens of various towns, states, provinces, and nations.

In living out his faith in the civil sphere, the Christian has an obligation to bring his faith to his politics. This will have a variety of implications, but not always what is popularly thought. Because a Christian is guided by God's Word, he will seek to obey God in every part of his life. And the Word contains not only all that we need for doctrine but for life, certainly as to its principles that God teased out as we live life.

What this means for the Christian is that he should approach politics like he does everything else in the living of his life, with a single eye to the love of God and of his neighbor. And how the Christian may bring the love of God and neighbor even into the public square will always be in a distinctly Christian way. In other words, he must do so by being the kind of person described in the Beatitudes and defined by the fruit of the Spirit. He must never engage the world as if he were of the world but as one who is a child of God, washed in the blood and robed in the righteousness of Christ.

“The Christian and Politics,” then, will look at the ethos and principles that we bring to the public square. The Bible furnishes us with that. So, yes, there are implications for things like abortion, marriage between one man and one woman, and other moral matters. And, no, the Bible does not necessarily give details about what all our other politico-civil policies should be. Good Christians of the same confessions may differ politically on a variety of public policies as they seek to love their neighbors. Let's save dogmatism for dogmatics and be sweetly reasonable as we discuss things like immigration, taxes, guns, and other disputed issues. Join in on the conversation as a Christian!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan D. Strange". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

Dr. Alan D. Strange
President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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MESSAGE FROM THE EDITORS

The new year is here, and we're already moving swiftly through 2026.

This issue of *The Messenger* offers much to encourage and edify. Our feature article, the third installment in Dr. J. Mark Beach's series on pastoral leadership, addresses the vital role of elders in Reformed church government, where he challenges them to examine their hearts and ensure that their oversight is grounded in a proper understanding of the gospel, not in self-righteousness or mere duty, but in the grace that renews both shepherd and sheep alike.

We are pleased to introduce you to Brett Chase, our new Vice President of Advancement, whose experience and passion for Mid-America's mission will serve us well in the years ahead. We also celebrate our graduating seniors, whose completion of studies marks not an end, but a beginning, as they prepare to serve Christ's church in various capacities.

The Center for Missions and Evangelism continues its important work, and we invite you to read about our upcoming conference on October 2-3, 2026, focusing on "Being a Welcoming and Enveloping Church."

Finally, you'll also read about alumnus Jason Tuinstra (class of 1998), who reflects candidly on nearly three decades of pastoral ministry and shares how Mid-America equipped him not merely with academic tools but with a vision for feeding Christ's flock through faithful preaching and pastoral care.

As you read these pages, may you be encouraged and strengthened in your support of this vital work.

Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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Our Mission

Mid-America Reformed Seminary seeks to serve Christ and His church by assisting in the formation and preparation of servants for the Kingdom of God. Our primary purpose is to train men for the gospel ministry of Jesus Christ. Guided by this focus, we are also committed to providing solid theological training for others among God's people whose life calling may be enhanced by theological education.

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DEVELOPMENT REPORT:

“STAYING GROUNDED; TOUCHING GRASS”

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

James 1:17

Rev. Vander Hart would be pleased: Merriam-Webster sends me a word-of-the-day every morning, renewing and expanding my vocabulary, even though it’s not Hebrew, but my native tongue. It caught my attention that one of 2025’s words is a phrase: touch grass, meaning “to participate in normal activities in the real world especially as opposed to online experiences and interactions.” With AI being infused into everything, even unnaturally, it’s no surprise that the world is looking for a break, a way to get back to “normal” activities in the “real world!” So much seems to be changing so fast, one can hardly keep up, reminding me of James’ words above, “...with whom there is no variation or shadow of change...!” Looking back over 2025, it was an active and chaotic year at Mid-America, and while I probably wished to “touch grass” many times, I am ever thankful for the rock-steady foundation and truth of God’s unchangingness!

LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

As it has been the theme in our financial updates this year, God has once again proved faithful, and we are pleased to introduce Mr. Brett Chase as our new Vice President of Advancement! Mr. Chase brings over 25 years of leadership in global operations and organizational development with leading technology companies, including Meta Platforms, Microsoft Corporation, and Apple. Throughout his career, he has managed complex supplier relationships across North America, Europe, and East Asia, and contributed to teams that developed iconic products used by millions worldwide. While his formal training

and background aren’t extensively in development, we anticipate greatly the fresh perspective and innovative approaches he will bring to our operations.

As Vice President of Advancement, Brett will oversee all fundraising initiatives, donor relations, and strategic development planning. His appointment comes at a critical time for us as we work to strengthen existing donor relationships while cultivating new partnerships that will support our mission for years to come.

Brett and his wife of 29 years, Elizabeth, will relocate from the Seattle area to Northwest Indiana later this Spring, with an anticipated start date at Mid-America the beginning of May.

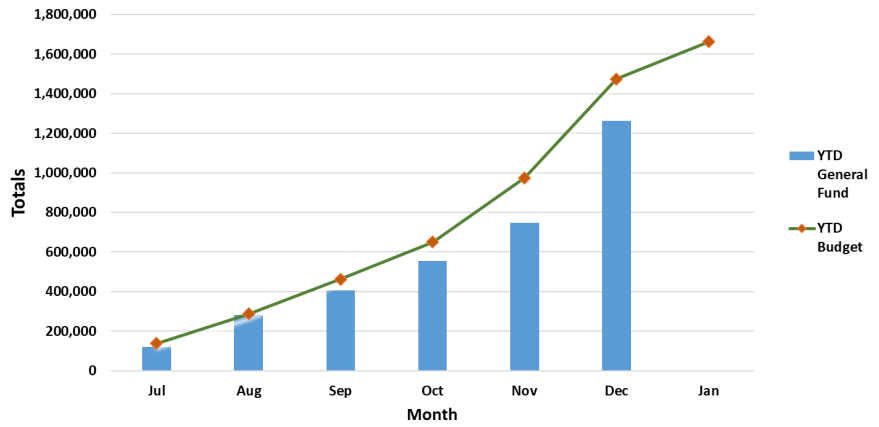
Please join us in welcoming Brett to our leadership team!

FISCAL YEAR GIVING SUMMARY

Our development efforts through December 2025 reflect the continued generosity and commitment of you, our donor community. Total general or operational giving for the current fiscal year has reached \$999,962, representing strong momentum as we pass the midpoint of our fiscal year, which runs from July 1 to June 30. This support enables us to maintain excellence in our programs and services while planning strategically for future growth.

Budget vs. Actual General Fund Income Received

(Includes Actual US Donations and Funds Moved from Foundation Trust)



The geographic distribution of donations demonstrates the broad base of support we enjoy across North America for calendar year 2025. United States donations total \$1,848,293, while our Canadian donors have contributed \$742,632. This cross-border support underscores the widespread appreciation for our mission and the impact God makes through Mid-America in communities throughout the region. We are grateful for every contribution, regardless of size or origin, as each gift represents a personal investment in our shared vision.

CAMPAIGN PROGRESS

Our *Foundation for the Future* building campaign continues to advance. With January’s visit from our audio-visual contractor to install and tweak final components of lighting, sound, and video systems, the construction and fit-out phases of the project are DONE! Campaign giving for our current fiscal year stands at \$369,003, with a total annual giving in 2025 of \$814,471, bringing us significantly closer to crossing the finish line of funding this project. These funds represent dedicated support from donors who understand the importance of proper facilities in delivering exceptional programs and education. The new facilities will provide enhanced capacity, improved functionality, and a welcoming environment that reflects our commitment to excellence.

While we celebrate this progress, important work remains ahead. The building campaign

currently carries an outstanding balance of \$800,000. This gap represents both a challenge and an opportunity as we engage with prospective donors who share our vision for the future. Meeting this obligation will require continued dedication from our development team, strong leadership from Brett, and generous support from our donor community.

LOOKING AHEAD

As we move forward, anticipating Brett's leadership later this Spring, several priorities will guide our development strategy. First, we must maintain the momentum demonstrated in our year-to-date giving while identifying opportunities to expand our donor base. Second, closing the \$800,000 gap in our building campaign remains essential to bringing the financial component of our construction project to completion. Third, we will focus on deepening relationships with existing donors, ensuring they understand the impact of their generosity and feel connected to our mission.

We are grateful for the trust you, our donors, place in us and for the financial support you provide, which makes our work possible. The figures reported here represent more than numbers—they represent relationships, shared values, and the collective commitment to the Kingdom work and mission of Mid-America. With Brett's leadership and your continued partnership, we are well-positioned for sustained success in our development efforts, which ultimately result in the next generation of Kingdom workers, prepared to ably handle the Word, relate to people, and remind them of God's eternal faithfulness and unchanging nature!

OUR NEW VICE PRESIDENT OF ADVANCEMENT

After his appointment to the Vice Presidency, Brett sat down with Seminary President Dr. Strange to discuss strategy, some interim work he will engage in with the Seminary, and transition plans; they also took a few minutes to provide the following Q&A style interview so that you can begin to know the latest addition to our staff! Kindly read on...

Dan Fletcher
Vice President of Operations

Dr. Strange: Tell us a bit about yourself and your family.

Brett Chase: I was born in Anchorage, Alaska, and will celebrate my 54th birthday in March. I grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, and in Madison, I graduated from college and married my beautiful wife, Elizabeth. God has blessed us with two grown sons: Baxter (26) lives in Madison, Wisconsin, and Oliver (24) is a senior at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona. We also have two dogs: Tootsie, our elderly French bulldog, and Wilbur, our middle-aged English bulldog. I am an enthusiastic fan of Wisconsin sports. I also enjoy listening to podcasts and audiobooks and spending time with my father in the Northwoods of Wisconsin.

Dr. Strange: Why the interest in Mid-America?

Brett Chase: I first became aware of Mid-America in the spring of 1998 when I visited the campus as a prospective student. I ended up staying in my engineering career, but since then, I have continued to follow the seminary's work. I love the seminary's biblical and confessional identity, combined with its vocational training for pastoral ministry. I have encouraged aspiring seminarians throughout the years to attend Mid-America.

Dr. Strange: Why the interest in this position (VPA) at Mid-America?

Brett Chase: When the opportunity to join the staff at Mid-America became available to me, it was a dream come true. I had hoped to one day work full-time in a Christian ministry where my professional experience and vocational gifting would be relevant and useful in advancing Christ's kingdom. I am grateful to the Lord and to the seminary for giving me this opportunity to serve the Lord at Mid-America.

Dr. Strange: What do you most hope to achieve in this service?

Brett Chase: By God's grace, I hope to use my spiritual gifts and professional experience to ensure that Mid-America remains a preeminent academic institution in the Reformed tradition,



serving Christ's church. My prayers and labors as the VP of Advancement will be focused on making Mid-America a place where professors can pursue a fulfilling career of scholarship and discipleship, where students have their hearts and minds vigorously exercised in the Word of God and in Gospel ministry, and where students, staff, and faculty experience a genuine, Spirit-filled communion of saints. I want to be a part of ensuring that Mid-America can celebrate at least 100 years of faithful service to Christ, should He tarry.

Dr. Strange: What does life look like for you as you prepare for your move to Indiana?

Brett Chase: Life is busy for us over the next few months as we wrap up life in Seattle and plan for life in northwest Indiana. We are preparing our Seattle home for listing in early March, and we have recently found a home to purchase near St. John, Indiana. The home will not be ready to move into until the fall, so we are looking for temporary housing. My last day at Meta is scheduled for April 3, 2026 followed by a move to Indiana and Oliver's graduation at GCU.

Dr. Strange: What can our readers pray about for you and your family?

Brett Chase: For the Lord's provision of a home buyer for our Seattle home and for a temporary home in Indiana. Also, for an encouraging transition for Elizabeth to her new life in Indiana, and for the Lord's leading in finding a new church home.

INTRODUCING THE THEME OF THE 2026 CENTER FOR MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM CONFERENCE

What does a healthy church look like? In Romans 12:13, Paul encourages the saints to “contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.” We often do the former well, especially with the help of our deacons, but many churches struggle to do hospitality well. Some of our churches have very large families that are always together, and others see few visitors at all. But what happens when visitors come to our churches for the first time? Are they warmly welcomed, greeted by more than one person, and invited over to someone’s house for a meal?

Showing hospitality is one of the marks of a healthy Christian life and a healthy Christian church. We were made by God to be relational creatures, and the church should be

the most hospitable place in the world. The book of Hebrews goes so far as to say that hospitality should be shown not just to those whom we know, but even to strangers (Hebrews 13:2).

This year, on October 2nd-3rd, the Center for Missions and Evangelism annual conference will address this important subject with the help of seven capable speakers (full speaker list to come). The event will include plenty of time for questions and answers during our panel discussion, and as always, great food, fellowship and singing.

Reflecting on our 2025 conference, we were greatly encouraged to see so many young people and youth groups come together for the event. This year, we are striving again to make the content and language very practical and accessible to



believers of all walks and ages.

Please come and join us as we learn from God’s word how to welcome and enfold people into the life of our churches. We can’t wait to see you—and show you a bit of hospitality!

Dr. Eric Watkins
Director of the Center for Missions and Evangelism

FALL LECTURES & SPRING CONFERENCE

The Seminary’s distinguished lecturer for the 2025 Fall Lectures was Dr. James Eglinton of the University of Edinburgh. Professor Eglinton’s lectures were entitled “Knowing God: Archetype and Ectype in Reformed Theology.”

While you won’t find a Q&A in the Catechism about archetypal and ectypal knowledge, this unfamiliar language targets a basic insight about God and creatures. Theologians are like God in at least one respect: they know things. However, there remains a fundamental difference between human knowledge of God and God’s knowledge of himself. God knows himself perfectly; humans know God by imperfectly sharing in God’s perfect self-knowledge. Reformed theologians as early as Franciscus Junius (1545-1602) classified the former as archetypal knowledge; the latter, ectypal.

In his first two lectures, Professor

Eglinton surveyed the theological rationale for this distinction as well as its mixed reception in the history of Reformed theology. In the third, he highlighted its promise for contemporary and future Reformed theology.

Get archetype wrong, and you’ll misunderstand God; get ectype wrong, and you’ll misunderstand theology. Get the distinction right, however, and you’re that much closer to knowing the true God who knows himself.

On March 10, 2026, beginning at 1:00 p.m. (US/Central), Mid-America looks forward to hosting Dr. Mark Jones, pastor of Faith PCA in Vancouver, BC, to speak at our annual Spring Student Lectures. Never backing down from difficult topics, Dr. Jones will speak to matters addressed in his recent book *The Pilgrim’s Regress: Guarding Against Backsliding and Apostasy in the Christian Life* (P&R, 2023). When it comes to the conference circuit, difficult topics are rarely broached. Yet it is these topics that are also the most important.



Recognizing this, these lectures provide the perfect opportunity to engage local pastors, elders, seminarians, and laypeople on how to think biblically about backsliding, but even more, how to return to close fellowship with God and his people. Mid-America is hopeful that these lectures can be used to help restore the beauty of the law and gospel of Christ to those who have lost it. And given that the lectures are named after a rock band (R.E.M.’s “Losing My Religion”), it should be fun, too!

John Waldrop & Jon Vos,
Mid-America Students

SENIOR PROFILES

On May 13th at 7:30 p.m. (US/Central), the Lord willing, the following students will graduate from Mid-America Reformed Seminary at Redeemer United Church in St. John, Indiana. We are thankful to God for their diligent work and pray His blessings as they move forward into service in His name.



Thomas Bell (MDiv) and his wife, Mya, married on January 3rd, 2025, and are remaining local while Mya completes her Political Science degree. Thomas seeks a year-

long internship or, Lord willing, to serve as a pastor in a confessional church. He valued the high-caliber academic training, the faculty's care for students, and their focus on developing deep convictions to live by.



Dane Bothun (MDiv) has accepted a call to Heritage OPC in Springfield, Missouri. After his ordination exam this spring, he will begin ministry there in the summer. Dane

appreciated the quality and practicality of instruction at Mid-America. His wife, Olivia, has been a key support, and together they have an eight-month-old daughter named Jane.



Canaan Chaw (MTS) and his wife, Le Pey, plan to return to Malaysia to continue ministry work, focusing on church planting in the Klang Valley and broader mission

work there. Canaan appreciated the strong community at Mid-America, the accessible faculty, and fellowship at local churches, especially Covenant Fellowship Church in South Holland.



Ruth Huang (MTS) will join InterVarsity's campus staff while continuing translation work in Reformed theology. She valued the solid Reformed theology grounded

in Scripture, the low student-to-faculty ratio fostering community and friendships, and Mid-America's generous support throughout her studies.



Leo Joewono (MDiv), having completed seminary in December 2025, serves as a pastoral intern at Providence URC in Strathroy, Ontario, while

preparing for his candidacy exam with the URCNA in March. He looks forward to proclaiming the gospel, and he expresses joy in Mid-America's curriculum's encouragement of critical thinking rooted in Scripture and the confessions, which have provided both necessary tools and guardrails for ongoing study of God's Word.



Ezekiel McMurtry (MDiv), with his wife, Rebekah, and children, Knox and Geneva, plans a family break after graduation before beginning an internship and

preparing for examination by the Classis of Western Canada of the URCNA in the fall. The McMurtry family greatly appreciated the community of fellow students and their families, as well as the staff and faculty's investment in them.



Greg Ritzema (MDiv) plans to complete an extended internship with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

following graduation, serving as a Bible translator for the Romany/Gypsies of Eastern Europe alongside his wife, Abby, and daughter Anastasia. Greg entered Mid-America knowing the professors' reputations and came to appreciate something more personal: their encouragement, warmth, patience, joy for life, and genuine love for students. He also valued their role as fathers, friends, and brothers in Christ.



Jon Vos (MDiv) will be moving with his wife, Elyssa, and their daughters (Erie, Holland, and Colina) to serve

as pastor at Armor Bible Church, an OPC congregation in Orchard Park, New York, upon sustaining ordination exams. Jon candidly shares that just a few years ago, he would never have felt confident enough to accept such a call. However, Mid-America provided him with a realistic picture of ministry alongside a solid curriculum, and he and his family trust that the Lord will use them as they depend on Him.

Jared Luttjeboer,
Director of Marketing



WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE ELDERSHIP?

GOSPELIZING ELDERS FOR GOSPELIZED OVERSIGHT

by J. Mark Beach

In this article, we wish to address elders—specifically to encourage them in their task, and to help them center their labors where it must be centered: on our Lord Jesus Christ. First, we'll offer a brief review of two errors that must be overcome regarding pastoral leadership. Then we'll explore how elders come alongside pastors in shepherding God's people. Our focus will be on the gospel itself, for without getting the gospel right, the supervision and shepherding care of the eldership is doomed to produce non-gospel fruits.

Now, in the previous articles in this series, we identified two errors surrounding the pastoral office. The first error was to regard the pastor principally as a person the congregation hires to minister to them, to nurture and help them in Christian living, to perform tasks assigned to him, and to have the elders supervise him accordingly. The pastor is hired help. This model can work across denominational lines and church traditions but is most evident in the congregationalist tradition. It has, however, infected Reformed and Presbyterian church circles as well. Missing from this view is that the pastor is first Christ's servant, called to the office of minister of the word and sacraments, who must give account to the Lord of the church, and who has a calling that requires prophetic service that summons the whole church to conformity to the Word of God: himself, the elders, the deacons, the entire

congregation.

The second error, which was only briefly addressed, is the "bully" pastor model. This is the pushy pastor. He is the type of pastor who thinks of himself as a CEO, the ruler of the roost. This is an ugly misconception of pastoral leadership. Among Evangelical churches, this is sometimes the prevailing model of the pastor. Whether he started the church from scratch or took the reins of a well-established church, the minister serves as a lone captain. This doesn't mean that there isn't also a governing body of deacons or elders who labor alongside him, but he is the chief. He decides. His word is final.

Many celebrity preachers assume this role. As the star of the show, he gets what he wants. Not a few evangelical churches lack a sound doctrine of the church and its ecclesiastical offices. Even in small-town churches, with thin membership, one finds this model of pastoral leadership.

Another interesting manifestation of this notion of pastoral leadership is when an evangelical Christian is won over to the Reformed faith, warmly embracing its rich doctrines of grace and God's providential care and sovereignty, but is not won over to its doctrine of the church and its offices. That sort of person may hang on to the CEO model of pastoral leadership. The consequence is that when some such individuals

decide to enter the ministry in Reformed churches, they bring with them their unreformed notions of the pastoral leader. This sometimes manifests when the pastor promptly starts a parachurch organization, where he, of course, is in command, and he likely has little regard for the broader assemblies of the church, for that is not where the action is.

Naturally, we recoil at this distorted conception of the pastoral office. Inevitably, under that model of pastoral leadership, elders sit on the sidelines and function as "yes men." Even in Reformed and Presbyterian churches, many of us have experienced not so much the CEO-type pastor as the pastor as bully. This error must not be allowed to take root, for it is as serious an error as the hired-help fault.

The classic Dordtian model of church polity has sought to avoid each of these mistakes. We must continue to labor to keep in conformity with biblical dictates.

Next, we examine how God determined to establish elders in the churches to share the work of supervision and shepherding the flock that is Christ's church. Given that the pastor is called to lead a congregation unto maturity, unto spiritual transformation, being a shepherd of the flock principally in the ministry of the Word, both in preaching and in private counsel, God, knowing that pastors are vulnerable and weak like clay jars, wisely placed elders alongside them,

co-shepherds, who together with him rule the church and tend the needs of the flock, doing the work that shepherds do.

Elders have a vital role in the life of the church. Many elders take up the task with eagerness but likely with little training. Many elders grow in the task by watching more experienced elders. From time to time, a minister might seek to train the elders, but many churches do not have a formal training program, and where term-eldership is the norm (as in many Dutch Reformed churches), the task of training the eldership presents a bigger challenge. A short article like this cannot address eldership training except to say that it ought to include a biblical understanding of the office, an exposition of the duties of an overseer, training in the nature of corrective ministry, inclusive of a scriptural understanding of the nature of faith and repentance, along with practical protocols for making hospital and sick visits, how to conduct family visits, the sorts of Scripture passages to use in distinct ministry situations (a person in deep grief is different from a person in hard-hearted rebellion), and the ministry of prayer that coincides accordingly. Even more basic for elders (and here I will make some comments) is that they understand the gospel of Jesus Christ—really understand it, experience it, so that they can minister the gospel to parishioners.

I suspect that most congregants, including the elders, are fairly certain they know the gospel well. In actuality, getting the gospel right, keeping to it, applying it to your own life, ministering it to others, is more difficult than you think.

Jesus taught us that there are two ways to live. One is on a narrow road, entering through a narrow gate, yet this road, though few are on it, leads to life. The other road is a broad road. It is heavily populated; many are on it, but it leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13, 14). Our Lord teaches us that he is the singular road to life; and the road to life is marked by faith and repentance, a continual dying of the old self and coming to life of the new self (see Heidelberg Catechisms LDs 7, 33).

However, it is important to understand that the broad road that leads to destruction has travelers of different sorts. That is, a person can travel that road through rank unbelief, being an avowed atheist, declaring that God and the whole of Christianity, along with any form of theism, is the biggest bundle of stupidity in the history of nonsense. But people can also travel this road through false

religiosity. They can follow the path of the Pharisee; they can rebrand Christianity under the flag of Pharisaism. They can do this and be unaware that they've done it. After all, the Pharisees did not regard themselves, under that label, as falling short of true devotion to God, as being anything less than lovers of the law and the prophets, or as missing the mark of being pious and dedicated servants of the Lord. We use the word Pharisee today with negative connotations, but those connotations did not exist before Jesus's ministry. He exposed the hypocrisy underneath the religious zeal, likening these committed souls to "whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27).

What this means is that, as Tim Keller observed some years ago, though there are indeed only two roads (unto life or death), there are three ways to live: (1) *Overtly and unbelievably plotting against God and His Anointed, seeking to burst their bonds* (Ps. 2:2, 3). (2) *Overtly and believably bowing before God and His Anointed, serving the Lord and kissing the Son* (Ps. 2:11, 12). Or (3) *Covertly and unbelievably having a form of godliness without the power thereof* (2 Tim. 3:5). The last of these is Pharisaic religion; we may also call it older brother Christianity. It is important for elders to know this. It is also important for every elder to test his heart: What path is he on? Is he, unbeknownst to himself, a Pharisee, an older brother? (I refer readers to Keller's book, *The Prodigal God*).

This is not a lightweight issue. It is not a point where one gives it a quick nod, whispering to himself, "Oh, that! Well, of course, I'm not guilty of that." Be careful! In Romans 1 and 2, the apostle Paul first shows up Gentile rebels in their sins and unbelief, only to show up Jewish "believers" in their rebellion, in their sins and unbelief. Don't forget, the Jews were God's covenant people. "To them belong [and still belong] the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen" (Rom. 9:4-5). Heritage, however, does not produce the equal sign of faith.

There is an antithesis between overt faith and overt unbelief. There is also an antithesis between true faith and false faith, a faith masquerading under the Christian name. Jesus's Sermon on the Mount is a perpetual call to test your heart. Note: He is not confronting today's

modern, secularized, woke, atheist whose culture thrives at the university. He is confronting what comes much closer to our church circles: devotion devolved into carefully circumscribed duties; piety fashioned after the human imagination—an image-making that can only be rejected as idolatry; religiosity that is pleased with itself but not pleasing to God; commitment that is committed to being comfortable; faith that dares not to venture in faith; and a love for God that translates as love of self.

Now, I know that is disturbing. But that is the test. Consider the parable of the two lost sons in Luke 15—yes, two! Many, if not most, of the elders in our churches have not lived the riotous life of the younger son. Many, more nearly most, have, however, lived or can more nearly identify with the older son. We are well familiar with the first punchline of the parable. The younger son, having wasted his father's wealth "on reckless living," well outside the faith community, returns home in rags, his repentance speech at the ready, but gospel love and gospel celebration interrupt his opportunity to express his shame and show his heartfelt repentance (the gospel of gracious forgiveness runs to this sinful son, embraces him, and kisses him), for the father is barking orders about a feast, a town block-party for crying out loud. The son manages to squeak out: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Meanwhile, he is bedecked with the best robe, a family ring is placed on his finger, and shoes cover his bare feet. He is not a "hired servant." He is a son! He is a forgiven son, a wanted son, a welcomed son, a celebrated son-come-home. He is a gospel-loved son. A feast is prepared. Why? Because he was dead, and is now alive; he was lost, and is now found. Let's celebrate! That's the first punchline of this parable.

The second punchline comes when the older brother returns from the field, dutifully doing his duty. *What's this? Music, feasting, dancing? What's up?* News of his brother's homecoming party, this gospel-party of grace, perturbs him greatly. More than that, he is angry. He will not join the party. We know that the father entreats his older son, but the older son spits out his rehearsed speech to his father, revealing his dark heart:

“Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.” Notice his view of himself: *I’m dutiful; I’m faithful; I follow orders; I obey; therefore, I deserve.* He is not done: *“But when this no good son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”* Notice his view of his brother: He hates him. He hates this sinner, perhaps because he hates all sinners. He declares that his sibling is not his brother; he is your son. *This son of yours is a whoremonger and a spendthrift. He is beneath contempt. A party? Are you serious? Where’s my party with my friends?* As he sizes things up, his faithful service deserves reward. The younger brother’s reckless, riotous living deserves, if anything, a cool, sober, at arm’s length assessment. A tepid nod of acknowledgement. *Yes, make him a hired servant. Let him earn his keep. He needs to prove himself, like I have all these years.* The older brother is an angry, tangled ball of resentment and conceit. He hates this cheap gospel grace. He won’t have it. He just won’t.

Yet, a gospel word comes to him, too, which is the second punchline of the parable, for the father says to him, *“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.”* There is nothing to be earned! It is not a matter of reward. No, it’s yours as my son! Gospel! And then more gospel, *“It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”* That is what the gospel of Jesus Christ accomplishes in each and every one of us!

We examine this parable at some length because every elder (whether a newbie or a veteran) needs to ask himself whether he is an older brother, holding his brother at a distance, or a father running to welcome him home. Pastors, likewise, need to ask themselves this question. Can you stomach this gospel parable? Isn’t this just too free and easy? Just too generous, too extravagant? Isn’t this just too open-ended? Doesn’t it all need more proof, more making amends?

The Jesus answer is “No.” As shepherds of the church, elders and

pastors are reminded that the sheep don’t so much need us as they need the Good Shepherd. The task is to minister the Lord Jesus Christ to His sheep, and also to those who are lost and afar off, whom the Lord is pleased to call. Elders need to remember this.

Thus, it is vital that we bring the gospel to our meetings and to our labors beyond them. Maybe you’re an elder reading this, and you’ve been a younger brother. You’ve experienced firsthand the welcome home of being dead and made alive. Or maybe you’re more like the older brother. You never left the home. Did you, though, freeze the home? Remember, both brothers need God’s love and forgiveness. Both need the gospel of grace. The older brother has a standing invitation to join the party!

For many of us, the older brother seems a more natural fit, though we don’t want to admit it. You relate to his testimony. Like him, you were raised in the church and are living your life right and straight. You are upstanding and do what is expected of you. You are also reliable and trustworthy. Yet, for all that, maybe you see in yourself something harsh and graceless. The older brother was the Pharisee who didn’t think publicans belonged in worship services (see Luke 18:9-14). Such snaky sinners aren’t welcome here; they’ll corrupt our children. You’re the laborer who works all day in the heat for a stack of cash that is no thicker than the one given to latecomers (not wanted latecomers at that), and you’re angry. You have never disobeyed nor been an embarrassment to the family of God. Moreover, you have never pursued a Las Vegas life with exotic dancers. You keep the rules and drive the speed limit. Do you wonder about your reward? Where’s mine? Why, instead, has God sent me this sorrowful providence?

Does God’s grace seem just a bit too generous and soft to the undeserving? Do you wish to disciple scandalous sinners or would you rather see them get their comeuppance? The older brother was a knotted bundle of spite. The church doesn’t need such elders—elders who do not know and have not experienced the gospel of Jesus Christ. Such elders are a plague on the church. Many elders in our churches, fortunately, are more like the father in the parable, or at least they pray to become like the father and repent for

not always being so. Many elders wish to become more like Jesus in love, in mercy, in truth, in strength, in courage, in compassion, and in surrender to God’s will. Most elders and pastors also know that an older brother lives in their heart. He must be put down.

Other elders, may their number decrease, are boldly and devoutly older brother types. They are not godly. Their outward conformity to doing what is right, however, masks the pride of their hearts. No, they are not like the father in the parable. They know it. They do not treasure divine grace as depicted there. Too quick and too easy! Too unguarded and too simple! Too much justification while lacking enough (prior) sanctification! Such types would despise the Roman Catholic doctrine of penance but then require their own variety of Protestant penance on the way to forgiveness.

The parable teaches us that the older brother resents his father’s amazing grace. Not that he isn’t amazed, but he’s amazed, utterly flabbergasted, that grace is given to such an ingrate, for his father (it’s incomprehensible) isn’t concerned about getting his money back or putting his son on probation. None of that. He hardly acknowledged his lost son’s confession. We hear no stern lectures about making amends or *“now this is how it’s going to be, or else.”* Nothing of that. No, let’s celebrate. As an elder, do you get the gospel right?

Elders of the church can learn protocols, procedures, and rules; they can learn to perform tasks and duties, vote when needed, and offer insight on a debated matter. But without the gospel, without believing it, all that is window dressing. Elders are shepherds, co-shepherds with the pastor, and pastor and elder alike must know and believe the gospel if they are going to shepherd the flock of God with the gospel, for the flock needs shepherding care, *gospel shepherding care.*

Next time, if God permits, we will examine the duties of elders and the sorts of burdens and sins that afflict God’s flock. Only the gospel can console and beckon hurting and wandering sheep, for the gospel is the voice of the Good Shepherd.



Dr. J. Mark Beach
Professor of Doctrinal
and Ministerial Studies

ALUMNI PROFILE: JASON TUINSTRA

What can you tell us about your family right now?

Jody and I are blessed with five children, three of whom are married. They all live in the area which allows us to regularly see our eight grandchildren (the two youngest are not in the family picture). Our youngest child will graduate Ferris State University in the Spring, which is another way of saying that our nest will soon be empty.

Where have you served in gospel ministry since your ordination?

I was ordained in 1998 and served three United Reformed congregations. I first served Community URC in Schererville, Indiana (1998-2005). We then moved to Hanford, California and served Emmanuel URC (2005-2009). I have been at Bethel URC in Jenison, Michigan since 2009.

What can you tell us about your present ministry?

Bethel is blessed to be experiencing a season of expansion and growth. While this growth has taken place from within our theological tradition, it has also come from outside. We have sought to be intentional in being a witness to our community, as we engage our neighbors and welcome them into our fellowship. We have a robust new-members program to ensure that we preserve our Reformational distinctions and also lay out the expectations for participation in Bethel. In many ways, this growth is the fruit of years of labor and vision casting. It has come through fervent prayer and faithful work. It has not been easy, but God has been abundantly good.

What has been your greatest joy in Christian ministry?

I'm sure I'm not the first alumnus to struggle with the word "greatest" in this question. How do you answer this question looking back on decades of ministry? Nevertheless, I regularly say



to myself, "Can you believe that God has called you to a life of seeking his face and speaking his word?" I am both humbled and grateful for the joy of being able to meet people with the simple word that can profoundly heal, comfort, mend and speak into the mess of our broken world. When I was in college, a fellow student asked an older pastor what was most "fun" about the ministry. The reply was an incredulous "Fun?" He quickly dissuaded us from thinking about the ministry in terms of fun. "But there is," he said, "joy." As I'm a bit further down the road than I was when I first heard that as a college student, I can look back as one who has now experienced this joy - the joy of bringing God's unchanging word to those living in this ever changing world.

What has been your greatest challenge in Christian ministry?

If you won't be offended by my brevity and my use of a phrase that isn't my own, my greatest challenge in the ministry is the daily challenge of my everyday life: believing my beliefs and doubting my doubts.

How has MARS shaped your understanding and practice of gospel ministry?

Even though I graduated from MARS a long time ago, the impact of my education is not lost on me. My education equipped me with a vision for the ministry that said, first and foremost, God's people need to hear God's voice. The sheep need to see the Shepherd of their souls. While no seminary gifts a man the abilities for ministry, seminaries give the tools necessary for the gifted man to flourish in the ministry. The tools that I received from my education at Mid-America have proven incalculable in rightly handling, dividing and proclaiming God's word. We were always pushed to see that our work had an end-goal in mind, and it wasn't just a good grade; it was edification of the church and the glory of God. At the end of the day, I was taught how to cook so that the little lambs could be fed. Mid-America did their part in passing on the tools to cook a good meal. By God's grace, I trust that's what has been done with the investment they made in this 1998 graduate.

Jason Tuinstra
1998 Mid-America Alumnus



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