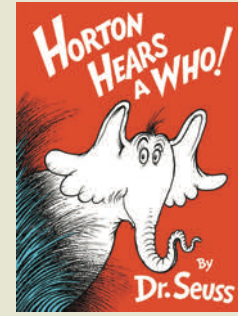


SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2016

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Journal & Bible Studies



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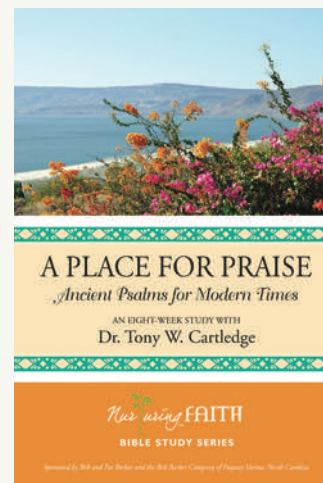
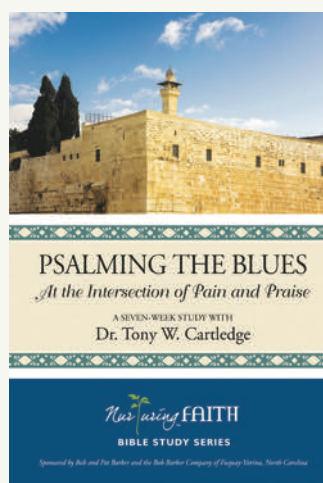
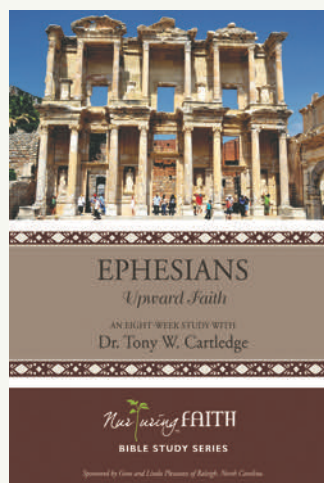
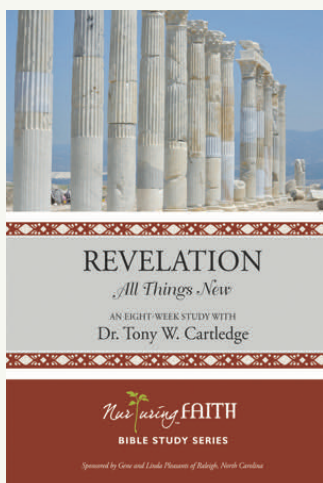


Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge are scholarly, yet applicable, and conveniently placed in the center of this journal. Simply provide a copy of the journal to each class participant, and take advantage of the abundant online teaching materials at nurturingfaith.net. These include video overviews for teacher preparation or to be shown in class.

See page 21 for more information.

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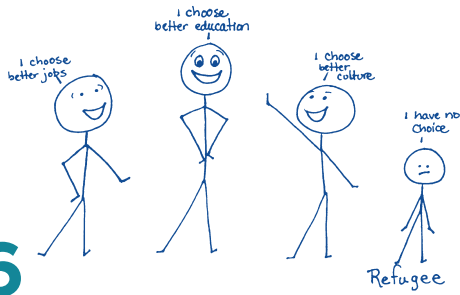
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WHISPER**

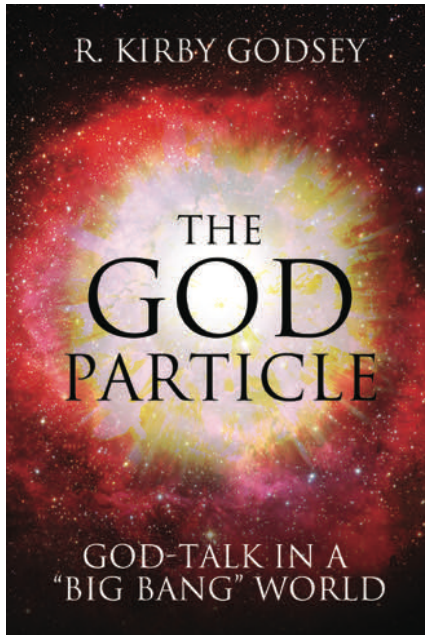
By Barrett Freeman

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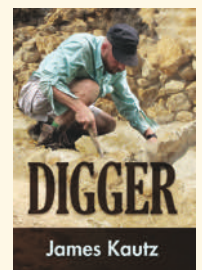
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Worth Repeating

“Church is one day a week.

This will be six days a week. It will change our life.

—Marsha Always of Vittoria, Ontario, opposing a bakery/café opening in a vacated Baptist church building adjacent to her property
(Simcoe Reformer)

“Those of us who understand that we are better together had better raise our voices, because there are others who are trafficking in theater, in paranoia, and they ply the trade of fear as part of their political craft.”

—Pastor Raphael Warnock on Atlanta’s historic Ebenezer Baptist Church participating in interracial efforts through the New Baptist Covenant *(New York Times)*

“Teaching privilege and entitlement of any kind is dangerous. Racial privilege, social privilege and gender privilege are all slippery slopes that we do not want to perpetuate in the church with messages about male headship, husband pastors, and spiritual leaders. We need to do away with archaic cultural models of power and lean in to the teachings of Jesus Christ.”

—North Carolinian Carrie Fernandez, who blogs at girlgonejunking.com

“We simply cannot achieve the perfection toward which we erroneously aspire. One of the maxims of my childhood was ‘confession is good for the soul.’ It does allow sober self-assessment and a window into our need for grace all the while. When we fail to confess our sin and the hubris that shrouds our actions, we cut ourselves off from the flow of God’s mercy.”

—President Molly Marshall of Central Baptist Theological Seminary
(Baptist News Global)

“Religious liberty should not be code for anti-gay or anti-any-other-people.”

—General Counsel Holly Hollman of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

“This flag is a stumbling block to many African-American souls to our witness. I rise to say that all the Confederate flags in the world are not worth one soul of any race.”

—Atlanta-area pastor James Merritt, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, supporting a successful effort to pass a resolution opposing public display of the controversial flag (RNS)

“Just because you are the loudest voice in the Christian community doesn’t mean you’re the majority voice or the correct voice. There are people who speak on behalf of Christianity or speak politically while claiming a Christian mantle who may not be reading the Bible the same way the rest of us do.”

—Mark Wingfield, associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, when asked on public broadcasting about his compassionate approach to understanding transgender persons (keranews.org)

“God help us all! In a world that is desperate for the message of Christ, we continue to be less diligent in sharing the Good News.”

—Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee President Frank Page regarding statistics compiled by LifeWay Christian Resources from church reports that show a denominational membership loss of more than 204,000, down 1.3 percent to 15.3 million members in 2015 (RNS)

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The reversal of Christian conversion

By John D. Pierce

Sharing the gospel just got harder. And the blame cannot be cast upon millennials, atheists, government, religious diversity or contemporary translations of the Bible.

Widespread, public misrepresentation of the Good News is the strategic work of American religious/political fundamentalists now deemed — whether we like it or not — “evangelicals” in virtually every media report.

To say one is “Christian” in America today requires significant qualifiers — if granted enough time to offer an explanation. In widening circles, Christianity implies commitment to an agenda of self-interest, fear, and suspicion of those who are different, if not overt racism and homophobia.

It is deeply concerning when a reversal occurs — and the Christian message gets converted into mere political philosophy.

Telling someone about Jesus often requires major demythologizing of the prevalent Americanized version of Christianity that resembles first-century Pharisees far more than the Christ so troubled by these self-righteous religious elitists.

The focus of this perverted gospel has shifted from “the least of these” to how to remain religiously pure when surrounded by such great “sin” — meaning anything with which one has disagreement and can possibly conjure up a Bible verse or two for support.

Honest morality is not the chief concern of this movement, however. Rather the focus is on gaining or retaining enough political clout to enforce a narrow and destructive view of religious “rightness” on all others.

This politicized religious fundamentalism that is causing great harm to the perception and practice of American Christianity has produced a bad equation.

Evangelicalism — and therefore the Christian faith in the minds of many — is now publicly defined as being inconsistent with and in conflict with basic concerns of human equality and commonsense understandings of freedom and justice.

The fruits of this spirit are: fear, arrogance, condemnation, retribution and self-preservation.

The prevailing question for many American Christians today is not how to minister in a changing culture but how to defend oneself from that which seems so threatening.

This positioning — holing up in cultural and religious bunkers — is vastly different from the call of Jesus to make disciples and serve those in greatest need.

This mindset can be seen in the highly defensive rather than ministry-focused response to the Supreme Court ruling that same-sex couples could be legally married in the U.S.

For example, Southern Baptist entities have poured significant energies and mission dollars into efforts to help churches with restrictive bylaws revisions, to lobby for discriminatory legislation, and to discourage laypersons from attending family weddings that might taint them with such “sin.” Their inward focus is astonishing.

“It’s not enough to decide not to allow same-sex weddings in church facilities or [not to] endorse same-sex marriages

among members,” Jeff Iorg, a Southern Baptist seminary president who wrote a book on the subject, told Baptist Press at the one-year mark of the court decision. “These are important decisions, but they don’t make the problem go away.”

Wow. Prevailing “Christian” responses to such cultural shifts are merely defensive efforts to ensure these changes do not negatively impact institutional church life — while admitting that “the problem” (for them) remains. What attractive Good News!

A common refrain in the church of my youth was that we are all witnesses; it just depends on what kind of witnesses we choose to be.

That is timeless truth. Those who choose the name of Christ either reflect the nature of Christ, though imperfectly, or contradict it.

There is a major challenge today that requires more than lamenting the ways politicians and media lump all “Christians” together. That does nothing to lessen the reality of the situation at hand: that is, the perception of the gospel is built on those clamoring the most to use it for their personal advantage.

Think of the worst possible approaches to evangelism — from Chick tracts to emotional manipulation of the gullible — and the ongoing acquiescence of the church’s mission to such political machinery is worse.

It creates both a burden and an opportunity for those who see this abuse for what it has become. Somehow we must get Jesus back into the public understanding of Christianity.

His words. His deeds. His love. His mercy. His grace. His embrace. His calling. His life, death and resurrection.

Somehow. [NFJ](#)





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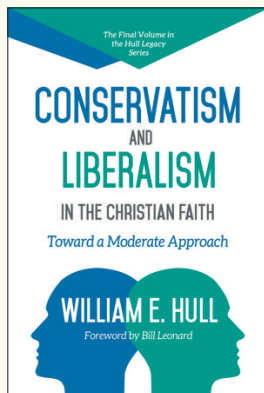
—William E. Hull in his final book,
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—Novelist
WENDELL BERRY,
in a letter to David Hull

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—From Foreword
by **BILL J. LEONARD**

Publication of this book and guide made possible by the generosity of David Hull, Susan Hull Walker and the Hull Legacy Series Committee of Mountain Brook Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala.

Lolley celebrated as his influence expands

STORY AND PHOTO
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

GREENSBORO, N.C. — Randall Lolley's remarkable influence on pastoral ministry and theological education expands as those blessed to have been his students, parishioners or scholarship recipients move about.

The Lolley mark of personal warmth, honest intellectual pursuit and unwavering integrity is a good stamp to bear — and is most apparent in the Tarheel State where Randall and his wife, Lou, have long lived and served.

Despite health challenges, the Lolleys came from their home in Raleigh to Greensboro for the June celebration of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's 25th year. They were celebrated themselves in a fun-filled, "Love Boat"-themed gathering of CBF of North Carolina.

Hundreds of friends joined them, including a horde of graduates of the old Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in the town of Wake Forest, N.C. — where Randall was president from 1974-1987 — and those blessed to have sat in the pews of the First Baptist churches of Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and Raleigh along with other places where Randall has preached and taught.

"Randall and Lou Lolley are beloved by Cooperative Baptists around the country, especially those in North Carolina," said

Larry Hovis, executive coordinator for CBFNC. "Through his presidency at Southeastern Seminary he shaped an entire generation of ministers. Through his pastorates at several flagship North Carolina churches he shaped an entire community of free and faithful Baptists."

Hovis called the Lolleys "an inspirational team" for a large swath of Baptists in North Carolina and beyond.

THE BOOK

A highlight of the gathering was the opportunity to greet the Lolleys and to get a signed copy of Randall's new book, *Journey with Me: Redemptive Threads Woven Through the Bible*, published by Nurturing Faith in collaboration with CBF of North Carolina and the support of more than 100 sponsors.

The book — a gift from the Lolleys to the two collaborating organizations — is a collection of sermons that takes the reader on an inspiring journey from Genesis through Revelation. The chapters are based on sermons that Randall preached at First Baptist Church of Greensboro.

"Randall Lolley is a gospel wordsmith," said Hovis. "Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in his recent book, *Journey*

with Me, a collection of sermons in which he preached through the Bible."

Hovis noted that Randall's preaching touches both the mind and heart.

"These sermons both inform and inspire," he said. "This book is unusual in that it can serve as both a reference book for preachers and teachers, and as a devotional guide for those seeking daily spiritual nourishment."

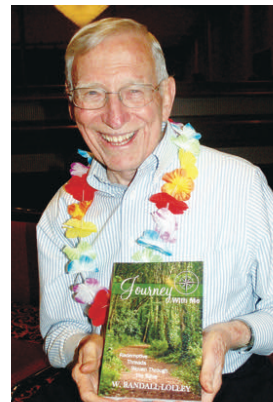
The book is available at nurturingfaith.net. However, copies bought directly from CBFNC (cbfnc.org) provide greater support of a scholarship fund that honors the Lolleys.

THE FUND

The Randall and Lou Lolley Fund for Theological Education was created by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina to continue the Lolley legacy through ongoing support of those preparing educationally to be ministry leaders.

"We are grateful for all those who have contributed to the fund through the years," said Hovis. "Our Lolley scholars have become first-rate ministers of the gospel; the fund is accomplishing its purpose."

Hovis expressed hope that the fund and its influence would continue to grow. For more on the fund and the various ways to support its mission, visit cbfnc.org. [NFJ](#)



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Laughter & Grace

A conversation with lawyer-comic-preacher Susan Sparks

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

NEW YORK CITY — Susan Sparks, pastor of Madison Avenue Baptist Church in the Big Apple, is billed as “America’s only female stand-up comedian with a pulpit.” She is the author of *Laughing Your Way to Grace: Reclaiming the Spiritual Power of Humor*.

“Laughter is, in fact, a way of coming at the world,” she writes in the book’s introduction. “It challenges how we perceive ourselves and our circumstances, it reframes how we see others, and it changes the very way we engage with God.”

Nurturing Faith editor John Pierce posed some questions to the former trial lawyer turned preacher and comedian. The following conversation is adapted from that interview.

NFJ: Let’s start with your identity issues: trial lawyer, stand-up comedian and Baptist preacher. Which do you confess to being when asked by a seatmate on an airplane — and why?

SS: None (laughing). Seriously, I tend to follow the lead of my comedy partner Rabbi Bob Alper. Bob and I star in the “Laugh in Peace Show” with Muslim comic Aman Ali.

Bob says when he gets on a plane and is asked what he does for a living, he hedges.

“I *could* say I’m an ordained rabbi,” he explains, “heading to perform standup with a Baptist preacher and a Muslim comic at a comedy show sponsored by the Catholic Church and Hadassah. Which would be true. But then I think, ‘Naw,’ and answer nonchalantly, ‘I’m a consultant.’”

It is very hard to explain what I do. At first, people respond, “That’s so cool!” Then, inevitably, they pause, their faces



Susan Sparks, pastor of Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City, extends grace and draws laughter.

changing from a smile to a cross between concern and fear, and exclaim “Why?”

It has become clear over time that my call in life is to demonstrate the connection between humor and the spiritual, and to encourage people to reclaim their joy. As Voltaire said, “God is a comedian playing to an audience who is afraid to laugh.”

NFJ: Often I express appreciation for speech and preaching professors but acknowledge that I learned a great deal from Johnny Carson’s monologues over many years. From whom did you learn? And how do you see comedy and preaching to be related?

SS: I remember watching Jack Benny — vaguely, of course, as I was only an hour or so old. His physical comedy — the ability to make people laugh without saying a word — was magic.

I was also influenced by storyteller comedians — which is more my genre — like Grady Nutt who could spin a wonderful tale, yet have laugh breaks throughout.

In terms of the craft of standup,

I studied with Stephen Rosenfield at the American Comedy Institute (ACI) in Manhattan. The ACI is where I truly began to appreciate the art form of crafting comedy (which is all about editing), the discipline of silence and pauses, and perhaps, most importantly, joyful, heartfelt communication.

These skills are critical not only to comedy, but to preaching as well. In fact, I am working on a book titled *Preaching Punchlines*.

NFJ: You offer a qualifier about Madison Avenue Baptist Church: “Baptist — but not like you expect.” Why, and how has that been received?

SS: It makes people laugh and think, which is the point. I hate to say it, but many people in the world at large see the word “Baptist” and think conservative, bordering on crazy.

Apologies to my Baptist folk who are offended by that assertion, but I’m afraid it’s true. Thanks to some hateful, un-Christian and very un-Baptist rhetoric that is blasted out by certain voices, our reputation as

Baptists has taken a serious nosedive.

In fact, thanks to that bad rap, our deacons met several years ago to discuss whether we should remove “Baptist” from our name. After a long conversation, the board decided to keep it.

“It represents our roots, who we are,” said our spry 89-year-old chairwoman, originally from North Carolina. “And I’m not letting that go. We’re going to keep the name Baptist, just redefine it.”

Thus, “Baptist — not like you expect” was born.

NFJ: Too often humor is equated with frivolity. In what ways is humor seriously good for the soul?

SS: Humor in the spiritual path is more than jokes. It is a way of coming at the world.

If you can laugh at yourself, you can forgive yourself; and if you can forgive yourself, you can forgive others.

As a minister, I encourage a holistic approach to worship, prayer and daily life; one where all of who we are is brought before God — the tears, the anger, the fear and the laughter. It’s all holy.

Bottom line, you can’t be healed if you don’t give God all the pieces.

I’ve always believed that ministers and stand-up comedians have the same job. We both are called to stand in solidarity with people during the crazy, annoying times of life and the times of tragedies.

When done right, both ministers and comedians make people feel a little less alone. In short, comedy can bond people, whether delivered from a pulpit or a podium.

Sadly, I spent years as an adult estranged from the church because my early childhood was seeped in judgment and shame, not joy and hope. My early memory of worship was walking in, bracing myself for the body blow of shame, and then walking out bent and beaten down three inches shorter.

Now as an ordained minister and a stand-up comedian, I feel called to say, “Enough!” There is a time to weep and a time to laugh — and we have erred way too hard on the side of weeping.

NFJ: How have your understandings of God and life evolved through your various experiences in recent years?

SS: I have learned a number of things in my years as a minister and a comedian. First, it’s never too late to follow your dream.

We may experience multiple calls in our lifetime — many coming in our later years. Who are we to say that God has the wrong number?

In fact, one of the lessons here is that God speaks and moves in totally unexpected ways.

Meister Eckhart, a medieval theologian, must have had the same experience when he wrote, “God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away.”

Also, I have learned about dealing with pain and loss. In 2006 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. In was then that I discovered how humor can help us live our faith in places of pain.

The philosopher Camus said, “In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me lay an invincible summer.”

Humor is that invincible summer. When you find something to smile about in any place of pain, the balance of power shifts.

You remember that what you are experiencing is not who you are. It’s then you reclaim your invisible summer and take life back.

Because of this experience, I am now privileged to speak to breast cancer survivors all over the country about humor and healing.

Bottom line: We all have a call. The trick is to find the courage to jump when we can’t see the other side. I’m grateful every day of my life that I was able to take that leap.

While mine may not be the most orthodox of paths, it is one I believe feeds a great need in this world: a reminder of our God-given sense of joy and hope, a renewed sense of forgiveness for ourselves and others, and a call to leave the world better than we found it, one smile at a time. **NFJ**



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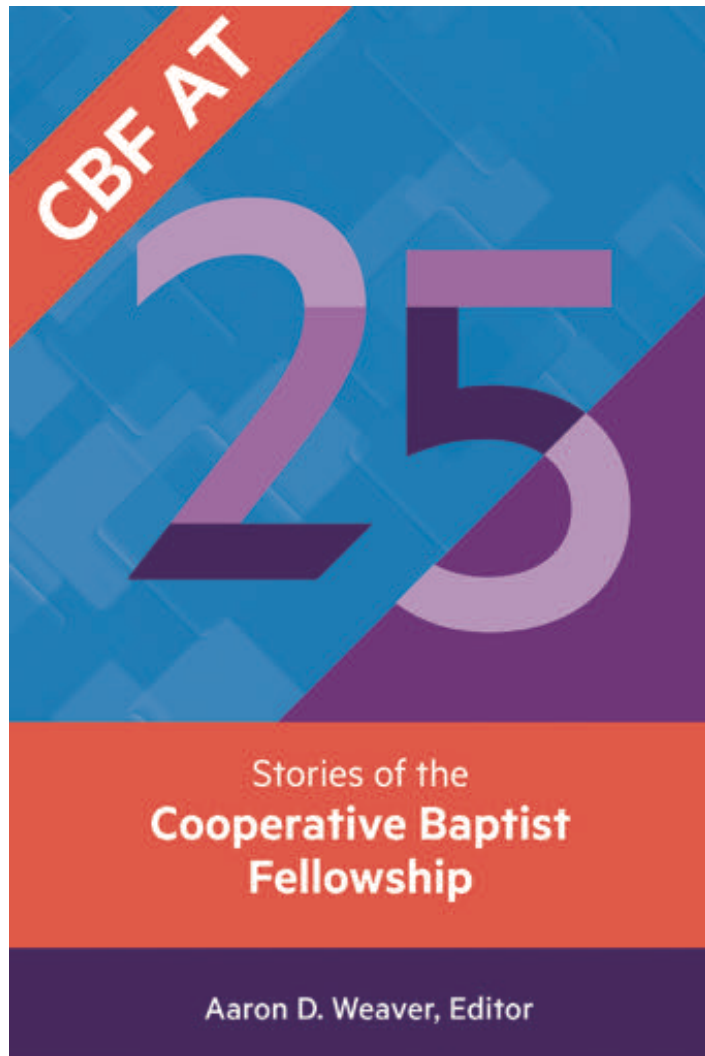
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Pride before destruction

By Tony W. Cartledge

“Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall,” according to the familiar King James translation of Proverbs 16:18.

I was reminded of that on a visit to the ancient Greek city of Delphi, home to the famous oracle. Most of the terraced temple complex, parts of which are more than 3,000 years old, fell into ruin long ago, and was covered with dirt until archaeologists began uncovering it in the late 19th century.

Along the serpentine path leading to the Temple of Apollo, the home of the oracle, various cities or peoples erected treasure houses to store gifts sent in hopes of gaining Apollo’s good graces and receiving a positive response from the oracle.

Some were surrounded by friezes showing activities of the gods, battle scenes or other images.

The Treasury of Siphnos, a city-state on one of the Cyclades Islands, is among the best known. The Siphnians had grown wealthy from mining silver and gold. Their treasury, probably built around 525 BCE, was one of the first buildings constructed wholly from marble.

The pediment beneath its angled roof and friezes surrounding the building featured scenes from the Trojan War on the east side, a scene from the “judgment of Paris” on the west, and what appears to be the abduction of an unknown woman on the south.

The north-facing frieze depicts a “Gigantomachy,” a mythical scene in which the Olympian gods did battle with a race of giants for control of the earth. The giants are armed with swords and spears, and



protected by helmets, breastplates, greaves and round shields.

Pictured here, and beginning at the left, one can see two giants facing left toward two goddesses on a part that has been broken. To their right is Dionysus, wearing a panther skin, and a goddess who drives a chariot pulled by a lion, which is attacking a giant.

To his right, the twins Apollo and Artemis pursue another giant who is fleeing toward a line of three other armored giants, with a fallen comrade at their feet. The aspect

I liked best can be seen in a close-up of the far-right giant’s shield.

The sculptor, apparently proud of his abilities and knowing that the north side would be visible to pilgrims walking up the

sacred way, took the unusual step of signing his work, inscribing the shield in ancient Greek letters with his name, followed by the statement that he “made these and those at the back.”

Others apparently did not appreciate his hubris, however, and deliberately chiseled out his name: one can see only traces on the top left portion of the shield.

We are all-too-familiar with the pompous self-inflation of those who can’t get enough of the public eye. Self-flattery may massage our pride, but fame, as we know, is fleeting.

To coin a proverb of our own, “Better to have one’s name written in heaven than in all the newspapers on earth.” **NFJ**

—For Tony’s blogs related to archaeology and a variety of subjects, visit nurturingfaith.net.



AMERICAN TRAGEDY

How Southern delusions lie at the heart of the Charleston killings

BY VOLNEY GAY

Religion News Service

On the evening of June 17, 2015, a white man joined a prayer group at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, S.C. After talking with the African-American group for an hour, he pulled out a handgun and systematically shot 10 people, killing nine, including pastor Clementa C. Pinckney, who was also a state senator.

According to news accounts, the killer waited for the members to pray before shooting them. The brutality of this crime — and the racial hatred the killer announced online and spewed at his victims — galvanized Americans everywhere.

Because the killer had earlier posed with a Confederate battle flag and affiliated with racist groups, numerous people urged the South Carolina governor to ban the flag from the legislature, where it had flown since 1962.

Five days after the church killings, Gov. Nikki Haley called for the flag to be removed from the Capitol.

Two questions emerge from this story:

Why was the Confederate States of America flag flying at a state capitol?

It seems strange that a battle flag from a rebellion against the United States would be celebrated by an American state 150 years after that rebellion failed. Stranger still is that many Americans, loudly proclaiming their love of country, also love a battle flag used to rally those who wished to destroy that country.

How can we understand this oddity?



The answer is that raising the battle flag in Charleston portrayed the Confederacy as a fledgling state that sought freedom. According to this story, the bombardment of Union forces at Fort Sumter in 1861 was like the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

That sentiment fuels the delusion that the Civil War was about an abstract idea — states' rights — rather than the defense of a material advantage — the ownership of human beings.

A delusion cannot be maintained without obsessively proclaiming its truth.

In 1861, before the Civil War, Southern authorities made themselves clear: President-elect Abraham Lincoln threatened to curtail the spread of slavery, the mainstay of their wealth. That was intolerable, and so secession and war were justified.

In 1865, Confederate President Jefferson Davis and other Southerners fabricated a propaganda masterpiece, arguing that

slavery was not the major cause of the rebellion. Their centerpiece was the idealization of Southern soldiers and Southern leaders, especially Robert E. Lee.

Endless discussions of battles, guns and tactics have flowed since then. Immersed in this tide of brilliant evocations, one could come to love the men (and the flag) under which they fought and died with such courage.

Why did it take the murder of innocent people — at prayer, in a church — to motivate South Carolina authorities to remove the flag?

Hypnotized by the lost cause of the Civil War, those under its spell could not awaken without the shock of wanton cruelty inflicted on innocent victims. The murders at Emanuel AME Church provided that shock.

A deranged young man, who wrapped himself in a Confederate flag, chose to murder people who were black and who were praying, in a famous black church to which he was invited.

For Christians, this attack on the perfectly innocent is identical to the attack on Moses as an infant, the threats against Jesus as a young child and the crucifixion of the perfectly innocent Christ. The idealization of Southern heroes was so strong it required the sacrifice of innocent blood to break it.

That fact is part of our continuing American tragedy. **NFG**

—Volney Gay, professor of religious studies, psychiatry and anthropology at Vanderbilt University, is author of a new book titled,

On the Pleasures of Owning Persons: The Hidden Face of American Slavery.

'A delusion cannot be maintained without obsessively proclaiming its truth.'

Survey finds white evangelicals say U.S. no longer a Christian nation

BY EMILY MCFARLAN MILLER

Religion News Service

The United States is not a Christian country anymore. That's according to 59 percent of white evangelical Protestants recently surveyed by the Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with the Brookings Institution. And that number has jumped 11 points in just four years, from 48 percent in 2012.

Evangelicals' growing conviction that the U.S. is losing its Christian identity, and that the country now is headed in the wrong direction, comes as politicians debate immigration and cultural change during the 2016 election season.

In the new PRRI/Brookings immigration survey tackling those issues, Americans expressed concerns about foreign influences on the American way of life. They mostly agreed that the U.S. is on the wrong track, but differed as to how to get on the right one. The survey, released in June, polled more than 2,600 adults.

"When we step back and look at the big picture, we do see heightened anxieties among Americans," PRRI CEO Robert P. Jones said in a Washington press conference announcing its findings.

While a strong majority of white evangelical Protestants agree that the U.S. has lost its Christian identity, Americans overall are split on the question: 41 percent say it was Christian and remains so, and 42 percent say it was in the past but is no longer. Relatively few (15 percent) say America never has been a Christian nation.

The white evangelical Protestant community feels its cultural dominance in America has been lost, said Henry Olsen, senior fellow at the Ethics & Public Policy Center, who attended the press conference.

"Over the last four years a growing number are seeing that it's lost irretrievably," he said. "That has massive implications for



A U.S. flag flies on the grounds of Rock Springs Baptist Church in Easley, S.C. Photo courtesy of REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst

our politics going down the road."

Americans also are split on whether American culture and the country's way of life have mostly changed for the better (49 percent) or worse (50 percent) since the 1950s.

And, the PRRI/Brookings report said, "no group of Americans is more nostalgic about the 1950s than white evangelical Protestants," with 70 percent saying the country has changed for the worse. Americans also split politically on the question: 68 percent of Republicans agree things have gotten worse, while nearly the same share of Democrats (66 percent) say times are better.

But Americans agree the country is moving in the wrong direction — a belief that crosses the political divide and has inched up from 65 percent in 2011 to 72 percent. And most (57 percent) believe they should fight for their values, even if they are at odds with the law and changing culture.

Other key findings:

- Nearly 6 in 10 Americans (57 percent) say the values of Islam are at odds with American values and its way of life. Of all

major religious groups, white evangelical Protestants (74 percent) expressed the most skepticism.

- A majority (55 percent) of Americans believe that the American way of life needs to be protected against foreign influence. Of all major religious groups, white Christians — including white evangelical Protestants (76 percent), white Catholics (68 percent) and white mainline Protestants (63 percent) — are most likely to say their way of life needs protection.

- Americans are split on whether discrimination against Christians has become as big a problem in America today as discrimination against other groups. Many Christians — including 77 percent of white evangelical Protestants, 54 percent of white mainline Protestants, 53 percent of white Catholics and black Protestants and 50 percent of Hispanic Catholics — feel anti-Christian discrimination is a problem. About 8 in 10 Americans who are religiously unaffiliated (78 percent) and members of other religions (77 percent) disagree. [NFJ](#)

The weaponization of religious liberty

BY PETER MONTGOMERY

Religion News Service

For the second year in a row, more than 100 pieces of anti-LGBT legislation were introduced in state legislatures during the first few months of the year, many of them promoted as measures to protect religious liberty.

How did something as fundamentally American as religious freedom become a culture war weapon against LGBT people and their families?

The religious right has a long history of equating criticism with persecution, and portraying political losses and legal defeats as attacks on faith and freedom. Its followers have been told for years that feminists, liberals and gays are out to silence people of faith, and even to criminalize Christianity.

There's a sinister logic to the strategy: It is easier to convince fair-minded people to support discrimination against their gay neighbors if you first convince them that the gay rights movement is out to destroy their churches and families.

But as more Americans came to know their LGBT family members and friends and discovered they were not the demons the religious right made them out to be, the movement to win cultural acceptance and legal equality for LGBT Americans built momentum. And as marriage equality started to become a reality, conservative strategists tried to regain the moral and political high ground by reframing the debate as one of religious liberty.

A group of social conservatives released the Manhattan Declaration in 2009, a manifesto pledging that its signers would refuse to “bend” to “any rule purporting to force us to bless immoral sexual partnerships, treat them as marriages or the equivalent, or refrain from proclaiming the truth, as we know it, about morality and immorality and marriage and the family.”

Since then, religious right groups, their allies at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and others have increas-



Rusty Thomas of Waco, Texas, preaches outside the Rowan County Clerk's Office in Morehead, Ky. The issuance of marriage licenses to same-sex couples in Kentucky and other states has become the latest focal point in the long-running debate over gay marriage, which became legal nationwide after a U.S. Supreme Court decision in June 2015. Photo courtesy of REUTERS/Chris Tilley

ingly framed their opposition to marriage equality, nondiscrimination laws, reproductive choice and the contraception coverage requirement under the Affordable Care Act as questions of religious liberty.

They have had mixed results. Their efforts paid off in the Supreme Court, where conservative justices ruled in the Hobby Lobby case that a for-profit corporation could use the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act to seek exemption from a law based on the religious beliefs of company owners.

At the state level this year, they got new bills signed into law in North Carolina and Mississippi, while the Republican governor of Georgia, Nathan Deal, vetoed legislation. Federal legislation to give special legal protection to discrimination grounded in religious belief has failed to move forward.

Pushing these efforts is a massive interconnected collection of legal and political groups, radio and TV networks, political and lobbying organizations, think tanks, colleges, and law schools. Among the most influential are the Family Research Council, Alliance Defending Freedom and the

Heritage Foundation.

They and their many allies work together and in parallel to eliminate legal access to abortion and roll back legal protections for LGBT people, couples, and families — often masking their ultimate objectives by portraying themselves as the victims of religious persecution.

These forces have made religious liberty their rallying cry precisely because genuine religious freedom is such a broadly cherished American ideal. Most Americans believe deeply in religious freedom, but most do not equate religious liberty with a blank check to cause harm or deny others' rights.

Where the religious right has made progress, it has done so thanks largely to politicians who share its agenda or are afraid of being targeted by those groups. Fortunately, growing support for LGBT equality among Republicans as well as Democrats, and among religious and business leaders, is helping limit the success of the religious right's determined efforts to pit religious liberty against other constitutional principles. [NFJ](#)

Muslim attitudes about LGBT complex

BY LAUREN MARKOE
Religion News Service

As one of a tiny number of openly gay imams in the world, Daayiee Abdullah has felt the sting of rebuke from fellow Muslims. No good Muslim can be gay, they say. And traditional schools of Islamic law consider homosexuality a grave sin.

But Abdullah, a Washington, D.C. lawyer who studied Islam in the Middle East, says that mainstream Islamic teaching on gays must change.

“It has to or it will die from its harshness or rigidity,” Abdullah said. “The way it is presently understood, it rots the heart and decays the brain.”

Since the June massacre at an Orlando gay nightclub, in which a Muslim man killed 49 people, attention has focused on homophobia among Muslims. And gay Muslims have talked about living between that rock of anti-gay anger and the hard place of Islamophobia that only increased after the Orlando attacks.

Investigators are considering whether Omar Mateen was at least partially motivated by his inability to accept that he was gay. Mateen’s father said his son was disgusted by two men he saw kissing days before the rampage.

Yet attitudes towards LGBT people in Muslim communities are complex, and far from universally anti-gay.

Some Muslims, like Abdullah, are welcoming what they see as an opening within their communities to address anti-gay attitudes. Several groups supportive of gay Muslims have sprung up within the U.S. in past years.

Young Muslims who often feel differently about homosexuality than their elders are increasingly speaking out in support of gay rights, as religion scholar Reza Aslan and comedian Hasan Minaj did in an open letter to American Muslims after last year’s Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage.

Others are pointing toward the Quran and a history of relative tolerance.

“In 1858 the Ottoman Empire decriminalized homosexuality, 100 years before they did so in the West,” said Abdullah, referring to the empire that ruled over Turkey and much of the present-day Middle East in the 15th and 16th centuries.

In the U.S., a 2014 Pew Research Center study shows, Muslim Americans are less accepting of homosexuality than Americans as a whole: 47 percent of U.S. Muslims said it should be discouraged and 45 percent said it should be accepted. But they were not the religious group that was

most disapproving: Evangelical Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons oppose homosexuality by larger margins.

Abroad the picture is starker. A 2013 Pew global study of Muslims showed overwhelming disapproval of homosexuality. In only three of the nearly 40 countries surveyed do as many as one-in-10 Muslims say that homosexuality is morally acceptable: Uganda (12 percent), Mozambique (11 percent) and Bangladesh (10 percent).

And almost all of the 10 countries that allow the death penalty for same-sex sexual relations are Muslim-majority nations. The president of one of those nations, Iran, has denied that gay people exist in his country.

The gay capital of the Middle East is in the Jewish state of Israel: Tel Aviv advertises itself as a safe, vibrant destination for LGBT tourists, and attracts gays from the Palestinian territories and other societies where it is unthinkable to be openly gay.

While Muslim nations such as Iran and Saudi Arabia have legislated violent punishment for gays, there are no laws against gay sex in either Jordan or Lebanon. You can find gay-friendly bars in Beirut, Amman and Istanbul.

Because socialization between unmarried men and women is unacceptable in conservative Muslim society, same-sex social gatherings are the norm, and may present opportunities for gay people to follow their hearts, Abdullah said.

That doesn’t mean that gays don’t suffer beatings and worse in these somewhat more tolerant countries, or that their families accept them, however.

Those Muslims who reject gay relationships often point to sacred writings, as is the case with like-minded Christians. For example, some Muslims invoke the story of Lut in the Quran (comparable to the story of Lot in the Bible) to argue that Islam condemns men who love men.

But Abdullah comes to a different conclusion: that the story condemns cruelty, not any particular sexual act. In the Quran, he finds nothing to condemn his sexual orientation. *NFJ*

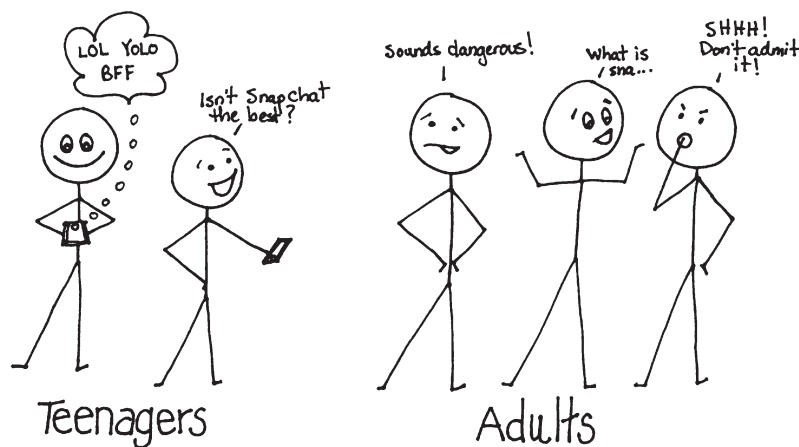


A woman marches during the Gay Pride parade in Toronto in 2012. Photo courtesy of REUTERS/Mark Blinch

Why refugee “talk” makes us *whisper*

STORY AND ILLUSTRATIONS
BY BARRETT FREEMAN

One of my least favorite social situations is when someone brings up a topic that I know nothing about ... awkward. For example, when youth in the church start talking about Snapchat:



We whisper when we feel uncertain, mainly because uncertainty isn't exactly bragging material. In addition, the “not knowing” can cause a little anxiety. So it's not surprising that people whisper when the word “refugee” comes up.

WE WHISPER because many of us don't know exactly what a refugee is.

I'll admit it: I didn't. Refugees are not the same thing as immigrants and asylum seekers. Often those terms get bundled into one package. Refugees are people who cannot return to their home because of persecution related to their religion, political views, race, national origin or social group. They aren't shopping

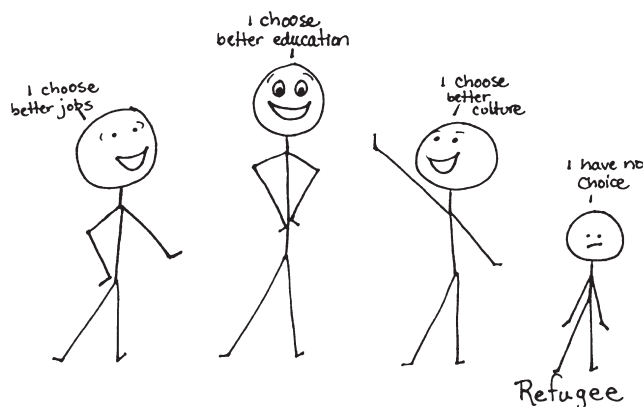
for the best alternative; they simply have no other option. All that remains is an indefinite stay in a tent camp, followed by a two-plus-year vetting process with about eight different agencies.

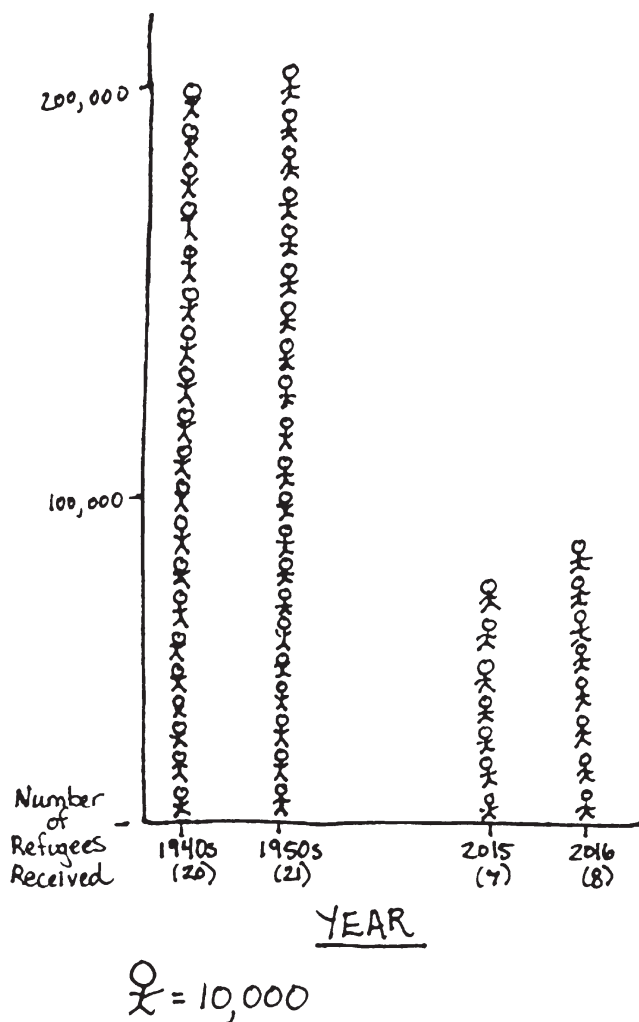
WE WHISPER because many think “our” safety is threatened.

The word “refugee” is becoming linked to “Muslim,” which gets linked to “terror.” With the intensified threat of Islamic terrorist groups, such as the Taliban and ISIS, there is a valid fear that these groups are seeking ways to sneak into vulnerable places and exploit them — hence the term, TERRORism. However, the terrorist attacks in California, Paris, Pulse nightclub, etc. have no connection to refugees.

Of the more than three million refugees admitted into the U.S. since the 1970s, not one of them has perpetrated a terrorist attack. According to New America, the majority of jihadist terrorism in the U.S. post 9-11 has involved citizens born and raised in America. If it's the religious affiliation you have discomfort with, here's more good news:

Last year more refugees admitted to the U.S. were Christian (45 percent) than any other religious group. Additionally, more refugees came from Burma, where the majority are persecuted Christians, than from all the Middle Eastern countries combined. In fact, only about 25 percent of refugees come from countries in





the Middle East, where most Muslims are actually far more likely to renounce extremist groups (see Pew poll) than to accept them.

WE WHISPER because we aren't really sure who is coming.

"Don't talk to strangers" is an embedded mantra where I come from. That's especially true if that stranger is a young military-aged man. Take the Syrian crisis. If Facebook videos displaying an army of military men riding on a refugee Trojan horse concern you, fear not.

Roughly 70 percent of Syrian refugees are women and children. Further, the Syrians whom we would welcome are not those who are pouring across European borders without documentation, but are documented and vetted cases. These refugees were living peacefully

and now need to be moved again in order to make room for the crisis situation Europe faces.

WE WHISPER because it sounds like we are going to be overwhelmed.

There seems to be a lot of chatter out there that the number of refugees is increasing far beyond the norm. If true, that might raise some eyebrows.

However, recently we've been receiving about 70,000 refugees nationwide per year. The goal this year is 85,000. For comparison, in the 1940s we received more than 200,000 refugees per year. As recently as 1980 we resettled more than 207,000 refugees. These little guys (left) wanted to share a visual aid of that data.

WE WHISPER because there's money involved.

Money talks and sometimes it says, "Don't let anyone take me away from you." If refugee resettlement is going to have a negative financial impact on the community, that might get some good whispering started.

The truth is, refugees outperform other immigrant categories (another poll) in the workplace and have proven to be substantial contributors to their communities. One recent study in Cleveland, Ohio shows that over time refugees account for a net gain of 10 times what was spent to resettle them into their new community.

WE WHISPER because the church isn't sure what to do.

Similar to the "not understanding" issue is the "not having direction" issue. No clear direction paralyzes any response and leaves us whispering about what to do. Enter scripture to provide a path.

The Old Testament uses the phrase "resident foreigner" more than 90 times and gives clear instruction on what to do with the "resident foreigner" (Lev. 19:34). The New Testament tells the story of a savior child and his refugee family. Matthew 25 speaks about welcoming the stranger and how it relates to living in the Kingdom of God. Jesus' life demonstrated great love and support for the foreigner. After all, perhaps the most famous of parables was the Good Samaritan, in which Jesus chose to make the star of his story the good neighbor, who just happened to be ... a foreigner. And who are we supposed to imitate in that story? **NFJ**

—Barrett Freeman is pastor of Mount Carmel Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, N.C., and a writer and speaker known for sharing good news through transformative theology and humor.

LEARN MORE:

"Ten Facts about U.S. Refugee Resettlement," from the Migration Policy Institute

"Six Reasons to Welcome Syrian Refugees after Paris" and "America Accepts More Christian than Muslim Refugees," breaking down the religious demographics of refugees admitted to the U.S. by the Niskanen Center

"Syrian Refugees Don't Pose a Serious Security Threat," by the Cato Institute, analyzing instances of terrorism-related arrests among those admitted to the U.S. as refugees

A letter on the security and foreign policy value of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program from a bipartisan group of former U.S. secretaries of state, defense, and

homeland security and national security advisors, including Henry Kissinger, Madeline Albright and Michael Chertoff

"A Church Leader's Toolkit on the Syrian Refugee Crisis" as collected by World Relief

An article summarizing various studies on the economic impact of refugee resettlement from *U.S. News and World Report*

The paradox of peace

By John R. Franke

Peace is often simply defined as the absence of conflict, but in the biblical tradition it means much more than this. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, points not merely to the absence of overt conflict but to a state of ordered tranquility that is the result of right relationships with God, neighbor and the whole of creation.

It is the interconnectedness of all things for their mutual benefit, something that comes from, and manifests, the goodness of the Creator. Peace is the very intention and gift of God, and connotes the spiritual and material well-being of both individuals and the community as a whole that is the result of covenant faithfulness to the ways of God in the world.

The concept of peace in the New Testament builds on the Hebrew notion of *shalom* and intensifies its spiritual dimension as being connected to a life lived in union and in solidarity with Jesus, a life that shares his mission of peace and reconciliation through the imitation of his self-sacrificial love for the sake of others.

The epistle of James (3:13-18) contrasts two approaches to life: (1) an earthly, unspiritual and self-centered wisdom characterized by envy and selfish ambition leading to disorder and wickedness; and (2) wisdom from above that is peaceable, gentle and willing to yield, leading to a harvest of righteousness sown in peace.

In scripture, a life lived in accordance with the wisdom from above is described as a life lived in righteousness resulting in an individual state of peace that comes as a gift from God to be enjoyed and continuously cultivated. This is the peace that Paul speaks of from prison in his letter to the Philippians (4:7), the peace that passes all

understanding even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances we encounter in life.

The Hebrew Bible points to the social dimension of *shalom* and reminds us that the fullness of peace is never simply an individual matter. Isaiah describes the results of this *shalom* as a society in which children do not die in infancy, the elderly live productive and dignified lives, and those who build and plant enjoy the fruit of their labor.

This is in stark contrast to the domination societies that were characteristic of the ancient Near Eastern context in which these words were written. Such societies were politically oppressive, economically exploitative and chronically violent.

The Roman empire of Jesus' time was also a domination society. While it secured the famous *Pax Romana* (Peace of Rome), it also imposed a way of life on its citizens that was the very antithesis of peace: an oppressive political and social structure enforced by violence. This reminds us that the absence of war or overt conflict is not a guarantee of peace.

In contrast, the Hebrew prophetic tradition proclaimed by Jesus offers a vision of peaceful, harmonious existence in which everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid.

The proclamation of this vision by Jesus points us to the struggle for peace and helps us to understand his words in the Gospel of Matthew (10:34-36): "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to

the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be the members of one's own household."

How is it that the one spoken of in the Christian tradition as the Prince of Peace can utter these words?

Jesus knew that the proclamation of peace for all people would bring him into direct opposition to the principalities and powers of this world in the persons of Roman magistrates who were more interested in preserving the status of their realm than in alleviating the suffering and oppression of its citizens.

Such challenges to the *status quo* for the sake of peace, justice and reconciliation lead to division and conflict by their very nature. As it was in Jesus day, so it is in ours.

African-American social reformer and abolitionist Frederick Douglass maintained that without struggle there could be no social progress and no real peace. He said that those who desire peace and freedom for all but oppose agitation are those "who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. ... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

This is the paradox of peace: its realization comes only through costly struggle. We can't have one without the other. Jesus invites us to both. **NFJ**

—John R. Franke is theologian in residence at Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis and general coordinator for the Gospel and Our Culture Network.



Coke and biscuits

By Colleen Walker Burroughs

The drive from Greensboro, N.C., to our office in Birmingham, Ala., took seven hours, so Dale Tadlock and I had plenty of time for stories from PASSPORT missions.

Dale coordinates a summer team along with finding and vetting the thousands of volunteer hours our students will complete over the summer. Since that was once my job I understand the impossible task and the joy in its accomplishment.

Dale told me about a woman who called him, reacting to the news that free help was on the way to paint her father's house — avoiding a \$4,000 fine from the city.

"Is this real?" she asked skeptically, having been scammed many times before.

We get that reaction often. I imagine that's what it felt like to be served a bottomless bowl of fish and bread on a Galilean mountainside when you knew there was no Captain D's near by. It is wonderful to be surprised by God's gracious provision.

I smiled and celebrated: "That's the way it sounds when we find the right mission work to do, Dale. Way to go!"

He told of another man who had fallen through the cracks in the system. John had simultaneously lost his job and been diagnosed with cancer. There were weeks when he survived on a single can of tuna.

With no family close by and no job or other help, he said: "I just knew nothing good would ever happen to me again."

Standing in the front yard along with the team's mission project coordinator Jeffery Dunkerly, Dale explained to John that he was not alone. He assured him that God loved him and that there was hope.



Colleen's father James Walker in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.

John responded: "You are the good thing I never thought would happen for me again."

Dale connected John with Josh Hearne who through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship oversees Grace and Main, a ministry in Danville, Va., where a Passport camp is held. Now John can find a free meal each week as well as a community of people who will enjoy his company.

This is the critical piece for doing missions well: learning to work yourself out of a job.

My missionary father taught this concept to me. He said, "Colleen, if people's relationship to God is dependent upon my presence (in a village in southern Africa or a pastorate in Alabama), then I have not done my job very well. People do not need to depend on me; they need to depend on Jesus Christ."

Then he added: "My job is to work myself out of a job."

For Passport that means offering helping hands wherever we find meaningful work and connecting marginalized people with local agencies doing redemptive work.

What does working yourself out of a job look like for churches on mission in the local community or for mission field personnel in remote corners of the world?

Here is my best example:

When I was a girl in Malawi, my father would drive our family to remote villages on Sundays. Dad was tasked with starting churches that began simply as "preaching points."

My sisters and I would roll our teenaged eyes because church always took the entire day. During rainy season the experience included getting stuck in the mud at least once, greeting everyone with a handshake and a bent-knee curtsy, and then finding our spot on the ground or under a tree or in a small mud building.

We passed time by counting chickens or imagining shapes in the clouds. Sundays were long days that stretched past a nightfall return.

One Sunday, at a preaching point started by another missionary, the crowd was glad to see my father and eager to share communion. When they asked for the bread and juice, my dad realized the church had become accustomed to the missionary providing the elements.

Speaking in their Chichewa language, he said: "You do not need a missionary to have communion. You are a church. You can choose to remember the Lord's Supper without me. I did not bring the elements. What do you have that we might use?"

Perplexed, they began to look around and finally announced, "We have Coca-Cola and some tea biscuits."

The church learned to host communion that Sunday, and I learned what it looks like to work yourself out of a job. [NFJ](#)

—Colleen Walker Burroughs is vice president of Passport, Inc., a national student ministry based in Birmingham, Ala., and founder of Watering Malawi.

Becoming a real New Yorker

By Brett Younger

On the rare occasions that sweet tea appears on a menu, it is a lie. Feeling at home in New York is taking longer than I had hoped. I recently moved from Atlanta to Brooklyn. I have a long way to go to be a real New Yorker.

I need to ride the subway without repeatedly looking at the map to make sure the train is still headed in the right direction.

I need to go a day without consulting my GPS.

I need to go into a grocery store and think, "That's a reasonable price for a pound of ground beef."

I need to look at a restaurant menu without sticker shock: "How can a Coca-Cola here be three times as good as a Coca-Cola in Georgia?"

I need to go to a Mets-Braves game without secretly rooting for Atlanta.

I need to convince myself that climbing stairs counts like a trip to the gym.

I need to honk my horn like a New Yorker.

I need to learn how to act in places like the DMV. It's pretty far to the DMV, but I walked because that's what New Yorkers do.

I get in line to talk to a stern woman who is telling us which line to get in.

I smile and say, "I'm here to get a New York driver's license."

She points. I get in a second line.

After a long wait I smile and say, "I'm here to get a New York driver's license."

Another woman who is having a bad day says, "Old license, three forms of identification."

I hand her my old license, Social



Security card, passport and birth certificate.

She asks, "Why would I want your birth certificate?"

"I'm sorry. I thought you said three forms."

"The passport counts for two."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're B512. Listen for your number."

I remember that my number is B512 because I am B512 for several hours.

An unseen computer voice eventually calls me to window 19, where a man who wishes he was somewhere else asks to see my old license and three forms of identification. I don't offer my birth certificate, but I'm ready.

I say, "It's pretty busy today."

He says, "Go wait for your number."

I sit for a long time. After a few hours I decide to send a picture to Carol so she can see where I'm spending the day. A police officer runs over to make it clear that I will go to prison if I take a picture inside the DMV.

I almost say, "But I need it for my Christmas card," but then think better of it.

They finally call B512 to window

32, where a frustrated clerk complains that I should have been sent to a different window. When she sees my old driver's license she says, "If I could get to Georgia I would never come back to Brooklyn."

This is probably not what the Chamber of Commerce wants government employees to say.

I may never feel at home at the DMV. The people who work at the DMV may not feel at home there. One function of the DMV is to make it clear that we need a home.

Some institutions treat us like a number instead of a person. Some people make us feel unimportant. We need a place where we matter. We need a family that cares for us.

We have restless hearts. At times we feel like strangers even when we are surrounded by people. Sometimes we feel like we are not at home in our own community, our own family and even our own skin.

According to one source, the average American moves 11 times. We are drifters, pilgrims, gypsies, nomads, wanderers, because, at the deepest level of our being, we feel homeless.

The dream of feeling at home keeps us looking for a holy place that will offer meaning for our lives. We long for sisters and brothers who will help us remember that we are God's children. We need a community and a family where we are at home.

New York reminds me that I need a church. [NFJ](#)

—Brett Younger is the senior minister of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, New York.

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SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2016

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

September 4, 2016

Jeremiah 18:1-12

Getting Into Shape

Does the name “Scott Adams” ring a bell? Adams worked in the corporate world for a number of years, holding jobs ranging from teller to commercial lender to budget analyst and computer programmer. As cubicle culture veteran, Adams learned that some people can be difficult to work with.

To spice up work presentations, Adams began drawing comic characters, including a frustrated programmer named “Dilbert.” He developed the concept into a syndicated comic strip so successful that he was able to leave the cubicles behind.

Dilbert is portrayed as a socially inept but competent programmer who has to deal with lazy, incompetent, or borderline psychopathic co-workers. The strip often pokes fun at trendy management mantras or illogical work orders. Readers enjoy it because they know what it is like to work with unskilled, unmotivated, or passive aggressive people.

If there are funny pages in the *Heavenly Star Tribune*, I suspect that Dilbert is on top of the page. Surely God has a sense of humor (consider the giraffe), and God knows that people can be perversely difficult to work with.

Jeremiah 18:6 –

“Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.”

The potter and the clay (vv. 1-4)

That’s the situation we find in Jeremiah’s familiar story of the potter and the clay in Jer. 18:1-12. 🇺🇸🇺🇸 God sent Jeremiah to watch someone at work, not with contrary people, but with inconsistent clay.

Have you ever watched a potter at the wheel? It is a beautiful thing to watch a skilled artisan position a wet lump of clay, then use fingers, thumbs, and palms to shape the spinning form. Once the potter is satisfied, the piece is cut loose with a string and set aside to dry before hardening in the blazing heat of a kiln.

Some modern potters still dig and prepare their own clay, but most use clay from commercial suppliers. The clay is treated in a variety of ways to remove impurities and make it of uniform consistency.

Ancient potters had a more difficult task. They used local clay, which has such a specific signature of abundant or trace elements that archaeologists can use scientific techniques to determine where a particular artifact originated — not just where it was found.

Without modern machinery to sift out grit and organic matter or to thoroughly mix the clay to work out dry or dense spots, early artisans had to be particularly careful. Sometimes one could be nearly finished with a pot only

to have a small stone or bubble rise and mar the surface, or to encounter a hard lump that affected the shape. In some cases, a potter would have to remove the trouble spot, break the piece down, and start over.

That’s precisely what’s going on in today’s text, where crooked crockery becomes a vessel for truth. The account begins in typical prophetic fashion: “The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD” (v. 1). This formula, identical to 7:1 and 11:1, indicates that Jeremiah believed God had spoken directly to him. Whether it was audibly or in a vision, we cannot say. 🇺🇸

God and people (vv. 5-10)

God directed Jeremiah to a potter’s workshop (v. 2), where he watched a man working clay on a wheel. 🇺🇸 Jeremiah didn’t say precisely what kind of pot, pitcher, or plate the potter was making: he used a generic term that can mean “thing” or “article” (v. 3). In other words, Jeremiah saw the potter making “something at the wheel.” It doesn’t really matter what he was shaping, but to provide a visual image translators have used terms such as “vessel” (NRSV, KJV, NAS95), “pot” (NIV11, NET), or “jar” (HCSB).

When the potter’s work became too marred to continue, he squashed it back into a lump and started over. Jeremiah may have stayed and watched for a while, and the potter’s problem was apparently a common occurrence. The sentence structure and verb tenses suggest continuing action, so it could be translated: “whenever the vessel he was making was ruined, he would reshape it.”

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The story in the text does not explain why the pot was spoiled to the point of having to be flattened and reshaped. Were there rough spots in the clay, or inclusions of foreign matter? Was it too wet or too dry?

God is clearly portrayed as the potter, so we may presume that the fault does not lie with the artisan. Obviously, the clay represents Israel. The LORD, Yahweh, was committed to making something good out of Israel, but had to work with the materials at hand. While it is clear that God was doing the shaping, the clay had a mind of its own, and didn't bend readily to the potter's hand.

The acted parable does not name the troublesome flaw, but Israel's greatest downfall over time was the incorporation of foreign gods into the nation's culture and practice. Yahweh could hardly shape a useful and worthy vessel from clay pocked with pagan influences.

Such thoughts would be in keeping with Jeremiah's understanding of the problem, as indicated in vv. 14-16, but he does not spell out what caused the vessel to become too messed up for the potter to continue. He simply notes that when that happened, the potter reworked it into a different vessel, "as seemed good to him" (v. 4).

With vv. 5-6, God explains the connection: "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?" As clay in the potter's hand, Israel was within God's power. God wanted to make something good of Israel, and had entered a covenant with the people. The covenant promised that God would bless the people with security and good things if they proved faithful and obedient. In contrast, though it was not God's desire, disobedience would lead to cursing: the emerging pot would be broken down.

But that was not the end of the story.

Even when judgment was called for, and God had rendered judgment to a nation "that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it," the future remained open for the penitent. "If that nation . . . turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster (the same word as "evil") that I intended to bring on it" (vv. 7-8).

Conversely, if God had declared "concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it" (vv. 9-10).

The options were clear. Jeremiah was fully versed in Israel's covenant theology, and believed that God had confirmed it to him personally. The northern kingdom of Israel had already gone into exile. Would Judah be next? The people could repent and become something good and beautiful, or they could persist in evil and be broken down.

A warning and a response (vv. 11-12)

Thus Jeremiah declared that God was shaping disaster (or "evil") again, but there was still hope: "Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings" (v. 11b). Jeremiah uses skillful wordplay by employing the same word that means "potter" to declare that Yahweh is shaping a disaster against Judah. The NRSV captures the double meaning with "I am a potter shaping evil against you . . ." 📖

The most important word in the verse, however, is the verb addressed to the people of Judah and Jerusalem: "turn." The Hebrew word *shub* basically means to "turn" or "return," but in this and many other contexts it means "repent." To truly repent is to turn away from sin and toward God and goodness. 📖 Or else.

The people's response was not what Jeremiah — or Yahweh — would have hoped for. Their reply was fatalistic, and potentially fatal: "It's no use. We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will" (v. 12).

It seems unlikely that anyone would have used such a blunt retort, rapidly accepting the "evil" tag with which the prophet had labeled them. But, Jeremiah perceived the people's response as a categorical rejection of God's offer to forgive and rebuild if they would only repent. When we read through to v. 12, the people's decision makes this one of the saddest stories in the Bible.

Jeremiah's vision of the potter and the clay has long been a favorite metaphor for preaching, Bible study, or devotional thoughts. Unfortunately, we have often given to it an interpretation not found in Jeremiah. Influenced more by hymnody than scripture, we often use the image of the potter and clay as a prayer of believers who seek to be obedient to God, like clay in the potter's hands. Thus we sing the familiar words written by Adelaide A. Pollard (1907):

Have Thine own way, Lord! / Have Thine own way! / Thou art the Potter, I am the clay. / Mold me and make me after Thy will, / While I am waiting, yielded and still.

The hymn offers a beautiful devotional thought, but it doesn't describe what is happening in Jeremiah 18, where the prophet's purpose is to warn a headstrong people whose attitude is precisely the opposite of the hymn: they would be much more comfortable singing the self-absorbed anthem that Paul Anka wrote and Frank Sinatra made popular: "I did it my way."

Which song are you singing? [NFJ](#)

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

September 11, 2016

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Bad Starts Can Be Redeemed

Picture Sally, a professional food critic who tried a newly opened restaurant, but was not impressed. In a blistering review, she critiqued its mushy spring rolls, uninspired salads, overdone salmon, and use of commercial frozen pies for the dessert menu.

A few weeks later, a friend introduced Sally to Edward, who turned out to be both charming and attractive. The two hit it off immediately, but in time their conversation turned to the inevitable question: “What kind of work do you do?”

Imagine Sally’s chagrin in learning that Edward was head chef at the restaurant she had skewered, and his discomfort in learning that his promising date had publicly disparaged his food.

Talk about getting off to a bad start: Could that budding relationship be salvaged? Could sharp-tongued Sally find a way to smooth things over? We’ll have to wait for the movie to find out.

We do know the ending of another story of bad beginnings, however. It’s the story of Paul, a driven man who had persecuted the followers of Christ with violence before a radical conver-

1 Tim. 1:15 —

“The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the foremost.”

sion experience made him not only a follower of Jesus, but also a leader of the church.

A message for an apprentice?

Our text is found in 1 Timothy, which purports to be a letter from the Apostle Paul to Timothy, his faithful friend and disciple. The letters of 1-2 Timothy and Titus are frequently referred to as Paul’s “Pastoral Epistles.” For a variety of reasons, many scholars doubt that the letters (especially 1 Timothy and Titus) are original to Paul. It is possible that one or more later admirers of Paul wrote the letters to address emerging questions in the church, attempting to answer them as he believed Paul would have (see “The Hardest Question” online for more on this).

While our interpretation of the letters could be influenced by whether Paul or a later writer is responsible for authorship, we must acknowledge that the early church adopted these letters as authoritative scripture. Whether they come from Paul’s hand or that of a later disciple, they can be instructive for believers of all ages. The letter is shaped as a personal message to Timothy, but was clearly intended as a message to the larger church.

The immediate context of 1 Timothy portrays Paul as writing to Timothy at some point after he had traveled to Macedonia, leaving

Timothy to provide direction to the church in Ephesus.

Timothy’s task, according to 1 Tim. 1:3-7, was to remain in Ephesus so he could refute false teachers known “to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies,” promoting “speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith” (v. 4). In contrast, Timothy was to teach sound doctrine with the goal of promoting “love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith” (v. 5).

Mercy for the ignorant (vv. 12-14)

Paul generally began his letters with thanksgiving for God’s work among his readers, but here his gratitude focuses on what God had done for him. “He has strengthened me,” he said. Christ had empowered Paul, we read, because “he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service” (v. 12). “Service” (*diakonian*) is the root of our word “deacon,” often used to describe ministry or service in God’s behalf.

Paul was particularly grateful that Christ had chosen him despite his past record as “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence” (v. 13a). “Blasphemer” usually refers to someone who speaks directly against God or who wrongly presumes to have divine authority. Here, Paul uses it in the sense that he had persecuted the followers of Christ with violence.

Opposing Christ’s followers meant he had opposed Christ, too: when Paul experienced his life-changing vision on the road to Damascus, he heard a voice asking “Saul, Saul, why

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do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). When Paul asked who was speaking, the voice said “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). To persecute the church was to persecute Christ, and thus equivalent to blasphemy.


Paul considered his former rebellion to be forgivable because he “had acted ignorantly in unbelief” (v. 13b). The Old Testament law distinguished between sins committed in ignorance, which could be forgiven, and “high-handed” sins that one knew to be wrong, for which the penalty was banishment from the community (Num. 15:22-29). Like many other levitical commands, it would have been rarely enforced, though the prophets promised destruction or exile as a divine response to Israel’s conscious refusal to follow the law.

Paul had not been ignorant of Christian teachings: he could hardly prosecute people for heresy if he did not know what they taught. His primary fault was unbelief: he knew that Christians believed Jesus to be the Messiah, but had not accepted it prior to the vision described in Acts 9, when “the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (v. 14). Note that Paul attributes his change of heart and relationship entirely to the grace of Christ, and that he returns to the core elements of faith and love as evidence of one’s relationship with Christ.

Before we move on, consider Paul’s assertion that his blasphemy was forgivable because it was done in ignorance. Do we often sin out of ignorance, or is it more likely that we know our actions are wrong, but do them anyway? Does this mean they are unforgivable (that is, still governed by the levitical laws), or does Christ offer forgiveness to all who come with a penitent spirit? Have you known

what it is like to receive “overflowing” grace?

A model for the masses (vv. 15-17)


The writer — whether Paul or a later admirer writing in his name — was so impressed by the grace shown to the church’s former arch-enemy that he carried the theme into the next three verses. “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance,” he wrote, “that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the foremost” (v. 15). 

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” is the essence of the “worthy saying,” and it has the marks of an early confession that would have been familiar to believers. Christ entered a world of people living at cross-purposes with God in order to save them from themselves. The pastoral epistles often use the verb “to save” with reference to God’s work of salvation (see 1:1, 2:3, 4:10; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 3:5), and it is instructive that Paul attributes salvation both to God and to Christ Jesus.


Did Paul really consider himself to be the chief of sinners? On other occasions, Paul spoke of his extreme piety, claiming to have been “blameless” regarding “righteousness under the law,” even as he persecuted the church (Phil. 3:6). Paul also spoke of having been “crucified with Christ” so that his very life was subsumed by Christ (Gal. 2:19, Phil. 1:21), enabling him to say “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

In this context, the author is mainly concerned with Paul’s pre-conversion persecution of the church, as if to say that if God could save an anti-church zealot such as Paul, then God could save anyone. This is the focus of the next verse: “But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the

foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life” (v. 16). Paul’s dramatic conversion made him a remarkable example of how far God’s grace will go.

When I was young, evangelistic events often featured preachers such as Nicky Cruz, a former gang leader, along with testimonies by others who sometimes described in lurid detail their lives of crime, drinking, drug use, or womanizing before they come to know Christ. Those of us who had grown up as “good boys and girls” worried that our testimonies could never be as powerful as if we had sown wild oats before walking the aisle. 

The dynamic “before and after” contrast in Paul’s life was powerful, but not intended to suggest that we should all plumb the depths of depravity before trusting in Christ. Paul’s main concern was not the believers’ past, but their present and future lives. He wanted them to experience the overflowing grace of Christ and to grow in the kind of faithfulness that expresses itself in love.

That kind of life recognizes that we may be weak and sinful humans, but we are loved by and live before “the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God” (v. 17a). First and second century Christians lived in a world where visible images of the Greek and Roman gods were ever apparent. They knew the improbable myths of how the various gods were born, and the stories of their often-capricious and competitive behavior. 

Christians did not worship gods like these, gods who suffered all the human peccadilloes, only in larger ways. They served a Lord who could not be seen, but who had always existed as the only true God, the only one who deserved “honor and glory forever and ever” (v. 17b). **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

September 18, 2016

1 Timothy 2:1-7

It's Not About You

Payer: Few words are more common in the Christian vocabulary. We punctuate our worship services with prayers: invocations, intercessions, confessions, doxologies, and benedictions are some of the fancier names. We talk a lot about the importance of prayer. In times of trial we may ask others to pray for us, or assure troubled friends that we are praying for them.

Some people literally kneel by the bed and pray before turning in each night. Some have the discipline to rise early and pray with the dawn of each new day. Some never eat without offering thanks. Some practice “breath prayers,” seeking to time a simple prayer with their breathing so that they can truly “pray without ceasing,” as Paul encouraged the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:17). Other believers give lip service to prayer while rarely moving their lips, praying only when in trouble.

Where do you fall on that spectrum? Is personal prayer an integral aspect of your faith and practice, or do you tend to be more of an observer? When you pray, do your prayers focus on your own needs, or the needs of others?

The writer of 1 Timothy was convinced that prayer should be at the

1 Tim. 2:5-6 —

“For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all — this was attested at the right time.”

heart of Christian living — and that a concern for others should be at the heart of prayer.

Prayers for all (vv. 1-2)

Having introduced the theme of Christ’s salvation (cf. 1:15), Paul turned to a series of instructions for church members, so that “you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (3:15). Those instructions begin with prayer.

Paul stressed the importance of prayer by introducing it with the word *prōton*, which can mean either first in order or first in importance. Paul urged Timothy (with a word that could mean “command”) to promote prayer with passion. Paul believed that the church needs to pray, and to pray “for everyone.” We may be tempted to limit our prayers to self-oriented concerns and grow weary if the pastoral prayer extends to victims of war and natural disasters around the world, but the church’s primary prayer should extend beyond itself.

Verse 1 includes four different words for prayers — “requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving.” The words vary slightly

in meaning, but Paul’s piling up of synonyms was more concerned with emphasizing the importance of prayer than with delineating categories. The point is that all types of prayer are important, and should be offered for all people. ↓

“Kings and all those in authority” should be specific objects of prayer, he said. As the Jewish people commonly prayed for the emperor, Christians recognized the need to pray for government leaders, even (or especially) those who were not Christian. Such prayers were not for the benefit of government leaders alone: Paul understood that a stable government facilitates Christians’ ability to lead “peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and dignity” (v. 2). ↓

These paired expressions suggest the ideal deportment of a believer: a life of “peace and tranquility,” expressed in “reverence and dignity.” Americans may take religious freedom for granted, but others struggle under dictatorial regimes that deny free expression. Should we not pray for them — and for their leaders? ↓

Paul was well acquainted with Roman oppression, but he generally expressed a positive attitude toward government, which he elaborated most clearly in Rom. 13:1-7. He knew that, while widespread political stability made the practice of personal faith easier, it also facilitated missionary travels and the spread of the gospel.

Under Roman rule, believers had no elective input into who ran the government: they could only pray for its leaders. Today we can do both, making Paul’s advice even more pertinent. Our nation’s march toward

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increased political polarization drives fellow citizens apart, and Christians often find themselves on opposite sides of an increasingly rancorous debate. In such times, it is particularly important that we make prayer a priority, praying for candidates we don't like (and those who support them) as well as for those we favor.

The vitriolic behavior we have seen at many political rallies is far removed from the peaceful, godly, and dignified demeanor Paul sought. Whether we are pleading for change or expressing gratitude, prayer should be a priority for believers.

A desire for all (vv. 3-4)

With v. 3, we are reminded that Paul's purpose is not only to promote prayer, but also to pray to the end that all would come to know Christ. "This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior," he wrote, "who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (vv. 3-4).

God's desire is a two-fold progression, then. We are to pray for all people, first, that all should find salvation through Christ, and secondly, that they "come to the knowledge of the truth." This phrase also appears in the Pastoral Epistles at 1 Tim. 4:3, 2 Tim 3:7, and Titus 1:1. The expression does not refer only to the truth about salvation, but indicates the body of Christian doctrine that Timothy is to teach and to uphold, "the divine training that is known by faith," and that results in "love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith" (1:4b-5).

Churches commonly have far more members on the rolls than persons in the pews, for many people seek salvation but don't follow through with the kind of discipleship that leads them to express unselfish

love, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Have you ever found yourself in that situation?

A mediator for all (vv. 5-7)

To reinforce the importance of core beliefs, perhaps, the writer turns to the words of what must have been a familiar confessional statement, perhaps sung as a hymn. Most Bibles set the confession in poetic form: *there is one God; / there is also one mediator between God and humankind, / Christ Jesus, himself human, / who gave himself a ransom for all* / (vv. 5-6a).

The confession makes three affirmations. First, "there is one God," a statement that echoes the Old Testament emphasis on worshiping Yahweh exclusively within a polytheistic land (Deut. 6:4-6). Timothy and the believers he served lived in a society that revered many gods. The city of Ephesus, where the letter of 1 Timothy presumed him to be, was home to a massive temple to Artemis, known to the Greeks as Diana. Following Christ was not a matter of adding one more god to the list of those worshiped, however, but of rejecting all others to recognize that there is only one true God. ↓

Secondly, "there is also one mediator between God and humankind." That mediator is Christ Jesus, who is "himself human." ↓ Jesus knew what it was like to be God, and to be human. As a result, only he could serve as a true mediator to bring reconciliation between God and humankind. This does not suggest that Jesus worked in the same way as a court-appointed arbitrator seeking to work out compromises between conflicted parties, but that his actions made it possible — at God's initiative — for humans to enter a personal relationship with God.

The third affirmation is that Christ Jesus "gave himself a ransom for all."

This is one of several ways to speak of Christ's atoning work on the cross, which is a mystery beyond human understanding. In the writer's context, slavery was common. The price one paid or the action one accomplished in order to win a slave's freedom was called a *lutron* (Matt. 20:28, Mark 10:45), or *antilutron*, as here. It is usually translated as "ransom," for lack of a better word, though it could indicate a redemptive action as well as a monetary payment.

Paul's concern was not to explicate fine points of theology, but to emphasize divine initiative. The real point is that Jesus "gave himself," an expression Paul often used to speak of Christ's crucifixion (Gal. 1:4, 2:20; Eph. 5:2, 25; Titus 2:14). Jesus willingly gave himself, and he did so "for all." If Jesus could give himself for all people, Christians could surely pray for all people.

This teaching, Paul wrote, "was attested at the right time" (v. 6b). The word *kairos* indicated a particular time or opportunity rather than a chronological date or time on the clock. At God's initiative and in God's timing, Christ came, and at God's discretion, messengers were appointed to spread the news.

Indeed, Paul insisted that God had appointed him as "a herald and an apostle ... a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth" (v. 7). Paul did not limit his ministry to Gentiles: he typically visited the local synagogue when beginning work in a new place. Still, he understood himself to be a pioneer in taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul's interjection that he was telling the truth and not lying might lead us to think that he thought Timothy doubted him, but it's more likely that he used it as a rhetorical device to emphasize the truth of what he was saying. ↓

If we were to tell the truth, without lying, what could we say about the priority of prayer in our lives? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

September 25, 2016

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Find Contentment Where You Are

We might as well admit it: most of us feel a lot happier when our bank accounts are healthy and our retirement savings are growing. Are there any of us who wouldn't be pleased to have stronger finances and a big cushion to fall back on if things turn sour? Is there a political candidate anywhere who doesn't claim that his or her plan will put more money in more people's pockets?

That's a reality of life, but it's not the only approach. In today's text, Paul does his best to convince Timothy that money can be more trouble than treasure, and the love of money should be avoided at all costs. Can the aged apostle convince a crowd of modern materialists that we've gotten it wrong with our pursuit of prosperity?

True contentment (vv. 6-10)

The text begins in the middle of a one-sided conversation. Beginning in 4:11, Paul had run through a litany of instructions ranging from church leadership (choosing elders, managing charity) to personal advice (respect older people, drink a little wine). He insisted that those who labor in God's behalf should be paid for their efforts

1 Tim. 6:10 —

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

(5:17-18), but sharply criticized those who were “depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain” (6:5). Apparently, prosperity preaching is not just a modern heresy. ▽

This thought led Paul into a short meditation on the proper understanding of money and material things. The primary “gain” one should seek is the contentment inherent in true godliness itself, he said (v. 6). ▽ Although wealth exerts a near universal appeal, Paul reminds us that possessions play a role in our lives only between birth and death (v. 7): one who has adequate food and clothing should be content (v. 8).

The desire to be rich is a temptation that can trap believers through “senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction,” he added (v. 9). Note the contrast: those who seek security through increased possessions will find not gain, but grief. ▽

Paul's conclusion in v. 10 is often quoted, though not entirely correctly, as an aphorism so common that many people don't realize it originated in the Bible. “The love of money is the root of all evil” (v. 10a, KJV) overstates the Greek text, which has no definite article before the word for “root.” Literally, it says “for a root of all kinds of evil is the love of money.”

The single word translated as “love of money” describes someone who goes beyond an appreciation for the value of money to making the pursuit of wealth the prime purpose of life. Financial greed is not the only wellspring of evil, but it spawns any number of sinful, selfish, and harmful acts. The lure of money is so powerful that it can even lead people away from their faith. Paul spoke of some who were so eager for gain that they “have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains” (v. 10b). Chasing money would lead to destruction (v. 9), Paul believed, with the ruinous wounds being self-inflicted by people who stab themselves with the dagger of their own greed, causing intense pain. ▽

True grit (vv. 11-16)

As a “man of God,” Timothy was to avoid the dangers of greed and materialism. Indeed, Paul's language suggests more than avoidance — he was to “shun all this,” literally, to “flee these things” and run in the opposite direction. Instead of chasing after wealth, he was to “pursue” righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. The list recalls other texts in which Paul described similar attributes as the fruit of the spirit. ▽

It is composed of familiar virtues, most of which had been previously mentioned in the letter. The term translated “godliness” stands out in particular: it appears nine times in the Pastoral Epistles attributed to Paul (plus four times in 2 Peter), but nowhere else in the New

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Testament. “Godliness” can function as an umbrella word for the righteousness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness characteristic of the life God wants us to live.

“Fight the good fight of the faith” (v. 12) should not necessarily raise images of combat, however spiritual. The term usually translated as “fight” (*agōnizou*) is the root of the English word “agonize,” and its basic meaning had to do with striving for victory in an athletic contest, to “compete in the good competition.” Wrestling and races were the most common events in ancient games, both requiring intense effort.

Since Paul had used the verb “pursue” in v. 11, and had spoken of the goal of eternal life in v. 12b, perhaps the image of “running a good race” would be more apt than the idea of fighting (see 2 Tim. 4:7). In either case, the believer recognizes that faith is a struggle and living up to our confession of faith requires daily effort. As athletic events take place before spectators, so our confession of faith is lived out “in the presence of many witnesses,” so we should be careful what kind of testimony we give.

In vv. 13-16, Paul gave to Timothy a solemn charge that drew imagery from the legal system and the idea of a solemn oath. Paul issued the charge before powerful witnesses: “in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession” (v. 13). The term “good confession” may refer to Christ’s confirmation of his identity as the Son of God (John 18:37), but more likely was intended to describe his faithful testimony despite suffering and the certainty of death. To fight the good fight is to faithfully champion the good confession. Timothy, like all faith-

ful believers, was to stand firm in his faith in every circumstance, “to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 14).

Just what is “the commandment” that Timothy was to keep so faithfully? Some think it may have been a baptismal or commissioning vow, but Paul probably had in mind the things he had just named: to live with righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness (see “The Hardest Question” online for more).

Timothy was to live out this calling until Christ’s “manifestation,” the anticipated return of Christ, which would take place in God’s time (v. 15a). In keeping with the solemn nature of his charge to Timothy — a charge made before God — Paul recited a litany of divine titles and closed with a formulaic acknowledgement of “he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.” (vv. 15b-16).

The exalted titles offer a fitting reminder that we worship a God who is far more than our personal comforter. Many people live as if they have a deity in a bottle, ready to call God forth like a genie when they have a need, paying little attention at other times. How does that attitude fit with Paul’s description of the awesome, immortal God?

True goodness (vv. 17-19)

One would think Paul’s powerful charge would be a perfect way to end the letter, but his command to Timothy led to a challenge for his younger colleague to extend a similar directive to others, particularly the rich.

Having just spoken of God’s immortality, Paul wanted affluent believers to remember that wealth is temporary and uncertain, in contrast to the lasting hope we have in God, “who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” (v. 17, cf. 4:10 and 5:5). We have a natural desire for pleasure and enjoyment, and Paul doesn’t criticize that.

We also have a tendency to buy more expensive toys or adopt more extravagant tastes as our income increases, perhaps assuming that we deserve it. But do pricier pleasures bring us greater delight than the simple joys anyone can appreciate? All we truly need for enjoyment, Paul says, God provides.

There is no sin in being blessed with material wealth, but financial prosperity brings a particular responsibility to others, not just to one’s own family and estate. Persons who have wealth should “do good” in ways that they are particularly equipped to do: “to be rich in good works, generous, ready to share” (v. 18). Such generosity does not buy the wealthy a ticket to glory, but is an appropriate reflection of their faith in and service to Christ.

As Jesus encouraged his followers to lay up treasures in heaven, so Paul called for believers to be “storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life” (v. 19).

What is real life? We may fantasize about sipping martinis on a private tropical beach and think “that’s real living,” or “that would be the life,” but we would be wrong. For Paul, “the life that really is life” is found in joyful service to God through sharing with others in helpful ways. ⤵ That’s one area in which the rich have no advantage: “real life” is available to all. ⤵

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

October 2, 2016

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Keep the Faith

A father telephones a child who is struggling during his first year of college. “Just remember the things your mother and I taught you,” he says. “Remember what is most important. Remember who you are. Believe that you can do it, and know that we believe in you, too.”

Many of us have made — or received — similar phone calls. Growing into maturity is not an easy task. Distractions are frequent and remaining focused can be a challenge. We need the encouragement of others who know us, who have taught us, and who believe in us.

The letter of 2 Timothy is not unlike one of those phone calls, though in the form of a hand-carried letter. Paul wanted his younger colleague to see past the hard days and to grow in his confidence, his fortitude, and his commitment to the gospel. ↓

Don't forget your calling (vv. 1-7)

Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter, probably in Rome, and possibly expecting that his life might soon be over. One has the sense that these are his “last words” to Timothy, so he wants to make them count. ↓

2 Tim. 1:14 —

“Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

The letter was not intended for Timothy alone, though it addresses him as “my beloved child” for whom he constantly prayed. He longed to see Timothy, remembering how Timothy had wept for him (vv. 2-4). ↓

Curiously, Paul goes on to give Timothy a raft of instructions for his ministry, but then asks him to leave it behind and come to him in Rome, bringing with him Mark, a cloak he had left in Troas, and “also the books, and above all the parchments.” Paul must have expected to need the cloak, for he urged Timothy to arrive before winter (4:9-13, 21). Whether the books (or “scrolls”) and parchments refer to books from the Hebrew Bible, copies of other documents, or fresh writing materials is unclear. ↓

If the message, like the other Pastoral Epistles, was meant to be private correspondence alone, there would have been little need for Paul to be so keen on establishing his authority. We are not surprised by Paul’s wish for Timothy to know God’s “grace, mercy, and peace” (as in 1 Tim. 1:2), but he forcefully identifies himself as “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus.” This suggests that the letter was intended for a wider audience. Paul believed God had purposefully called him to help others understand and accept “the promise of life that is

in Christ Jesus,” one of his favorite summary statements of what it meant to live as a Christian.

We may wonder if Paul may also have suspected that the end of his life was near, and was reminding himself as much as Timothy that true life, eternal life, is found in Christ alone. He wanted Timothy — and others who would read the letter — to remember that, too.

Paul rejoiced that Timothy also followed God with “sincere faith,” with authentic belief and actions that come from a clear conscience (v. 5), as Paul did (v. 3). Timothy did not learn the faith from his forefathers, but apparently from his “foremothers.” Timothy’s father was Greek, but his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, were Jewish Christians, and they had imparted their faith to Timothy (v. 6). ↓

Perhaps Paul perceived that Timothy needed a spiritual “pick-me-up,” a dose of renewal and refreshing. Thus, he reminded him of how the Spirit had empowered him during a special service in which Paul had laid hands on him (v. 6), possibly in a service involving a council of elders (1 Tim. 4:14). At that time, Paul had urged Timothy to “not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands.” Here Paul urges Timothy to “rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands.”

Neither text identifies the “gift of God” for which Timothy was known, but the command to “rekindle the gift of God that is within you” suggests that Paul may have thought his

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disciple had been too timid, lacking the confidence or discipline to utilize it fully. Perhaps Timothy had not been as strong in leadership or prophetic preaching as Paul had hoped, so he insisted, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (v. 7). Good leaders and good preachers are marked not only by strength and discipline, but by love and concern for the people under their watch.

Can you name one or more spiritual gifts or abilities that you possess, but haven’t fully utilized? What would it take to fan that gift into flame? What difference could it make for your church and the kingdom of God?

Don’t fear suffering (vv. 8-12)

With v. 8, Paul shifts to the subject of suffering: he knew it well, and did not fear it. Paul said he was not ashamed of his chains, and encouraged Timothy to adopt a similar attitude and “join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace” (vv. 8-9).^u

Human officials can imprison the body, but it is God who saves eternally and calls his followers to a holy, set-apart life. Paul knew it was tempting for Timothy to desert the faith as others had done (see v. 15), or to shy away from confrontations with troublesome authorities, but he called him to stand firm and follow his own example, even if it resulted in suffering.

Paul put such suffering in perspective by reminding Timothy that God’s salvation also came through suffering. Through God’s own purpose, grace was made manifest in the earthly life of Jesus. Through his death and resurrection, Christ Jesus “abolished death and

brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (v. 10). Humans are not inherently immortal, but the work of Christ has made eternal life available to all who would trust the gospel message of his grace. Earthly suffering pales in importance when compared to eternal life with Christ.

Few of us have faced the possibility of arrest or jail for expressing our faith, but we still may be tempted to back away from our convictions or change our behavior in the face of peer pressure or social venues in which faith may not be valued. Have you experienced such situations? How did you respond?

Paul reminded Timothy of his own faithfulness to the gospel, for which he was “appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher” (v. 11). His unbridled commitment to that calling was the sole cause of his present suffering. Yet, Paul was not ashamed or afraid, because he knew the one who had called him and was convinced of his ultimate victory.

Christians through the ages have found comfort in Paul’s affirmation of v. 12: “I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.” We often encourage children and new Christians to memorize the words as a bulwark against temptation, and we sometimes sing them when gathered for worship. A familiar hymn written by Daniel W. Whittle draws on the King James Version:

*For I know whom I have believed, / and
am persuaded, that he is able / to keep
that which I’ve committed / unto him
against that day.*

Don’t lose the treasure (vv. 13-14)

As Timothy faced the pressures of life, politics, and doctrinal aberration in

the churches, Paul challenged him to “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me” (v. 13a). It is unlikely that this refers to a particular body of encoded doctrine: the word translated as “standard” means “pattern,” and in Greek the article “the” is not present, so Paul probably had in mind “a pattern of sound teaching” (literally, “healthy words”) drawn from what Timothy had learned from Paul.

Paul was wise enough to know that no amount of teaching or doctrine is sufficient for ministry: it was always to be weighed against and expressed through “the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (v. 13b). In reminding the Galatians of the centrality of following Jesus, Paul had said “the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6b). Faith brings us into relationship with Christ: love guides our living in Christ.

Paul urged Timothy to guard “the good treasure” that had been entrusted to him (v. 14a), using a term that normally means “deposit.” Paul had invested himself in Timothy, “depositing” both sound teaching and his own example of fervent faith. He wanted Timothy to keep the faith, but knew that he, like Paul, would need “the help of the Holy Spirit living in us” (v. 14b). Others had turned away, deserting Paul and perhaps the gospel, too (see v. 15). Paul was counting on Timothy to remain faithful.

Have you ever had the experience of a Christian brother or sister turning away from you or from the church? How did that feel? Can you remember others who have remained steadfastly faithful in offering encouraging refreshment? If others were thinking of you when answering this question, would your example be uplifting, or a spiritual downer? What would you like it to be? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

October 9, 2016

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Don't Be Ashamed

When I was a boy moving into the “Junior” department in Sunday School, the director gave each incoming child an official “Sword Drill” Bible and encouraged us to memorize 2 Tim 2:15 as the theme of our study. We knew of no option other than the King James Version: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Since both “word” and “truth” had only one syllable, I didn’t understand how we could “divide” either of them — just one obstacle in understanding scripture when taking everything literally and relying on a 400-year-old translation.

What does it mean to “divide” the “word of truth,” and what is the “word of truth” to begin with? Today’s lesson offers a grown-up opportunity to study a familiar, but often misunderstood, text.

The unchained gospel (vv. 8-10)

The letter of 2 Timothy was written to offer encouragement and instruction from an older minister to a younger one. Paul, the seasoned missionary

2 Timothy 2:15 —

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.”

who had been confined to a Roman prison, wrote to his young colleague Timothy with words of encouragement, instructions, and a plea to come visit him in Rome.

The first seven verses of chapter 2 continue the theme begun in chapter 1: Paul urged Timothy to remain firm in his faith, even in the face of suffering or persecution (vv. 1-2). Timothy was to be like a good soldier who ignores distractions and seeks to please his senior officer (vv. 3-4), to be like an athlete who strives for victory while following the rules (v. 5), and to see himself in the model of a hard-working farmer who deserves to have the first share of his crops (v. 6). “Think over what I say,” Paul wrote, “for the Lord will give you understanding in all things” (v. 7).

What Paul wanted Timothy to think over was the heart of the gospel, which he reiterated in vv. 8-10. Timothy was to continually remember that Jesus, a human descendant of David, was also the Christ, the promised messiah. Jesus had died, but was also raised from the dead. “That is my gospel,” Paul said, “for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal” (compare 1:11-12). Nothing could sway Paul from proclaiming that central word of the gospel — not even suffering, not even chains.

In one of the most powerful affirmations of the New Testament, Paul declared that he might be shackled like a common criminal, but “the word of God is not chained.” The Greek term for “chained” could mean “tied up” or “bound.” It was used in John 19:40 to describe Jesus’ body being bound as others wound the long linen grave clothes around him.


This phrase is powerful, but often misinterpreted or distorted. Although modern readers often use “word of God” as a reference to the Bible, that was not Paul’s meaning. The Bible did not yet exist, but the gospel existed — the word of truth, the core belief in the life and work of Jesus Christ, the teachings of Christ embodied in the life of the church. That gospel word could not be bound by something so simple as an iron chain on a single man or even the widespread oppression of believers. The gospel of Christ had been released into the world, and while humans might oppose it, pervert it, or misuse it, they could not contain and manage it for their own purposes.

This verse is a reminder that no one has a corner on God’s self-revelation in Christ. Some may claim that in the Bible they possess an inerrant record of finite truths that cannot be questioned, but as Christ could not be restrained by the binding of grave clothes, his message cannot be locked behind walls of human certainty.


For all of our attempts at developing systematic theologies and definitive dogma, Christ the true Word of God continues to speak to the minds and hearts of those in whom the Spirit dwells.


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This belief comforted Paul as he endured suffering for the sake of the gospel and of those who accepted it, whom he called “the elect” (v. 10). We should not interpret this with the Calvinistic approach that God has predestined the “elect” for salvation while damning all others. Paul used the term “elect” as a term for the people of God who have been saved by grace through faith — not by human merit or divine fiat. 

A sure saying (vv. 11-13)

Paul’s theme continues into the next several verses. His reference to a “trustworthy saying” implies that what follows was commonly repeated in the church, and the remainder of vv. 11-13 has the feel of a litany or hymn that might have been repeated in worship as a word of encouragement in the face of trial or danger.  As such, most Bibles set it as poetry:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him; / If we endure, we will also reign with him. / If we deny him, he will also deny us; / If we are faithless, he will remain faithful — for he cannot deny himself. 

In other places, Paul spoke of baptism as dying and being buried with Christ (Rom. 6:4, Col. 2:12), but here the possibility of martyrdom is also clearly evident. In both cases, those who “die with Christ” are assured that they will also live with him. Those who stand firm and endure will share in Christ’s eschatological victory at the end of the age, so it could be said that they could “rule with him.”

The relation between v. 12b and v. 13 is a conundrum. “If we deny him, he will also deny us” offers little hope for those who fail to stand strong for Christ in a time of persecution or

temptation (compare Jesus’ warning in Matt. 10:33 or Luke 12:9). Yet, v. 13 insists that, even if we are faithless in such a time, Christ will remain faithful “for he cannot deny himself.”

This verse is subject to varying interpretations, but probably means that, though we might be faithless toward God, God would never prove faithless to us because it is God’s nature to be faithful. It is possible that Paul’s intent is that God’s faithfulness will override our individual faithlessness. A more likely option is that, though some may deny God and be denied in return, God’s faithful promise of a blessed future remains sure for God’s people as a whole.

The word of truth (vv. 14-15)

Paul urged Timothy to solemnly remind the church that the gospel word was of central importance and the possibility of apostasy an ever-present danger, even as he was to warn them that “quarreling about words” was of no value, “and only ruins those who listen” (v. 14).

Paul’s reference to “quarreling about words” was aimed at those he considered to be false teachers. They majored on minors and complicated the gospel. Paul had similarly spoken against arguments and “disputes about words” in 1 Tim. 2:8 and 6:4-5. Titus 3:9 also contains a warning to “avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.” In vv. 16-17, Paul warned Timothy to eschew the false teachers’ “profane chatter,” which had the potential to “lead people into more and more impiety, and their talk will spread like gangrene.”

The measure of truth for Paul was that the gospel should result in transformed lives, empowered by the Spirit. The quarreling Paul saw in the false teachers, however, led to spiritual ruin

(see “The Hardest Question” online for more on this). 

Paul urged Timothy — as he would all believers — to avoid false teaching while doing his best to live a life that is approved by God, one that gives no cause for shame and that “correctly handles the word of truth” (v. 15).

Following the KJV’s “Study to shew thyself approved,” countless teachers and preachers have used v. 15 as a call for believers to study the scriptures. Bible study is indeed a worthy exercise, but not what Paul was talking about. The word translated as “study” really means “do your best” (NRSV, NIV), “make every effort” (NET), or “be diligent” (HCSB). Believers should strive to live before God as faithful followers who are tried and true, with no cause for shame.

The KJV’s “rightly dividing the word of truth” has also suffered from misunderstanding. The term translated as “rightly dividing” literally means “to cut straight,” as in building a straight path or plowing a straight furrow. It is a metaphor that means to do something accurately or appropriately. Thus we have options such as “rightly explaining” (NRSV) or “correctly teaching” (HCSB) the word of God, “teaching the message of truth accurately” (NET) or “who keeps the message of truth on a straight path” (NJB).

“The word of God,” as noted above, is not a reference to the Bible, which was still in the process of being written, but to the gospel truth that Paul had emphasized earlier. The proclaimer is not to change the gospel, twist it or take it in the wrong direction, but keep it straight: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to the earth in human form and died for our sins; he was raised from the dead and lives on through the Spirit in the lives of those who follow him, the hope of eternal life. The challenge is to stay on the path. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

October 16, 2016

2 Timothy 3:14–4:5

Read the Instructions

A gospel song that became popular in the 1970s proclaimed “God said it, and I believe it, and that settles it for me.” It always seemed to me that if God said it, that settled it whether I believed it or not. ↓

But what has God said? I suspect that most people who sang the song or listened to it had the Bible in mind: if it was in the Bible, then God said it, and that settled it. But is it that simple? The Bible was clearly written by human beings. Sometimes they claimed to speak the direct word of God, but more often they wrote to testify of their personal beliefs about the relationship between God and humankind.

Paul’s instructions to Timothy offer an opportunity to explore this important question.

Trust the scriptures (3:14-17)

In the latter part of chapter two and the first part of chapter three, Paul counseled Timothy to trust the gospel he had been taught and to guard against those who would distort it. In 3:10-13, Paul reminded him of his own sufferings for the sake of the gospel and his striving against deceitful “imposters”

2 Timothy 4:5 —

“As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.”

who preach a false gospel.

With v. 14, Paul turned to offer Timothy encouraging words of advice for his own certain struggles. Paul urged Timothy to “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.”

Timothy had learned much from Paul, but had first become a disciple through the witness of his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois (1 Tim. 1:5). Though Eunice had married a Greek, the synagogue welcomed “God-fearers” even if they were Gentiles. Whether at home or in the synagogue, Timothy must have received training in the faith from a young age: Paul said “from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:15).

While some written documents probably existed within the church, no widely accepted body of Christian literature had developed during Paul’s life, so he almost certainly had in mind the Jewish scriptures. A number of prophecies pointed to a hoped-for messiah (*Christos* in Greek) and the promise of future deliverance for God’s people. Paul believed that Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of those promises. Thus, he instructed Timothy to find guidance and strength through “the sacred writings.” ↓

What did Paul have in mind when he spoke of “all scripture” that

is “inspired by God” (3:16a)? Many modern readers assume Paul was speaking of the Bible, but would that be the Protestant Bible with which we are familiar, or the Catholic Bible — which includes the *Apocrypha*, a collection of books and additions to Daniel and Esther that were written about the Hebrews, but in Greek? ↓

Most of the New Testament had not yet been written in Paul’s day, so he could not have meant “the Bible” as we know it. Since Paul had spoken in the previous verse of the “holy writings” Timothy had studied, we presume he meant such Hebrew scriptures as were accepted as authoritative in his day — though the contents of the Hebrew Bible had not yet been settled. We cannot say for certain precisely what documents Paul had in mind (see “The Hardest Question” online for more), but we can explore what Paul had to say about those writings.

Paul spoke of scripture as *theopneustos* — literally, “God-breathed.” Many modern translations render the combination word as “inspired by God.” Like his Jewish brethren and the early church, Paul believed that God was directly involved in the writing of the scriptures — but in what way?

Biblical literalists assert that God directly controlled the mind and heart of the persons who penned the scriptures, so that every word and thought conforms exactly to the divine intention. Some embrace a belief that God dictated every word, but even conservative scholars generally accept that God allowed human personality to color the authors’ presentation of their testimony, though not to the point that

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any error or inconsistency could creep in.

Those views not only disallow much of the human freedom and creativity that God granted to humankind, but they gloss over the bald fact that the Bible does in fact contain many internal inconsistencies and sometimes flatly contradicts itself. Much ink has been spilled in trying to rationalize these problems away, but the arguments often strain the limits of credibility. If God had truly directed the writing of every word, one would expect a more consistent and unified result.

Bible scholars who apply critical thinking to their study of scripture do not consider biblical authors to be little more than merely copyists of divine quotations, but regard them as inspired storytellers who sought to advance their own beliefs about God — and not all biblical writers understood God in the same way.

The word translated as “breathed” or “inspired” could also be used to describe the wind. Imagine a ship whose sails are filled with a strong breeze. God inspires the writer, filling his or her spiritual sails with the wind of truth. The author’s own personality, background, and human limitations remain evident, because the ship remains a ship. The resulting scripture gives testimony of the author’s experience with God. That testimony can be profitable for helping others to understand their own encounters with God without claiming to be the final word about God.

Paul did not idolize the scriptures, as some biblical “inerrantists” do, but pointed to their usefulness for believers. The writings that are inspired by God — the ones we rightly call scripture — are “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (3:16b).^U

This is the great value of scripture:

not that it should be put on a pedestal as the embodied “Word of God,” for that status belongs to Christ alone, but that it should be respected and studied as a valued means of teaching and training, directing our walk with God so that “everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (3:17). In the scriptures, we meet God as revealed through the testimony of others. The scriptures serve, not as the path itself, but as an invaluable map for following the way of God.^U

Proclaim the gospel (4:1-5)

The opening verses of Paul’s closing charge to Timothy are perennially chosen for sermons or charges presented at ordination services for new ministers. Paul framed his words as a solemn exhortation “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom . . .” (4:1).

The charge began with “preach the word.” This was not a directive to preach the Bible, which did not yet exist, but to proclaim the gospel message. Paul often referred to Old Testament scriptures and would have expected Timothy to do the same in support of the gospel, but the primary “word” he was to preach was the core message of God’s saving work through Jesus Christ.

Such preaching should occur both “in season and out of season.” Whether in favorable or difficult circumstances, Timothy was to remain a faithful witness to the gospel proclamation of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

Timothy was also to defend the gospel against opponents who would defame it and misguided teachers who would distort it. When necessary, he was to correct those who

erred, reprove those who led others astray, and encourage those who were weak or confused — always “with the utmost patience in teaching” (4:2).

Many of us are quick to correct or rebuke, but not always with the adequate preparation, great patience, and careful instruction Paul called for. One cannot truly uphold gospel truths without also living a gospel-led life.

Paul apparently believed that the end was near, a time when people would “not put up with sound doctrine” (4:3a). The word “doctrine” is perhaps over-interpreted. It renders the word *didaskalos*, which means “teaching.” By extension, that could mean “doctrine,” but much of what we think of as church dogma had yet to be developed. What Paul had in mind were the core gospel teachings he had emphasized throughout the letters, not a systematic list of beliefs.

Preachers and teachers of every age have seen 2 Tim. 4:3-4 fulfilled in their own time, for there are always those who prefer their own ideas to God’s ideas, along with gullible folk eager to follow the latest religious fads. In doing so, they turn away from the gospel witness and follow “myths,” a word Paul used to describe the speculative ideas of the false teachers in Ephesus. Our generation is no different. Whether it is New Age spirituality, the prosperity gospel, or a fascination with end-times scenarios such as those reflected in the *Left Behind* series of fictional novels, forsaking the heart of the gospel for what appeals to “itching ears” is a serious error.

Timothy, however, was to avoid “itching ear disease” and continue trusting what he had been taught, keeping his head in difficult situations, proclaiming the gospel despite hardships, and fulfilling his calling to ministry (4:5). We are called to do no less.^U

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

October 23, 2016

2 Timothy 4:6-18

Finish the Race

Have you ever contemplated what it might be like to know that your death is near, but conscious enough to reflect on the life you have lived, the choices you've made, the things you have done? How do you think that might go? Would you feel satisfied with the way you have lived toward others and toward God? In a course on "The Ministry of Writing," I ask students to write their own obituary. The exercise can prove to be both challenging and soul-searching.

As Paul brought the letter of 2 Timothy to a close, he appeared to believe that his days were short. Paul wrote from prison, probably in Rome, knowing that he could be executed at any time. Evidently he hoped to live until winter, since he asked Timothy to bring his outer cloak, but Paul's instructions to Timothy were clearly colored by reflections on his own life and discipleship. ↓

Finishing the race (vv. 6-8)

"As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come," Paul said in v. 6. The imagery of a libation reflects a worship service in which drink offer-

2 Timothy 4:6 —

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

ings were poured out on the altar as a sacrifice to God (Num. 15:5, 7, 10; 28:7; Phil. 2:17). Paul may have thought metaphorically of how he had poured out his life in sacrificial service to God, or he may have pictured his own blood being poured out. Prisoners in Rome were sometimes executed by beheading, and an old church tradition claims that Paul died that way.

Paul seemed ready to die — not eager for it, but prepared, aware that he had done what he could do: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (v. 7). As in 1 Tim. 6:12, "fighting the good fight" is not about physical combat, but unswerving effort. The term typically described one's striving in athletic events such as wrestling or running. While "fight the good fight" has a nice ring, the image of pressing on through a marathon is more appropriate, for Paul added, "I have finished the race." ↓

Like a good athlete, Paul had prepared himself well, given his very best effort to the contest, and finished strong. Modern athletes, given to coach-induced hyperbole, often speak of "giving 110 percent." Paul did not claim to have given more than physically possible, but said he had given his all. He had kept the faith, living out the calling of God to him. In Phil. 3:13-14, Paul spoke of straining toward the mark as he sought to follow God's call. In 2 Timothy, he sensed that the race was nearly over. He had

kept the faith and finished well.

In Paul's day, victorious runners were rewarded with a wreath woven of branches and leaves from a plant sacred to the host city's patron god. ↓ Paul expected to receive a crown, too — not a leafy wreath, but a "crown of righteousness" to be awarded by "the Lord, the righteous judge" (v. 8). Unlike the ancient games in which only the victor received a reward, however (no silver or bronze medals), Paul said the crown of righteousness awaits "all who have longed for his appearing." The apostle did not have in mind a physical crown, of course, but the unfading prize of eternal life, available to all who trust in Christ. ↓

Needing friends (vv. 9-15)

In v. 9, Paul moved from musing about his coming death to giving practical instructions regarding Timothy's approaching visit, which he hoped would take place quickly.

What was the urgency? Perhaps Paul simply longed to see Timothy and hoped to see him soon. Perhaps he was anxious for Timothy to arrive before his execution date. More practically, since he also begged Timothy to come before winter (when travel was very limited), he was concerned about delivery of the heavy cloak he had left in Troas: he could expect little heat in a Roman cell.

A more immediate cause was isolation (v. 10). Most of Paul's friends had either deserted him or left for other ministry assignments. We don't know what caused Demas to leave. Paul called him a "fellow worker" in

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Philemon 24, but here accuses him of desertion “because he loved this world.” Perhaps Demas was afraid that he would also be in danger if he remained with Paul. Or, he may have given higher priority to family or business interests in Thessalonica.

Others had also gone, though more likely on ministry-related errands. Crescens, who had gone to Galatia, appears only in this verse. Paul had often mentioned Titus as a companion in ministry (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:6, 13-14; 8:6, 16, 23; 12:18; Gal. 2:1, 3). A letter to Titus, which purports to be from Paul, is one of the Pastoral Epistles. Titus had gone to Dalmatia, a mountainous country on the eastern shore of the Adriatic, part of present-day Croatia. Paul had preached in that region (Rom. 15:9), so Titus may have gone to visit the churches.

Paul said he had sent Tychicus — who probably delivered the letter — to Ephesus, perhaps to take Timothy’s place: 1 Tim. 1:3 says that Paul had urged him to remain in Ephesus to confront false teachers and uphold the true gospel (v. 12).^U Luke, a constant companion known from Acts, Col. 4:14, and Phil. 24, seems to have been the only friend Paul had left (v. 11).

Paul’s request that Timothy bring Mark with him is a bit surprising, because Mark and Paul had become estranged after Mark failed to finish Paul’s first missionary journey (Acts 13:13, 15:36-41). They must have been reconciled, for Paul added “he is helpful to me in my ministry.”

Paul also asked for material goods. We have previously mentioned the cloak, a winter garment he had left behind in Troas. Paul particularly asked for “my books, especially the parchments” (v. 13).

The word translated as “books” (KJV, ESV, NASB, NRSV) or “scrolls” (NIV, NJB) is *biblion*, the Greek root of the English word “bibliography” and “Bible.” The word was commonly used to describe scrolls made from long sheets of parchment or papyrus that were rolled up for storage. Perhaps Paul had copies of the Pentateuch or other Old Testament writings.

Paul expressed special interest in his “parchments.” Parchment was made of specially prepared animal skin, and was more durable than papyrus. We don’t know if all of the scrolls and parchments contained writing, or if Paul was in need of additional supplies for his ministry of writing letters to churches and individuals. The latter was something he could do even while imprisoned, but not without supplies.^U

As he urged Timothy to make preparations for his coming journey, Paul reminded him to be on guard against a particular opponent of the gospel, a coppersmith named Alexander who Paul said “did me a great deal of harm” (v. 14). We don’t know any specifics about Alexander’s identity or offense (see “The Hardest Question” online for more).

In 1 Tim. 1:20, Paul had spoken of Hymenaeus and Alexander as two men who had deserted the faith, and whom Paul had “handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.” We can only speculate whether this was the Alexander who caused Paul such harm, but Timothy would have known him, and Paul wanted the young minister to be on guard.^U

Trusting in God (vv. 16-18)

Perhaps the thought of Alexander’s opposition caused Paul to remember the opening stages of an earlier trial, when

no one came to his defense. “Everyone deserted me,” he said (v. 16a). This may refer to the events of Acts 23-24, when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem by temple authorities and quickly escorted to the governor’s palace in Caesarea Maritima to stand trial before Felix.

In either case, we have no information about who might have deserted Paul. Whether it was then or another time, Paul spoke with grace: “may it not be held against them” (v. 16b). As Jesus asked forgiveness for those who crucified him, not knowing what they were doing, so Paul asked God to forgive those who had deserted him in his hour of need.

Though human friends had left him, Paul said, “the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength” (v. 17a). God strengthened Paul, not only that he might endure personally, but that he might continue proclaiming the gospel message and encouraging others in their ministries, so that “all the Gentiles might hear it.”

What does Paul mean by “And I was delivered from the lion’s mouth”? (v. 17b). It may suggest that he was released from prison, at least for a time. Whether Paul had in mind the threat of being fed to the lions in the Coliseum, or was using the phrase as a metaphor, he had escaped some sort of danger.

Even so, his life had again come under threat. Paul did not expect God to save him from every earthly danger, but he did trust God for ultimate deliverance. “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will save me for his heavenly kingdom,” he said (v. 18). Even if Paul should fall to the executioner’s sword, he believed God would be standing by to usher him safely to an eternal home. Perhaps it was a reminder of eternity that led Paul to offer the benediction “To him be glory for ever and ever, Amen.”^U

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

October 30, 2016

Luke 19:1-10

Little Big Man

One of the more inane songs many of us learned as children was about Zacchaeus. We might not have been able to spell his name, but we could sing “Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he, he climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see ...” and so forth.

That led me, as a child, to imagine Zacchaeus as some sort of leprechaun, smaller and more odd than he really was. Zacchaeus was famously “short in stature,” but no leprechaun, and not one to be overlooked. In Jericho, Zacchaeus was a big man ... and his encounter with Jesus led to a big change in his life.

Zacchaeus (vv. 1-4)

In Luke’s version of the gospel story, chapter 19 brings to an end Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem. Like other pilgrims from Galilee, Jesus would have followed a road that wound down through the Jordan rift valley and passed through the city of Jericho, some 25 miles east of and several thousand feet lower in elevation than Jerusalem. Jericho was a verdant oasis in the midst of a hot and barren area not far from the upper end of the Dead

Luke 19:10 —

“For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

Sea. Any traveler in the region would make for Jericho to rest, restock, and replenish water supplies, so it became an important juncture on ancient trade routes.

Today Jericho is part of the occupied West Bank, a Palestinian city with limited self-government under Israeli auspices. Visitors to the city must pass through security checkpoints with armed guards. In Jesus’ day, Romans were the occupiers, and visitors were required to stop at a tollbooth. To finance their occupation and enrich the empire, the Romans exacted tolls on the transport of goods from one district to another (Matt. 9:9; Luke 5:27), and Jericho was on the border between Perea and Judea.

While soldiers may have helped with enforcement, the Romans outsourced the actual collection of taxes to local Jews, granting franchises to the highest bidders. The “chief tax collector” for a given region could then hire other agents to operate the toll stations. The Romans charged tariffs as high as 25 percent of their value on some goods, to which agents could add additional fees to profit themselves.

Can you guess who were the least popular people in town? Jews typically hated the Romans and resented their occupation, so fellow Hebrews who cooperated with the oppressors for personal gain were ostracized as despicable sellouts.

But Jesus did not snub them or steer clear. He chose a tax collector

named Matthew (whom Luke calls Levi) to be one of his disciples (Luke 5:27). He praised a penitent tax collector as a model for humble prayer (Luke 18:10-13). And, he took special interest in the diminutive but wealthy taxman who enters our story today: Jesus took the initiative in reaching out to Zacchaeus, possibly the most hated man in Jericho.

Zacchaeus’ name is derived from a Hebrew word that means “pure” or “innocent,” but his reputation was anything but. He was the last person one would expect to be looking for Jesus, but the text says he was anxious to see the famous Teacher (vv. 2-3). Zacchaeus was long on wealth, short in stature, and lost — lost in his social isolation, lost in his business dealings, lost in his sinful lifestyle. Was he looking for a way out, searching for a new life? If so, no one knew — no one but Jesus.

Try to visualize the scene. Zacchaeus wears robes that are not just stylish and colorful, but clean. His sandals are hardly worn. Chains of gold grace his neck beneath curly, well-tended hair. His stubby fingers sport expensive rings. He smells good, but no one wants to come within 10 feet of him.

News traveled fast in Jericho, even without cellular phones. Jesus was coming. He had already healed a blind beggar on the outskirts of town. Men, women, and children had come out to see him. Local citizens and traveling pilgrims were pressing against the beleaguered disciples, straining for a touch, a word, a glimpse of the man who had magic in his hands and sunlight in his words.

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Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, too, but he wasn't tall enough to peer over the crowd and he knew the people would never let him through. They might, in fact, use the opportunity to throw a few convenient elbows his way, or to trip him, or to grab the gold from around his neck. But Zacchaeus did not get rich without being resourceful: he ran ahead of the moving crowd and climbed into a roadside sycamore tree. 📖

Jesus (v. 5)

Now, look at Jesus, clad in a simple peasant's robe, covered with dust, making his way through the crowd. He walks with purpose, yet slowly enough for the people to see him, to hear him, to reach out their hands for a Hebrew high five.

Like thousands of other pilgrims from Galilee, he is traveling to Jerusalem for the Passover season. The others are going to celebrate. Jesus is going to die. The Palm Sunday road lies before him, Gethsemane is around the corner, and the shadow of a cross looms over it all.

Jesus knows this, and yet he also knows that life is lived in the present tense. He does not overlook the opportunities of today for the worry of tomorrow. On this day, Jesus sees possibility perched like a peacock in a sycamore tree. As the movable mob approached Zacchaeus, the locals may have spit in his direction, but Jesus stopped, letting the disciples trip over their own importance as the crowd swirled about him.

Jesus stopped and looked up, and that one moment was a perfect picture of what Jesus was about: countless others had looked down on Zacchaeus as a traitor who was lower than pond scum. But now Jesus, the only man

who truly had a right to sit in judgment on others, stopped and looked *up* at him. It may have been a long time since anyone had looked at Zacchaeus without anger, had looked into his eyes, had looked beyond his reputation.

When Jesus looked at Zacchaeus, he saw through the fancy robes and the glittering gold. He saw a small man with big hurts, a wealthy man who was lost in his sin, but longing for the light.

And so Jesus stood there beneath the tree and perhaps he smiled, and he called out "*Zacchaeus!*" How did Jesus know the man's name? Had someone pointed him out as a great sinner? Had he heard someone curse Zacchaeus by name? The crowd hushed and waited for Jesus to call the publican on the carpet for his many sins, but they were deeply disappointed.

In so many words, Jesus said "*Zacchaeus! Come on down from there. I need to stop by your house and stay for a while*" (v. 5).

Lost and found (vv. 6-10)

Zacchaeus was delighted to welcome Jesus into his home (v. 6), but his neighbors were less pleased. The same people who had wanted to be close to Jesus were angry that he wanted to be close to Zacchaeus. "All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner'" (v. 7).

Jesus neither slowed down nor sought to justify himself. Surrounded by the flock of Israel, he had eyes only for the lost sheep that was about to be found. We can imagine Jesus laying a hand on the little man's shoulder, chatting and laughing all the way home.

We don't know what they talked about around the table in the tax collector's sumptuous home or for how long, though Jesus' presence alone spoke

volumes. Did Jesus confront Zacchaeus with his sin, or simply listen as a broken man poured out his heart?

Whatever it was that Jesus said or didn't say, the experience set Zacchaeus free from his inner turmoil, his anger, his driving psychological need to get back at the world. Zacchaeus was changed, and he was never the same again.

Out of gratitude for the acceptance Jesus had shown him, and in testimony of a new faith that wanted to atone in some way for past wrongs, the short man stood tall and promised to give away half of what he owned to the poor. Furthermore, he said, "if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (v. 8). 📖

Noting the outward evidence of the man's inner faith, Jesus remarked "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham" (v. 9) — not just a Jew, but a person of faith. 📖 Then, to all in the house and to any nosy neighbors who might have been listening at the window, Jesus added "for the Son of Man came to seek out and to save what was lost" (v. 10).

Jesus often referred to himself as "the Son of Man" as a way of identifying with those he came to seek, including us. Marcus Borg, in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, wrote that he spent the first 40 years of his life thinking that following Jesus meant having enough faith, and sometimes that was hard. Finally, he realized that Christianity is not about faith, but about a relationship with the same Spirit that empowered Christ, the one who came to seek and save the lost.

We all have a bit of Zacchaeus in us, and know what it is like to feel lost. Do you count yourself among those whom Jesus has found? What changes have meeting Jesus prompted you to make? 📖

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RECOGNITION & REMEMBRANCE

Judy G. Allbee retires Sept. 30 as executive minister of the American Baptist Churches of Connecticut, a position she has held since 2005.

Elijah Brown is executive director of the North America Baptist Fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance. A former professor at East Texas Baptist University, he is executive vice president of the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative. **Samuel C. Tolbert Jr.**, a pastor in Louisiana, is the NABF president.

Mack Dennis is the 22nd pastor of First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C. After serving congregations in eastern North Carolina, he completed a Doctor of Theology degree and taught at Duke Divinity School.

Dough Dortch is moderator and **Shauw Chin Capps** is moderator-elect for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Dortch is pastor of Birmingham's Mountain Brook Baptist Church and Capps is executive director of Hope Haven of the Lowcountry, a children's advocacy and rape crisis center in Beaufort, S.C.

Greg Earwood retired as the first and only president of Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, a position he assumed in 2001. His leadership is being marked by the endowed office of the president in honor of Earwood and his wife, Nell.

Priscilla Eppinger is executive director of the Atlanta-based American Baptist Historical Society, coming from Graceland University Community of Christ Seminary in Lamoni, Iowa, where she was professor of religion.

Linda Jones, missions coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina, is assisting the larger global Fellowship in broadening its diversity. **Alan Williams** of Beaufort, S.C., is CBF's new U.S. disaster relief director. He is a retired emergency management and E911 systems administrator.

Joseph LaGuardia is pastor of First Baptist Church of Vero Beach, Fla., coming from the pastorate of Trinity Baptist Church in Conyers, Ga.

Griff Martin is the 24th pastor of First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas. He came from University Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, La., where he served as co-pastor.

Ed Stetzer has filled the newly-created Billy Graham Distinguished Endowed Chair for Church, Mission and Evangelism at Wheaton College, coming from LifeWay Research where he was executive director.

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On being the answer to prayer

By Ray Cowan

Prayer is vital to the Christian life. The type of prayer varies with the age of the petitioner and the occasion.

Our children learn to say simple prayers before meals and at bedtime. As they grow, they move beyond self-centered requests to include family and friends, the church and the broader community.

As one grows spiritually, private devotions become part of the Christian life, and one prays about things of close and intimate concern that are known only to the individual and to God. In public worship we acknowledge our creature-hood and dependence on God, and give thanks for God's goodness and praise for the many blessings we have received.

We also bring to God the needs and requests of the congregation and acknowledge the many prayers answered in the past. It is good to reflect on the way that God has ordered and directed our paths and answered our prayers.

It is valuable to think about how God answers prayer and — even better — to have been the answer to one's own prayer.

Have you ever been engaged in an activity of the church or in trying to exemplify the Christian life among friends and acquaintances and suddenly realized that God had used you to answer someone else's prayer? It is one of the greatest experiences in the Christian life.

So how does God answer prayer?

We read in the Bible of great physical miracles that are unparalleled in modern times. Some among us believe that the difference is due to modern Christians not having as much faith as the early ones.

Others see it not as a lack of faith, but that God has dealt with creation in different ways at different times. What was appropriate 4,000 years ago was not needed 2,000 years ago, nor was the thing needed in the first century that which is needed in the present.

During my youth I often heard this popular religious cliché: "Prayer changes things." It appeared in church bulletins, on bumper stickers and on wall plaques — the purple-flocked cardboard kind with letters that glowed in the dark. My wife's father even had those words painted on the side of his family's car.



While Christians would not openly challenge the substance of the statement, I wondered then, as many wonder now, "How does prayer change things?"

In the 1950s some people reduced it almost to the level of magic. I heard it said that if you do certain things and truly believe, God was "obligated" to grant the request.

When people tried the formula — and failed — they often received the response that "You didn't pray hard enough," or "You just didn't have enough faith."

Some people expected direct miraculous intervention by God as described in the Bible, and when it didn't occur they rejected Christian claims completely.

It is interesting and informative, however, that Luke in describing Paul's ministry at Ephesus in Acts 1:11 said: "God did extraordinary miracles by the hand of Paul." Two aspects of that statement are very important.

First, Luke described the miracles as "extraordinary." The deeds were not part of his ministry in other places.

Second, God did the miracles "by the hand of Paul." If Paul had not gone to Ephesus, the deeds would not have been performed.

God answered the prayers of those in need through a human agent. Perhaps a more accurate rephrasing of the old cliché would be, "Prayer changes people, and people change things."

This brings us to another consideration: "What does it mean to say that the church is the body of Christ?"

Paul, in 1 Cor. 12:12-26, makes extensive use of the analogy of the church to a body. There are many members, but they are to work together as one organism, not as competitors.

In verse 27 that follows he writes: "Now ye are the body of Christ, and individually members thereof. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helpers, administrators, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have all gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?"

The answer to all of these rhetorical questions is a definite "No." In Ephesians 1:22-23 and 5:30 Paul again uses this imagery to explain the place and work of the church in the world, and asserts that "we are members of his body."

The church as the body of Christ is the agent through which the needs of his people are met. One of the first acts of the early church was to create deacons to attend to the material needs of the people while the apostles devoted themselves to "prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6: 4).

James asks in 2:15-16, “If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?”

He does not suggest that the hungry will find manna from heaven on their lawns each morning, or that the meal in the jar and the cruse of oil will be miraculously replenished as it was for the widow who fed Elijah.

Therefore, the large question before us is: What is expected of us?

First, we are to pray for and cultivate sensitivity to the needs of others.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus responded to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” with a simple answer: “the one who needs a neighbor.”

There are people all around us who have needs that Christians can meet. It might be someone who has no sense of meaning or purpose in life, to whom we can give a message of life and hope.

It might be someone we meet in our business or professional activities. It might be someone in our community — perhaps next door. It might even be someone sitting next to us in church whose needs and burdens are not apparent to the casual observer.

Sometimes the need might be for something as simple as a word of encouragement for someone facing difficult circumstances.

Second, we need an effective way to move from the recognition of a need to meeting it. The New Testament gives us illustrations of how that is done in two of

the examples already cited.

In Acts 6 we have an example of a systematic organized approach to meeting the needs of people. The apostles attended to the preaching of the word, calling people to repentance and saving faith. Others took care of the sick and needy, instructed the children and new converts, and did other necessary tasks.

In the organization of our congregations we have followed that model, but need constantly to be alert to the changing needs of our community — and likewise adjusting our ministry to the needs of the 21st century.

The story of the Good Samaritan illustrates an unanticipated need and a spontaneous response. It was not the work of an organization, but that of an individual who had a love for the neighbor he didn’t even know, and an active concern for his welfare.

Every day we meet people with needs. We should be sensitive to these and alert for opportunities to be of service. As individuals or by organized effort, we cannot meet every need but that is no excuse for not doing what we can.

We should pray daily that we would be used to achieve God’s purpose, and to be the answer to the prayer of someone in need. There is no greater blessing for a Christian than to have that prayer answered. *NFJ*

—Ray Cowan, with an academic background in religion and history, taught for more than 30 years at DeKalb College, now part of Georgia State University in Atlanta.

He is a member of First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga.

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Prayer, preferential treatment and a gift from Jesus

By Ron Perritt

Many years ago an elderly woman in our church related this story: “When my son was in combat in WWII, I prayed for his safe return every day. One evening I had an insight that if we were going to win this war, some of our precious boys were going to die. That is just the way it has to be. If I ask God to protect my son and bring him home safely, am I not asking God to withhold protection for another mother’s son?”

She made me think about what “love your neighbor as yourself” meant in a way I had never considered before.

But shouldn’t we express to God those things that are on our heart? Doesn’t a loving God listen to our heart’s desires?

Since my friend shared the story about praying for her son, I have tried to understand what Jesus said about preferential treatment from God.

Two verses in particular seem to capture one of the most profound principles Jesus gave us. Matthew 5:44-45 tells us, “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

To me, Jesus is saying that we should care for others, even our enemies, because they too are important and valuable to God.

This is the point of the Book of Jonah. God sends the rain and sun to all regardless of moral condition.

I believe Jesus is saying that God values us all, in some sense, equally and thus does not give preferential treatment. For me, this means that I cannot *expect* preferential treatment from God.

I thought about that often while sitting with my dad through his struggle with cancer. Of course I prayed for his recovery. That was my heart’s desire, and I believe in a God who listens to heartfelt prayer and shares our pain.

Even though I shared with God all the reasons why my dad’s life was so important, I had decided not to *expect* God to give him preferential treatment. That’s right: I asked God to do what was on my heart, but didn’t *expect* God to do it.

I said many of the same things to my wife who listened and consoled me as best she could, but I didn’t expect her to take responsibility for Dad’s healing either. I knew what I wanted in my heart, but in my head I had concluded that it was unreasonable to ask God to do something Jesus taught us was not consistent with God’s nature.

This change in my expectations has been a wonderful gift, a freeing experience. I never have to wonder that if only I had a closer relationship with God or was

more spiritual, somehow I could be more persuasive when asking God to be more benevolent than God would otherwise be.

I never have to imagine that I need to change God’s attitude. I trust that God would be doing everything possible for me or my loved one that could be done without violating the principle of no preferential treatment.

When my dad died, I never imagined that his failure to recover was punishment from God. Likewise, if he had recovered, I would not have interpreted that as a reward for him or me. I never felt that God was indifferent. God refused to grant my request for preferential treatment because to do so would say, in effect, that God cared more for my dad than for others who were also dying, many of whom had people praying for them too.

I know that God’s spirit is always present helping all of us make the best of the situation. This is not indifference on God’s part.

Some friends harass me at this point, saying that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is filled with stories of preferential treatment by God. This is true.

Those writers saw God being involved in their lives based on their understanding of the nature and character of the God they knew at that time. I am convinced that a major part of Jesus’ mission was to refine our understanding of the true nature and character of the God he knew so well. **NFJ**

—Ron Perritt, a leader at University Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, holds advanced degrees in theology and engineering and taught the latter at Georgia Tech and Louisiana State University.



Mama kept short accounts

By Haven Parrott

When at the last the stage was all hers, Mama's flawless delivery betrayed the frequency with which she'd rehearsed the lines. Mama had come to terms with dying long before the day her deathwatch dawned.

Truth be told, she'd gotten a little anxious to get on with the gettin' on ... an understandable anxiety, I suppose, when breathing becomes as labor intensive as ditch digging and every movement requires strength you don't have and intensifies pain you can't remember living without.

And, worst of all, after a lifetime (91 years) of serving every single soul who ever came into your orbit, you can't imagine being able to muster the vigor to help anyone with anything ever again. Convinced her serving days were over, Mama was more than ready for her curtain call.

So when the gentle emergency room doctor suggested a risky surgical procedure that might possibly delay her death, Mama promptly and politely declined. The doctor nodded and explained what Mama already knew: that she'd soon die, likely within 24 hours.

Mama sighed, smiled, checked the clock (because she'd be counting down the moments like a kid counts down the days till Christmas), and said in a tone of pure delight — as if commenting on a delectable sample of pecan pie or a moving rendition of her favorite anthem — “Isn't that *wonderful!*”

Having finally been given her cue, Mama wasted no time getting the show started. Though impossibly weak, she somehow managed to fully command the makeshift center stage — a stainless steel gurney within the drape-enclosed ER cubicle.

An examination lamp served as spotlight, sparkling off the soft waves of her silvery-white crown and illuminating the

joyful luster in her watery eyes.

Then, with the humility of one who'd long understood that all is grace, and with the authority of one who'd been assured her allotment of earthbound hours was all but depleted, Mama crooked a bony index finger toward each member of her mesmerized audience, beckoning us to come close, one at a time, to receive the words she'd rehearsed.

The youngest, I stood in the shadows as one by one my three brothers took their place at her bedside and received a final blessing from the same woman who'd dispensed their first.

I couldn't make out the actual words, but the lilting timbre of her voice was intimate and timeless, the same cooing hum born deep in the soul and released through the lips of a woman-made-mama as she rocks her newborn, eyes closed tight and face nuzzled soft against the fragrant, downy head.

Though now the diminished parent lay cradled in the arms of the grown child, still — as always — it was the mother who comforted the son. And then it was my turn.

Stepping into the radiance of Mama's moment, I could barely wait to hear the speech she'd prepared just for me. I sat down on the edge of her bed. Mama cupped my face with the hands that held my world together.

She looked long and deep into my soul and, then, finally, released the waterfall of well-rehearsed words: “I love you, Haven. You are the best daughter ever in the whole wide world. You are amazing and beautiful,

gifted and bright, and oh, so, so strong. I am incredibly proud of you, honey. I've always been very proud of you. I love you so much. You can't imagine how much — and I am infinitely grateful God chose me to be your mother.”

Mama pulled me close. I buried my face in her neck and hugged her with a gentle fierceness. The room had gone quiet, save the sound of my muffled sobs.

After a few moments, I pulled away, wiped my eyes, managed something of a swagger as I crossed my arms in front of my chest and asked, “So, that's it? That's all you've got to say?”

Mama grinned, winked, pulled me close again, and together we giggled and sobbed all at once, for she knew what lay behind my mock sarcasm. It wasn't the first time I'd had the privilege of bathing in the downpour of my mama's outlandishly gracious words.

Those life-giving words she spoke at the end were nothing new — nothing she hadn't said or written to me a thousand times over. She'd hoarded no blessing for the final hour, held no compliment captive.

Mama's deathbed speech was flawless and familiar because she'd rehearsed it so many times, and I'd been at every rehearsal. She'd made sure that if death came without warning, it would never cheat her of the opportunity to bless her people with words of approval, affirmation, endearment and encouragement.

I want my mouth to be like my mama's.

“Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.” (Eph. 4:29)

—Haven Parrott is bereavement coordinator at Hospice of the Upstate in Anderson, S.C.



A very brief history of Muslims in the U.S.

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

The Islamic faith began with a perceived revelation from God to a merchant named Muhammad in western Arabia in the year 610. Other revelations followed, eventually leading to a compilation in the form of the Quran, a holy book consisting in part of Old Testament-like precepts and considered by believers to be the very words of God.

Muhammad became the founding prophet of Islam. “Muslim” emerged as a designation for adherents of the Islamic faith.

Within a few short decades Islam spread from Arabia into Africa. So rapidly did the upstart religion grow and expand that in the centuries thereafter it competed and clashed with dominant Christianity, most spectacularly in the series of bloody holy wars of the 11th through 15th centuries known as the Crusades.

In the New World, Muslims preceded Baptists, Quakers and other Christian religious dissenters. Some evidence suggests a brief Muslim presence prior to Columbus and long before the English established lasting colonies. Whether before or after Columbus, however, the New World’s earliest Muslims faced a bleak future in what would become the United States of America.

Founded in 1607 as the first permanent English settlement in the New World, Jamestown offered opportunity for agricultural riches. Tilling and tending the land, however, required enormous amounts of labor. In need of cheap workers, the colony’s elite landowners imported African slaves.

The initial “20 and odd” group of

Africans (some or most Muslims) that stepped off a boat at Jamestown, Va., in the summer of 1619 were quickly put to work in nearby tobacco fields of the Christian colony charged with “propagating the Christian Religion” to people living “in Darkness and miserable Ignorance of the true Knowledge and Worship of God.” Unable to understand English, the Africans knew only that their pale-skinned overseers were cruel people.

White, English religious dissenters faced persecution of a different kind. Whether capitalistic Anglicans to the South or theocratic Puritans northward, colonial leaders of the New World did not tolerate religious dissent. Death, banishment or imprisonment comprised the common lot of the few who dared voice unapproved religious sentiments.

In 1635 the Massachusetts Bay Colony banished Separatist Roger Williams, one of the more notorious of dissenters, for advocating “newe & dangerous opinions.” Fleeing into the wilderness, Williams purchased land from local Native Americans and established Providence Plantations (later Rhode Island) as a place of refuge for any and all religious dissenters. Converting to the Baptist faith, in 1638 he founded America’s first Baptist church, located in Providence.

The following decade Quakers arrived in the New World. Persecuted in Massachusetts, they soon found refuge in Rhode Island. Although Williams made it known that Muslims, too, were welcome, any who may have set foot in Rhode Island probably arrived as slaves, their religion beforehand suppressed by their Christian captors and/or colonial owners.

Profits from slavery helped New World colonists reconcile the institution with Christianity. Crafting a self-serving narrative of dark-skinned persons as inherently inferior to the superior white race, in the

late 1660s Virginia decreed that all enslaved persons imported into the colony, “whether Negroes, Moors [Muslims], Mollattoes or Indians ... shall be converted to the Christian faith.”

Restricting the ability of enslaved Africans to earn freedom, the colony sought the salvation of Africans’ souls by forcefully eradicating public expression of the Muslim faith.

Baptists, while persecuted throughout much of colonial America, maintained defiant demands for freedom of conscience and religious liberty for all. As did some other dissenting sects, they often voiced anti-slavery views. Quakers, however, most insistently opposed slavery.

Determined to contain religious non-conformists, theocratic colonies often wielded violent means of persecution into the Revolutionary War years. Perhaps dissenters’ dangerous but persistent commitment to religious freedom caught the attention of some Muslims.

In 1777 the Muslim country of Morocco became the first nation to recognize America as an independent nation. During the war a handful of Muslims fought on the American side, including Yusuf ben Ali and Bampett Muhamed, both of whom there is little known.

Baptists and other religious dissenters triumphed in the enactment of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1791. Providing religious liberty for all and church-state separation nationally, the First Amendment paved the way for more human liberties, including the 1807 abolishment of the importation of slaves. The legislation closed a chapter of American history that witnessed the forced migration of more than 500,000 Africans.

Meanwhile, America’s diplomatic relations with Muslim nations expanded. A 1796 treaty with the Muslim nation of



Muslim worshippers pray during Eid al-Fitr services in the Queens borough of New York. Photo courtesy of REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

Tripolitania (the Treaty of Tripoli) affirmed “the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.”

Thomas Jefferson in 1805 hosted a Muslim envoy from Tunis. A treaty in 1815 ending the Second Barbary War declared that the U.S. had no animosity toward Muslim nations.

Within the United States, Muslims comprised an estimated 20 percent of all African slaves, about one-half at least influenced by Islam in their homeland. In the antebellum South, a decided minority of African Muslim slaves successfully retained their Islamic faith and practices, while many in private observed a synergistic form of religion incorporating American Christianity, African traditions and (in some instances) Islamic influences.

Among the few openly practicing Islam was Omar Ibn Said (1770-1864), an educated slave from Futa Tooro (modern Senegal) who lived on a North Carolina plantation. He seemingly converted to Christianity in 1820, an event touted by southern Christians as evidence of the benefits of slavery. A celebrity in the white South, in an autobiography Said spoke of the importance of receiving a Bible translated in Arabic, but nonetheless did not profess faith in the Christian God.

Nearly 300 Muslims from northern states fought in the American Civil War, a war fought over slavery. The highest-ranking Muslim officer, Capt. Moses Osman, served in the 104th Illinois Infantry. Nicolas Said, a teacher from Detroit, served in the 55th Massachusetts Colored Regiment of the United States Army.

Union troops at the end of the war in April 1865 set the University of Alabama ablaze, but saved a copy of the Quran found in the university’s library, one of only a few then known to exist in America.

Perhaps the first white Muslim in America, Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb, born in New York in 1846, converted from the Presbyterian faith. Appointed U.S. Consul in the Philippines in 1887, he studied and embraced Islam. In 1893 he established a Muslim mission in New York City and represented Islam at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

Several other Muslim organizations were established in New York City in ensuing decades. In addition, Albanian Muslims opened an American mosque in 1915 in Biddeford, Maine.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the earliest large-scale wave of Muslim immigrants. Primarily from Lebanon and Greater Syria, most settled in the Midwest, far from the nation’s

population centers.

Ross, North Dakota, in 1929 became home to America’s first mosque devoted to serving a Muslim population. The isolated location reflected lingering white Christian fears of the Islamic faith.

Founded in 1934 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, America’s oldest surviving mosque became the center of a thriving Islamic community. Local Muslims established their own grocery stores and other businesses. The Muslim National Cemetery, founded in Cedar Rapids in 1948, distinctively placed all graves facing Mecca, the holiest city of Islam.

Many Muslims served in the U.S. military during World War II, including Abdullah Igram, a teacher of the Quran at the Cedar Rapids mosque. Upon enlistment, the only religious affiliation options for dog tags were (P) Protestant, (C) Catholic and (J) Jewish. Following his service, Igram successfully petitioned President Dwight D. Eisenhower to have (M) added for Muslims.

Muslim immigration increased again following World War II. Many arrived from Palestine after 1948, the year of the establishment of Israel as a nation. By the late 1950s more than a hundred mosques existed in America.

The passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, opening America’s shores more broadly to immigrants of many nationalities, triggered an even greater influx of Muslims from the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The legislation transformed the U.S. into a truly multicultural nation.

Some white American Christians, suspicious and fearful of Muslims and other non-European immigrants, still waged a post-Civil War campaign of domestic terrorism against black persons in an effort to preserve white supremacy.

Terrorism, too, arose in the Middle East. Fundamentalist, militant Islamic groups, angered at Israel’s 1967 Six-Day War victory over Egypt, Jordan and Syria, fostered regional wars and acts of terror in retaliation. Continuing to the present day and vastly greater in scope, Islamic extremists using mass violence are bent upon establishing Old Testament-like theocracies in the Middle East and portions of Asia and Africa.

Historically strained, America's public perceptions of Muslims took a turn for the worse in the deadly Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City's World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. All told, Islamic terrorists, primarily Saudis, hijacked four commercial airplanes and used them as weapons, killing more than 3,000 Americans, including Muslims. Affiliated with an extremist group known as al-Qaeda, the terrorists acted from a hatred of America's Western culture.

Since that horrific day, many Americans have come to view all Muslims as terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. The reality, however, is far different.

According to Federal Bureau of Investigation data and other studies, the vast majority of terrorist attacks in America are domestic and carried out by non-Muslims, including Christian extremists. As with Christians, most American Muslims are peaceful, law-abiding citizens opposed to terrorism and respectful of other faiths. Increasingly multicultural in their worldview, many celebrate the Christian holiday of Christmas.

Some three to five million Muslims currently live in the U.S., the largest concentrations in Illinois, Virginia, New York, New Jersey and Texas.

More educated and affluent than the general population, about 60 percent of American Muslims hold an undergraduate college degree. Collectively, American Muslims make great contributions in the fields of politics, business, science, arts, literature, entertainment, sports and religion.

About two-thirds of U.S. Muslims are African American, and one-quarter white. Ethnically, one-third are South Asian and one-fourth Arab. Approximately one-fourth converted to Islam, primarily from Protestant faiths.

The most famous American convert to the Muslim faith, Louisville native and boxing champion Muhammad Ali (formerly Cassius Clay) who passed away in June 2016, set a public example of the peaceful, generous nature of mainstream Islam.

The Islamic Society of North America is the largest Muslim organization in America, representing about 25 percent of the roughly 2,500 mosques in the U.S. The

Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy group in America, represents mainstream Islam, condemns acts of terrorism, and works in collaboration with the White House on "issues of safety and foreign policy."

From their earliest experiences as slaves in America's Christian colonies, Muslims now thrive in a pluralistic United States, appreciative of the freedoms they share with other Americans. Yet they live a guarded, scrutinized existence. Their accommodation of Western culture makes them enemies of Islamic extremists. At the same time, many non-Muslim Americans look upon all Muslims as potential terrorists.

Baptists and other religious dissenters of the colonial era persevered through violent persecution and ultimately triumphed over Christian theocracies, instilling religious liberty for all and church-state separation in America. Today's mainstream Muslim Americans, often hated by theocratic-minded Muslims and Christians alike, may well play a critical role in a future, global victory over 21st-century religious terrorism. [NFJ](#)

Pope says wine 'necessary for the celebration'

BY ROSIE SCAMMELL

Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis has upended many traditions during his extraordinary pontificate, to the point that some have wondered whether he is really Catholic.

But the pope made one thing clear: he is not a Southern Baptist.

Addressing pilgrims at his weekly public audience in St. Peter's Square in June, Francis reflected on the wedding feast of Cana during which Jesus turned water into wine, the first miracle of his public ministry.

That was a crucial symbolic action to demonstrate he was the husband of the people of God, Francis said — an episode that reflects of God's love and also shows how wine is central to marking the joy of a new marriage.

"How is it possible to celebrate the wedding and have a party if you lack what the prophets indicated was a typical element of the messianic banquet?" the pope asked.

"Water is necessary to live, but wine expresses the abundance of the feast and the joy of the celebration. And a wedding party which lacks wine — the newlyweds feel ashamed of this," the pontiff said.

Then he added: "But imagine finishing a wedding party drinking tea — it would be shameful! Wine is necessary for the celebration." The pope himself is not much of a drinker, though he enjoys a glass now and then.

But his theology of wine might not win him favor with some of his abstemious Protestant friends, such as members of the Southern Baptist Convention, which has passed more than 50 resolutions on the negative effects of alcohol.

The fast-growing Assemblies of God movement also prohibits its ministers from drinking and encourages members to abstain. The United Methodist Church, on the other hand, once required all clergy to sign an abstinence pledge, but the practice was abandoned decades ago.

For Catholics and other, more traditional churches, wine is essential to the Mass — reflecting its use in the Last Supper — and it is a long-standing part of Catholic culture in most places.

Those are likely some of the reasons that the Vatican — a city-state of just a few hundred permanent residents — has the world's highest per capita wine consumption.

According to 2014 research by the California-based Wine Institute, the amount of wine consumed in the Vatican amounts to almost 20 gallons for each resident annually. [NFJ](#)

BEING CHURCH IN CHANGING TIMES

A column provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches (chchurches.org)

Resurrecting the ‘E’ word

By Robert U. Ferguson Jr.

Evangelism — the sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ — has become a missing element in much of moderate Baptist life. For a tradition founded on the belief that each person is to have a personal experience with Jesus Christ as his or her Lord and Savior, this is incredible.

We may give lip service to evangelism, but any evangelistic emphasis seems non-existent.

Over the years church members have asked why I did not give more forceful invitations. My reply was that it was the Holy Spirit’s job to save people, not mine. Further, protracted invitations are no longer a culturally effective method of evangelism.

These members are well intentioned; they desire to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ. While they fail to comprehend that their preferred method of evangelism is no longer effective, they do understand that we are not “evangelistic” in any sense of the word.

Many moderates are uncomfortable with practices associated with evangelism, especially confrontational models. We do not like the “you will burn in hell” model, saying we opt for the relational model.

We like the idea of building relationships with others in order to enable them to come to Christ. However, the underlying reality is that we have often opted for

no model other than baptizing the children who grow up in our churches.

Since many churches accept transfer of membership without re-baptism, few adults are baptized in our churches. Our baptismal rates, including in the church I serve, are often abysmal.

Some longtime moderate friends will think I have become fundamentalist, although I have consistently emphasized the ethical/intellectual aspects of our faith for more than 25 years. Maybe this article is my mea culpa!

Our operative model of church growth depends upon other churches to be evangelistic. So how will we grow?

We believe that after persons come to faith elsewhere, they will realize our way of practicing our faith is superior. Once they are sufficiently “mature” in the faith, then they will come to us — so we will grow by transfer. Other churches are the neonatal unit; ours are the adult room.

However, transfer growth is mostly inadequate to support our churches in the future. For some reason, these believers are not finding our churches sufficiently attractive. So, we have a problem: our churches are slowly dwindling.

What are we to do? Some think that if our buildings are beautiful and inviting, and if our programming and worship are engaging, then we will win this slow battle of attrition. Are we sure?

A few years ago I engaged with Scottish

Baptists on behalf of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina. Riding the train around Scotland I decided to talk with young people regarding their faith in God. Not one told me they attended church other than for weddings and funerals.

Their reasons varied, but most indicated they found no overwhelming reason to attend. Nothing in church life or God intersected with their world in any meaningful way.

In the 10 years since I have paid attention to young adults in our communities — and am hearing many of the same responses. As an older generation dies off and our churches slowly dwindle, we begin to realize that the “under-40 crowd” no longer packs our churches.

They give many reasons, but I fear at the center is a failure to find any meaningful reason for doing so. We have lost the battle at the university and now are losing it in our homes.

If we do not make sharing of the good news in an intellectually challenging and spiritually uplifting pattern the central focus of our mission, then American Protestant Christianity will slowly follow the path of European Protestant Christianity. No, we may not die today or tomorrow — but we will surely die. **NFJ**

—Robert U. Ferguson Jr. is pastor of Emerywood Baptist Church in High Point, N.C.

He blogs at drbobseblog.blogspot.com.

Some think that if our buildings are beautiful and inviting, and if our programming and worship are engaging, then we will win this slow battle of attrition. Are we sure?

Kirby Godsey affirms mystery, relatedness in new book

A REVIEW BY JOHN D. PIERCE

To disclose a bias: I regard R. Kirby Godsey as an innovative leader and deep thinker, and seek his wise counsel at times of strategic decision making. For 27 years he led Mercer University as its president before becoming chancellor in 2006.

At his core Godsey is a philosopher with a thoughtful Christian orientation. So not surprising, his latest book, *The God Particle: God-Talk in a "Big Bang" World* (Mercer University Press), may be the most philosophical of his five published works — though each reveals that trait.

Many readers find his theoretical thinking to be insightful and helpful while others question his orthodoxy (especially if such orthodoxy is narrowly defined and defensively held).

Smaller (though not shallower) than his earlier books — *Is God a Christian?* and *When We Talk About God, Let's Be Honest* — this volume is a reworking of Godsey's Mountain Top Lectures given in 2015.

As stated in the preface, Godsey advocates for allowing scientific advances (such as discovery of the elusive particle that gives mass to all things in the universe) to inform conversations about faith — and to reshape theological presuppositions.

"Religious truth and scientific truth are ultimately coherent," Godsey writes. "... Not all revelation is past tense."

His lectures-turned-book, he affirms, is "mostly a celebration of mystery." Both cosmology and theology, he states, "begin with the siren of mystery."

Indeed, one must embrace mystery in

order to appreciate Godsey's contributions — which offer fresh ways of viewing the world (including humanity's place) rather than easy, clear, defensible answers to life's questions.

Godsey notes that most scientists are not victims of scientism and most religious persons are not victims of fundamentalism, yet there are those in both camps who "abhor uncertainty." He warns against misguided efforts that confuse the roles of science and faith.

"Confusing religious stories with science leads to bad religion and bad science," he writes. "...When faith seeks to nullify the facts, those actions are both misguided and arrogant."

Godsey emphasizes the relatedness of all that exists — offering a perspective that views God and humanity in terms of verbs rather than nouns.

"Every one of us is scientifically, ontologically and theologically related to everything else," he affirms.

As always, Godsey testifies to being a Baptist and then offers statements that cause some Baptists to question his

membership in both the denomination and the Kingdom of God. Such is the case when he addresses the resurrection — which he states cannot be established as historical fact — and other doctrines.

But Godsey's pressing concern is to note that inflexible dogma — which sees science as an enemy — is costly from the standpoint of faith. His point is exemplified in the growing number of "nones" (who claim no religious affiliation) and "dones" (who no longer hold to the religious brand of their upbringing).

"It may take 20 years to grow a Baptist

and 20 minutes to lose one to no religion at all," he writes. "It happens when a person cannot make his religion square with what else he knows."

Godsey's insights may be most helpful to those (if they are willing to hear and heed) who confuse a firm faith with a mind that is set in concrete regarding all that is true. Even if one disagrees with Godsey — as many Christians will surely do in his considerations of the existence and nature of God — his reminder (like that of St. Paul) is needed: We see through murky glass.

Godsey commends myth as a way of understanding realities. He notes that no person lives by reason alone.

"When speaking of God, myth and metaphor are the very best we can do," he writes — warning of destructive ways that often emerge when "myths harden into creeds and certainties."

Which brings Godsey back to his affirmation of relatedness.

"The more you come to know yourself, through science or religion or psychology, the more you begin to discern your essential relatedness to all beings," he writes. "Every other person is also a transcendent being to whom we are related."

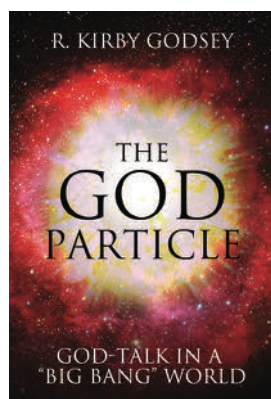
And he adds: "Both science and religion are leading us there."

Some might conclude that Godsey is a heretic. It won't be the first time.

If so, at the least he is a helpful heretic — one who reminds us to avoid setting at odds those things that aren't actually in conflict.

Godsey stands opposite from those strident voices today who create unnecessary division — even battles — over issues of scientific discoveries and religious dogma. He advocates for a less defensive position that allows for various forms of truth to inform rather than restrict each other.

His is a better way. **NFJ**



(2016, Mercer Univ. Press)

[Main character] Paul Gartin is neither the stereotypic pharisaical heavy of Hollywood movies nor the cardboard saint of conservative Christian literature.'

Novel reflects the spiritual journeys of many seekers

A REVIEW BY KEITH R. NELMS

Is James Kautz's novel, *Digger*, about your life? Probably not, unless you are a college professor and globetrotting biblical archaeologist. However, you might see your reflection in the spiritual journey of Kautz's protagonist, Paul Gartin.

The novel tells Gartin's story from his boyhood in rural Missouri to his retirement in the North Carolina mountains — where the writer now resides.

The reader has a front-row seat as Gartin struggles to reconcile the fundamentalist faith of his childhood with other scriptural perspectives he encounters through scholarship and in the sands of the Middle East.

The title's metaphor is quickly apparent as Gartin digs into his beliefs with the same inquisitiveness and integrity that guides his archaeological endeavors.

Set in the time frame of the 1950s into the 2000s, contemporary historical events serve as backdrop to Gartin's personal journey. Many themes are woven subtly throughout the narrative.

In addition to Gartin's spiritual pilgrimage, author Kautz (who has participated in many Middle Eastern digs) describes the evolution of archaeological techniques central to Gartin's professional life.

Obviously, geopolitics of the Mideast changed significantly during the years of the novel's setting and there is an inherent sadness as biblical archaeology becomes more difficult and dangerous.

Stateside, the politics of Christian fundamentalism is ever present as preachers, professors and college administrators tangle in contests of will and ideology. (Kautz, who taught at two Baptist colleges as well as the University of Tennessee, has familiarity with those matters too.)

In his writings Kautz recounts a lifetime rich in relationships. However, *Digger* is not a romance novel by any means.

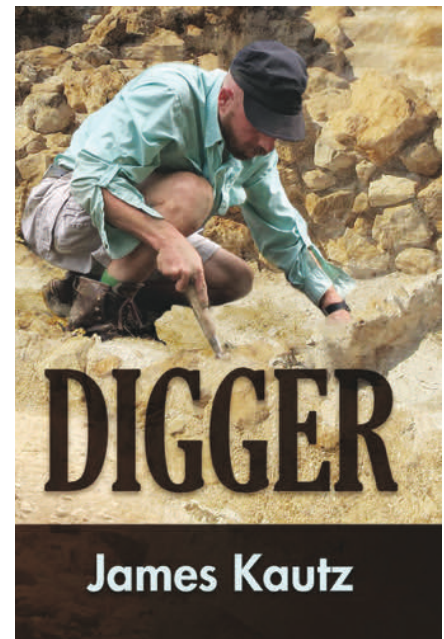
Instead, Paul Gartin experiences the same uncertainties and awkward missteps in love that most of us experience in real life — especially those who, like Gartin, spent their younger years as academic or professional vagabonds.

Early in the novel we meet the downhome, down-to-earth adults who shaped young Paul's character. Kautz also aptly describes the deepening of both personal and professional friendships over a lifetime.

In later chapters Gartin watches friends and loved ones age. As in life, the path to death is sometimes heartbreaking.

Whether by conscious design or subconscious serendipity, archaeologist Kautz's writing style in *Digger* is less lyrical than in his 2006 non-fiction work, *Footprints Across the South: Bartram's Trail Revisited*.

Digger smacks of an archaeologist observing the life of Paul Gartin and his



(2015, Create Space Independent Publishing)

friends. We are privy to Paul's thinking but, like Paul, we are left to infer the thoughts and motivation of other characters.

Throughout the novel Kautz alludes to theologians, theological movements, archaeological sites and other details without bogging down the narrative in exposition. Readers with appropriate academic background will immediately recognize the references; the rest of us might keep Google and a favorite translation of the Bible handy to chase down topics of interest.

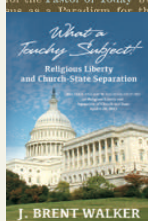
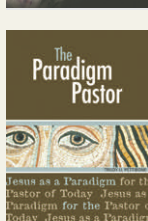
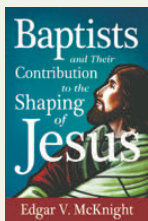
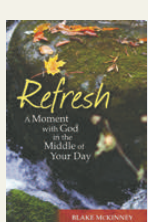
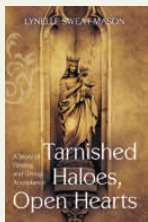
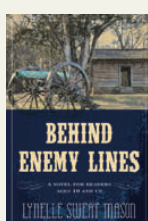
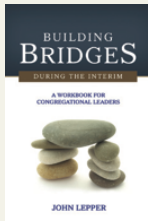
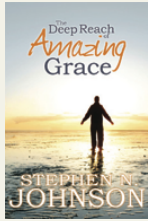
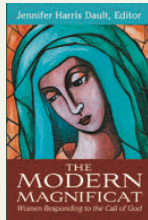
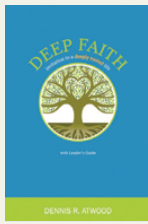
Digger is an enjoyable read. It features a refreshingly realistic portrayal of a life lived in faith.

Paul Gartin is neither the stereotypic pharisaical heavy of Hollywood movies nor the cardboard saint of conservative Christian literature. *Digger* is the story of a man who already "knows Jesus" and is now seeking truth.

If his quest echoes yours, then *Digger* may well be a novel about your life. **NFJ**

—Keith R. Nelms of Tallulah Falls, Ga.,
is professor of information systems at
Piedmont College.

Lots of great books



DEEP FAITH

Dennis Atwood introduces ordinary Christians to the core issues vital to personal and corporate spiritual formation and a more intentional and deeper faith.

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Lynn Brinkley addresses the issues of preaching and hosting etiquette in a manual written for current and future ministers and for teachers and churches.

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Claude Bryan tells the story of a university professor who returns to his rural hometown to deal with internal demons and external injustice.

THE MODERN MAGNIFICAT

Jennifer Harris Dault shares the stories and struggles of 23 women who heard God's call to ministry.

THE DEEP REACH OF AMAZING GRACE

Steve Johnson urges fellow "ragamuffins" needing "a handout of amazing grace" to explore the profound richness of God's outlandish grace.

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Walker L. Knight shares in his autobiography a message of missions ministry that focused on grace, compassion, inclusion and reconciliation during his five decades as a religious journalist.

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Lynelle Mason crafts a young reader's historically accurate story, from a 12-year-old's viewpoint, of how the Civil War came to Chattanooga and North Georgia.

TARNISHED HALOES, OPEN HEARTS

Lynelle Mason forthrightly tells a story of giving and finding acceptance in people and places behind the common masks of fragile humanity.

REFRESH

Blake McKinney believes that God intends for our faith to intersect with our everyday life, so offers devotional readings to help facilitate that contact.

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Bert Montgomery shares stories from friends, neighbors, and classmates in and around New Orleans based on their journey through the storm Katrina and into interconnected wholeness.

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CHRISTMAS: THEN AND NOW

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Michael Ruffin shares his daily offerings to God to enlarge on the sense of Christian community found in the commonality of human experience.

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Charles Taylor explores how the early Christians dealt with their challenges and how the gospel message overcame all obstacles and moved on unhindered.

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REMEMBERING MISS ADDIE

Lamar Wadsworth makes fiction come alive through the story of a young female pastor and her older female mentor.

COME IN THE HOUSE

Howard Williams shares remembrances from simpler times that remind us to celebrate the little things in life and to love one another while doing so.

WOMEN I CAN'T FORGET

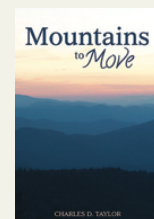
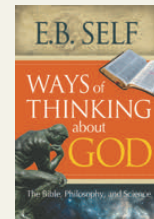
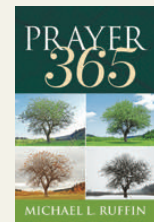
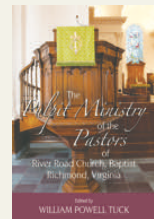
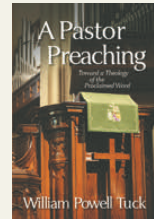
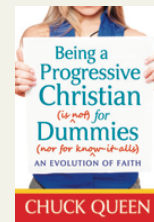
Winnie Williams describes the beauty of people and places she has seen around the world and examines the role of hope in fulfilling dreams that can lead to change for the better, especially for women.

THE GREATER GIFT

Jennifer Wylie introduces her personal story of servant leadership by saying, "Our lives are like bridges, and, when we share them and the things that God has taught us through them, we are like bridge builders."

THE LIGHTER SIDE

Brett Younger brings humor to the ordinary, and meaning to the mundane in this delightful collection.



HORTON HEARS A WHO

and Jesus does too

By Gary Furr

After hearing someone tell of using children's books in sermons, I decided to give it a try for the summer. I started with *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst, and then *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein.

During the children's time I'd read or summarize the book. Then the sermon would pick up one of the main points and connect it to the scripture text.

One sermon came from Dr. Seuss' *Horton Hears a Who* — which could easily yield five sermons. A delight of this exercise is to find how many powerful truths are embedded in simple stories.

There are terrific online resources such as the University of Washington Center for Philosophy for Children and a site called Teaching Children Philosophy, the work of Professor Thomas E. Wartenberg and his students from Mount Holyoke College.

Both sites include summaries and discussion guides for parents and teachers to use literature to develop moral and philosophical thinking. As a pastor I am interested in good theology, but a philosophy conversation partner is a helpful overlap.

I also found the New York Public

Library list of the 100 most-read (i.e., checked-out) books of the past century to be useful. These three sites give ample guidance to find worthy books with great themes.

Ministers before me have preached on *Horton*. It lends itself to the gospel and biblical themes such as perceiving beyond what we already know, being present and paying attention, valuing the smallest of God's creatures, and personhood.

I wrote the sermon in a Dr. Seuss-like voice, though it occurred to me that "this might totally flop." It didn't; people loved it. Of course, being only 10 minutes long helped.

The interesting aspect of writing "like Seuss" is the simplicity and childish playfulness. You can make up a silly word to get a rhyme; have fun with it.

That's not a bad way to see good preaching — capturing the heart and mind in the first sentence and keeping them all the way to the closing prayer. The point comes across in a disarming way. And they listen.

I took the text from Luke, moving from chapter 14 to 15. What caught my attention

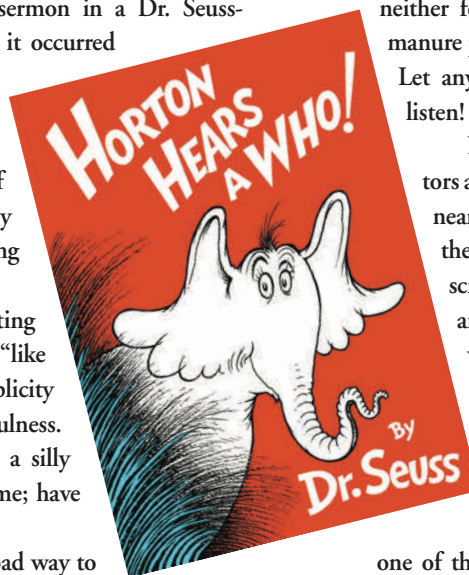
was Jesus' admonition to his hearers to "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Then, in Luke 15, I was drawn to the contrast between "the tax collectors and sinners coming near to listen to him" and the Pharisees and scribes "grumbling." Their hearing was blocked and their eyes unable to take in the joy of what they saw.

Here, then, is what came out:

Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen! (Luke 14:34)

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'" (Luke 15:1-6)



As a pastor I am interested in good theology, but a philosophy conversation partner is a helpful overlap.

THE SERMON

What if Dr. Seuss could give my sermon today? It might sound like this:

In the grand universe, on this ball we call earth,
'Twas a small speck of dust, some would say of no worth
An obscure little dot on the Milky Way's fringe
In a cosmos so big it can leave you unhinged

Some don't believe that God really is
And that humans are only a chemical fizz
But into that world came the man Jesus Christ
Making loaves and fishes multiply out of sight

Lots of people were listening and heard Jesus say,
"I have come now among you to love and to save,"
And the Negabob Naysayers and all their friends
Said, "No, there's only the way it has been"

There are good ones and bad ones and you must ask us
Who is God's favorite and who are the just?
For the Negabob Naysayers were in charge of stuff
and decided that God's heart was not big enough.

They got mad at Jesus, he talked kind of crazy
He listened to people they thought were all lazy,
Didn't do doodly squat when it came to the Law
They were nothings and no one cared about them at all

But Jesus was calm, and he taught them a lesson
How to open their ears and learn how to listen
Not unlike old Horton, they started to hear
Past all their habits and troublesome fears

The Negabob Naysayers only got madder
So they went to the governor Pilate to chatter
And said Jesus finally had gone too far
If Pilate was smart, he would start up a war

The Negabob Naysayers thought they loved God
They just hated his people that they thought were odd
But Jesus just loved and invited them in
The ones who were lepers and the ones who had sinned;

The ones who were traitors and those who did wrong
Some lived in graveyards and howled all night long;
Others were lost in the crowds around him
But he still could feel them touch his garment's hem

The crowd would be roaring, no one could hear,
When one called out to him, he said, "Please, come near."
Sick ones and sad ones and some with bad pasts
All of them offered new beginnings at last.

They laughed and they cried, it was too good to be true,
He said, "Don't be worried, God still cares for you."
You may think you don't matter at all,
but to God, a person's a person, no matter how small.

The Negabob Naysayers told some big fibs,
About things that he said and things that he did,
So they tried to stop him with a terrible cross
And even his followers thought all was lost.

But God played a wonderful joke the third day,
He turned all the tables in a most funny way
What seemed the end was beginning again
A tomb with no body, and alive to his friends,

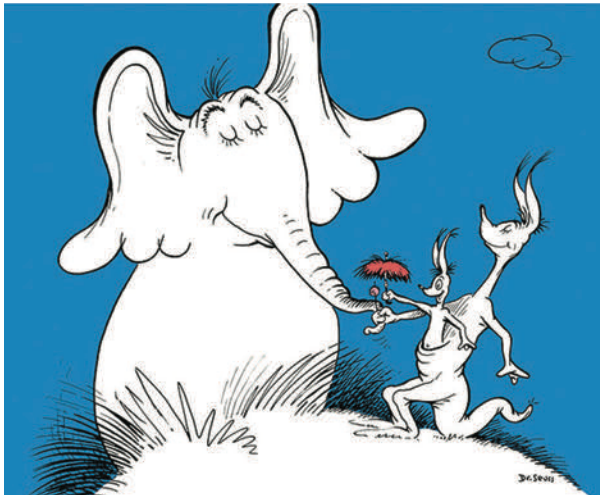
They didn't believe Mary when she came to say,
"He's alive, he's alive, I just saw him today."
The words he had told them, and the way that he lived
Must be the right ones to follow and give

And he gave us a life and a way to go round
To find what is lost that waits to be found
And so now, he gives us his eyes to see,
And his ears to listen to life carefully,

Just like Jesus, we hear through the noise
hearts of dads and mothers and little girls and boys,
people who nobody listens to anymore,
hear them longing for God's happy forevermore

Big ones and small ones and rich ones and poor
People with mansions and those with dirt floors,
We hear tiny voices forgotten by all,
'Cause a person's a person, no matter how small.

Oh, the world that we live in still clatters and clangs
There are still kangaroos and the Wickersham gangs,
Their ears so stopped up they don't believe me or you
So afraid they would boil us in Beezlenut stew.



The Negabob Naysayers tweet, shout and moan
About good ones and bad ones and that we're all alone
They would have us, to hear it, give up on love
Stop loving Jesus who's weak as a dove

But I always remember when I get afraid
That when things look their worst, just to wait a few days
For you never know if you have ears to listen
Just what might happen to that one or this'n

God loves us all, but God doesn't shout,
God whispers and sings and spreads his love out.
So all that he asks is that we quiet down
Stop all the screaming and knocking around

Even if the Negabobs don't believe us
We refuse to let negabobbing stop and deceive us
The whispers of God's love are right over there
In us and with us and here everywhere

God loves the creation and flowers and trees
And animals and even loves you and me.
So when people are hurting, and you know they do,
Don't get all huffy, just stay calm and true

They cry out sometimes out of pure pain
Afraid of the world and of you and the rain
Not sure you can hear them or that you care
Wondering if God really is there.

Be just like Jesus, and listen real clear
Don't listen to terror or sadness or fear,
Don't write off each other like old Negabobs
Don't give up on failures and mad ones and slobs.

Jesus can clean out the wax from their ears
Open their eyes and dry up their tears.
Even the Negabob Naysayers still have a chance
If they'll give up naysaying and join in the dance.

So if you're not too sure that you matter to God
That you're not important or that you are odd,
Remember that Jesus came to this speck of dust
To seek and to save him and her, you, and us.

O God, whose eye sees all things, knows all of us, loves beyond our knowing, open our hearts, clean out our ears, make us think right, forgive us where we fail, that we might strive again to hear the whispers of love and life you offer us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

—Gary Furr, pastor of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church in
Birmingham, Ala., blogs at garyfurr.me.

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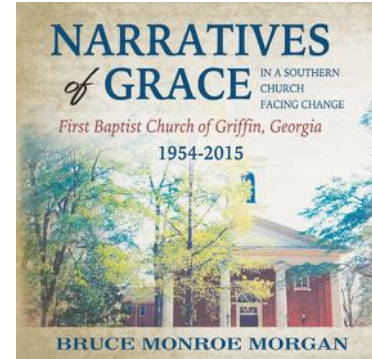
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—Dr. William L. Hardee, Pastor
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James Buchanan (1857-1861)

By Bruce Gourley

The fifth president in succession to be born in a log cabin, James Buchanan was the first and only from Pennsylvania. Far more cosmopolitan was the nation's first capital of Philadelphia than the small village of Cove Gap in 1791, the place of Buchanan's birth.

James Buchanan Sr., an Irish-born entrepreneurial farmer and businessman, in 1797 moved with his wife and 11 children to the nearby town of Mercersburg. There young James attended a village academy, afterward studying law and attaining the bar in Lancaster.

Raised under Scotch-Irish Presbyterian influences and attending but declining to join the local church, the young Buchanan believed in God but showed little to no inclination toward personal religious faith. His father, perhaps sensing his son's religious ambivalence, in 1810 warned the young man that "without religion all other things are as trifles, and will soon pass away."

Nine years later a young woman Buchanan loved, Ann Coleman, passed away. He wrote a note to Ann's father, hoping that "Heaven would enable you to bear the shock with the fortitude of a Christian." Destined to be the only president who never married, Buchanan prayed that God would not allow him to forget his memories of Ann.

Serving in the War of 1812 as a private, Buchanan in 1814 launched his political career in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives as a Federalist, an advocate of a strong national government. Elected to the United States Congress in 1821, he served there for 10 years.

During this time the Federalist Party

faded into obscurity, its former members becoming either Democrats or Whigs, Buchanan joining the former.

In 1832 President Andrew Jackson, a Democrat, appointed Buchanan as minister to Russia. Shortly after his arrival on the field he lamented that "the higher classes among the Russians in St. Petersburg have, I fear, but little religion."

He visited a number of Russian churches, marveling at their architecture. In one instance he noted that his "old Presbyterian notions" prevented him from attending "a theatrical entertainment."

Two years later his fellow Pennsylvanians elected Buchanan to fill a United States Senate vacancy, a seat he held through the next two elections.

A close brush with death during his senatorial career led Buchanan to reflect upon religion. "I am a believer; but not with that degree of firmness of faith calculated to exercise a controlling influence over my conduct," he wrote in a letter to his brother Edward.

Noting the pervasiveness of unbelief in his life, Buchanan voiced hope that "the Almighty Father, through the merits and atonement of his Son, will yet vouchsafe to me a clearer and stronger faith than I possess."

A supporter of the First Amendment, Senator Buchanan affirmed "the right of every citizen to worship his God according to the dictates of his conscience." In another

instance he succinctly declared, "I have always opposed a union between church and state."

In 1845 Buchanan resigned from the Senate to accept an appointment as secretary of state in the James K. Polk administration. In this capacity Buchanan played a lead role in negotiating the 1846 Oregon Treaty, establishing the 49th parallel as the United States' northern boundary west of the Rocky Mountains.

Upon the completion of his cabinet position in 1849, four years passed until his next appointment, that of minister to the United Kingdom from 1853 to 1856 under President Franklin Pierce. During this time the sectional debate over the prospects of slavery in the western United States grew bitter and violent.

Although a northerner, Buchanan believed the Constitution protected slavery. He also defended slavery as biblical and "sanctioned by religion." On the other hand, he affirmed the right of Quakers and others to petition Congress for the abolition of slavery.

Pierce failed to broker a middle ground on slavery, leading Democrats to turn to Buchanan as their 1856 presidential candidate. Defeating candidates from the briefly-lived American Party and newly-formed Republican Party, Buchanan, the 15th American president, declared "The object of my administration will be to destroy sectional party, North or South, and to restore harmony to the Union under a national and conservative government."

Like Pierce, Buchanan quickly learned that national harmony, or even the semblance thereof, was no longer possible.



This is the 15th in a series of articles by historian Bruce Gourley on the religious faith of U.S. presidents. Gourley is online editor and contributing writer for Nurturing Faith Journal and executive director of the Baptist History & Heritage Society.

Shortly after Buchanan took office, the U.S. Supreme Court in March 1857 in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* invalidated the 1820 Missouri Compromise prohibiting slavery in the Northwest, and declared that persons of African descent, whether free or slave, could not be citizens of the United States. The ruling outraged many Northerners and brought the nation closer to civil war.

In addition, Buchanan sided with pro-slavery forces in advocating for the admission of Kansas as a slave state. Combined with questionable tactics, the president's position largely split the Democratic Party north and south. Buchanan lost the political battle over Kansas to a Democratic faction led by Illinois senator Stephen Douglas.

Concurrently, a financial panic in 1857 hurt Buchanan's public image. The same year a long-running conflict with Utah's Mormons over control of the territory spilled into open conflict between federal and Mormon military forces. Buchanan resolved the dispute in favor of the government, but the episode further damaged

his reputation.

Yet worse, Democratic divisions opened the way for Republican gains in the 1858 elections. Afterward, an 1860 investigation into Buchanan's activities in the Kansas conflict found the president guilty of attempted bribery and extortion in exchange for votes. The charges, however, proved insufficient for impeachment, and Buchanan declared himself victorious. Even so, his public image plummeted yet again.

Buchanan spoke little of religion during his tumultuous presidency, but declared to a visiting Presbyterian minister, "I hope I am a Christian." When asked to join the Presbyterian church, he refused.

Having promised to serve only one term, Buchanan watched as the Democratic Party splintered haplessly in 1860 over the issue of slavery, paving the way for the election of anti-slavery Abraham Lincoln of the ascendant Republican Party.

Deep South states seceded from the Union, beginning with South Carolina on Dec. 20, 1860 and collectively forming the

Confederate States of America in February 1861 in order to preserve in perpetuity domestic, African slavery.

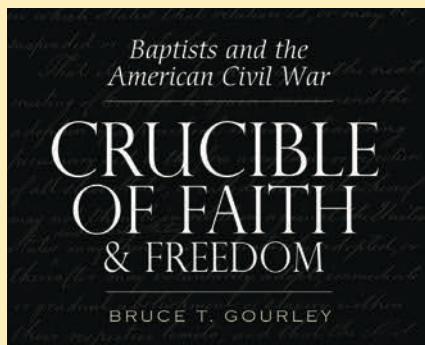
Upon Buchanan's departure from the presidency in March 1861, the United States lay in ruins. The treasonous but jubilant southern Confederacy controlled most federal military arsenals and forts in their territory. Civil war loomed.

Upon the outbreak of war in April 1861, Buchanan from his home in Lancaster, Penn., wholeheartedly supported the Confederacy. Considered by many in the North as a traitor, he received a deluge of threatening letters from citizens outraged over "Buchanan's War."

In 1865 and nearing death, Buchanan finally joined the First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster. Controversial to the end, Buchanan passed away from complications of a cold in June 1868 at the age of 77.

His last words were, "O Lord, God Almighty, as Thou wilt." In his will James Buchanan, long religiously ambivalent, left a bequest for his church. [NFJ](#)

Good reading *for fall*

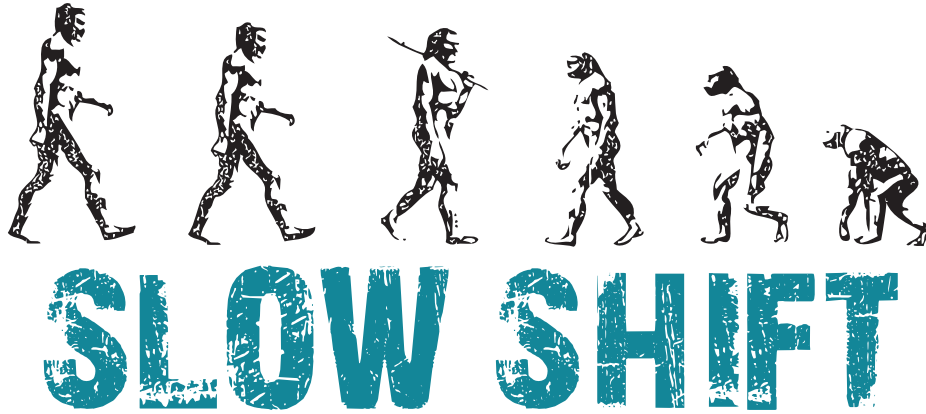


The 150th anniversary of the American Civil War provides a grand opportunity to consider precisely what Baptists — North and South — were saying from their pulpits, in the press, and through official resolutions from that time. Bruce Gourley brings such perspectives to life by making good use of careful and significant research, creatively taking a chronological approach using primary sources.

He highlights the role of various kinds of Baptists, for example: Robert Smalls, Thomas Hill Watts, Basil Manly Sr., Gov. Joseph Brown, Gov. Sam Houston, Isaac Taylor Tichenor, Crawford H. Toy, and Frank and Jesse James — most of whom went on to great prominence in politics, religion or education.

Gourley's firsthand accounts of how Baptists on both sides sought and claimed divine favor and righteousness provide lessons as plentiful as the statues and markers that dot the many battlefields where the devastation has given way to peaceful fields and quiet woodlands.

nurturingfaith.net



Why some evangelicals changed their minds about evolution

BY CATHY LYNN GROSSMAN

Religion News Service

The Ark Encounter, a literal vision of Noah’s story in Genesis, opened this summer as a theology-packed tourist attraction in Williamstown, Ky. Yet, near the same time, another group of evangelicals was making a very different case — minus any animatronic critters — in the new book, *How I Changed My Mind About Evolution*.

It promotes the idea that one can be serious about Christian faith and still accept a scientific account of human origins.

BioLogos, the organization of pro-evolution Christians in the sciences founded by famed geneticist Francis Collins, teamed with InterVarsity Press to publish a collection of 25 personal essays from clergy, scholars and scientists.

Astrophysicist Deborah Haarsma, president of BioLogos, said the goal of the book was “just to tell stories. Storytelling has a power. It engages heart and soul as well as the mind.”

One of those stories is her slow, thoughtful shift from the teachings of her childhood church that God created the world, microbes to mankind’s Adam to Eve, less than 10,000 years ago.

But Haarsma, like most of the essay writers, is neither an atheist acolyte of godless science nor a “young-Earth creationist” like backers of the Ark Encounter or its sister attraction, the Creation Museum.

The more science she studied,

Haarsma wrote, the more she was driven back into her Bible, asking herself, “What was Genesis really teaching?”

Her childhood church “never taught me the cultural context of the Bible and how the Hebrews navigated the ancient Near Eastern world,” she said.

She treasures Genesis, she said, because she reads in it the message that “God is continually sustaining the universe he created with intention and for a purpose.” Science, she wrote, doesn’t replace God; “it gives us a human description of *how* God is creating and sustaining.”

However, BioLogos is not relying only on the book to get its message out. This fall the organization will send scientists and theologians on the road to speak to churches, seminaries and universities.

Many surveys, such as a Pew Research study released in 2015, show a typical three-way split among U.S. adults:

- 34 percent reject evolution, saying humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time.
- 33 percent say all living things evolved solely due to natural processes.
- 25 percent say evolution was guided by a supreme being.

However, a study commissioned by BioLogos, the National Study of Religion & Human Origins, found there are more openings to change minds than many realize.

Sociologist Jonathan P. Hill of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., found the

same three major groupings:

- “Creationists,” who often said accepting scientific evolution would have “dire religious consequences”
- “Atheistic evolution” supporters, who take an anti-religious stand for facts, including the scientific view of evolution, as “superior to superstition and irrational beliefs”
- “Theistic evolution” followers, such as Haarsma, who do not see contradictions in the lessons of Genesis and Darwin.

However, Hill’s major finding — one that explains the target audience of the new book — was that in open-ended questions “well over half the population are at least somewhat uncertain about what they believe.”

They could not articulate their basic views on human origins, they held beliefs that didn’t fit the usual categories, or the whole question of human origins wasn’t particularly important to them, Hill wrote.

That question is very important to megachurch pastor and author John Ortberg of Menlo Church outside San Francisco, who adapted a sermon for this book. Like Haarsma, he moved inch by inch over time from a childhood that didn’t emphasize science to learning more about “the nature of Genesis and the questions it tried to answer in its time.”

He came to see that the Bible is “written *for* us but not *to* us. The more we are able to see the Bible through ancient eyes, the more we are able to see science through contemporary eyes,” said Ortberg. [NFJ](#)

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*"Paul Wallace is an
astrophysicist who writes
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Questions Christians ask scientists

How were you able to study science in school and allow room for your faith to grow?

— Joshua Riley, Cleveland, Ohio

My first sense of a conflict between faith and science occurred as a 9-year-old. It didn't start in school or at church. It started at home.

I know my age because it happened on Nov. 7, 1977, the date on a particular *Time* magazine. It was when, for me, evolution got personal.

The magazine appeared in our mailbox and ended up in my hands. On the cover was a fellow named Richard Leakey, kneeling beside what was to me a hideous-looking creature.

It was apelike but also vaguely human in appearance. It had a giant head, broad high cheekbones, strangely long arms, and small dark beady eyes looking straight at the camera.

It was a model of *Homo habilis*, a species that lived in East Africa several million years ago. Above the image were the words, "How Man Became Man."

It didn't take me long to figure out what Mr. Leakey and *Time* were telling me: This brute was my ancestor.

Today the connection between *Homo habilis* and *Homo sapiens* is contested, but the scientific details hardly matter. What matters is that I was horrified by the thought of my family and friends and me being related to any such creature.

It bothered me that Mr. Leakey seemed to be OK with this. He seemed like a nice man. It seemed wrong, and made me sad. *Homo habilis* hurt my feelings.

The problem got theological when, a year or so later, Dad showed me a timeline in a natural history book that presented, in great detail, the 3.5-billion-year story of life on earth. Single-celled life, ancient plants, trilobites, dinosaurs and lots of other extinct oddities showed up in the timeline — but nowhere could I find Adam and Eve.

Meanwhile, the Bible I carried to church every week was silent on trilobites

Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to editor@nurturingfaith.net.

BY PAUL WALLACE



and *T. rex*. The situation was acute.

Several months before meeting *Homo habilis* and in the language of the moment, I had accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior. I was a newly baptized Christian, still wet behind the ears, and the cosmos was shaking me up already.

During my high school years faith and science lived in uneasy tension inside of me. I couldn't really see how the two fit together, but I never seriously questioned science.

Science was always delivered to me — by my dad, who was a scientist, and by my teachers — in such a calm, direct way that it never once struck me as unbelievable. It was always religion, which seemed so emotionally driven, that lost ground.

And by the time I reached college and began studying physics my faith had simply faded away. I wasn't angry; Christianity just seemed, on balance, unlikely and insufficient and irrational in the light of the cosmos I was learning about. So I just dropped it.

But later I picked it up again, and I didn't have to drop science in order to do so.

In fact, I returned to faith while I was working on my Ph.D. in physics and there

was never a question of compromising science. I just began to understand religion, faith and the Bible differently.

If I had to choose a single word to describe this change, it would be *enlargement*.

The rather conventional Protestantism with which I grew up, like so many local expressions of faith, was pretty limited from an intellectual point of view. Historically, culturally and theologically, my church upbringing was narrow. This is not a criticism but an observation.

I loved the church of my youth and was truly loved by people there. But as I entered adulthood I needed something more; I needed a larger faith.

Over time I got it. I can't say how exactly, but my years in a Catholic high school might have laid some of the groundwork.

I began to see Christianity as a far larger and more complex and diverse and *interesting* tradition than I had ever known. In particular, I saw beyond the clichés about the conflict between science and religion and with God's help began to rebuild a faith that works.

My change in perspective can be explained in terms of two simple Venn

diagrams. In my earlier view, Christianity and science basically stood apart from one another and had equal standing, as in the first diagram.

The point is that, while I was in high school and college, I viewed Christianity and science as *competing* ways of knowing. In my mind, each had no real need of the other and it was not possible to stand in any place that was covered by both.

It was one or the other, either/or. So there was conflict.

In my current view, Christianity and science are not opposed. I see science as contained within Christianity, as in the second diagram.

Conflict arises only when you remove science from its context and try to set it up as its own independent worldview. Science is not sufficient to stand on its own in this way.

There are too many normal human questions — about meaning, value and purpose — that science simply does not address. The facts and theories of science need a context, and for me Christianity provides that context.

However, my faith needed to be enlarged for this to occur. It had to grow in order to contain science. That's what happened as I entered adulthood.

You ask: *How* did I leave room for my faith to grow? How did I get to where my faith could grow large enough to encompass

science and the cosmos it has shown us?

My answer, and it may seem paradoxical, is: I dropped it. I let my faith go.

Let's rewind to my later high school years. That was when I began to sense my faith constricting around me. It did not help with questions I had about life, including scientific questions, because its answers suddenly seemed small and irrational and beside the point.

believe. I felt disconnected from the faith that at one time comforted, inspired and challenged me.

But what I felt wasn't my faith constricting; it was my growing. I was leaving behind a faith that no longer worked. It was starting to pinch and chafe and to do little else.

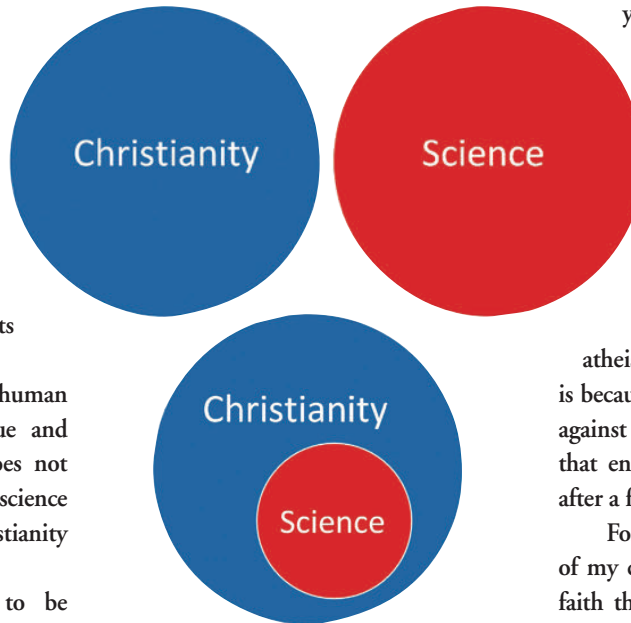
So, within a few months, after moving away from home for the first time, I no longer went to church, no longer prayed, and simply dropped the tradition of my youth. Why should I keep holding onto something that served no good purpose?

The language is important: I didn't push my faith away. I just let it go because it did not seem to square with what I was learning about the world, including science.

I never became an atheist, militant or otherwise. I suppose it is because my mind and heart never turned against God in any rigid or absolute way that enabled me to return to Christianity after a few years away.

For me it was essential to let the beliefs of my childhood go in order to discover a faith that worked in adult life and in the world of science.

Once this happened, my faith began to expand, and today it is roomy enough for science, trilobites, *T. rex*, *Homo habilis*, and the whole wild and woolly cosmos we call home. *NFJ*

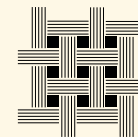


As a senior I played the role of pastor on Youth Sunday. I don't recall what I said from the pulpit but remember the uncomfortable feeling of selling something I didn't

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