

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2017

# NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

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invitation to the  
'divine  
dance'*

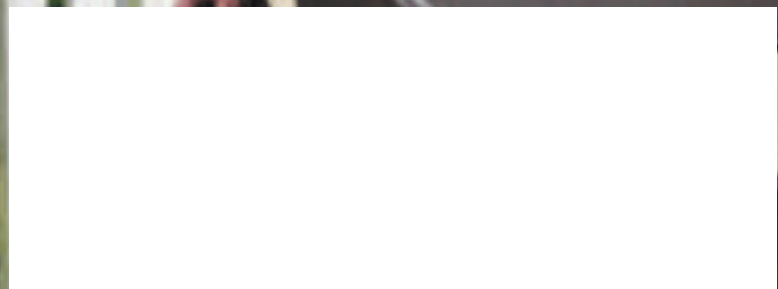
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## Religion in Colonial America

- > *Jamestown reveals  
America's roots*
- > *John Leland's belated  
visit, timely sermon*

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OF 'THRONES'

PUSHING THE  
CONGREGATIONAL  
RESET BUTTON



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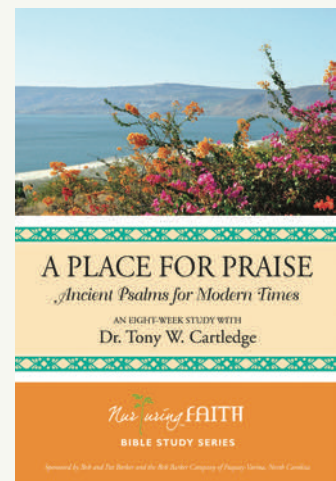
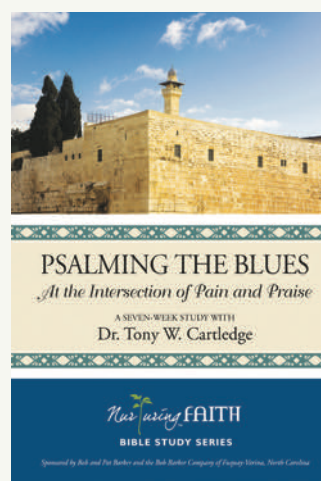
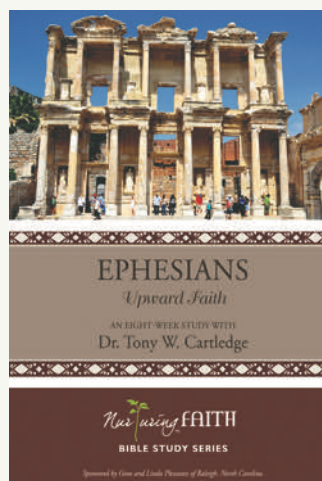
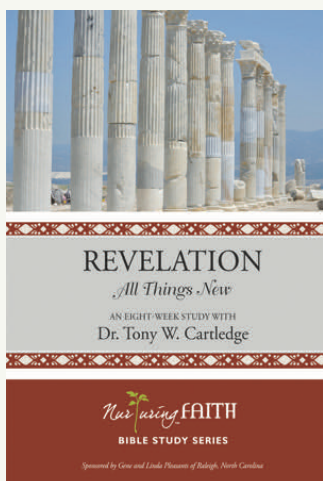


*Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge are scholarly, yet applicable, and conveniently placed in the center of this journal. Simply provide a copy of the journal to each class participant, and take advantage of the abundant online teaching materials at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net).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

*See page 21 for more information.*

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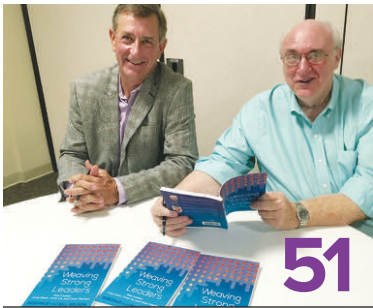
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 say authors

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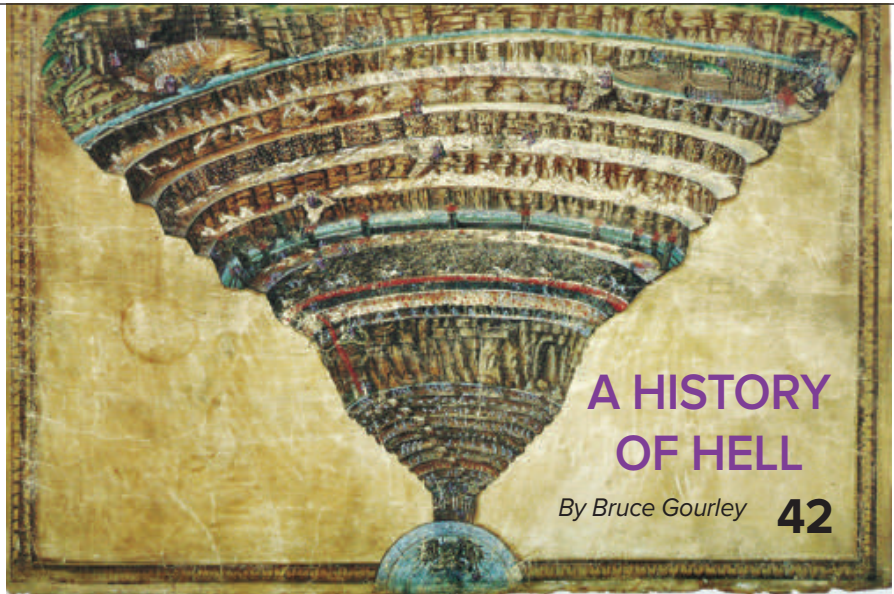
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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. Colonial Williamsburg and nearby Jamestown offer insights into the emergence of a new nation when government and religion were entwined. Stories begin on page 4.

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# Discovering Jamestown

*First English settlement reveals America's roots*



JAMESTOWN, Va. — “Even if you just got here today, all Americans are from Jamestown.”

Those were opening words historian Mark Summers offered to Nurturing Faith Experience participants who took a step back in history by visiting Colonial Williamsburg and this earlier site of Jamestown.

Established in 1607, Jamestown was the first permanent English colony in America.

“The United States was settled before it was founded,” added Summers, an education specialist with Jamestown Rediscovery. And that first English settlement — begun as a three-sided fortification built by the 104 men and boys who arrived on three ships commanded by Capt. Christopher Newport — rose on Virginia land along a wide river, all named for the British king.

Jamestown barely survived — facing devastating disease, conflict and division. This early slice of American history has been described as years of hope, adventure, discovery, struggle, suffering, growth and more.

Despite many and grave challenges, better times followed and a new nation came to life.



## RELIGIOUS LIFE

The treasured principle of separation of church and state as a way of guaranteeing religious liberty for all would grow out of the American experience well after the settlement of Jamestown — where the Church of England and the controlling political force were inseparable.

The church's influence is indisputable, and still highly visible. Yet what was long regarded as the site of the first enduring church in English America — where a remaining structure with an earlier tower

stands today — turned out to be the congregation's second location.

Archaeological efforts in 2010-2011 revealed evidence of a timber-framed structure identified as a church erected early in 1608. Among other historical significances, it was the place where English settler John Rolfe and Pocahontas, daughter of the Powhatan Indian chief, were married in 1614.

Jamestown was a groundbreaking experience for the new nation coming into being. Before the *Mayflower* landed to the north, church and state were established in Jamestown. The ensuing political/religious disputes begun there would shape the formation of this country, said Summers.

“There's a reason not to have an established church,” he opined. “It changes depending on who is in charge.”

## NEW DISCOVERY

The recently discovered site of the church built in 1608 was layered with information and intrigue. The structure, evidence showed, was erected of large timbers — and spanned a space of approximately 24 x 60 feet, with a tall roof.

“This is holy ground,” said Summers, standing within the newly-erected posts that mark the early place of worship.

The church chancel held four graves — now marked by simple crosses — archaeologists discovered. With the help of a team from the Smithsonian Institution, they used forensics and archival information to identify the four men given such prominence.

Robert Hunt was an Anglican chaplain who was the settlement's first spiritual leader. He served briefly, dying just one year after arriving with the earliest settlers.

Sir Ferdinando Wainman was a military leader. Like Hunt, he died in his 30s after a brief time at the fort. One of Wainman's relatives, Capt. William West, who was killed battling native warriors, was the last of the chancel interments.

Captain Gabriel Archer, one of Jamestown's early leaders, also was entombed in the chancel. Interestingly, his burial showed evidence of Catholic rather than Anglican practices — leading some archaeologists to believe he was likely “a secret Catholic” within the Church of England community.

More on this recent archaeological work may be found in *Holy Ground: Archaeology, Religion, and the First Founders of Jamestown*, published in 2016 by the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation, or by visiting Historic Jamestowne.

## 'FIRST CHAPTER'

Jamestown was more than a religious community. It grew into a vital seaport and center of government — thriving in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century despite many challenges.

There the flawed founders of Jamestown opened the door to the New World in what Summers called “the first chapter” of American history. Eventually, the first enslaved Africans would work the tobacco plantations along the James River.

Early leaders in Jamestown miscalculated threats, said Summers, noting the fear of the Spanish (who never attacked) that caused the settlers to move inland — while underestimating the clashes with native Indians and the harsh conditions of their swampy homeland.

A fire in the winter of 1608 burned down the fort, causing some leaders to call for abandoning the settlement. In the conflict of ideas arose a new leader: Capt.

John Smith, whom Summers cast as “what we'd call a good ol' boy today.”

Smith, he said, was “a misfit in England who was perfect for the job in America.”

These diverse strands — woven together to form a new nation — are all traced back to this place, said Summers.

“These are all your ancestors ...,” he added. “We can't hide from it.”

## TRYING TIMES

Leadership shifted from John Smith to George Percy in a contentious struggle.

“[Smith's] leadership is challenged,” said Summers. “So he locks the door to the storehouse and quotes Thessalonians.” It was a radical act, he added, to interpret scripture without a priest.

Following a suspicious gunpowder explosion, Smith returned to England in 1609, a year after assuming leadership. Jamestown entered a season of warfare, disease and food shortages known as the colony's “starving time” in which many of the men and the women who had joined them died.

Yet it was not the only time of severity for those who were carving out life in Jamestown.

There was more talk of abandonment until new settlers arrived under a second charter from King James I. Experiences in developing new industries and forming a representative government would follow.

Jamestown remained at the center of political and social life in Virginia for nearly a century until the seat of government moved to Williamsburg in 1699. Then Jamestown would fade from its earlier groundbreaking prominence — but remain of great historical significance.

Jamestown started something — the beginnings of a new nation — said Summers: “the people who land you on the moon in 300 years.” **NFJ**



## BEING MARY BUCK

Only men and boys first arrived from England to settle Jamestown in 1607. It was the next year, following the death of the first minister, that Mary Buck accompanied her husband who would assume the important role of spiritual leader and representative of the Church of England.

Entering the 1907 Jamestown Memorial Church with an adjacent 17<sup>th</sup>-century tower, living historian Rebecca Suerdieck took on the persona of Mary Buck with keen knowledge and a bold English accent.

Acknowledging the archaeological work outside that led to the recent discovery of the settlement's first church, she expressed surprise at those “digging through our rubbish in broad daylight.”

While at times light-hearted, she conveyed with great clarity the daily challenges faced by the early settlers. It was no surprise, she said, that those who arrived on ships first — after a long voyage from England — would erect a place of worship so soon.

“Imagine how thankful they were,” she said.

She shared her own harrowing experience at sea that included fire, a hurricane and an unplanned stop on an island we know as Bermuda. She described the fervent prayers and resulting miracle that brought her and others to the new land.

Due to the harshness of life, she said, abandonment was considered and sometimes planned. But everything changed in 1619, she added, when an elected assembly gained political power, bringing order and promises of peace. Comfort, however, was not an option.

“Life is hard in England; life is hard in Virginia,” she surmised. “That's why we went to church so often.” **NFJ**

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN D. PIERCE

# A GREAT PRICE

## *John Leland's belated visit to Williamsburg*

**W**ILLIAMSBURG, Va. — Religious diversity and freedom were not practiced or celebrated — and only to a limited degree tolerated — in Colonial America. In Williamsburg, as in other places, one might find a Baptist minister or other dissenter in jail or receiving another form of punishment for not following the state-imposed religious rules that favored the Anglican tradition.

The Church of England was well established by the ruling powers and supported through mandatory tax dollars — a familiar approach brought over from the motherland.

Following this tradition, participation in a state-supported Anglican church was required for white citizens by colonial Virginia law. The colony's religious and civil authorities were in many ways indistinguishable.

Resentment of such coercion regarding religious expression would fuel the struggle for religious freedom that gained strength in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century — and led to the adoption of a secular constitution affirming religious liberty when America set its course of independence.

Those with different-than-official religious convictions found ways to live out their faith despite resistance. For example, Baptist women would meet in the old powder magazine — a site known to Revolutionary War buffs for an incident involving Patrick Henry's militia.

These gatherings of Baptist women in a place of danger led to the formation of Williamsburg Baptist Church.

For religious dissenters, the goal was never mere toleration. Full religious



Tinsmithing is one of the early skills that lives on in Colonial Williamsburg.

freedom, they believed and argued passionately, was God-given — and true faith can never be enforced by government might.

Despite punishments that included jail time and spilled blood, dissent they did — leading eventually to a new, independent nation with a constitutional guarantee of liberty and justice for all, including full religious freedom.

Yet the enshrining of religious liberty

remains a promise that a diverse nation still struggles to fulfill — but one far advanced from church-state coziness in its early settlements.

A visit to Colonial Williamsburg is a reminder of the birth pangs of this nation. Conflict, hope, defeat, victory, compromise, suffering, sin and grace entered the mix of personalities, loyalties and ideas on which the nation came into existence.

The American experience was not brought to life by actors following a well-crafted script or by tedious builders with a detailed blueprint. It was and continues to be shaped by humanity prone to evil and gifted for good.

From the old Capitol Building on one end of DoG Street (Duke of Gloucester) to the still-active Bruton Parish Episcopal Church on the other, there are lessons to learn about life, struggle and resulting freedom.

## BELATED VISIT

The Wren Building on the campus of the College of William and Mary, across the street from Colonial Williamsburg, rings with history. It is the oldest college building in the U.S., dating back to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century when Jamestown was still the capital of the colony of Virginia.

Despite three fires, careful restoration efforts have enabled the historic structure's survival. Part of the larger building, Wren Chapel is a favorite wedding venue where spoken words, hymns and the booming pipe organ beautifully resound.

John Leland (1754-1841) was a minister in Virginia and Massachusetts — and a horseback-riding, itinerate preacher. Being a Baptist, he would have never been invited to preach in the Anglican chapel at the college in Williamsburg in real time.

He has, however, had such an opportunity thanks to his “traveling companion” Fred Anderson, who has portrayed Leland on 64 occasions. Anderson, executive director of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, brought Leland to life in Wren Chapel as part of the Nurturing Faith Experience last year.

He commended Baptists for their good singing but noted how his denominational kin were “plain people” who “believed the gospel was plain.” However, he confessed: “I like a little more colorful cloth myself.”

His fashion tastes and peculiar humor, he said, had gotten him in trouble with some deacons at his church in Culpeper, Va. But there was a bright side to the story.

“The deacons at Culpeper did me a big favor,” he said. “Being in the next county made me a neighbor of James Madison ... and a near-neighbor of Thomas Jefferson.”

Leland is best known for influencing



Colonial Williamsburg interpreters say it was more common for burials to occur in family cemeteries than in churchyards. In 1724, Rector Hugh Jones of Bruton Parish complained about the practice that required long trips to various farms to conduct services.

these men in their commitments to full religious liberty through the separation of church and state — a time-honored, Baptist-influenced contribution to the American experiment.

He recalled taking a giant wheel of cheese — inscribed with “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God” — from Cheshire, Mass., where he was a minister at the time, to President Jefferson in Washington upon his inauguration. Leland, when delivering the “mammoth cheese” to the new president, was invited to give his message on religious liberty to Congress and elsewhere.

Leland, an abolitionist, presented the gift to the slave-owning president as only a prophetic pastor would. “I looked Mr. Jefferson straight in the eyes and said: ‘cheese made without the aid of a single slave.’”

With equal straightforwardness, Leland noted that many slave-owners became Baptists during revivals and “came up with their own defenses” for human bondage.

Also, he lamented the punishment and imprisonment of more than 40 Baptist ministers in Virginia for simply preaching the gospel in violation of colonial law. Only marriages conducted by Anglican priests were considered valid in the colony, he added, calling such actions “unholy matrimony.”

He noted the three-fold contributions of Baptists to the cause of religious freedom: enduring persecution, circulating petitions and influencing the founding fathers.

Standing boldly in the Wren Chapel pulpit, this incarnation of Leland continued his centuries-old call to religious freedom. He acknowledged that the battle for religious liberty is never over.

“I looked to [Madison] to become that friend of religious liberty should it ever be under threat,” he said.

But Leland concluded with a strong word for his contemporary audience: “Now it’s your hour to defend what was purchased at a great price.” **NFJ**



*“To say that religion cannot stand without a state establishment is contrary to fact and a contradiction in phrase. Religion must have stood a time before any law could have been made about it; and if it did stand before, it can still stand without it.”*

—JOHN LELAND (1754-1841)



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# Worth Repeating

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“As a young preacher, I thought about church 90 percent of the time and about the world 10 percent of the time. It changed my preaching when I came to the realization that my congregation thought about church 10 percent of the time and about the world 90 percent.”

— Jerry Wallace, former president of Campbell University, quoted by Mike Queen in his *Journey Notes*

“Sometimes while you’re in the middle of [making] a mat, you just realize you’re helping someone, and it makes you want to keep doing more.”

— Janice Akin, one of the “bag ladies” at Second Baptist Church of Union City, Tenn., that turns thousands of discarded plastic bags into sleeping mats for homeless persons (ABC News)

“It was pretty overwhelming to just see the care and attention he put into that passion.”

— Pastor Derrick Ross of Celebration Church in Lakeville, Minn., on member Dennis Erickson leaving the congregation his collection of 32,000 model cars (CBS Minnesota)

“The protest of [Martin] Luther was a good thing. For me, it gave me the capacity to go beyond the dictates of a hierarchical church.”

— Kenneth Meyers, faith formation specialist with the Alliance of Baptists, reflecting on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation (BNG)

“Not only are these our neighbors and friends, but they are brothers and sisters in Christ ... and the church hasn’t treated the LGBT community like family. We have to do better.”

— Best-selling author and HGTV star Jen Hatmaker, in an interview with Jonathan Merritt that led to her books being removed from LifeWay Stores (RNS)

“Faith must strive to achieve inclusive community where all people are welcome and safe, including the nonconformists.”

— Robert M. Franklin, Laney Professor in Moral Leadership at Emory University, calling for healing following a divisive political season (RNS)

“For a group that was previously in bondage and is largely marginalized, the idea of freedom is powerful ... On this night, we are reminded, there is hope.”

— Lesli White, a writer for Beliefnet.com, on the significance of Watch Night, especially in black churches, to welcome the new year

“If we want to learn to love each other better, to live in healthy communities that support us when we’re struggling, to build a country in which flourishing is a reality for every person, then we have to start by telling our truths.”

— Amy Butler, pastor of the Riverside Church in NYC, on the mix of vitriol, compassion and shared stories that followed her earlier blog about facing a medically-necessary, late-term abortion (BNG)

# Generalities and specifics

By John D. Pierce

**O**ften I have wondered if faith communities have enough space in which both “who I was” and “who I am” could feel comfortably at home.

The very consideration of that thought requires a confession that my understanding and practice of the Christian faith has changed considerably over several decades.

Perhaps the best way to define such changes — which some would deem maturity and others as waywardness — would be to say that I affirm the generalities of the faith passed on to me but not an abundance of the specifics.

Of course, the more revealing question might be if “who I am” would be accepting of “who I was” — and vice versa. And what about all of those “who’s” in between?

In general, the faith passed on to me continues to receive my affirmation.

These are the broad affirmation of a biblical faith conveyed by family, Sunday school teachers and others who invested their time, instructions and examples for which I’m deeply grateful.

They taught and showed — and I believed and still believe — that God is love and that my value comes from being created in the image of the loving God. That confessing one’s sin and professing one’s faith in Jesus Christ is an important place to begin the personal journey of faith.

That the Bible has something important, even divine, to say to us — today and tomorrow. That being kind to one another is a good way to live.

Many of the specifics, however, have been replaced by newer understandings.

For example, I consider the nature of God’s love and grace to be broader and more inclusive than once imagined — going far beyond the limited spiritual clubhouse that we so eagerly sought to manage.

That what “the Bible says” is not necessarily the Way of Christ. That Revelation is not some secret roadmap to the end (which only a few can decipher) but a passionate call to stay firm in faith despite the harsh challenges.

That varied literature forms comprise holy scripture and present truth in ways other than literal interpretations often softened to soothe our desire to know everything and to fit our social comforts.

That the narrow way of following Jesus is not about believing some neat set of manmade doctrinal statements but doing the really hard stuff that Jesus said marked his followers — such as loving enemies,

walking extra miles, giving away goods, losing one’s life. Hard stuff that could not be marked on the 6-point offering envelopes familiar to “who I was.”

That salvation is wholeness — not the signing of a four-step tract of directives. That confession is more than reciting magic words as a way of missing hell and then living until that time in hellish ways toward others deemed less acceptable to God by poorly-constructed biblical justifications.

Yet “who I was” and “who I am” — and all the “who’s in between” — shared the same desire: to follow Jesus. I like to think that is enough to enable the various “who’s” to embrace that important common ground.

But I’m not sure — because so often those various “who’s” have been and are too sure.

The church and its various expressions often lose when insisting that Christ followers remain the same in order to remain in the fold. So do individual Christians who too narrowly define who is right and who is wrong in their claims of faith.

There are important and needed efforts to building unity within the diversity of Christianity. Yet, in a sense, the starting point for Christian unity and acceptance may be with ourselves.

All of our varied selves. **NFJ**



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# Smithsonian Initiative

Curator says diverse religious history is part of everyone's American experience

BY S. BRENT PLATE

Religion News Service

**T**he place of religion in museums has a long, troubled, and often strange history.

In the 1930s, the Soviet Union established a series of “anti-religion” museums. Several decades later, objects from the museums were transformed for use in the Museum of the History of Religion, now in St. Petersburg.

And in response to ethnic and religious clashes across Scotland, the government there helped create the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, which is dedicated to “understanding and respect between people of different faiths and of none.”

Whether devoted to art, archaeology, or history, museum spaces can provide a neutral, public space to see the role of religion in the variety of human experiences.

With a major new initiative recently announced at the Smithsonian Institution, Americans will now be able to more clearly see the role of religion in the history of the United States. The Lilly Endowment provided a \$5 million grant to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History dedicated to presenting religion as a vital element in American life.

The grant also made it possible for the Smithsonian to hire a permanent curator of religion. Peter Manseau, who holds a Ph.D. in religious studies from Georgetown University and whose many books include the history *One Nation, Under Gods* and the novel *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter*, was hired as the first Lilly Endowment curator of American religious history at the NMAH.

Religion News Service talked with Manseau about this new position, and about the past, present and future of religion in museums. The interview was edited for length and clarity.



A single-volume Quran copied by Abd al-Qadir ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who worked in what is now Iran in the 16th century. The ink, color and gold on paper manuscript is from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul and is now on display at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian

**RNS: Your position is new, and as far as I can tell, the first appointed curator explicitly dealing with religious history in the Smithsonian Institution. What is the significance of this new post? And, why now?**

PM: Religion actually has a long history at the Smithsonian. As early as the 1890s, there was a division of religion that was part of the National Museum. Those early efforts were mostly outward looking, concerned mainly with objects brought from afar to be displayed in Washington.

My position is the first at the Smithsonian dedicated specifically to American religious history. Viewing the role I now have historically, I would say the creation of a curatorship of religion at the NMAH is part of a larger effort over the last 15 years on the part of national institutions to engage with religion as a subject of vital significance to the nation and the world.

It grows out of awareness that one cannot tell the story of America without including the story of religion in America.

**RNS: What are your goals in filling this position? What would you like to see happen, both within the Smithsonian, and with regard to the general public?**

PM: My immediate goal is to complete the exhibition we have opening next summer, “Religion in Early America.” Beyond that, my work will involve helping the museum consider the ways religious ideas, beliefs and practices are part of many stories, including those that might not seem to have anything to do with religion.

We are also launching a music and theater series. These events often present surprising moments of intersection that have always been part of our multi-religious heritage.

I will also be actively collecting religion-related objects — both from the past and today. The Smithsonian takes the long view, and so one of the more challenging aspects of a curator's role is guessing what kinds of things being used and created today will be useful for future generations making sense of early 21st-century American life.

In all this, my hope is to tell stories about religion that feel inclusive and welcoming, framing the nation's diverse religious history as a part of everyone's American experience.

**RNS: Religion can be seen in a number of museum settings. What can museums do for the public understanding of religion in ways that other institutions cannot?**

PM: Museums strike me as a rare public space where we enter with the expectation of learning. And very often we expect to learn through direct contact.

That expectation of learning through standing in the presence of something from another time and place makes museums powerful places.

**RNS: Can you give us a sneak peak into any upcoming exhibitions at the NMAH that focus on religion, in one form or other?**

PM: "Religion in Early America" will open in the summer of 2017. It tells the story of what religious freedom, diversity and growth meant in the Colonial period until the 1840s.

It includes objects from the Smithsonian collection (including the so-called Jefferson Bible, a cut-and-paste edition of the New Testament Thomas Jefferson assembled with a pen knife and glue; George Washington's christening robe; and a shawl worn by the Quaker abolitionist and early women's rights advocate Lucretia Mott), as well as many loaned objects.

Along with objects from the various Protestant denominations, visitors will find objects drawn from Catholicism, Judaism, Native American religions, African traditions, Judaism and Islam.

After that initial exhibition, which runs for one year, many ideas are being considered as a follow-up. Whatever it ends up being, it will include stories that I hope will appeal even to those who do not think they are interested in American religious history.

I hope a takeaway from all the exhibits and programs related to the museum's religion initiative will be that, no matter what you believe or don't believe, this is your history too. **NFJ**

## Smithsonian's Quran exhibit aims to dazzle the eyes and may soften the heart

**BY LAUREN MARKOE**  
*Religion News Service*

Islam prohibits the depiction of God or prophets, and some Muslims believe drawing any animate being is also forbidden. Certainly no such images appear in the Quran, its central holy book.

So there are no pictures per se in the first major exhibit of Qurans in the U.S., "The Art of the Qur'an," on display at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery on the National Mall until Feb. 20. What visitors to the exhibit can expect to see are words, thousands of Arabic words.

But these words, within the more than 60 Qurans on display, present a visually stunning tour of more than 1,000 years of Islamic history, told through the calligraphy and ornamentation that grace the sacred folios.

"We can convey a sense of how artists from North Africa to Afghanistan found different ways to honor the same text, the sacred text of Islam," said Sackler director Julian Raby.

"They found different forms of illumination and binding to beautify the manuscripts they had copied. But above all they developed different forms of script to express in a dazzling array of calligraphic variety the very same text. The results could be intimate; or they could be imposing. But in every case the scribe invested his calligraphy with piety."

Intricate calligraphy and rich ornamentation made these Qurans — which come almost exclusively from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul — cherished possessions of some of the most powerful people of the Muslim world. Each comes with a rich story of those who commissioned it, copied it, entombed it or preserved it.

Many were offered as gifts to forge military and political alliances.

Essentially though, Qurans are religious objects, the word of God that Muslims believe was transmitted through

the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, when Islam was founded. Details within the text and on the margins of the parchment convey the pronunciation of words and the cadence of the verses.

Intricate ornamentation — geometric illuminations in gold, azure and other brilliant colors — beautify the pages, but also serve a function, said Simon Rettig, assistant curator of Islamic art at the Sackler.

"They help the readers locate him or herself within the Quranic text. They tell you when you have to prostrate yourself," he said, pointing to a complex geometric emblem in an early 14<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript by Abdallah al-Sayrafi, a master calligrapher who worked in Tabriz, a historical capital of Iran.

"Calligraphy is a way to capture the beauty of the orality," said Massumeh Farhad, chief curator at the Sackler and Freer galleries, which form the Smithsonian's Asian art collections and exhibits.

Scholars don't know exactly how scribes wrote Qurans centuries ago. Farhad said it's possible they would inscribe verses as they were recited, each showing reverence through his skill and style.

"That's why the work of Yaqut is considered so supreme," Farhad added, referring to the 13<sup>th</sup>-century master scribe who worked in Baghdad for the last caliph of the Abbasid dynasty. "It has this sort of lightness. It seems to float on the page."

The exhibit is not intended as commentary on today's politics, its organizers said. Work started on the project six years ago, before sharp rises in Islamophobic rhetoric and violence in the U.S. and Europe, and before Muslim immigration and culture became a flashpoint in American and European politics.

But the Smithsonian is not sorry for the timing, and hopes the exhibit can help quell fears of Islam and its followers. **NFJ**

# BEING CHURCH IN CHANGING TIMES

A column provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches ([chchurches.org](http://chchurches.org))

## Uncritical lovers and unloving critics

David Julen

In 1968, John Gardner — an academic, reformer and cabinet secretary — spoke at Cornell University’s commencement at the height of the social unrest in America. He employed the rhetorical device of imagining himself to have traveled three centuries into the future and to be speaking on the struggles of public institutions that began in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Gardner pointed out that many institutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were often unable or unwilling to respond to the challenges they faced in turbulent times. They were beset by those within the institutions who demonized their opponents — often ignoring the collateral damage inflicted on the institutions.

Gardner described these institutions as “caught in a savage crossfire between uncritical lovers and unloving critics.” On one side those who loved their institutions tended to smother them in an embrace of death, loving their rigidities more than their promise, shielding them from life-giving criticism. On the other side there arose a brand of critic without love, “skilled in demolition but untutored in the arts by which human institutions are nurtured and strengthened and made to flourish.”

Gardner’s words seem more prescient almost 50 years later when viewing the struggles our institutions — including government, higher education, school systems and law enforcement — deal with on a daily basis. There is little patience dealing with complex and deeply embedded problems in their institutions.

Gardner noted that “Demands for instant performance often lead to instant disillusionment.” It is not much of a stretch to see how these tendencies apply to the

church. These two forces of unloving critics and uncritical lovers hinder an institution’s ability to change and respond to challenges.

A pastor friend shared a conversation his music minister was involved in recently. She was told if she liked a certain type of music, then she could “leave with all the rest.” That attitude is deadly as a church wrestles with change.

Gardner noted that some institutions show “astounding sclerotic streaks.” (I looked up “sclerotic.” It means becoming rigid and unresponsive, losing the ability to adapt.)

How can church leaders minister in the midst of these societal trends? How can we avoid the extremes of uncritical lovers and unloving critics?

One way is to be better informed about how to manage change and transition. In William Bridges’ classic *Managing Transition*, he noted that institutional leaders often forget the emotional and psychological aspect of change.

Bridges defined change as more than situational: for example, the new worship service or the newly created staff position. Transition is also a psychological experience. That is, it is the internal process people go through as a result of the change.

One thing I would do differently, when looking back on my ministry, would be to relentlessly communicate the reasons for the change and not stop with simply making the change.

As Bridges put it: “Sell the problem that is the reason for the change. Many people put

only 10 percent of their energy into selling the solution to the problem. People are not in the market for solutions to problems they don’t see, acknowledge or understand. They might even come up with a better solution than yours, and then you won’t have to sell it to them; it will be theirs” (p. 16).

Another way we can help people avoid the extremes of uncritical love or unloving critic is to practice the biblical admonition to go directly to people with a problem. I fear that ministry leaders are not any better than others at sitting down and working out a disagreement or problem. We often develop a plan that either consciously or unconsciously avoids dialogue with those who disagree with us.

In doing so, we play to the uncritical lovers and avoid the unloving critics. Our avoidance of confrontation breeds congregational dysfunction and illness. Both groups suffer when they miss the opportunity to have honest and intense conversations.

When we retreat into a shell, put, gather around our supporters and refuse to engage those who disagree with us, we set the church up for failure. How we think about people impacts how we act. People are watching closely, and it is often our role as leaders to be the “adult in the room,” and to act accordingly.

“Speaking the truth in love” is our ethic and must be our practice. Confronting uncritical lovers and unloving critics with gospel truth is no easy task. The fact that it is terribly hard does not mean it is any less important for us to aspire to do in our ministry. **NFJ**

—David Julen is pastor of First Baptist Church of Cramerton, N.C.



# Professor's cross-cultural ministry has lasting impact

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

We all have those teachers whose impact lasted beyond the final exam. My list of classroom heroes includes professor George W. Braswell Jr.

**H**is seminary class on cross-cultural communication has long informed my understanding and practice of relating to those from backgrounds that differ from my own. These insights served me well, especially when working with international students in my first career, and then throughout my life when relating to the growing diversity experienced each day.

On Nov. 4, 1979, more than 60 American hostages were seized when Iranian students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. This revolutionary act was part of the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini in reaction to Western influence.

The religious-political context was complex and confusing to most Americans — many of whom held (or still hold) little more awareness than the old Three Stooges' map showing the neighboring countries of "I-ran," "He-ran" and "She-ran."

However, we took the daily news and our own questions into the classroom. Braswell and his wife, Joan, had served as Baptist missionaries in Iran where they built significant relationships.

An exceptional scholar in comparative religions, George was invited to teach this subject at the University of Tehran's Islamic School of Theology. He was the only non-Muslim to serve on the faculty.

The revolution was no surprise to him. He had heard whispered conversations over strong tea and had seen the early dynamics at play.



George Braswell and his wife Joan were honored by Campbell University Divinity School with the naming of the Braswell World Religions and Global Cultures Center that he started in 2007. Campbell University photo

He brought such informed perspectives to the class and taught us the value of understanding cultural context — something often lost in the easy, mindless world of talk radio and bumper sticker politics.

A few years after graduation, I hosted my former professor when he came to Georgia to lead an international student conference. The hours we spent together (from the Atlanta airport to a North Georgia conference center and back) were a delightful rehashing of that course that had enlightened my understanding of cultural contexts and given me some needed skills in relating effectively across sociological lines.

Through the years we have kept in touch through career shifts along the way. And I've enjoyed visiting with the Braswells at their home in Wake Forest, N.C.

One mark of his career has been leading a practicum in world religions that helps church leaders to better understand the growing diversity of religious belief systems that co-exist in what were once rather homogenized societies across the U.S.

His last stop in an impressive 55-year ministry career was Campbell University in Buies Creek, N.C. And his work is being honored in a way that is fitting and allows for future students to experience and learn the valuable lessons of cross-

cultural relationships.

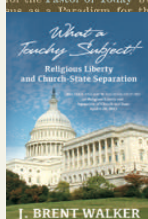
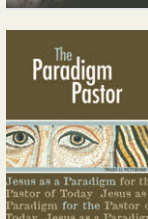
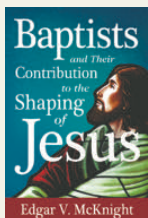
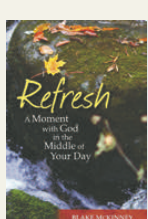
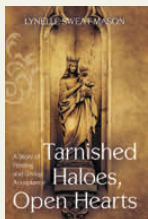
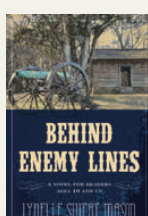
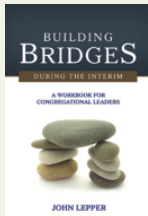
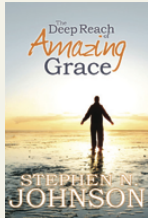
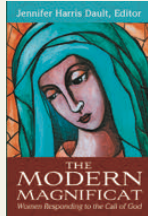
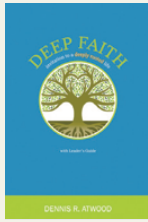
Last October, the Campbell University Divinity School hosted a ceremony to name its George W. and Joan O. Braswell World Religions and Global Cultures Center. The center, founded by Braswell in 2007, helps ministers and laypersons to understand cultures and religions of the world and to interpret these understandings from a Christian perspective.

Dean Andy Wakefield, in a media release from the divinity school, commended Braswell's efforts at building relationships across interfaith communities and ensuring that students have the chance to engage persons from various faith traditions in an open, "dialogical process" rather than "an antagonistic process."

With so much fear, misinformation and overreaction tied to perceptions of the "other," this is a timely and important venture — just as it was when my classmates and I hustled across a seminary campus in the late '70s with eagerness to hear our professor explain the cultural context of the news we were hearing.

So, congratulations to George and Joan on this most-appropriate honor. And thanks for sharing your good gifts with so many of us. Your impact is lasting and appreciated. **NFJ**

# 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.

## MANNERS & MONEY

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

## WHAT THE WILLOWS KNOW

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.

## FROM ZION TO ATLANTA

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.

## BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE INTERIM

John Lepper helps lay leaders build a healthy bridge between pastors by knowing what to expect and how to proceed with various tasks during the interim.

## BEHIND ENEMY LINES

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.

## BAPTISTS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE SHAPING OF JESUS

Edgar McKnight traces the story of Jesus in an insightful and thoughtful fashion appealing to scholars and laity.

## GOING BACK TO NEW ORLEANS

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.

## LORD, LIFT ME UP

Bruce Morgan shares inspirational thoughts and an anthem of gratitude based on the hymn, "Higher Ground."

## THE PARADIGM PASTOR

Trudy Pettibone focuses on scripture texts that support the various aspects of Jesus' pastoral ministry and relate to the calling of pastors in general.

## HOPEFUL IMAGINATION

Mike Queen and Jayne Davis tell of how an "Old First" church adapted to changing times and managed not only to survive, but also to thrive by approaching ministry in new and different ways.

## WHAT A TOUCHY SUBJECT!

Brent Walker identifies the historical and theological principles that undergird freedom of religion.

# at nurturingfaith.net!

## BEING A PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN

Chuck Queen seeks to nurture theological imagination, critical thinking, and faith and spirituality from a distinctly progressive Christian viewpoint.

## GROWING A JOYOUS CHURCH

Charles Roberts examines how a covenant relationship with God, the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit build Christian fellowship.

## MORNING CONVERSATIONS

Jon Roebuck offers an inspirational thought from every chapter of the New Testament, intended to draw readers into a daily conversation with God.

## CHRISTMAS: THEN AND NOW

Jon Roebuck shares 25 original stories, set from centuries ago to modern life and offering a fresh look at God's unfolding plan of redemption and grace.

## PRAYER 365

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

## WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT GOD

E.B. Self encourages deep thinking about God by exploring questions regarding God and violence, human destiny, the existence of God, good and evil, and science and faith.

## A GYPSY DREAMING IN JERUSALEM

Amoun Sleem shares her journey as a Gypsy woman, from experiencing discrimination as a child to founding the Domari Center in Jerusalem to serve the needs of her people.

## MOUNTAINS TO MOVE

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

## DISCIPLESHIP DEVELOPMENT COACHING

Mark Tidsworth and Irceel Harrison offer coaching exercises that are highly relational and have the potential to empower all Christians to find their places in the world.

## A PASTOR PREACHING

William Tuck offers "best practices" that result in offering one's "best gifts" for the pulpit ministry.

## THE PULPIT MINISTRY OF THE PASTORS OF RIVER ROAD CHURCH, BAPTIST

The identity of a church is revealed through the preaching of five pastors spanning seven decades. Edited by William Tuck.

## 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

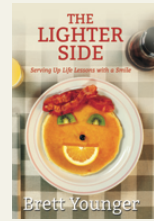
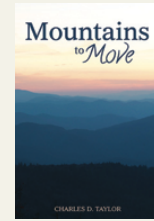
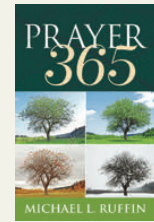
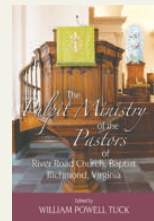
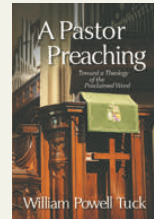
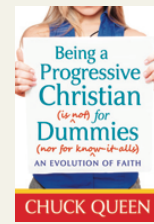
Winnie Williams describes the beauty of people and places she has seen around the world and examines the role of hope in fulfilling dreams that can lead to change for the better, especially for women.

## 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.





# Research shows: All churches can ‘grow young’

A REVIEW BY ANDY JUNG

**W**e have heard the statistics: Young adults ages 18 to 29 comprise 22 percent of adult population in the United States, yet they only represent 10 percent of church attendees nationwide.

The well-publicized “rise of the nones” points to nearly 23 percent who consider themselves religiously unaffiliated.

Most studies in religious demographics show that no major Christian tradition is growing in the U.S. today. The reality is, most churches are growing old.

How do churches stem the tide? What must churches do to not only reach 15- to 29-year olds but also to retain them in the life of the church? Does a church have to change its worship style and set aside its traditions and identity?

Does it have to radically change the building structure or have a huge budget? Do the worship services have to be hyper-entertaining to attract the young people? How do churches grow young?

The good news is that there is hope for all types of churches. In *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* by Kara Powell, Jake Mulder and Brad Griffin (Baker Publishing), leaders at Fuller Youth Institute share the results of ground-breaking research.

Based on a study of 250 churches across denominations, ethnicity and congregation size that are effectively reaching the younger generation, the research found six essential qualities churches shared in reaching this demographic that had little to do with music, church building or budget.

The study showed that churches



Brad Griffin, co-author of *Growing Young*, will speak at the Leadership Institute, a new feature of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship NC General Assembly. To register for the March 30 institute at First Baptist Church of Hickory, N.C., visit [cbfnc.org](http://cbfnc.org). Registration fee of \$50 (\$40 before March 1) includes a copy of the book.

willing to share key leadership, empathize with their struggles, help them take Jesus’ message seriously, create a culture of warmth within its fellowship, prioritize young people and their families and go outside the walls of the church to be good neighbors excelled at reaching and retaining young people.

All six principles are attainable for all churches. Whether a church has a large professional staff or a single pastor, it can learn to be intentional about entrusting and empowering young people with key leadership.

No matter how many or few young

people a church might have, it can learn the context and culture of today’s young people to show them empathy by helping them wrestle with their sense of identity, belonging and purpose. All churches can model for young people what it means to take the words of Jesus seriously and to live missionally.

Churches can grow young by weaving warmth into its DNA through encouraging authenticity and relationships across generations. Churches should put a high priority on young people by integrating them into all aspects of the church, especially in its overall philosophy, worship gatherings, staffing and budget.

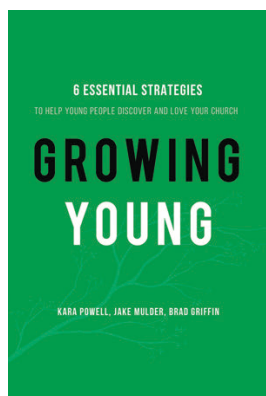
Finally, a church of any size can help young people value being a good neighbor by leading them outside the church to show love locally and globally. It is exciting to know that it is feasible for any church to accomplish all six principles with careful planning and strong leadership.

It matters because the present and future church hinges on these young people. When young people are a part of the fellowship in every way, the whole church benefits. Everyone rises when young people are engaged in the whole church.

These six principles are not principles for youth ministry or young adult ministry. The principles found in the research are for the whole church.

Helping a congregation grow young takes everyone: the pastor, age-group ministers, volunteer leaders, parents of young people and the entire church family. *Growing Young* shows pastors and other ministry leaders how to position their churches to engage younger generations in a way that breathes vitality, life and energy into the whole church. **NFJ**

—Andy Jung is pastor of First Baptist Church of Albemarle, N.C.



# 'Little book' contributes much to the faith-science conversation

A REVIEW BY FISHER HUMPHREYS

Two leaders in the Center for Science and Religion at Samford University have written *A Little Book for New Scientists* (InterVarsity Press). Steve Donaldson is a computer scientist, and Josh Reeves is a specialist in the history and philosophy of science.

They wrote their book “to help Christians studying and practicing in the sciences to connect their vocation with their Christian faith.” Although addressed to Christians, it includes an occasional defense of the Christian faith against challenges that arise from modern science.

The authors unpack a popular metaphor in which nature and the Bible are understood as the two books of God. The metaphor of nature as a book goes back to Augustine, and the two-books metaphor was used explicitly in the medieval period, centuries before the rise of modern science.

“The two-books metaphor implies that apparent inconsistencies [between nature and the Bible] are the result of human misinterpretation rather than a fundamental disagreement,” the authors note. They address those apparent inconsistencies by providing explicit information for interpreting the Bible, including that literal interpretations are not always to be preferred.

The authors point out that “there is a prominent story in our culture” about the relationship of science and Christian faith that says the two have always been in conflict and that science has triumphed, thereby overturning the superstitions of the pre-scientific world.

They write: “Fortunately for those who are both Christians and scientists, this conflict story is almost completely wrong.”

The conflict story ignores the fact that most leading thinkers of the scientific revolution were devout Christians, and it omits “the supportive role Christianity played in the emergence of science.”

Late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century two changes altered the relationship of science and religion: science became professionalized, and it became committed to methodological naturalism. Scientists look only for natural causes. The authors distinguish this methodological principle, which they endorse, from what they call “scientific naturalism or scientism,” the unwarranted claim that a naturalistic account of things is the whole story.

For example, scientism might claim that parents’ love for their children is nothing but blind chemical reactions in the brain. Scientism explains away the reasoning that informs scientific work.

I was surprised to learn that some people believe the scientific method instills intellectual honesty and intellectual humility so effectively that scientists are morally superior to other persons. As an alternative, the authors suggest that scientists are experts whose work inspires confidence because it is routinely tested by the larger scientific community.

The authors reject the claim that the work of scientists is value-free. They say that scientists are not like computers that follow an algorithm but like detectives who make good decisions about which leads are most promising. They also point out that, though scientists understand climate change, for example, better than non-scientists, they have no special wisdom about what is wise for society to do about this or any other issue.

The authors call new scientists to embrace intellectual humility and to be open to changing their minds, and they remind readers that Einstein never accepted randomness in the behavior of sub-atomic particles, a view that today is almost universally accepted.

Since science is now so specialized, the authors encourage new scientists to develop

the habit of “zooming in and out,” that is, of getting both the details and the big picture. They warn that single-mindedness can become narrow-mindedness and that science or one’s career in science can become an idol.

Having pointed out that many early modern scientists were Christians, the authors acknowledge that science can contribute to atheism, and they describe some of the reasons this happens. They close

the book with some down-to-earth observations about the ways in which scientists can contribute to the life of the church today.

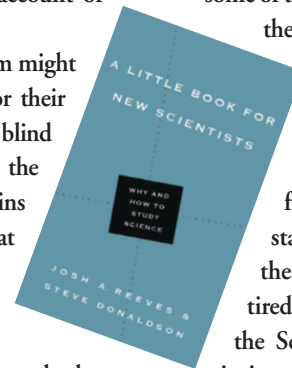
I am not a scientist, but found this brief book to be understandable and interesting. I am glad the authors decided not to re-tell the tired stories about the Galileo affair and the Scopes trial — and welcome their insistence that both science and religion are seeking truth.

They are courageous and correct to reject firmly the claim that truth is unavailable to us. I think it is self-contradictory to argue: “Truth is not available to us — that is the truth.”

Years ago some friends and I organized a group of scientists and theologians that meets six times a year to discuss books and articles on science and theology. The most rewarding discussions occur when we begin by accepting the standard model of the universe and the traditional understanding of Christian faith.

We are participating in a small way in an enormous international conversation, giving participants a more accurate and fruitful understanding of the relationships between the two disciplines. This book makes available to a wide audience much of the understanding generated by that conversation. **NFJ**

—Fisher Humphreys ([fisherhumphreys@gmail.com](mailto:fisherhumphreys@gmail.com)) is professor of divinity, emeritus, of Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.



# From darkness into light

By John R. Franke

**T**he dictionary defines an epiphany as a sudden intuitive perception of or insight into the essential meaning of something.

In Christian terms epiphany is particularly associated with the realization that Jesus is the Son of God. The church celebrates this revelation among the Gentiles in the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus where they honored him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

While this is the pinnacle of epiphany in the Christian tradition, the experience of this phenomenon is not limited to the knowledge of Jesus as the Son of God. For many people epiphanies are a regular if not frequent occurrence in the journey of faith. They occur as we gain fresh insight into the nature of our faith and the commitments it requires of us as we seek to be faithful to the things we believe.

Epiphanies are not limited to individuals but also occur in the midst of communities as a group of people comes to mutually-shared insight regarding the practice of their faith. While such communal epiphanies are seldom sudden and are often inspired by particular individuals, their collective nature makes them more enduring and socially significant.

As we turn the calendar to 2017, the Protestant church prepares to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of such a communal event. The Reformation forever changed the practice of Christian faith in the West and throughout much of the world, even among those who do not accept the conclusions of the various reformations that were promulgated during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. In addition to the practice of Christianity, the Reformation had a profound effect on societies in which it occurred.

In Geneva, the leaders attempted to capture the significance of this communal epiphany for their city and the lives of its citizens with the Latin motto *Post Tenebras Lux*, from darkness into light. As the history of Geneva and the Reformation demonstrated, this movement from darkness into the light is not a one-time occurrence but something that must be understood and appropriated again and again.

Many people are surprised to learn that John Calvin, the leading figure in the Reformation at Geneva, believed that true reformation was not something that could be accomplished and completed once and for all but had to be a continual concern for the faith and practice of the church in the context of ever-changing circumstances and situations.

Indeed, Calvin remarked that those who simply affirm that which they have been taught are in danger of failing to be faithful to the will of God. Instead, the business of theology involves the constant, ongoing activity of taking that which is handed down and attempting to form and communicate it in a manner that is deemed to be best for a particular time and place.

From this perspective, the process of reformation is not, and never can be, something completed once and for all and appealed to in perpetuity as the one and only faithful Christian position on a particular issue. As German theologian Jürgen Moltmann put it, reformation is not a one-time action to which a confessionalist can appeal and upon whose events a

traditionalist can rest.

Rather, an approach to reformation that acknowledges the never-ending process of moving from darkness into light will be an ongoing process that is “always reforming.” This is important to remember for Protestants as we celebrate the Reformation this year.

While it affirmed basic truths about the presence of God in our lives as a gift of grace and faith, the Reformation also produced discord, hostility and violence among the people of Europe that is not in keeping with the intention of God to bring peace to the world through Jesus Christ.

While we can appropriately appreciate the good news of the Reformation message concerning the free grace of God, we must not forget the devastation it left in its wake as it turned Christians against Christians in the name of theology and truth.

In other words, even as we celebrate the Reformation we must continue the process of reformation, guided by the mission of God to bring peace into the world through Jesus Christ. He is our peace, and through his life and death he has broken down the hostility that has divided the peoples of the earth in order to bring peace and harmony to all of creation as it was intended by God from the beginning.

In this season of Epiphany let us remember this most basic movement of our faith, continually leaving the ways of darkness behind us and moving ever onward toward the light of God’s love for the world made known in Jesus Christ. **NFJ**

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



# What do you see?

By Colleen Walker Burroughs

**W**hen my twins were small we read a book called *Brown Bear*. It read, “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?” Turning the page, something new would appear and the text would introduce us to another colorful friend: “I see a red bird looking at me.”

Many mission opportunities begin with just this question. “Church, church, what do you see?” And, once you see it, are you brave enough to do something that might change your church, your community or even yourself?

The folks at Baptist Church of the Covenant in Birmingham, Ala., saw the community just outside their door and began a mid-week banquet of sorts. The offer of a hot meal to the families in city housing next door quickly overwhelmed the nursery with crowds of tiny children.

Wednesday night tables filled with new faces completely changed the dynamics of the church’s mid-week fellowship in beautiful and challenging ways. If you have your eyes open, missions will change your congregation. And, some people will not like it.

Young boys at suburban Birmingham’s Vestavia Hills Baptist Church have a long history of serving supper at the Firehouse shelter once a month. They play checkers with the men after dinner, making friends and telling stories. This downtown community looks very different from the church’s upper-middle class neighborhood.

It’s a beautiful tradition the boys love. So much so that, when the girls were invited to join them *once*, the boys felt territorial about their Wednesday night buddies. If you have your eyes open, missions will change how your children love the world. Some people will not like it.

Hopewell Baptist Church in

Tuscaloosa, Ala., was at the epicenter of a massive tornado outbreak. Surviving significant loss to the community inspired a practical and potentially life-saving opportunity.

The church collected and distributed tornado response kits to the trailer park directly across the street from the church. The kit included a weather radio, batteries and a bottle of water — as well as an invitation to seek shelter in the brick and mortar structure of the church building.

“We just want to make sure you to have a safe place to weather the storms,” the church conveyed to its neighbors.

If you have your eyes open, missions can change your community. Some people will still not like it.

Church, church what do you see? What do your children see? Who do your teenagers see?

At PASSPORT we offer opportunities for children and students to open their eyes to the world. We lay sod at Habitat for Humanity houses, we read to children, we dance with senior citizens and paint nails. We try hard not to make it about the people we are “helping” but about realizing that doing these things in our world helps to make Earth as it surely is in heaven.

We pray for a world where there is no more hunger, where children bring joy without fear to those with little hope and where the family of God is a Noah’s ark.

What we do at camp is meant only to introduce children and youth to missions. It is an eye exam of sorts. We want to teach those of the next generation how to set their

sights on what is right in front of them or on the street across from them, and then what that leads to just around the corner. We keep in mind these three things:

1. These are children: Mission opportunities should introduce them to service, not exhaust them.
2. Learning the why is as important as the what. Conversations with teens about cycles of systemic poverty locally and globally help make thoughtful Christian citizens.
3. What we are doing is an exercise of faith, not commendation. Missions is never the quest for gratitude or recognition. More often, acts of service in Jesus’ name teach us something about the power and providence of God in the midst of brokenness in the world.

One youth group went home and adopted the seniors at the center across the street from their church. They began walking or rolling their new friends over for Wednesday night supper.

One group went home from camp and began recognizing the new communities of Spanish-speakers in the neighborhood and found ways to practice welcoming strangers.

If you have your eyes open, missions can change your teenagers.

“Church, church what do you see?” Are you open to change in your community, in the make-up of your congregation, within yourself?

Some people will not like it, and that probably means you are on the right track. **NFJ**

—Colleen Walker Burroughs  
is vice president of Passport, Inc., and  
founder of Watering Malawi.



# How to ride the subway

By Brett Younger

Londoners have reacted with horror to an attempt to get them to speak to one another on the subway. “Tube Chat?” buttons encourage riders to engage in conversations with fellow travelers. The response on social media has been universal distress:

“I feel like civilization is ending.”

“You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot lead a Londoner into social interaction on the Tube.”

“It’s bad enough on above-ground trains, where random strangers want to talk while I’m on Twitter, chatting to random strangers.”

New buttons have appeared:

“Don’t even think about speaking to me.”

“Wake me up if a dog gets on.”

“Nope.”

One Londoner argued: “Only drunks, lunatics and Americans talk on the Tube. Resentful silence is the proper way.”

The man behind this attempt to get commuters talking is indeed an American. Jonathan Dunne admits that he has not received the friendly experience for which he hoped. He explains his motivation by saying he comes from a small town in Colorado where “we actually talk to people.”

When I moved to Brooklyn, I got lots of advice on how to ride the subway:

“Do not be discouraged if your metro card does not work on the first five swipes.”

“Download the NYC Subway app, because only tourists look at paper maps.”



“Most of the time uptown and downtown are directions and not actual places, but sometimes they are places and not directions.”

“If there is an empty car, avoid it. There is a reason it is empty.”

“Do not rush for a seat as though it is musical chairs. You might lose.”

“You should offer your seat to a woman with a small child or a pregnant woman — though she should be at least eight months pregnant.”

“Hang on to the pole. This is no place to pretend you are surfing.”

“Face the right direction — the direction everyone else is facing.”

“If you look at the ‘NEXT STOP IS ...’ sign, you look like a tourist.”

“Do not make eye contact.” (Since no one else is looking at me, I find that I can look people in the eye, but this may not always work.)

“Do not stare at anything that is hard not to stare at. This includes tattoos, piercings, uncovered body parts, and hair colors Disney has never tried.”

“Do not pay attention to the crazy guy giving a speech — even if he is making sense.”

“If someone tries to hand you something, do not take it.”

“Move to the side to let people get off the train and avoid getting moved off the train.”

I enjoy riding the subway. I am amazed by the number of nationalities. I love the musicians — both the ones who have permission to be there and the ones who clearly do not. \$2.75 is a bargain.

A crowded early morning subway car can be amazingly quiet. When this many people live this close together, we need to give each other space. So, for the most part, we leave each other alone.

Commuters hold on to their coffee as if it is their last hope. College students study. People in suits read the *Wall Street Journal*. People in Red Sox caps read the *New York Post* — our version of the *National Enquirer*. Teenagers play the kind of games I am too smart to put on my phone, but which I wish I had on my phone. Lots of folks wear earbuds, which may not be connected to anything. Commuters have a surprising level of weariness.

No one has given me any advice on how to ride the subway like a Christian. While I love the subway, I am afraid it might make me less caring. I do not want my silence to become apathy. I do not want to learn to ignore those around me, so here is what I am doing:

I look at the people on the train. I look at each face and say to myself, “God loves you.” ... That crying little boy, that elderly woman, that angry man, that bored teenage girl.

I need to think “God loves you” so that I will remember it is true.

And if there is ever a moment when it does not seem horrifying, I will start a conversation. **NJF**

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

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# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 1, 2017

## Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

### *It's Always Time*

**Y**ou've heard today's text before. Maybe it was at a funeral, where the reminder that there is "a time to be born, and a time to die" was intended to bring solace and order into a trying time. Perhaps it was in Pete Seeger's adaptation of the text, which became a hit for the Byrds as "Turn! Turn! Turn!" in 1965. 📖

With the Civil Rights movement ringing cultural change and the war in Vietnam sparking widespread unrest, the song came across as a hopeful assurance that, if there's a time for everything, peace must be on the horizon.

You might be surprised to know that the person responsible for this memorable poem – the only part of Ecclesiastes that many people can recall – found little comfort in his belief that life is so ordered and predictable.

### **A classic poem (vv. 1-8)**

The author of Ecclesiastes, who called himself Qoheleth, does not come across as a happy man. 📖 An old tradition identifies the author as Solomon, but David's son could hardly have written Ecclesiastes (see "The Hardest Question" online to learn why). It is likely that the author was a person of some

### **Ecclesiastes 3:1**

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven ..."

means, but not the richest man who ever lived, though he pretended to be in a brief royal fiction designed to emphasize his frustration with life (1:12-2:26).

Qoheleth began and ended his writing with a motto most familiar from the King James Version: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities. All is vanity" (1:2, 12:8). 📖 The word translated "vanity" is the Hebrew word *hevel*, which describes a breath or vapor that quickly disappears, as on a cold day. 📖

Qoheleth was not your average wisdom teacher. He wrote beautifully, mostly in a sort of lyric prose that occasionally morphed into poetry. He began his loosely organized teachings with a reflection on the futility of life (1:3-11): generations of people, like seasons of the year, come and go. The sun comes up and goes down, while cycles of wind and weather repeat themselves year after year. All the streams run to the sea, but the sea is never full. People live only to be forgotten, he concluded.

The old sage followed that reflection with a story of a rich and powerful king who could do, have, or try anything he wanted. After various adventures in excess – the sort of things people might expect to make for a happy life – he concluded there was nothing new under the sun and nothing to be gained from human toil, for "all was vanity and a chasing after wind" (2:11).

That pessimistic note brought

Qoheleth to the first formal poetry in his book. Whether he composed it himself or quoted previously existing verses is unknown. The poem explores the notion of a time and season for everything (vv. 3-8). 📖 It consists of fourteen antithetical pairs arranged into seven couplets in which the first and second lines are related. Each pair includes two things that seem mutually exclusive at any given moment, but all of which are common life experiences.

There is "a time to be born and a time to die," the poet said, "a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted" (v. 2). Like crops that are sown and later harvested, human life is marked with a beginning and an ending. No one is exempt.

Verse 3 reflects a reality of human culture in which conflict seems inevitable, so that there is "a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up" (v. 4). The terms for breaking down and building up are drawn from construction, especially the building or breaking down of protective walls (Isa. 5:5, 49:7, Ps. 80:12). Neither killing people nor destroying good walls is desirable, but in this world, it happens.

Both weeping and laughter have their place and appointed time, often related to mourning and dancing (v. 4). There is much in this world to make us sad or melancholy, but also much to cause rejoicing. Neither puritanical seriousness nor excessive frivolity would fit Qoheleth's reality, in which both sorrow and gladness have their place. 📖

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The imagery of v. 5 has given rise to much speculation. The poet compares times for throwing or gathering stones to “a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.” Farmers typically cleared stones from a field to prepare for planting (Isa. 5:2), often using them to build a protective wall. A war story in 2 Kings 3:19, 25 reflects a custom of ruining enemies’ fields by throwing stones into them, but neither custom has an apparent connection with human hugs or the lack of them.

Rabbinic interpreters took “throwing stones” as a euphemism for ejaculation during sexual intercourse, and “gathering stones” as a reference to periodic abstinence (*Midrash Rabbah Qoheleth* 3.5.1).<sup>U</sup> The remainder of the poem avoids metaphors, but this interpretation offers an apt comparison to embracing another, or refraining.

Verse 6 contrasts seeking and losing with keeping and throwing away. On the surface, both relate to personal property. If something has been lost, there is a time to seek it, but also a time to give it up as lost.

As possessions of differing values or usefulness pile up in our homes, we must decide what to keep and what to discard. One might extend the truism to abstractions such as ambition or love: there is a time to go after something (or someone), and a time to let go. That may be beyond the poet’s intent, however.

The opposing pairs of ripping/sewing and silence/speaking (v. 7) may seem unrelated, but it helps to recall that the tearing of one’s garments was a public symbol of mourning (see Gen. 37:29, 34; 2 Sam. 1:11-12; 2 Kgs. 2:11-12; Job 1:20, and others). Clothes were handmade and not easily replaced: when mourning was over, torn clothing would be repaired. Perhaps the poet had in mind

the loud ululations and other cries of grief that often accompany mourning: a time would come when weeping would give way to silence.<sup>U</sup>

The poem concludes with a more obvious pair of antithetical behaviors: “a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace” (v. 8). We would like to live in a world where love and peace thrive, but the cold reality is that there are things that inspire hatred, and there are times when war is not only the lesser of two evils, but what is necessary to preserve the liberty to enjoy peace and love.

### An eternal puzzle (vv. 9-15)

While the poet’s ponderings on time and human actions may be assuring to readers, it was no comfort to Qoheleth. God is not mentioned in the poem, but Qoheleth presumed that God had set the world and its realities in place, leaving humans to live in a situation they could not understand.

Human toil (v. 9) could be seen as a reference to the ordinary activities of going through life, “the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with” (v. 10), and Qoheleth wondered what gain or profit anyone could find at the end of it.

While there was a time for everything, it was God who “has made everything suitable for its time,” not humans (v. 11a). As in 1:4-11, where he bemoaned the cyclical nature of life, Qoheleth knew that he might bounce between mourning and dancing or tearing down and building up, but if it was God who determined the times, Qoheleth could see no gain in it.

The real kicker for Qoheleth, however, was that God “has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what

God has done from the beginning to the end” (v. 11b). The NRSV’s “past and future” translates a word that usually means “eternity,” and the phrase “a sense of” is not in the text, but added for clarity. A more literal translation could be “eternity, too, he has put in their hearts, but so that humans cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end.”<sup>U</sup>

Perhaps Qoheleth’s frustration was a belief that God had given humans an innate sense of eternity – of a divine reality beyond one’s days of earthly toil – but had not given them an ability to understand what God is about.

This led the sage to find some comfort in the pleasures of life that he *could* understand: “I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil” (vv. 12-13, see also 2:24, 5:18-19, 8:15, 9:7-10).

Qoheleth’s philosophy was not limited to “eat, drink, and be merry,” but he firmly believed that God intended for humans to enjoy what pleasures they could, even if they could not understand the full meaning of their existence. Trying to comprehend God’s work leads more to awe than to understanding (v. 14), for only God can stand in the present while seeing into the past and the future (v. 15). The human task is to reverence God and appreciate the lives God has given.

This may seem depressing, but Qoheleth was skeptical of the prophets, and lived long before the time of Jesus. If he had known the gospel message of eternal life through Christ that we learn from the New Testament, do you think he would have sung a different tune? **NFJ**



# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 8, 2017

Isaiah 42:1-9

## A Time for Justice

An old saying holds that good preaching should “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.” Do you experience that in your church? Biblical prophecy provides a helpful model, and a prime example is the book of Isaiah, which spoke to Israel in times of both security and distress.

### God’s servant

Events and life-situations described in the book of Isaiah reflect at least three distinct settings: the book begins in Judah during the eighth century BCE, shifts to Babylon during the sixth century exile, and concludes with the Jews back in Jerusalem following the exile. As different challenges arose during this extensive period, two or three different prophets preached in the name of Isaiah, addressing needs that arose in their varying historical contexts. ↓

Isaiah 42 falls within a section commonly known as “Second Isaiah.” Isaiah of Jerusalem, responsible for much of Isaiah 1-39, preached during the eighth century, when the wealthy and powerful were comfortable and in need of affliction. He promised judgment if the people did not repent and change their ways. Judgment

### Isaiah 42:1

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

came when the powerful Babylonians conquered Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, and marched many of its citizens into exile.

A prophet in the model of Isaiah arose in Babylon during the latter years of the exile, offering hope to a bedraggled people who may have wondered if they would ever see their homeland again. Commonly known as “Second Isaiah,” his message is found in chapters 40-55. His preaching included four poems commonly called “Servant Songs,” the first of which is this week’s text. ↓

### A song of justice (vv. 1-4)

People understand the power of armies, force, and control. When ancient prophets spoke of better days and a restoration for Israel, many imagined that a military messiah would arise, like David, and lead them to conquer their enemies by force of battle. There are prophecies that seem to speak of such a king, and some are in Isaiah (chapters 9, 11). They speak of a coming king who would be great and would bring peace to the earth, but they say little about how he would accomplish the task. Many assumed that the deliverer would be a military messiah.

They were wrong.

Isaiah of the exile speaks of a

coming ruler as God’s *servant*: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” (v. 1).

This single verse tells us several things about the servant. First, he is *God’s* servant. It was not uncommon for prophets to describe Israel as God’s servant people, or to criticize them for being prideful and self-indulgent, rather than living humbly before God.

Hebrew poetry is based on repetition, often using parallel statements for emphasis or explanation. Here, “my chosen” is parallel to “my servant,” underscoring God’s intentional choice of the servant. Likewise, “in whom my soul delights” parallels “whom I uphold.” God not only supports the servant, but also takes delight in doing so.

The second couplet of the verse describes the manner by which God empowers the servant (“I have put my spirit upon him”), and the end result of their partnership (“he will bring forth justice to the nations”).

The Hebrew word underlying “spirit” literally means “breath” or “wind.” The scriptures speak of rare individuals who experienced the power of the “spirit of the LORD” (*ruah-Yahweh*); people such as Gideon (Judg. 6:34), Samson (Judg. 13:25), Saul (1 Sam. 10:10), and David (1 Sam. 16:13).

The spirit of the LORD came upon people such as these during times of oppression, empowering them to prevail over Israel’s enemies and, ideally, to restore justice. The Hebrew concept of *mishpat* (justice) is more than a legal concept. True justice

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involves faithfulness to God and fairness toward others. To bring justice is not just to make sure all people get what they deserve, but to ensure that everyone has what they need. The text literally says that the servant will “make justice go out to the nations.”

While the first verse might lead hearers to expect a spirit-emboldened warrior-servant such as David, the next two verses indicate that he will not bring justice through ruthless force, but with gentle tenderness toward the “bruised reed” and “smoldering wick,” graphic references to people who are weak and downtrodden. They are like reeds that are bent but not dead, or a flame that is smoldering but has not died out (vv. 2-3). The servant will encourage them appropriately. ♣

Those words would have been comforting to the people of Israel, who remembered proud traditions of having once been a great nation. As Isaiah of the exile proclaimed God’s word, he recognized their weakened, wounded, uncertain condition. The servant would understand the needs of his people and bring justice coupled with tenderness.

Believers in our own time might become more compassionate people and more effective servants for Christ if we could begin to understand that justice involves far more than getting or giving what we or they deserve. God’s justice is always tempered by grace to offer what people need most. Often, their greatest need is forgiveness. Sadly, even those who delight most in singing “Amazing Grace” can be remarkably stingy when it comes to extending grace to others.

One might think a servant who is characterized by gentleness might be weak or easily defeated, but Isaiah insisted that “He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth” (v. 4a). The servant

will press forward, working in his own quiet way, “until he has established justice in the earth.”

The promise of justice is good news for any people. The expectation that “the coastlands wait for his teaching” (v. 4b) extends hope that the servant’s work would extend beyond Israel to the coastlands on either side, and beyond. In the ancient world, where few people traveled far, a seafaring journey to “the coastlands” expressed a thought not unlike “to the ends of the earth.”

### A call from God (vv. 5-9)

With v. 5, the divine speech shifts from a third-person description of what the servant will do to a direct address from God. Some scholars see this as a wholly different oracle, while others perceive it as a continuation of the song. The God who has created all things (v. 5) speaks in v. 6: “I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations . . .” ♣

Who is God addressing in these verses? The pronoun “you” is singular, and some see vv. 5-9 as a direct address to the servant. John D. W. Watts has argued that the “servant” in this case is Cyrus, the Persian king who would soon conquer Babylon and set the Israelites free (*Isaiah 34–66*, vol. 25 of *Word Biblical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 660).

Others judge that the oracle addresses the people of Judah and Israel. John Goldingay notes: “The last singular ‘you’ was Jacob-Israel in 41:8-16, who has presumably been the implicit addressee throughout. In other words, in verses 1-4 God was saying to Jacob-Israel, ‘You know you are my servants? Well, this is

what my servant is destined to be and do” (*Isaiah*, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012], 241).

Since neither Cyrus nor the Hebrew people fully carried out the commission given in vv. 6-7, later Jewish interpreters moved the message forward and pictured the one addressed as a future messiah. Early Christians believed Jesus to be that messiah, one who came as “a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (vv. 6b-7). Note the similarity of this to Isa. 61:1-2, which Jesus cited as a sort of mission statement in Luke 4:16-21 – adding “recovery of sight to the blind” to the release of prisoners, a combination found in Isa. 42:7, but not in Isa. 61:1-2.

The passage closes with an affirmation of Yahweh’s identity as the only true god, the one who controls the earth’s destiny, and who can declare “new things . . . before they spring forth” (vv. 8-9).

The first Servant Song speaks of one chosen and empowered by God to bring about justice, not by rude power, but by gentle grace. It expresses a hope that begins in every hurting, wounded heart, and it extends as far as the mind can imagine.

The people of Israel saw this as a mystery wrapped in a riddle. The people of Christ see it as the foretelling of one who could die on a cross but not be crushed by it, one who would rise even beyond the grave to establish justice through all the earth.

Though Christ-followers focus on the Suffering Servant they see in Jesus, there remains a corporate aspect to the text: if Christ’s justice is to extend throughout the earth, it will be through the gracious and compassionate presence of Christ’s persistent followers. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 15, 2017

Isaiah 49:1-6

## A Time for Light

**H**ow far does God's grace extend? That question lies at the heart of theological debates that troubled Israel and continue to dog the church today. Is God's saving grace limited to a select few, or available to all? Isaiah's second Servant Song suggests that, while God had a special relationship with Israel, God's grace, light, and salvation is intended for all peoples of the earth.

### The servant as Israel (vv. 1-4)

Today's text is the second of four texts in Isaiah that are called "Servant Songs" because they speak of a servant of God who will bring deliverance, not just to Israel, but to all people. The first Servant Song (42:1-4, or possibly 42:1-9) speaks of the servant and possibly to the servant, but in the second Servant Song (49:1-6), the servant speaks for himself and of his relationship with God. That much is clear: identifying the servant is another matter.

The overall message of Second Isaiah assumes that the descendants of Jacob, the people of Israel, are called to be God's servant, living in faithful obedience and serving as a light/blessing to the nations (recall Gen. 12:3).

### Isaiah 49:6

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

With the Hebrews unable or unwilling to live out their calling, however, the prophet raises the possibility of another who will do what Jacob-Israel has not done. In the second Servant Song, the prophet speaks for the people and appears to identify himself as the servant, standing in for the people.

Two attributes contribute to the unity of the poem. First, it begins and ends with a reference to all peoples, from "coastlands and peoples from far away" in the opening words to "the end of the earth" in the closing line. These act as bookends, binding together what comes between and emphasizing the theme of God's grace to all people.

"Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!" addressed the nations beyond Israel (v. 1a). The word translated as "coastlands" (NRSV) is sometimes rendered as "islands" (KJV, NIV, NASB). It refers not so much to a beach as to the border of a land that touches the sea, a place where mariners put into port. From the very small perspective of the world known to ancient Israel, the reference would be to nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea. They could only imagine the "peoples from far away" who were beyond.

A second stylistic touch is that the

first verse of each section of the song includes the idea that God's purpose for the servant extended from the womb onward (vv. 1, 5). The belief that God had a special relationship with some people "from the womb" is common in scripture (Gen. 25:23; Judg. 16:17; Ps. 22:9; Jer. 1:5; Luke 1:41). It is found with reference to Israel in Isa. 44:2, 24.

"The LORD called me before I was born," said the prophet/servant "While I was in my mother's womb he named me" (v. 1b). And what was the servant's name? It is found in v. 3. "And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'"

Perceiving the servant as the people of Israel may seem a bit troublesome, because we commonly think of the servant as an individual called to restore Israel, as in v. 5 of this same song. As we've noted previously, it is possible to understand the people of Israel and Judah as God's intended servant, though they had failed to become the nation-blessing witness God wanted them to be. Thus we might perceive a singular servant being called to do on Israel's behalf what the people could not do for themselves.

Whether we see the servant's identity as individual or corporate, the self-description in v. 2 may seem surprisingly warlike, since other texts describe the servant as gentle and non-combative (Isa 42:3, 50:6, 53:7). The weapons of war, however, are words, and their targets are not to be killed, but converted. The metaphor of the mouth as a sword when filled with the word of Yahweh is also found in Jer. 5:14, 23:29; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; and Rev. 1:16. "In the shadow of his

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hand he hid me” suggests that God has waited until the appropriate time to “draw the sword” of the servant’s speech.

Similarly, the servant is like a polished arrow, an archer’s favorite and most accurate shaft. Again, the servant has been hidden away in Yahweh’s quiver, to be withdrawn and unleashed with the message of salvation when the time was right.

In v. 3, any mystery about the intended identity of the servant is made clear: “And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’” That was the ideal, but Israel had not lived up to God’s call.

The prophet, speaking in behalf of Israel, stated the people’s case with apparent sarcasm: “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward is with my God” (v. 4).<sup>U</sup>

Israel-in-exile voiced similar laments, as in Ps 137:1: “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” In the prophet’s words, the people admit no guilt and acknowledge no failure. They see themselves as victims, claiming to have poured out their strength in service to God for nothing, since they remain in captivity. From this perspective, their conclusion is not so much a statement of faith as the wishful thinking of pious and self-interested pretense: “yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God” (v. 4b).

### The servant beyond Israel (vv. 5-6)

God responded to the servant’s lament with an even greater challenge, one that extends beyond the tasks “to bring Jacob back to him” and to see “that Israel might be gathered to him” (v. 5a). The call would

extend to all nations, and for this calling the prophet believed God would provide both opportunity and ability: “I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength” (v. 5b).

Restoring Israel alone might seem to be an impossible dream, but the servant learned that when God’s grace is involved, restoring Israel alone was far too small a goal. Thus, God said: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (v. 6).

Consider those words. God’s grace, expressed through the work of the servant, shines as a beacon of light and hope to all the nations. Servant Israel’s job was to quit blaming God for the nation’s failures, stop pretending to have been faithful, and start proclaiming God’s salvation.

Whether servant Israel would prove faithful or not, God’s purpose remained – and remains – unchanged: “that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” In v. 5, the servant comes across as defeated, unable to do the “small thing” of restoring Israel. Israel had rejected God. Yet, God appears to have rejected the people’s rejection. Neither God nor God’s cause would be defeated. God *will* be glorified, the servant *will* be a light to the nations, God’s salvation *will* reach to the end of the earth.

Could it be that God has in mind a salvation that goes beyond the limitations we typically draw around saving grace? In Isa. 45:22-23, the prophet spoke for God: “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every

knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.’” Matthew 18:14 credits Jesus with saying “Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.” The testimony of Luke 3:6 is that “All mankind will see God’s salvation.” Especially interesting, given the emphasis upon light in Isa. 49:6, is the claim of John 1:9: “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.”

John’s gospel also quotes Jesus as saying “When I am lifted up, I will draw all men to myself” (12:32), and “I did not come to judge the world, but to save it” (12:47). Is it possible that God might reject even our rejection, as Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland argue in *If Grace is True* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004)? “You did not choose me,” John quotes Jesus as saying, “but I chose you” (John 15:16).

Contemplating such ideas can be unsettling or even downright disturbing for those whose basic view of soteriology is “accept Jesus – or else.” Other biblical texts suggest differing destinies depending upon one’s response to God, and they must also be considered. God’s desire, however, is never in doubt: that all be saved.

It may be helpful to remember that just about everything Jesus said and did was unsettling and disturbing to the religious establishment of his day. In our time, when some seem intent on pulling in the stakes and narrowing the parameters of grace, it is refreshing to be reminded that God’s purpose is for God’s people to be a light to all the nations, “that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

We may not know exactly what those prophetic words mean – but we can *hope* they mean exactly what they say. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 22, 2017

Isaiah 9:1-7

## A Time for Hope

Have you ever longed for the light? Most of us have never been lost in a cave with a dead flashlight, longing to find our way back into the sunshine. We may, however, have lost power for hours or days after a storm, longing for the lights to come on. Many have spent long nights in worry or sadness, waiting anxiously for the break of dawn and the hope that comes with a new day.

Our text speaks of people who lived in a dark time, when national oppression and personal depression clouded their vision and dimmed their spirits. What brought the darkness? Would they ever see the light? And does it matter to us?

### A troubled time (v. 1)

To understand Isaiah's message, we must take time to consider his historical context. We get a glimpse of that in 9:1, which follows directly on the final verse of the previous chapter (8:22). Indeed, in the Hebrew text, 9:1 is numbered as 8:23. There, Isaiah speaks of a people so defeated that, whether they look upward to the sky or downward to the earth, they see only darkness.

The political setting of Isaiah 7-11 appears to reflect the aftermath of a

### Isaiah 9:2

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined."

devastating invasion by the Assyrians, probably around 733 BCE. It speaks of "distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish," and the threat of "thick darkness" (8:22), all of which are likely metaphors of oppressive enemy action. These images carry over into 9:1, which surprisingly predicts better days to come: "But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish" was spoken to the northern tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, the first to be overrun and deported by the Assyrian forces.

Despite the gloomy conditions of Assyrian oppression, Isaiah saw light ahead, a "latter time" when God would "make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations." These may be names given to northern regions by the Assyrians.

"The way of the sea," also the name of the main north/south highway, may describe a province along the Mediterranean coast. "The land beyond the Jordan" probably referred to Gilead, located east of the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee. "Galilee of the nations" likely describes the central area around Megiddo. Its very title reveals how much its population had been mixed: the Assyrians not only sent Israelites away from their homelands, but also brought in people from other lands to resettle the area.

The use of Assyrian terms for those areas speaks to the extent to which Israel had lost them, yet Isaiah spoke of a day when things would change: the pervasive darkness and gloom would give way to light and hope.

### A vision of hope (vv. 2-5)

The poetic oracle of vv. 2-7 has been described in ways ranging from a psalm of thanksgiving to an accession hymn to a royal birth announcement. However we might classify the text, it clearly offers a hopeful outlook to Isaiah's audience.

Verse 2 picks up on the contrast between darkness and light from v. 1, declaring that "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined."

The verbs imply past action, though the prophet wrote in a time of darkness and appears to be speaking of future events. In a fashion typical of Hebrew poetry, the second line advances and intensifies the thought of the first: "darkness" becomes "deep darkness." But, the people "have seen a great light" because "light has shined on them." As the opposite of darkness, light promises the hope of salvation.

With v. 3, the prophet shifts from a third person observation to a second person address, praising God for having "multiplied the nation" and "increased its joy." The word translated as "multiplied" doesn't necessarily refer to a growing population; it could also mean "you have made the nation great" or "you have enlarged the nation," which may catch the meaning better.

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Whether the “enlargement” is in people or in power, the result is rejoicing. Isaiah sees a nation walking out of darkness and into the light, celebrating newfound strength and confidence. Two metaphors call up joyful images: successful farmers beaming at the sight of a banner harvest, and victorious soldiers dividing the booty taken from their vanquished enemies (v. 3b).

The military metaphor morphs into reality with v. 4, as the prophet proclaims freedom from Israel’s foes, whose “yoke,” “bar,” and “rod” – all symbols of oppression – have been (or will be) broken in a victory as unexpected as Gideon’s unlikely triumph over the Midianites (Judges 6-7). In the heady aftermath of victory, Isaiah predicts celebratory bonfires built of bloody clothes and battle boots (v. 5) – but such happy times are not yet.

How could the prophet’s suffering hearers believe that such things would happen? What sign of hope might mark a turning point in the fortunes of Israel and Judah?

### A child of promise (vv. 6-7)

As in 7:10-17, Isaiah finds hope in the birth of a child. Indeed, he speaks as if the child has already been born: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us . . .” (v. 6). Did Isaiah have in mind the birth of Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz who would later become one of Judah’s most fondly remembered kings? ↓

Whether or not Isaiah was thinking of Hezekiah, there is no question that he had in mind a descendant of David who would lead with authority and preside over an era of unprecedented glory for the nation. Even so, how do we reconcile the thought of an earthly ruler with the expansive titles he attributed to the coming king? ↓

“Wonderful Counselor” raises no flags, for it simply implies something

like “Extraordinary Strategist” or “Wise Advisor,” an appropriate characteristic for a king in a time of war. But what are we to make of the name “Mighty God”? Although kings in Egypt and Mesopotamia sometimes claimed to be gods, this was not the case in Israel. Biblical coronation hymns suggest, however, a tradition that God “adopted” the king (see Ps. 2:7).

Many Hebrew names include God (*el*) or Yahweh (usually *-iah* or *-jah*) as an integral element. For example, “Isaiah” means “Salvation of Yahweh,” “Elijah” means “my God is Yahweh,” and Hezekiah means something like “Strengthened by Yahweh.”

The title “Mighty God” (*’el gibbôr*) is spelled as two words, however, and the same term is used in 10:21 with clear reference to God. This leads us to assume that the king in question, at the very least, bears a very close relationship with God.

The title “Everlasting Father” offers a conundrum for interpretation. ↓ It might be intended to express hope that the coming king, who would be in the Davidic line, would represent the everlasting dynasty promised to David in 2 Samuel.

Like “Wonderful Counselor,” the term “Prince of Peace” raises few questions. People would naturally admire a king who brought peace and security for his subjects.

With v. 7, the prophet clearly turns to the future. He sees the coming king’s authority and rule of peace growing continually, endlessly, a tangible fulfillment of the promise that David’s descendants would rule over an everlasting kingdom.

The new king would bring more than security, however: he would rule with the ideals of justice and righteousness “from this time onward and forevermore.”

Such promises sound too good to

be true, don’t they? Isaiah knew that his hearers would be skeptical, too. Thus, he concludes with the assuring claim that “The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”

How do we interpret this text? We can see how it functioned as an exercise in hope for troubled Judahites in the eighth century BCE, but we are much more likely to remember it from quotations in the New Testament. Isaiah may have hoped that Hezekiah would prove to be a delivering king, but that did not happen. As time went by, later believers transposed his prophetic hope to a future messiah.

When Jesus made his home in Capernaum, Matthew interpreted it as a fulfillment of Isa. 9:1-2, that light would shine on the people of Zebulon and Naphtali (Matt. 4:13-16). Surprisingly, the Gospels do not attribute the titles in 9:6-7 to Jesus: perhaps they realized that the eternal reign of peace still awaits fulfillment.

This text challenges us to do more than celebrate Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s hope. Rather than simply spiritualizing Isaiah’s message, may we remember that many people of our world also face days of darkness and gloom. Forlorn immigrants from war-torn countries long for light and security, for justice and righteousness that are not just a future hope, but a present reality.

As children of God and followers of the Prince of Peace, we are called to devote our best efforts toward bringing peace and justice – security and equality – to the world in which we live.

As we recall Isaiah’s promise that “the zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this,” may we remember that we are counted among the hosts of those whom God has called to live as model citizens of the Kingdom, working for peace and justice throughout the earth. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 29, 2017

Micah 6:1-8

## A Time for Mercy

As January draws to an end, our New Year's resolutions may already have gone by the wayside, but it's still a time to think about how we plan to carry out our lives during the coming year.

What do we want to do, and what do others expect of us? What does our family expect? What's expected in our job, or in our volunteer positions? What does our community or our country expect? More importantly, what does God expect of us? ↓

## A challenging lawsuit (vv. 1-5)

Fortunately, the Bible offers a very good answer. It is found in the writings of the prophet Micah, who lived and worked in Israel during the eighth century before Christ. Micah, like his contemporaries Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah of Jerusalem, often pointed out how Israel had fallen short of God's expectations for them. ↓

In a speech that opens chapter 6, Micah portrayed a dramatic scene in which God called Israel to court with the mountains and hills, the "enduring foundations of the earth," as both witnesses and jury (6:1-2). ↓

Acting as God's prosecuting attorney, Micah asked "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have

### Micah 6:8

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

I wearied you? Answer me!" (v. 3). Although the people of Israel were being charged, Micah began by asking why they could possibly be complaining against God. Were they tired of waiting for an easier life, when their present troubles were their own fault? Was God not living up to their expectations of a carefree life?

Like other prophets, Micah pointed to the many ways in which Yahweh had been faithful to Israel. God had brought the people up from Egypt, providing Moses as their leader, Aaron as their priest, and Miriam as a prophet (v. 4).

When King Balak of Moab paid the pagan shaman Balaam to pronounce a curse on Israel, Yahweh forced him to speak only good of the people's future (v. 5a). When the people were finally ready to enter the Promised Land, God led them from Shittim, their last camp east of the Jordan, to Gilgal, their first camp in Canaan (v. 5b). Had the people forgotten these things?

## A poor defense (vv. 6-7)

Micah believed the people had failed to appreciate God's blessings and had ignored God's guidance. He perceived that they had substituted religion for righteousness. They understood

rituals, but not respect. They were really good at religion: they worshiped at the temple, sacrificed animals, and paid requisite tithes, but the way they lived was a different matter.

Micah saw through the trappings of eighth-century Israel's religious practices to recognize that the people had reduced their religion to a system of bribing God with prayers and sacrifices in hopes that God would adopt a positive attitude toward them, but it wasn't God's attitude that needed changing. It was theirs.

The people's only defense, which Micah quoted sarcastically in vv. 6-7, was locked into the categories of ritual and sacrifice. "What do you expect of us?" he portrayed them as asking. "How do you want us to approach you? With whole burnt offerings? With year-old calves? With thousands of rams, or tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall we sacrifice our firstborn children as payment of our transgressions?" (vv. 6-7).

Whole burnt offerings, the "ōlā" or "holocaust" sacrifice, called for an entire animal, usually a young sheep or goat, to be burned on the altar. These were offered less often than *shelamim* offerings, in which God was offered the blood and visceral fat, while worshipers and the priests cooked and ate the meat. Did God want a higher percentage of whole burnt offerings, or for more of them to be year-old calves, which were more valuable than younger animals?

With increasing sarcasm, Micah imagined them upping the ante. Does Yahweh want *thousands* of rams? *Ten thousand rivers* of valuable olive oil? Would God never be pleased? Should they go all the way and sacrifice their

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first-born children to atone for their sins?

The answer, of course, was “No” on all counts. Child sacrifice was expressly forbidden by the law (Lev. 18:21, 20:2-5, Deut. 18:10), and the prophets strongly condemned it (Jer. 7:31, 19:5; Ezek. 16:20–21, 20:26; Isa. 57:5).

Micah understood that God was not interested in more ritual sacrifices or more religious acts. God wanted Israel to be righteous, not just religious, and that desire has not changed. Christians are not called to religion so much as to a right relationship with God and others. As Ralph L. Smith put it, “So when we come before God we must remember that it is not so much what is in our hands but what is in our hearts that finds expression in our conduct that is important” (*Micah–Malachi*, vol. 32 of *Word Biblical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 51).

### What God expects (v. 8)

And so, in God’s behalf, Micah offered a remarkable response that countless believers have memorized as a guideline for life: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8).

We live in a world where people practice prejudice, love selfishness, and walk arrogantly as their own gods. But this is what God expects from us as we go out to put our stamp on the world: that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before God.

Micah did not claim that this was any new revelation. “He has (already) told you,” he said. The teaching of Moses, the 10 commandments, the proclamation of other prophets had often declared the kind of attitudes and actions that God expects. ⚓

What does it mean to “do justice”?

Micah used the word “*mishpat*.” It is a term that could describe a legal decision or judgment, but more often referred to actions that are right and just for all people. ⚓

Amos, Micah’s contemporary, preached along similar themes. In words that are more familiar to us from a speech by Martin Luther King than from Amos, he also called on Israel to stop putting their trust in elaborate religious rituals. Instead, he said, “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

It is so easy for custom and culture to blind us to injustice. Popular “reality” television competitions depict settings in which lying, cheating, backstabbing and betrayal are all okay because “that’s how you play the game.” But life is not just a game, and others do matter.

Justice begins with respect for others, including those who look different, those who talk different, and even those who have different ideas. As Dr. King famously said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” ⚓

Now what is our motivation for practicing genuine justice? Are we to go out on a limb and stand up for others just because God said so? Are principles and ideals of justice enough?

Of course not. Micah’s audience had the law. They had a very clear set of moral and ethical codes to live by – but they weren’t following them. That’s because real justice cannot be motivated by fear of breaking the law alone. Real justice starts in the heart. It not only respects other people, but loves them and wants what is best for them.

That’s why Micah goes on to say “to do justice, and to love kindness.” That latter phrase can be translated in different ways. The familiar KJV and the NIV say “to love mercy.” The NAU

and NRSV have “to love kindness.” The NET says “to be faithful.” All of these elements are important, and it is this kind of faithful, steadfast love that motivates real justice. ⚓

Justice and mercy grow directly from a daily walk with God. Micah reminds us that we are called not only to walk with God, but also to walk humbly, modestly, and attentively.

So many problems in our world could be overcome if more of us could learn the art of humility. Any time people are dead certain that they have all the answers, one can be dead certain that strife will follow.

When religious leaders of any persuasion think they have a handle on all truth, or when political leaders think their way is the only way, or when husbands and wives are unwilling to compromise, there *will* be strife. There *will* be hurt. There *will* be pain.

Unless we are willing to admit that we might be wrong about something, or that the reality of a situation might be bigger than we yet comprehend, there is no room for change or growth in our own life, or in our relationships with others, or even in our relationship with God.

We can’t know all the answers and walk humbly with God at the same time. God is far beyond our comprehension, bigger than what is revealed in the Bible, surpassing our imagination. There is much God wants to teach us, but we cannot learn if we are not teachable, and we are not teachable if we do not have some humility about us.

We may wonder about many things, but we don’t have to wonder what God expects of us. We are called to *do justice*, to *love kindness*, to *walk humbly* with our God. If we can do that, we can be absolutely sure that our communities, our nation, our world will all be better for it – and that would be a *very* good thing. NfJ



# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 5, 2017

Matthew 5:13-20

## *Salt, Light, and Law*

**H**ave you ever had your worldview challenged? From childhood, we generally develop an embedded understanding of how things are. Our cultural biases, levels of aspiration, and general attitudes toward life are formed early and stay late – unless further experiences lead us to reevaluate. That may happen when we move to a different location, go off to college, enter the armed forces, spend time in a different culture, or come face to face with heartache or tragedy. Such things can shift our way of seeing the world.

With his “beatitudes,” Jesus turned traditional ways of thinking upside down, pronouncing blessings on unlikely people. Who would think being poor, grieving, or meek could merit the term “blessed,” which can also be translated as “happy”?

Teachings that follow in the “Sermon on the Mount” also put an interesting twist on common conceptions of righteousness. Jesus knew these would put him at odds with the religious authorities and with the common religious thought of the day, but he had come to teach a new way of righteousness. His teachings were not out of touch with the typical tenets of Judaism, but designed to go “higher and deeper” into a new way of life. 📖

### Matthew 5:17

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

### On being salty (v. 13)

In modern English, “salty” is not a compliment, but suggests coarse or vulgar behavior. Salty language is inappropriate for delicate ears. Jesus used the metaphor in a much more positive way, challenging his followers to remain faithful and make the world a better place. “You are the salt of the earth,” he said (v. 13a).

Salt can be used both to flavor food and to preserve it. In the ancient world, where refrigeration was non-existent, salt was so highly valued and necessary that compensation for Roman soldiers included an allowance for salt: both “salt” and “salary” are derived from *sal*, the Latin word for salt. 📖

Egyptian, Greek, and Roman physicians used salt as a disinfectant or in healing ointments and poultices. Hebrew midwives or mothers rubbed newborn babies with salt (Ezek. 16:4), possibly to ward off infection as well as to symbolize a wish that the child would live a life of integrity. The Israelites thought of salt as a symbol of faithfulness and probity: they were to include salt in their sacrifices and offerings as a “covenant of salt” that called for faithful living (Lev. 2:13, Num. 18:19, 2 Chron. 13:5).

Jesus used the metaphor to challenge his followers to add a lasting and flavorful quality to their commu-

nities and the world. As they exhibited the love and character of Christ, they would make life better for all. 📖

What did Jesus mean by the additional phrase, “but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored”? Today we can buy salt – cheaply – that is pure sodium chloride, often with a bit of iodine added as an easy way to prevent thyroid problems caused by an iodine deficiency.

In our experience, when salt dissolves, it disappears entirely. In first century Palestine, however, much of the salt commonly sold on the street came from the Dead Sea, which has a salt content of 29 percent: seven times more concentrated than ocean water.

Less than half of the salt content in Dead Sea water is sodium chloride, however. And, whether collected from aggregates on the shore or evaporated from the water, the salt was typically mixed with sandy grains of gypsum.

Gypsum had the same appearance as the salt, but it did not dissolve or add flavor. Once the salt was dissolved, there might be a residue that had the appearance of salt, but it was not salt, and it was good for nothing other than to be thrown out.

Jesus was all too familiar with people whose faith was all show and no substance. He challenged his followers to be salt, not sand; to live out a faith that had real substance, not just show.

### On being light (vv. 14-16)

Believers are to be not only genuine, but also visible. “You are the light of the world,” Jesus said. “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel

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basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (v. 14a, 15). Jesus’ point was clear: there’s no purpose in lighting a lamp if it’s not going to be seen or provide illumination for a useful space.

Jesus lived long before the advent of electricity or even gas lamps. After dark, people lit their homes with small lamps that burned olive oil. The lamps were typically the size of a person’s palm, so they could be carried easily from place to place and set on a table or into a niche in the wall. Oil was expensive and not to be wasted: no one would think of lighting a lamp and then hiding it. 📌

John’s gospel records Jesus saying, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:5), but Jesus knew that he would not always be physically present. His light would need to shine on through his followers. That’s why he went on to say “*you* are the light of the world.”

As the lights of a hilltop city make it clearly visible to anyone who can see, so his followers were to shine as beacons of goodness and grace and hope. In case they had failed to understand by now, Jesus charged them: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (v. 16).

It’s likely that Jesus was familiar with a religious community known as the Essenes, a Jewish sect whose members chose to live in isolation so they could better follow strict guidelines of purity. They sought to be righteous, but remained apart from others, keeping their light to themselves. Jesus wanted his disciples’ faithful living to benefit someone other than themselves or even other Jews: they were the light of the *world*.

Modern believers who hear Jesus today might benefit from comparing

the time we spend inside the church with our efforts to bring Christ’s light and love into the world. Does our light shine only within the bushel basket of our church building? Others cannot see or experience the light of Christ within us and be inspired to turn toward God if believers do not carry their light – and their good works – into the world. 📌

### Jesus and the law (vv. 17-20)

Jesus’ teaching often seemed at odds with the traditional laws of Judaism and rabbinic interpretations of the Pentateuch. Some might have responded by thinking that Jesus had come to abolish the law, but that was not the case. Jesus wanted his hearers to understand that his work did not dismiss the law, but fulfilled it (v. 17).

Jesus’ statement that “not one letter or one stroke of a letter” (v. 18) would pass away does not imply that believers should slavishly follow every aspect of the Old Testament law, however: in the following verses, Jesus directly challenged some of those very tenets.

It may seem counterintuitive, but the true fulfillment of the law might involve doing away with or moving past some less important or culturally conditioned aspects of the law: otherwise Christians would still be commanded to eat kosher and offer animal sacrifices for *yom kippur*, and the Apostle Paul would be spinning in his grave.

To fulfill the law is to understand and live out God’s purpose in giving the law. The late Malcolm Tolbert explained it this way: “God’s purpose, as revealed in the Bible, is to create a people who will love and serve him and one another. This purpose was behind God’s dealing with Israel,

including his giving of the law, and it was brought to fruition in the life of Jesus the Messiah. In this way the law, seen in its totality, is fulfilled” (*Good News from Matthew* [Broadman Press: 1975], 43).

To fulfill the law is neither to be loose nor legalistic with its teachings, but to seek its true meaning through what God has done in Christ. Luke quoted Jesus as agreeing with an expert in the Jewish law that the essence of the law was to love God with all one’s being, and to love others as oneself (Luke 10:25-28).

People of Jesus’ day regarded the scribes and Pharisees, who sought to fulfill every tiny requirement of the law, as being especially righteous – to the extent that they would tithe even from seasoning herbs grown in their gardens. Later, Jesus charged them with hypocrisy: “For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matt. 23:23).

Jesus told his followers that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. But how could one go beyond the legendary righteousness of Judaism’s religious all-stars? To illustrate his meaning, Jesus threw out a series of illustrations of how the law had been interpreted in the past, and how the fulfillment of the law through his teaching and work might be different. We will focus on these teachings in the next two lessons. 📌

In the meantime, today’s text has given us plenty to think about. Are we bright and salty Christians more righteous than those who practiced professional piety? What are some practical ways we can be salt and light to the people in our lives during this coming week?

The world is waiting. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*


Feb. 12, 2017

Matthew 5:21-37

## Then, and Now

**W**hat do you do when touchy subjects come up in conversation? Some people speak boldly and don't seem to care if they cause offense. Others prefer to leave delicate issues alone. While Jesus was known for his compassion and care, Matthew's gospel suggests that he sometimes took on topics that he knew might cause consternation, but did so in order to speak to the high ideals of the kingdom.

The collection of teachings Matthew has set into Jesus' famed "Sermon on the Mount" (chs. 5-7) begins with the encouraging "Beatitudes" (5:1-12) before moving to a charge for believers to be salt and light in the world (5:13-16). Jesus then prepared to launch into a series of challenges to current understandings of the law by insisting that his teaching did not violate or abolish the law, but established its true intent (5:17-20).

Jesus addressed several sensitive subjects: anger (5:21-26), lust (5:27-30), divorce (5:31-32), oaths (5:33-37), revenge (5:38-42), and love (5:43-48). 


Today we consider what Jesus had to say about anger, lust, divorce, and oaths.

Buckle your seatbelts.

### Matthew 5:23-4

"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."


### Murder and anger (vv. 21-26)

Everyone understood that murder was against the law (v. 21, Exod. 20:3), but Jesus explained that it was not enough to simply refrain from killing fellow believers. Holding on to anger or rage toward others was also sinful, Jesus said. There is a righteous kind of anger that Jesus would endorse, but this kind of interpersonal anger is not it.  Bearing grudges against others may not end in murder, but it results in murderous and harmful feelings.



In the ancient world, where names carried great significance, the act of name-calling was a more serious matter than today. There is nothing magic about using the word "fool" that will make one liable to judgment: the Aramaic word *raqa'* meant something like "idiot," in a particularly derogatory sense. Using it was wrong (v. 22).

Note that Jesus is speaking mainly of behavior within the community, toward Christian brothers and sisters. Not being able to see beyond our own anger can escalate into insults and degrading words, and words are weapons. They can kill both reputations and relationships. If believers cannot act with love toward each other, how can they be a witness to the world?

In first century Judaism, character defamation could make one subject

to discipline from the local council or even the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Ultimately, Jesus said, hateful attitudes could lead to "the hell of fire." In this he was using hyperbole as a rhetorical device, not condemning angry people to everlasting torment. 

Jesus understood that those who bear hatred or unresolved grievances toward others cannot truly worship God in good conscience. As Jesus would teach in "the Lord's prayer," we cannot expect God to forgive us if we do not forgive others.

Coming to church and bringing our tithes is important – but resolving grudges or differences with others is even more important.  Note that Jesus extends this responsibility to those who share reciprocal anger or are objects of others' wrath: we should take the initiative to be reconciled (vv. 23-26). 

### Adultery and lust (vv. 27-32)

Moving from murder to adultery, Jesus again showed that the core problem is one of the heart and mind, not just of actions. The prohibition of adultery was well known (Exod. 20:4, Deut. 5:17), and it could bring severe penalties for perpetrators, including death. Jesus insisted that believers are accountable for lustful thoughts as well as adulterous behavior (vv. 27-28).

For ancient Hebrews, adultery referred primarily to a man having sex with another man's wife, rather than being a blanket term for extramarital sex. The sin, in Judaism, was against the husband or father of the woman, as it damaged someone who, though not exactly his property, was under his

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control and of considerable economic value. 

The directives to gouge out one's right eye or chop off one's right hand rather than face eternal destruction are intended as hyperbole (vv. 29-30). Though such punishments were known in Jewish law, Jesus knew that lust is conceived in the heart and mind: one-handed or one-eyed people are at no handicap when it comes to lechery. The point is that we should take whatever actions are necessary to get lascivious thoughts under control.

Some consider the saying on divorce in vv. 31-32 as a separate antithesis, while others interpret it as a natural extension of the teaching on adultery (a similar teaching is found in Matt. 19:3-9).

In Jesus' day, Jewish women could leave their husbands or pressure them for a divorce, but only husbands had the legal standing to authorize a "bill of divorcement." This is referenced in Deut. 24:1, which allows a husband to divorce his wife if "she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her."

The rabbis interpreted this differently: the school of Shammai argued that the only sufficiently objectionable quality was sexual sin on the part of the wife. Hillel and his followers, in contrast, argued that a man could count it as "something objectionable" if his wife burned the dinner or failed to be as attractive as some other woman.

As Matthew relates it, Jesus taught that God intended for marriage to be permanent and that divorce should be allowed only "on the ground of unchastity." This translates the word *porneia*, which described a broader field of sexual misbehavior than the typical word for adultery. 

From the perspective of Jesus' teaching, men should not divorce their wives for selfish reasons, violating the

law and putting their wives – and any future husbands – in the position of becoming adulterous according to the law.

Again, the problem is in the heart. For either the husband or the wife, thinking so highly of one's selfish desires that he or she would dismiss the person who should be closest to them is a sinful and harmful act that falls far short of God's ideal.

### Oaths (vv. 33-37)

Jesus next turned to the subject of oaths and keeping one's word. There was no Old Testament command that one should make oaths, though they were allowed, and the breaking of oaths was roundly condemned (Exod. 20:7, Lev. 19:12, Zech. 8:17). Unfortunately, many translations and commentaries fail to distinguish between oaths and vows, using the terms interchangeably when they were in fact two different things.

In the Old Testament world, continuing into the first century, vows were conditional promises made directly to God: one would ask God for a particular benison, and promise to give God something in return if the prayer was answered. Hannah, for example, asked God for a son, and promised to return the boy to God if the prayer was granted (1 Samuel 1).

An oath, on the other hand, consisted of a promise to do something, accompanied by a self-imprecation that invited God to bring punishment if the person did not fulfill the promise. King Jehoram, for example, pledged to assassinate Elisha, saying "So may God do to me, and more, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat stays on his shoulders today" (2 Kgs 6:31, NRSV). In most cases, the full form was abbreviated, and over time people came to swear, not only by God, but by Jerusalem, by the temple, the gold in the temple, the

temple's altar, or the gift on the altar. 

This led to a practice of equivocating, as the rabbis distinguished between which oaths were binding, and which were not. Jesus took such interpretations to task, insisting that believers should not break their oaths, but live up to their word (v. 33).

To those who sought to make impressive but non-binding oaths, Jesus reminded them that anything they swore by – whether the earth, Jerusalem, or even one's head – belonged to God, and therefore implied that the oath had appealed to God and was therefore binding (vv. 34-36).

It's better yet, Jesus said, to avoid swearing at all. Believers should live with such integrity that they need no oaths to reinforce the truthfulness of their word or the faithfulness of their promise. "Let your word be 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no,'" Jesus said. This did not suggest a new form of swearing by saying "yes" or "no" twice, but was simply a method of emphasis indicating the sincerity of one's word.

Feeling the need to swear by our mother's grave or anything else automatically implies that we are untrustworthy and subject to the temptation to break our promise.

Unlike some religious sects, we should not take this as a programmatic ban on submitting to an oath when testifying in court or being "sworn in" to public office. Jesus' challenge is that we should be people of our word who have no need to initiate an oath: his concern was not to create a new law prohibiting believers from participating in legal requirements of society.

Whether the subject is spiteful anger, endangering lust, or breaking one's word, Jesus' teaching goes beyond the law. The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart – and a willingness to follow the one who rules our heart. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 19, 2017

Matthew 5:38-48

## Seriously?

“Seriouly?” Perhaps you’ve said that, when someone made a request or demand that you thought was ridiculous, stretching it, over the top.

We might have responded in the same way if we had been there when Jesus spoke the words in today’s text. We might do the same when we read them today. “Really?” “You’ve got to be kidding!”

Give to anyone who asks? Love my enemies? *Be perfect?*

Seriouly?

Let’s find out.

## Don’t retaliate? (vv. 38-39)

Today’s text continues a series of antithetical teachings in which Jesus offered a new take on the Jewish law, going beyond legalistic traditions to get at the underlying principles of behavior that God desires. Jesus insisted that he had not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill their true intent for human behavior and divine relationship (v. 17).

Accepted norms in our culture expect everyone to look out for himself or herself. We live in a world of retaliation and retribution, a world of tit-for-tat relationships where good begets good

### Matthew 5:48


“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

and evil begets evil. At an early age, children learn to excuse their misbehavior by saying “He hit me first!”

We know the rules of this world, and we are pretty good at playing by them. We know how to win by these rules, but Jesus’ teaching messes with our understanding of how the game is played. His ideas sound very much like a recipe for being a loser, and we don’t want to be losers.


The truth is, when Jesus proclaimed what it is like to be children of God and citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, he was describing the rules for a different game altogether. It’s not a game in which the winners gain the most money and bankrupt everyone else, as in Monopoly. It’s not a game in which we root for others’ misfortune because it’s good for our business or stock positions. It’s not a game in which the winners physically outplay their opponents and run up more points, as in basketball or football or wrestling.

The winners in this game are those who love other people so much that they are willing to put the interests of others first, even when the others don’t deserve it, even when the others are ungrateful and wicked.

And Jesus expects us to play by these rules? 


*Seriouly?*

In Matt. 5:21-37, the text for last week’s lesson, Jesus radically reinterpreted traditional laws concerning murder, adultery, divorce, and oaths. Consistently, his teaching went

beyond the letter of the law to focus on the purpose behind it. Murder is the unhealthy outgrowth of spiteful anger, and adultery is the product of sinful lust. Both need to be controlled, by extreme measures if necessary. Believers should live with such faithful integrity that neither divorce nor oath taking should be necessary. 

Still, in every case, Jesus challenged believers to move past the law and focus on a new kingdom ethic. In today’s text, we find him continuing that pattern with further teachings about a proper response to people who mean us harm: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (vv. 38-39).

Can’t you imagine his disciples looking at each other with raised eyebrows that asked the unspoken question: “Really?”

The law of “an eye for an eye,” commonly known as *lex talionis*, is attested as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century BCE, where it appears in the famous law code of Hammurabi, the sixth king of the first Babylonian dynasty.  References to the law appear three times in the Old Testament, where damaged eyes and teeth are not the only things subject to reciprocal penalties: hands, feet, fractures, and even lives are cited as examples (Exod. 21:24, Lev. 24:20, Deut. 19:21).

The purpose of *lex talionis*, or “lawful retaliation,” was to limit vengeance and keep conflict from escalating. The principle was stated in terms suggesting that victims of injury could retaliate with equivalent injuries

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to the one who harmed them, but by the time of Jesus things were usually settled with monetary payments rather than eyes and teeth. The law was also designed to curb immediate vengeance that could get out of hand: cases were taken to court and the penalty had to be authorized by a judge.

The custom was so old and well known that it was probably never questioned until Jesus came along and demanded, not equal retaliation, but *no* retaliation. In the first century world, a backhanded slap to the right cheek was particularly demeaning, bringing insult with injury. Jesus taught that the victim of such opprobrium should not slap back, but stand his ground and turn the other cheek, inviting a second blow.

Can you imagine? Jesus must have shocked his listeners by replacing permission to retaliate with a call to repay evil with good, but he wasn't done.

### Give freely? (vv. 40-42)

Responding to a physical insult with grace was just one example of how one could subvert the evil in another's hurtful behavior. Jesus cited an instance in which someone sued another person, asking for his tunic (a better translation than the NRSV's "coat").

The tunic was a person's main article of clothing: like a shirt, but knee length or longer. Jesus did not address whether the lawsuit was legitimate, any more than whether the blow to the right cheek was deserved. He simply said something like "If they demand your clothes, give them your outer cloak, too" (v. 40).

It's unlikely that Jesus was encouraging his followers to leave the courtroom and walk around naked: his shocking demand was designed to support the principle of loving grace over prideful reprisals.

The same principle would apply if a Roman soldier should conscript a citizen to carry his gear for a mile – a custom that applied in Jesus' time (v. 41). Jesus suggested that one should volunteer to carry it for another mile, showing grace by going beyond what was required.

Jesus' further commands that we give to beggars and make loans without question (v. 42) follow the same theme. Jesus wanted his followers to model a profoundly different approach to relationships: one that elevated grace over law, service over recompense, love over power, and generosity over greed. In every case, these examples took the Old Testament law into entirely new territory.

### Love enemies? (vv. 43-48)

Jesus' shocking new demands culminated in his commands to love one's enemies and pray even for abusive people (vv. 43-44). In this way, Jesus' followers could get a taste of what it meant to be "children of your Father in heaven" – who has set the example by providing life-giving sunshine and rain to all people, whether righteous or not (v. 45).

Jesus expanded the traditional interpretation of the law that limited caring responsibility to fellow Jews or family members. Showing love only to those who love in return is inherently selfish: learning to love the unloving is a lesson in selflessness (vv. 46-47).

In Jesus' teaching, foreigners, strangers and the despised Samaritans were neighbors in need of love and compassion. Even enemies – people who intentionally intended harm – fell into the category of people in need of our love and prayers.

Old Testament writers knew that God's self-declared character was "merciful and gracious, slow to anger,

and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exod. 34:6, cited or reflected in Num. 14:18; Pss. 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3).

In a sense, Jesus was challenging his followers to look past the law to the lawgiver, and to act in the same merciful, gracious, patient, loving, and faithful way that God related to the world. For Christ-followers to follow God's example, they must go beyond reciprocal expressions of love to people who love them back, and show grace even to those who are hateful.

Jesus concluded with a call to "be perfect," even as God is perfect. Once again we ask, "Seriously?"

It may help a bit to know that the Greek word Matthew used (*teleios*) does not mean absolute perfection as we might think of it. Rather, it means "complete," "whole," "mature," or "having attained the end." It is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew *tamim*, used to speak of persons who were ethically upright (Noah in Gen. 6:9; Job in Job 1:1). It is comparable to God's challenge in the Torah to "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 19:2). In Luke's version of this same teaching, he has Jesus conclude with "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Context is our best guide to meaning. Here, to be perfect or spiritually mature is to live as Jesus lived, to follow his teachings by demonstrating unselfish grace and love to others.

When responding to others' actions, whether loving or indifferent or hateful, we typically base our behavior on who they are or what they have done. Rather, we should respond on the basis of who we know ourselves to be as God's children, and act out of the Spirit-empowered love that dwells within us.

Is that radical? Absolutely. Did Jesus really mean it? Yes.

Can we do it? That remains to be seen. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 26, 2017

Matthew 17:1-9

## Keeping Secrets

Superheroes are ubiquitous these days: blockbuster movies, TV series, comic books, and children's cartoons regularly feature drab "normal" characters who can quickly transform themselves into tights-wearing superheroes at a moment's notice. It's all fantasy, but one that people have enjoyed at least as long as Superman comics have been around. ↓

Our text for today describes the one man in history whose transformation was not just super, but supernatural. What's more, those who choose to follow Jesus can be transformed, too.

### A special appearance (vv. 1-2)

We often refer to this memorable story as the "Transfiguration of Christ." ↓ Matthew's account is set near the end of Jesus' ministry, as he prepared to make his final journey to Jerusalem. As if seeking to renew his strength for the journey – and to give instruction to his closest followers – Jesus led his 12 disciples northward in Canaan to the territory near the city of Caesarea-Philippi, and they rested there near the foot of snow-capped Mt. Hermon in a beautiful and fertile area. Nearby was a temple dedicated to the worship of the Roman emperor, and not far away

#### Matthew 17:5

"While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'"

was an area devoted to the nature-god Pan. Jesus was about to show them who truly deserved their worship.

Three men among the Twelve were closer to Jesus than the others (compare Matt. 26:37; Mark 5:37, 13:3). ↓ Perhaps Jesus depended on them to learn some lessons first, and then explain them to the others. So it was that he took Peter and James and John with him as they climbed the mountain in search of an isolated spot for a special time of prayer.

As they prayed, something totally unexpected happened. Jesus' appearance was suddenly – and radically – changed. Matthew and Mark describe it by using a Greek word that is the root of our word "metamorphosis." Jesus was *transformed*. Luke tells us that "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." Matthew says "his face shone like the sun."

What the Gospel writers seem to be suggesting is that Jesus, who had been disguised as a Galilean peasant, threw off his human image and reverted to his heavenly, glorified appearance. Perhaps his clothes shone so brightly because his body, like his face, was shining through. If the event took place at night, as we might suppose, the effect would have been especially impressive. ↓

Jesus was *transformed*. Somehow, some way, something miraculous

happened. God's eternal world and time bloomed into our ordinary world and time, and the disciples were granted a brief vision of something beyond.

Matthew expected readers to recall that Moses' face had also shone so brightly after spending time with God that it frightened the Israelites, and he had to wear a veil (Exod. 34:29-35). As the disciples looked at Jesus, "his face shone like the sun." ↓

### Special guests (vv. 3-4)

Suddenly, Jesus was not only transformed, but also standing in the company of Moses himself, along with the prophet Elijah (v. 3). Luke says that Moses and Elijah appeared "in glory," suggesting that their appearance may have been much like that of Jesus. The Old Testament claimed that Elijah did not die, but was carried to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kgs. 2:11). Moses' death was shrouded in such mystery that a rabbinic tradition presumed that God had also taken him directly to heaven. ↓

The presence of Moses and Elijah carried significant symbolism. Judaism had strong traditions that Moses and Elijah would return to earth before the "Day of the Lord." Moses represented the Law, and Elijah the Prophets. The Law and the Prophets were the twin traditions upholding Israel's faith. Yet now the Law and the Prophets, present in Moses and Elijah, were upholding Jesus and giving way to him.

Of the three dumbfounded disciples, Peter alone had the wherewithal to speak, though he wasn't sure what to say. He knew the moment was special. He didn't know how long Moses and Elijah would stay, but felt an

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obligation to show them proper hospitality. So, he spoke up in fumbling, embarrassed words and offered to cut down limbs from the trees to build temporary shelters for Jesus and Moses and Elijah (v. 4).

It's almost comical to think about it – the idea that Moses and Elijah, having “beamed down” from heaven in fiery, glorified bodies, would have any interest in taking up lodging in a hillside lean-to. At least Luke was kind enough to add, “he didn't know what he said.” The suggestion, however, was not entirely inappropriate, because faithful Jews built similar shelters every year when they observed the “Feast of Booths,” which celebrated the Exodus.

### Special words (vv. 5-8)

If Jesus responded to Peter's request, Matthew does not record it, for as he was speaking, a bright cloud descended with surprising suddenness, enveloping them all (v. 5). The disciples, understandably, were terrified. In addition to the inherently spooky nature of the event, they would have remembered that in the Old Testament, when God appeared, it was often in a cloud. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more.)

Try to imagine the scene: when the cloud descended over Jesus, Moses, Elijah, and the three disciples – God was present. They could *feel* the divine nearness. And they were shaking in their sandals.

From the cloud came a voice – obviously to be understood as the voice of God – and the three awestruck disciples fell to their faces. When God spoke, the voice repeated the same words that were spoken at Jesus' baptism, with the addition of an injunction to pay him heed: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (v. 5).

As quickly as the voice had spoken, all was still and the cloud departed. When the bedazed and bedazzled disciples peeked out through their fingers, there was Jesus alone. Only Matthew says that Jesus came and offered a comforting touch and encouraging words: “Get up and do not be afraid” (v. 7).

“*This is my Son ...*,” God had said. “*Listen to him!*” Had they been awake, or sleeping? Was it real, or was it a dream? Matthew, alone of the Gospels, called it a vision (v. 9). Whether visionary or real, the effect was the same. The disciples were overwhelmed with wonder.

That Jesus was left alone after the heavenly visitors departed underscored his supremacy to the law and the prophets, for Moses and Elijah were gone. Only Jesus remained (v. 8). Just as God's voice had spoken at Jesus' baptism, validating his call and his ministry, so now God's voice had spoken again to impress the disciples with the truth that Jesus knew who he was and what he was doing – and they had best give attention to his words.

One can imagine how excited the disciples were to have caught a heart-stopping glimpse of Jesus' true nature, with Moses, Elijah, and the voice of God from a cloud witnessing to his divinity. Surely they would have been buzzing with exhilaration, anxious to tell others what they had seen – and no doubt they would have been completely confused when Jesus instructed them to keep it to themselves: “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead” (v. 9).

Why would Jesus want them to keep such amazing news a secret? Because neither the disciples nor the broader coterie of his followers could yet comprehend what Jesus was really

about. Jesus knew how many people expected God to send a military messiah who would lead an uprising against Rome. He had trouble enough controlling that sentiment as it was, even among his own disciples. If word of Jesus' divine transformation and attestation became public knowledge, public clamor for Jesus to lead a political uprising could derail his mission.

Only after Jesus' death and resurrection would it be appropriate to reveal what the disciples had seen, reinforcing the divine intention behind the crucifixion and resurrection. In a sense, the transfiguration foreshadowed Jesus' ascension to heaven, which would also take place on a mountain (Matt. 28:16-20). In the meantime, the three disciples would have to sit tight on an awesome secret.

The good news of this story is that Jesus' transformation carries with it the promise of our own inner and ultimate transformation. It may be hard for us to believe this. The real world we inhabit surrounds us with family demands, financial concerns, work to do, and people to please. Yet, we are also privy to what the disciples saw as a touch of heaven come to earth, and the witness “This is my Son ... Listen to him!” When we listen to Jesus, he calls us to be born again, to be transformed, to become new creations by his power.

That may not happen immediately, but it does happen. We can experience God's saving grace in a moment, but our transformation is a life-long process. As Paul described it to the Corinthians: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (1 Cor. 3:18). 📖

Amazing. NFJ



## RECOGNITION & REMEMBRANCE

**Stephen V. Allen** is pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church in Carrollton, Ga., coming from South Run Baptist Church in Springfield, Va.

**Daniel Glaze** is pastor of River Road Church, Baptist in Richmond, Va., coming from First Baptist Church of Ahoskie, N.C.

**Allie Calloway Kilpatrick-Hill** died Oct. 17. Professor emeritus at the University of Georgia where she taught social work for 24 years, she was ordained to ministry by First Baptist Church of Milledgeville, Ga., in 2006 and served as a hospice chaplain and family therapist.

**René Maciel** is community life pastor at First Baptist Church of Woodway in Waco, Texas. He had served as president of Baptist University of the Americas since 2007.

**M.B. (Bobby) Morrow Jr.** died Oct. 25 in Gaffney, S.C., at age 87. He had served seven pastorates and was pastor emeritus at First Baptist Church of Gaffney.

**Janeé Tisby** is director of Together For Hope Arkansas, a rural development initiative of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. She comes from Teach for America Mississippi where she was chief of staff.

**Amanda Tyler** is executive director of the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. A graduate of the University of Texas School of Law, she earlier served as assistant to the general counsel of the BJC. She had also worked in private practice and as a law clerk before joining a congressional staff.

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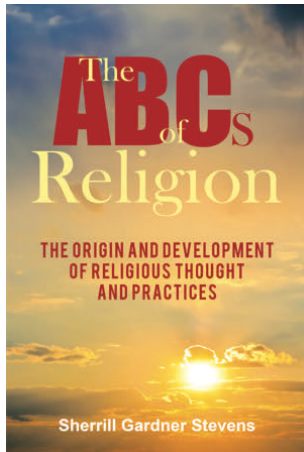
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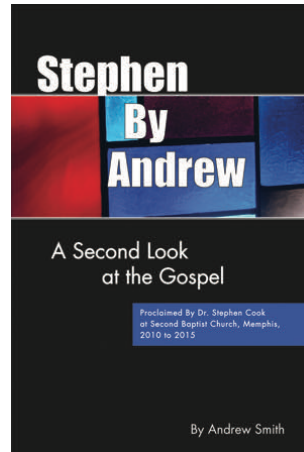


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# Stoking the

# FLAMES

## A brief history of hell and how it got in the Bible

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

What one believes about hell may well determine whether or not someone is sitting in a church pew on Sunday. According to a 2007 Baylor University national religion study, 85.3 percent of persons who attend church “weekly or more” believe in hell, while some 60 percent of those who “never” attend church don’t believe in hell.

**C**ongregationalist revivalist Jonathan Edwards certainly believed in hell and painted the place in vivid imagery in his famous 1741 sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” during the First Great Awakening:

*“O sinner! consider the fearful danger you are in! It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath that you are held over in the hand of that God whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of Divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it and burn it asunder.... It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will*



Hell, as illustrated in *Hortus Deliciarum*. By Herrad of Landsberg, c. 1100.

*be no end to this exquisite, horrible misery... You will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages in wrestling with this Almighty, merciless vengeance."*

Such preaching led Mark Twain to call Edwards "a resplendent intellect gone mad."

Not so, said Albert Mohler, currently president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who, like Edwards is a strict Calvinist. He has called the 18<sup>th</sup>-century revivalist "a great champion of the faith once and for all delivered to the saints."

Saints are few according to Southern Baptist Convention leadership. In 1993 the SBC's Home Mission Board pronounced that 70 percent of all Americans, including more than a few Baptists, were destined for hell. The newly ascended fundamentalist leadership promised to rescue the denomination and souls by mandating biblical inerrancy.

It was a way to turn up the heat on numerical growth that didn't work too well.

In 2002 Southern Baptist evangelist Freddie Gage identified the problem: Jonathan Edwards' sermon had "disappeared" from Southern Baptist pulpits.

"The subject of hell should motivate us to be soul winners!" Gage proclaimed. "The 'seeker-friendly' movement says that if you preach on hellfire, you alienate people and run them off. But my question is, 'Where are you going to run them off to?' I know of four options: 1. Hell, 2. Hell, 3. Hell or 4. Hell!"

Gage continued: "If there is no hell, the Bible becomes a book of blunders, a book of lies, a myth, and a fairy tale..." He led Southern Baptists to stoke ever hotter the fires of hell.

Gage may well have been right: preaching on hell likely ran some people off. Other denominations hot on hell have nosedived as well.

Interestingly, almost everyone remaining in their pews believes in hell. However, there is a burning, deep, underlying problem.

The concept of hell has pagan roots and, as a result, the word has been expunged from many Bible translations. And, as usual, Mark Twain was right.

So grab your Bible and let's journey into the surprising story of biblical and mythological underworlds. The starting place is my home office in Montana — with sweeping views of the Rocky Mountains.

Montana can seem like heaven. Yet, as I write these lines, I can see hell. Two hells, in fact — with a third just out of sight around the corner.

To understand why I am surrounded by hells, we must travel back in time past Jonathan Edwards and his "Angry God" sermon. Edwards was born in 1703.

A little more than 100 years before his birth, a new word began appearing in some early English Bible translations. You guessed it: "hell."

But let's pause at the introduction of "hell" into the Bible, in order to travel much further back in time to uncover the history of hell.

Thousands of years before the emergence of English translations of the Bible, the ancient Hebrews, like those of other faiths, grappled with the meaning of death. The Old Testament bears witness to their evolving understanding of death that in time bled over into the Christian New Testament.

This ancient faith journey into the mysteries of death pointed Hebrews, and later Christians, to the underground, wherein they developed a shifting post-death theology that revolved around four particular words:

*Sheol* is a Hebrew word found some 65 times in the Old Testament. It refers

to the underground abode of the dead. In ancient times the dead were buried in communal caves, their bones eventually added to a growing pile of bones from previous burials.

In the development of Jewish thought, somewhere deep underneath the burial caves resided a literal place where, in some sense, the spirits of the deceased dwelled. However, there is no judgment of the dead in *sheol*.

*Hades* is the Greek translation of *sheol* that appears 11 times in the Greek New Testament text, including four times in the book of Revelation. In Greek mythology, *Hades* is the deity who is the ruler of the dead and for whom the Greek underworld is named.

All dead persons went to *hades*, where judgment took place. Therein the spirit of each deceased mortal was assigned, based upon a person's earthly life, to his or her fate within one of three different places.

Good persons were rewarded with entry to Elysium, a blissful, peaceful and beautiful place. Persons whose lives were equally good and bad were sent to the Asphodel Meadows, a bland place of neutrality. The just reward of the wicked was banishment to *Tartarus*, a place of punishment and torture.

In the New Testament, *hades* is also the afterlife destination of all persons. Differing from the Hebrew *sheol*, in *hades* the dead are judged to be righteous or wicked, as in Greek mythology. Diverging from Greek mythology, torment of those judged wicked is absent in the New Testament *hades*, with one exception: Luke 16:23, the parable of the rich man who died and went to *hades*, where in the fires of torment he begged Abraham for mercy.

*Gehenna* bridges the Old and New Testaments, and is literally an ancient valley outside the walls of Old Jerusalem.

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*To learn more: In 2014 Christian History Journal published a bibliography of recent books regarding the centuries-long debate about hell. Some volumes address the linguistic and historical narrative of hell, while others offer an apologetic for a given viewpoint. The bibliography is accessible at [christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/modern-debates-a-bibliography/](http://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/modern-debates-a-bibliography/).*

In the Old Testament some of the kings of Judah sacrificed children by fire in *gehenna*, for which it became a cursed place (Jer. 7:31, 19:2-6).

By New Testament times, *gehenna* was a vast garbage pit of smoldering refuse and human waste. In the New Testament, *gehenna* appears 12 times (all but one attributed to Jesus) as a metaphorical place of temporary punishment for those who in *hades* are judged as wicked.

*Tartarus* was originally the name of an ancient mythological Greek deity — and also a name for the region of the underworld: a deep abyss in the depths of Greek mythology's *hades* where evil persons, monsters and defeated gods were tormented forever.

Mentioned only in 2 Peter 2:4, *Tartarus* is referred to as the place where the angels who rebelled against God in ancient times were banished in chains. But unlike the Greek understanding of *Tartarus*, Peter proclaims that the rebellious angels are being held in chains “until judgment.” There is no eternal punishment in Peter's adaptation of *Tartarus*.

Now from ancient underworld to the 16<sup>th</sup> century: The 1560 edition of the English Geneva Bible, the first complete publication of the volume popular among Puritans (Calvinists), removed *sheol*, *hades* and *gehenna* from the biblical text in 24 instances.

In nine cases the Geneva Bible used the word “hell” as a substitute. But in 13 instances an older version of the word was used: “hel.”

Some 60 years later, the original 1611 King James Version translated most instances of *sheol*, along with all instances of *hades*, *genenna* and *tartarus*, as either “hell” or “hel.” But unlike in the Geneva Bible, “hell” was used more than “hel.”

Spelling variations in the Geneva and King James translations reflect a transitional period of the English word. Within this fluidity lies an important clue to a dark theological innovation: Hel is the name of



Botticelli's *Chart of Hell*, c. 1480

an ancient Norse goddess who ruled over Helheim, the underworld of the dead — a cold, dark place. From Hel eventually emerged, about the eighth century CE, the Anglo-Saxon/Old English word “hell,” meaning “to cover,” “to hide,” or “a place of hiding or cover.”

Which brings us back to Montana. I live in a small community just west of Bozeman where wheat and potatoes are grown. The wheat ends up in breads and cereals, and the seed potatoes are shipped to Idaho where they are planted, harvested and then sold in stores or as McDonald's fries. (Yes, many Idaho potatoes are Montana potatoes by birth.)

Between the Montana harvest and shipment to Idaho, the potatoes are placed in storage bunkers, cellars with controlled, cool temperature and high (damp) humidity. In Old English, putting potatoes in cellars was known as “helling potatoes.” Literally, the phrase meant to place potatoes underground, and is yet known among some modern-day farmers.

Those potato cellars near my house are hells: places of “hiding or cover.” But how did “hel” and “hell” get into the Bible?

Keep in mind that judgment is absent from the Old Testament *sheol*, while in the New Testament *hades* introduces judgment of the dead, *gehenna* metaphorically

represents punishment of the wicked, and *Tartarus* becomes the place where rebellious angels (not humans) are in chains until judgment.

The late fourth-century Latin Vulgate Bible, commissioned by the preeminent Roman Church, removed *sheol* and *hades* from the scriptural text. In their stead the Vulgate used the word “inferno.” Literally meaning “fire,” inferno represented the pagan mythological construct of the underground abode of the dead.

Again, in *sheol* fire did not exist, while in only one instance was fire associated with the biblical *hades*. The Vulgate, in embracing Greek and Roman mythology, represented a radical departure from the Hebrew and Greek scriptural texts. Yet the pagan, fiery underworld of perpetual torment for the wicked proved quite useful for the Church, scaring many souls into heaven.

By the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Vulgate emerged as the standard biblical translation in Christendom, the “version commonly-used” by the Church, read to the people but rarely by the people.

On the cusp of early English Bible translations entered Dante Alighieri, an intellectual and devout Roman Catholic. In his popular 14<sup>th</sup>-century epic poem *Divine Comedy*, Dante borrowed “inferno”

from the Vulgate to describe a fictionalized underground place of perpetual torment of the wicked.

Two centuries later the Geneva Bible's adoption of "hel" to describe the underworld invoked, in readers' minds, Dante's inferno. Likewise, the 1611 King James Version's transition (mostly) to "hell" was also understood in light of Dante.

In a European world transitioning from Old to New English while making the biblical text accessible in common languages, fire and eternal torment imprinted in the public eye an image of "hell" that has existed ever since. Even John Milton's popular 17<sup>th</sup>-century volume *Paradise Lost*, contrarily imaging hell as a frozen place, describes the ice as having similar powers as hellfire.

Jonathan Edwards, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century imbibing deeply of hell imagery, preached pagan mythological concepts of an underground afterlife in his vivid attempts to scare people into heaven. Oh, the dark irony!

Even as Edwards preached a fiery hell,

the ascendancy of universalism (essentially a belief in the ultimate reconciliation of all humanity to God) underpinned a growing shift away from hell and back toward the original wording of the biblical texts. Threaded throughout Protestantism and well represented among America's educated classes, universalist thought staked out a biblically literal position on death and the afterlife.

Three years before Jonathan Edwards passed away, John Wesley's New Testament translation, published in 1755, omitted hell entirely.

Wesley's New Testament foreshadowed the future of biblical translation, as most translations since that time have entirely abandoned hell, while virtually all have dropped hell from the Old Testament. Only the King James and New King James (1989) versions retain the word in both testaments.

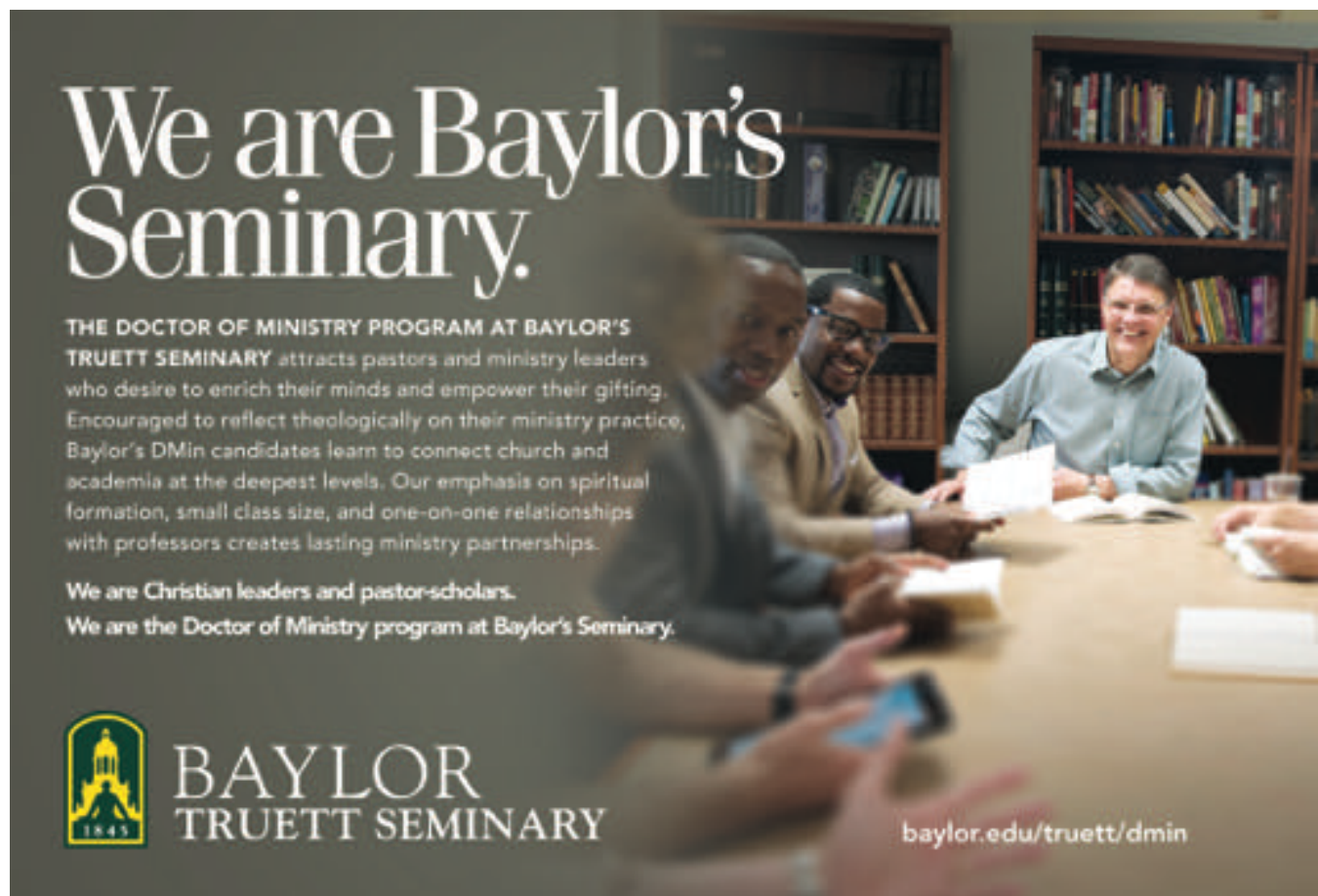
Some notable translations produced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century following, however, have clung to the use of hell in the New Testament in place of *gehenna*. These

include the American Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New International Version, Revised Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version and Southern Baptists' Holman Christian Standard Bible.

The translations yet using hell in the New Testament opt for the Greek mythological construct of *Tartarus* within *hades*, rather than the metaphorical New Testament *gehenna* they replace, in portraying a literal underworld in which the wicked are eternally tormented.

After all, should hell be banished from Bibles and driven from pulpits, fewer would likely darken the doors of church sanctuaries. But then again, a return to more accurate scripture might infuse new life into Christendom.


Now a confession: Though the editor will change it, I typed this historical foray into ancient underworlds in Helvetica font. It is a derivation of "Helviti" — the equivalent of "hell" in modern Scandinavian languages. Or, more precisely, "Hel's punishment." **NFJ**



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# Italian quake destroys historic Catholic landmarks

BY JOSEPHINE MCKENNA

*Religion News Service*

**R**OME — The strongest earthquake to strike Italy in more than three decades claimed no lives but struck at the heart of the country's vast religious and cultural heritage.

The late October quake, which measured 6.6 magnitude according to the U.S. Geological Survey, was stronger than the one that killed almost 300 people last August and it struck a region already shaken by tremors.

The quake felled several significant churches including the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Basilica of St. Benedict in the main square of Norcia, which is about 100 miles north of Rome and close to the quake's epicenter.

Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, head of the Vatican body responsible for culture, expressed his "immense sadness for all that has been destroyed including homes and livelihoods, churches and those things made by men to communicate the glory of God."

"With Norcia destroyed, it is as though the pulsating heart of Europe's faith and artistic traditions has stopped beating," he said.



The Basilica of St. Benedict in the ancient city of Norcia is seen on Oct. 31, 2016 following an earthquake in central Italy. Photo courtesy of Reuters/Remo Casilli

Around 20 people were injured and more than 15,000 people received government assistance after the quake shook an estimated 100 towns from Bolzano in northern Italy, close to the Austrian border and as far south as Puglia in the country's heel.

Believed to have been built over the birthplace of Benedict, the patron saint of Europe, the Basilica of St. Benedict is considered one of the region's most important sacred sites and draws nuns and monks from around the world, including the U.S.

"We thought it was the end of

everything," 74-year-old Sister Maria Raffaella Buoso told Reuters after she was evacuated from the nearby Monastery of the Poor Clares of Santa Maria della Pace.

Benedictine monks pledged to remain in the devastated town.

"Our cradle has vanished," Bruno Marin, superior and rector of the Benedictine congregation, told the media. "We will not leave and we will reconstruct it stone by stone with the help of God. From this wound there will be regrowth. We will go forward."

Italian cultural authorities estimated that 5,000 historic buildings were damaged by the series of earthquakes in central Italy last year.

The Santa Maria Argentea Cathedral, built in Norcia in 1556, was left in ruins.

The latest quake also damaged one of Rome's most popular basilicas, St. Paul's Outside the Walls, as well as other prominent churches in the Italian capital.

In Rome, the dome of the Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza Church, built by celebrated architect Francesco Borromini between 1642 and 1660 and considered a masterpiece of Baroque architecture, was also damaged. **NFJ**

## One-fifth of Americans raised in religiously mixed homes

BY KIMBERLY WINSTON

*Religion News Service*

**I**n another sign that America is a diverse country, a new poll reveals that 1 in 5 U.S. adults grew up in a family with more than one religion.

The poll, conducted by the Pew Research Center, also found that of those raised this way, most had one Protestant or Catholic parent and one religiously unaffiliated — sometimes called a "none" — parent.

"To be sure, religiously mixed backgrounds remain the exception in America," the report on the poll states. "But the number of Americans raised in interfaith homes appears to be growing."

That's because more millennials — 27 percent — are raised in religiously mixed homes than any other generation to date. And about the same number of young people — 24 percent — say they were raised by at least one parent who did not have a religious affiliation.

The poll also revealed:

- Those raised by at least one parent with no religious affiliation are more likely to be unaffiliated themselves (60 percent) — the same retention rate as those raised by Catholic parents.
- Children with two Catholic parents are more likely to remain Catholic (62 percent). But those raised with only one Catholic parent have a 50-50 chance of being Catholic as adults.

- Eighty percent of those raised in a Protestant-only home remain Protestants — but that number drops to 56 percent if one parent is a religious none. In either case, there is a lot of "religious switching" in Protestant families, as only one-quarter of those raised by at least one Protestant parent remains in that parent's denomination.
- More people say their mother, rather than their father, was mostly responsible for their religious upbringing; and those raised in mixed-faith homes are more likely to identify with their mother's faith.

The study was conducted among 5,000 U.S. adults and has a margin of error of 2.0 percentage points. **NFJ**

# How much is U.S. religion worth?

One demographer says \$1.2 trillion

BY LAUREN MARKOE  
*Religion News Service*

**W**ASHINGTON — Religion is big bucks — worth \$1.2 trillion annually to the American economy, according to the first comprehensive study to tabulate such a figure.

“In perspective, that would make religion the 15<sup>th</sup> largest national economy in the world, ahead of 180 other countries in terms of value,” said Georgetown University’s Brian Grim, the study’s author.

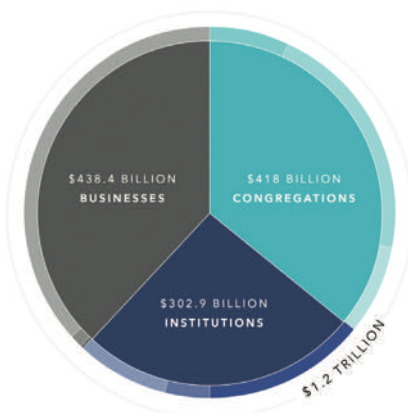
“That would also make American religion larger than the global revenues of the top 10 tech companies, including Apple, Amazon and Google,” he continued. “It would also make it 50 percent larger than the six largest American oil companies’ revenue on an annual basis.”

It might seem folly to try to put a number on religion’s value to American society. Even Grim understands why the religious and nonreligious alike might look upon the exercise skeptically.

You may think that’s not possible,” he said at the study’s release last September in Washington, and he compared it to putting a price tag on love.

“But if you realize that love often results in marriage and marriages often happen in churches ...” Grim continued. “I can tell you exactly how much money poured into center city Baltimore when my daughter got married there a year and a half ago.”

To put a value on the work of the nation’s 344,000 religious congregations — representing all faiths — Grim looked at the schools they run, the soup kitchens, the addiction recovery programs and their impact on local economies. Churches, synagogues, mosques and other houses of worship mostly spend locally — employing hundreds of thousands of people and



A pie chart represents the results of a study titled “The Socio-economic Contribution of Religion to American Society: An Empirical Analysis,” by Brian Grim of Georgetown University and Melissa Grim of Newseum. Graphic courtesy of Faith Counts

buying everything from flowers to computers to snow removal services.

Grim came up with three estimates and settled on the middle one — the \$1.2 trillion — as what he called a “conservative” appraisal of the work of religious organizations in American society annually.

Grim, an associate scholar at Georgetown’s Religious Freedom Project, said it’s good to know where religion stands. By one of his colleague’s estimates, that \$1.2 trillion equates to about 7 percent of the nation’s GDP.

But Grim also wants congregations and clergy — and the society that benefits from the charitable work of the religious — to appreciate this generosity. In a culture in which people often hear much more about the evils committed by religious people — from sex abuse scandals to genocide — it’s time for some “balance,” Grim said.

Even clergy often downplay the value of their work, said Ram Cnaan, who directs the Program for Religion and Social Policy Research at the University of Pennsylvania and came to Washington to help Grim unveil the new study.

Cnaan — though quick to describe himself as secular — hopes Grim’s work boosts the confidence of the religious and allows them to take pride in their contributions to the economy and society.

“This is a new day for the people who study congregations,” he said of the study, titled “The Socio-economic Contribution of Religion to American Society: An Empirical Analysis.”

“This is the beginning of a national debate — not if religion is important but how much it is important,” Cnaan said.

Eugene Rivers, a Pentecostal minister from Boston known for his efforts fighting crime and drug abuse, seemed glad for the acknowledgment. When it comes time to deal with the messy drug problems of the inner city, he said to the group of clergy, lay leaders and journalists gathered for the study’s unveiling, “none of the secular left shows up.”

Grim put Rivers’ point in context. Secular organizations certainly contribute generously to the social health of the nation, he said. But he also noted a recent Pew Research Center study that showed the religious are more likely to volunteer to help others, and give more to charity on average than the nonreligious.

Without the charitable work of religiously motivated people, “I don’t think we would see all the good of society disappearing,” said Grim. “But I think it would be significantly less.”

Grim’s study notes that congregations and religiously oriented charity groups are responsible for:

- 130,000 alcohol and drug abuse recovery programs.
- 94,000 programs to support veterans and their families.
- 26,000 programs to prevent HIV/AIDS and to support people living with the disease.
- 121,000 programs to train and support the unemployed.

William A. Galston, a Brookings Institution scholar and former Clinton administration official who writes on religion and society, called the \$1.2 trillion “a sensible number.” Grim’s paper, he said, can be used by religious organizations as “a credible calling card to get in the door.” **NFJ**



# ‘DIVINE DANCE’

*Contemplative  
Richard Rohr calls  
Christians to think  
more ‘trinitarily’*

BY BRANDON AMBROSINO  
*Religion News Service*

Catholic theologian Karl Rahner once wrote that Christians behave as “mere monotheists.” That is, if Christianity ended up dropping the doctrine of the Trinity, he suggested, the day-to-day lives of Christians would remain largely unchanged.

Richard Rohr wants to change that.

A Franciscan priest and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, N.M., Rohr, alongside Mike Morrell, published *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* in the hopes of inviting Christians to renew their lives by thinking “trinitarily.”

The book received rave reviews well beyond such popular Catholic writers as James Martin and Sister Simone Campbell. Mainstream figures, including U2’s Bono and scholar and public speaker Brené Brown, have encouraged their audiences to pick up a copy.

Why would so many people have interest in a devotional book written by a contemplative priest about a mysterious Christian doctrine?

“I’m wondering if it’s just that consciousness is ready for it,” he suggests.

Spoken like a true contemplative!

Religion News Service asked Rohr about his ideas on God, religion and what it means to be contemplative. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.



Richard Rohr, author of *The Divine Dance*. Photo courtesy of Whitaker House

**RNS: Why do you think so many people are excited to rediscover a Trinitarian God?**

RR: This idea of a Being sitting out there, critically watching reality and judging it — usually judging it to be inadequate — is not creating happy people, or peaceful people, as we see in our politics. The old paradigm, without us realizing it, has been falling apart.

**RNS: In your book, you mention that reimagining God might help heal our political divisions. How?**

RR: I think we all agree, no matter where you stand on the political spectrum, politics is not a happy worldview. It’s inherently dualistic, antagonistic and deceitful. It’s making us long for a bigger frame, a bigger

worldview than either/or.

Whenever you divide things into two, the mind quickly takes sides. It happens within a nanosecond. You identify with one side instead of the other, and decide that one side is better and the other side is, if not bad, demonic.

We’ve got to get out of this dualistic thinking. That is my most simple definition of what contemplation means: a mind that does not read reality dualistically but is able to hold contradictions until there’s a reconciling third, until there’s a broader frame revealed.

I think that’s the law of three. You can’t choose sides but you have to stay in the flow. I think we are so tired of our fighting. Maybe it’s out of desperation that a lot of people are willing to hear this message.

*“Whenever you divide things into two, the mind quickly takes sides. It happens within a nanosecond. You identify with one side instead of the other, and decide that one side is better and the other side is, if not bad, demonic.”*

**RNS: Why does it matter that Christians have a dynamic, flowing understanding of God?**

RR: A God who is just concerned with being right is inert, inaccessible: The law is the law; there’s no wiggle room. When you have God as relational, and if the basic definition of reality is relationality, then you’ve got an open system.

That’s what the beautiful biblical metaphors were trying to get to when they had God talking to Moses; God talking to Abraham; Abraham able to change God’s mind, as it were; Moses the same, knowing God face to face. This is good stuff!

But we understood it in such a static way — that these were things that happened to really special people, like Abraham and Moses and Jesus. But we didn’t understand that they were revealing the basic pattern of reality. That pattern of reality is this flow.

**RNS: If God is so dynamic, why did Christians come to understand the divine in such a static way?**

RR: What Trinity is saying, is: Don’t start with one substance, one being, and then try to make him three. This is what we get most of the first 2,000 years after Christ, and it looked like tri-theism, or like we were meddling with monotheism, or like a mathematical concept, and so a lot of people, including most Christians, didn’t know what to do with it.

But every science is discovering it’s entirely a relational universe. Nothing stands autonomously. Relationship is the thing, the core. See how this creates such a wonderful foundation for a Christian understanding of holiness? We’re inherently in relationship to God.

A lot of Christians might disagree with you here since “salvation,” to many, is an active choice to be in relationship with God. That’s perhaps the biggest Achilles

heel of so many Christians — that grace is an occasional additive merited by certain highly holy people.

Let me go back to the very first two verses of the Bible, where a beautiful verb is used. The Spirit is said to be “hovering” over chaos. The verb that’s used there refers to the wings of a mother hen protecting her young, guarding her eggs. We have the Spirit hovering over chaos, warming reality if you will.

Grace is not extrinsic! The whole thing begins by an act of grace which becomes the physical universe. That matter, henceforth, is the revelation place of Spirit, and Spirit shows itself through matter.

The incarnation that Christians honor is the personal incarnation. We thought it happened 2,000 years ago. What Franciscan spirituality always believed is that the primary incarnation was creation itself. Nature was the first Bible.

And we don’t know how to see the presence, how to honor the incarnate presence of God in the natural universe. I’m looking out right now on a beautiful blue New Mexico sky, the golden ashlands, green trees. How can you not be in awe of this universe?

But we didn’t respect the first Bible, so we murdered and mangled the second. We weren’t ready to honor the Christ, really.

What would you say if someone said, “I can’t believe grace is active in the way you’re claiming because there’s so much evil and death in the world”?

The human egocentric psyche is simply not ready to see that death is a necessary part of life. If you look at the entire universe, everything is changing forms all the time, no exception. In Catholic funeral liturgy, we say that life is not ended, but merely changed.

I admit it: It does seem like an incoherent universe. That’s very true. But once you

recognize this is the pattern of the universe, then Jesus’ death and resurrection is not a one-time anomaly, a one-time accident; it’s revealing the shape of the universe and inviting us to have the courage to trust that it’s OK. The final chapter is resurrection.

**RNS: You talk in your book about living in darkness, as if it’s a good thing. Is it?**

RR: If you take Moses on Sinai, and Peter, James and John on Mount Tabor, there’s always a combination of an apparition of immense light and the cover of a cloud. That’s letting us know that we don’t know. As Paul says, “We see through a glass darkly.”

Mother Teresa said she wanted to be known as a saint of darkness because dark is a better teacher than light. After the fights of the Reformation and the rationalism of the Enlightenment, we wanted to be certain, to be right. That’s to want too much light. It’s a refusal of faith.

Along with the rediscovery of the Trinity, I think I see a longing for a theology of darkness or the cloud. The classic phrase coined by the 14<sup>th</sup>-century anonymous English writer — the cloud of unknowing — sums up this theology very well. You can’t live in total light: It blinds you. That lack of humility has probably done more to undo the Christian religion than anything else.

When you presume your little mind fully knows what goodness is and who the good people are, and what evil is and who the evil people are ... you will most surely die.

Darkness is good, mystics would say. That’s the liminal space where you ask deeper questions, where you make room for God because you can’t figure it out. The soul expands inside of darkness. **NFJ**

*—Brandon Ambrosino is a Religion News Service correspondent.*

# What will your Bible study group learn this year?

Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge are found inside *Nurturing Faith Journal*, with teaching resources waiting to be discovered online at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net).

- Scholarly, yet applicable
- Lectionary-based to cover a wide range of scripture
- A great value through group subscriptions to the journal

- Tony's video overview, Digging Deeper and Hardest Question discussion starter — along with weekly lesson plans for adults and youth available online at no extra charge

## LESSONS FOR 2017

### Looking Forward (Seasons of Christmas and Epiphany)

**Jan. 1**  
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13  
"It's Always Time"

**Jan. 8**  
Isaiah 42:1-9  
"A Time for Justice"

**Jan. 15**  
Isaiah 49:1-7  
"A Time for Light"

**Jan. 22**  
Isaiah 9:1-9  
"A Time for Hope"

**Jan. 29**  
Micah 6:1-8  
"A Time for Mercy"

**Feb. 5**  
Matthew 5:13-20  
"Salt, Light, and Law"

**Feb. 12**  
Matthew 5:21-37  
"Then, and Now"

**Feb. 19**  
Matthew 5:38-48  
"Seriously?"

**Feb. 26**  
Matthew 17:1-19  
"Keeping Secrets"

### Faith Forward (Season of Lent)

**Mar. 5**  
Romans 5:12-19  
"Righteous Failure"

**Mar. 12**  
Romans 4:1-17  
"Trustful Faith"

**Mar. 19**  
Romans 5:1-11  
"Hopeful Peace"

**Mar. 26**  
Ephesians 5:8-14  
"Illuminated Fruit"

**Apr. 2**  
Romans 8:6-1  
"Mindful Spirituality"

**Apr. 9**  
Matthew 21:1-11  
"Royal Humility"

### Forward Living (Season of Easter)

**Apr. 16**  
Jeremiah 31:1-6  
"Everlasting Love"

**Apr. 23**  
Psalm 16  
"The Path of Life"

**Apr. 30**  
Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19  
"Paying Vows"

**May 7**  
Acts 2:42-47  
"Signs and Wonders"

**May 14**  
Acts 7:55-60  
"Faithful Unto Death"

**May 21**  
Acts 17:22-31  
"A God Unknown"

**May 28**  
John 17:1-11  
"The Lord at Prayer"

**June 4**  
John 7:37-39  
"A Pentecostal River"

### Forward Progress (Season After Pentecost)

**June 11**  
Psalm 8  
"Not Quite Angels"

**June 18**  
Genesis 18:1-15  
"Not Dead Yet"

**June 25**  
Genesis 21:8-21  
"Not Long Alone"

**July 2**  
Genesis 22:1-14  
"The Closest Call"

**July 9**  
Song of Songs 2:8-13  
"A Time for Love"

**July 16**  
Psalm 119:105-112  
"A Lamp and a Light"

**July 23**  
Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24  
"A Life Exposed"

**July 30**  
Psalm 128  
"A Blessed Man"

**Aug. 6**  
Psalm 17:1-7, 15  
"A Prayer for Justice"

**Aug. 13**  
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28  
"Selling Joseph"

**Aug. 20**  
Genesis 45:1-15  
"Making Peace"

**Aug. 27**  
Exodus 1:8-2:10  
"Saving Lives"

**Sept. 3**  
Exodus 3:1-15  
"Meeting Mr. Is"

**Sept. 10**  
Exodus 12:1-14  
"Blood in the Doorway"

**Sept. 17**  
Exodus 14:19-31  
"The Day That Never Died"

**Sept. 24**  
Exodus 16:2-15  
"What Is It?"

**Oct. 1**  
Exodus 17:1-7  
"Unbottled Water"

**Oct. 8**  
Matthew 21:33-46  
"Stony Hearts"

**Oct. 15**  
Matthew 22:1-14  
"Wait. What?"

**Oct. 22**  
Matthew 22:15-22  
"A Taxing Question"

**Oct. 29**  
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18  
"Being Holy"

**Nov. 5**  
Micah 3:1-5  
"Being True"

**Nov. 12**  
Amos 5:18-24  
"Being Just"

**Nov. 19**  
Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18  
"Being Ready"

**Nov. 26**  
Matthew 25:31-46  
"Being Surprised?"

### Forward Promises (Season of Advent)

**Dec. 3**  
Mark 13:24-37  
"Wakeful Faithful"

**Dec. 10**  
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13  
"Kissing Cousins"

**Dec. 17**  
Psalm 126  
"Tearful Farmers"

**Dec. 24**  
Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26  
"Keeping Promises"

### Praise It Forward (Season of Christmas)

**Dec. 31**  
Psalm 148  
"Praise Squared"

# WOVEN THREADS

*Faith, maturity create the fabric of leadership, say authors*

STORY AND PHOTO  
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

**W**ILLIAMSBURG, Va. — Bob Dale and Bill Wilson, authors of *Weaving Strong Leaders: How Leaders Grow Down, Grow Up, and Grow Together*, shared insights from their new book with clergy and lay leaders gathered at Walnut Hills Baptist Church in Williamsburg.

Published by Nurturing Faith in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches, which Wilson leads and through which Dale serves as a coach, the book is unlike many “how-to” approaches to leadership training. Instead, the authors focused on the Christian leader’s faith journey and maturity out of which leadership grows.

“Bill and I took the approach that leaders grow inside out,” said Dale, a longtime Virginia Baptist leader, former seminary professor and author of numerous books including the bestseller *To Dream Again*.

It takes time to grow as a leader, said Dale, noting that those seeking to short-circuit needed faith and maturity won’t fool people for long.

“Jesus, who had the biggest job ever, spent 30 years getting ready for 30 months,” Dale added.

In contrast, he told of accepting a pastorate at age 19 — before deciding he needed to learn and grow a bit more. “I was dangerous,” he said to laughter.

Dale credited “wise laypeople who kept me off the rocks,” adding, “I knew I needed to grow up a bit.”

“If you grow up,” he noted, “you ought to learn a few things.”

In their book, the authors addressed aspects of leadership growth at various stages in life. Dale said that persons often see themselves as leaders for the first time when teens at school and church.



**WEAVING LEADERS** — Authors Bill Wilson (left) and Bob Dale sign copies of their book, *Weaving Strong Leaders: How Leaders Grow Down, Grow Up, and Grow Together*.

Therefore, the teen years and 20s are identified in the book as the “launch decades,” followed by the “hustle decades” (30s and 40s) that are the busiest with work and family obligations.

The 50s and 60s are the “legacy decades” when leaders consider the marks they are leaving. Dale said the 70s and beyond are designated as the “wisdom decades” when “people kind of grow into themselves and into different kinds of leaders.”

Introspection and struggle, rather than just a bag of tools, are needed for effective leaders to grow said the authors.

“Courage is a key ingredient of leadership, born out of humility,” said Wilson.

Such courage, he said, is needed to confront inappropriate behavior that causes a church or other organization to be unhealthy and less effective.

A mature leader should “at least call a foul” when destructive behavior is exhibited, he said. It is a key to health for the community and requires maturity and courage.

Courageous and mature leadership, he said, is different from the “concierge pastor”

who asks everyone, “What do you need?”

Wilson encouraged church leaders to not take a Lone Ranger approach to ministry but to find peer support and guidance.

“I would never pastor again without a coach,” said Wilson, commending the benefits of a guide who offers needed perspective. Those who buy *Weaving Strong Leaders* are offered a free session with one of the Center for Healthy Churches’ 15 coaches.

Wilson urged ministers to find small peer groups. These groups and a coach can help ministers, he said, in taking “fearless internal inventory” and having “someone to help them stay balanced, grounded and honest about themselves.”

The book’s weaving motif calls for creating a “fabric of Christian leadership” that weaves together the threads of deepening, transforming faith with ongoing maturity, said Dale.

“Growing our beliefs and cultivating our maturity are two of life’s unending processes,” said Dale. “We believe the best church leaders are mature and well-defined.” **NFJ**

# Andrew Johnson (1865-1869)

By Bruce Gourley

**B**orn in poverty in 1808 in Raleigh, N.C., as a young man Andrew Johnson apprenticed as a tailor. Eventually settling in Greeneville, Tenn., he became involved in politics, serving as mayor for two terms. Election to the Tennessee House of Representatives followed in 1835, then election as a U.S. Representative in 1843. After 10 years in the U.S. House as a Democrat, Johnson served for two terms as the governor of Tennessee, afterward elected to the U.S. Senate in 1857.

Upon the formation of the Confederate States of America in 1861, Johnson became the only sitting U.S. senator from a Confederate state who did not resign his federal position. With most of Tennessee in Union hands in 1862, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln rewarded Johnson's loyalty to the Union by appointing him as military governor of Tennessee.

A vocal white supremacist, Johnson belatedly embraced Emancipation, freeing his slaves in the summer of 1863.

In a goodwill gesture to the South of his desire for national reunion, Lincoln in 1864 selected Johnson as his vice-presidential running mate under the banner of the National Union Party, rather than the Republican Party.

The Lincoln-Johnson ticket won the 1864 election. Unfortunately, on the day of Lincoln's second inauguration, March 4, 1865, a drunken Johnson delivered a rambling speech for which he was widely ridiculed. For weeks afterward he shunned public appearances.

On April 15, 1865, days after Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered to Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, Lincoln died from an assassin's bullet, elevating Andrew Johnson to the presidency.

Lincoln's untimely death hardened northern and Republican determination to prevent former Confederates from returning to power in the South. The radical wing of the Republican Party demanded punishment for Confederate leaders and suffrage and civil rights for African Americans.

Former slaves pressed for the permanence and expansion of wartime federal acts providing land, education and equal rights as a path to autonomy. An excerpt from an Oct. 28, 1865 letter from "Edisto Island Freedmen" of Edisto, S.C., to Andrew Johnson summarized the sentiments and hopes expressed in hundreds of letters from former slaves sent to the president in the months and early years following the war:

*... We the freedmen of this island and the state of South Carolina — Do therefore petition to you as the President of these United States, that*



*These are the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> 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.*

*some provisions be made by which every colored man can purchase land, and hold it as his own. We wish to have A home if it be but A few acres. Without some provision is made our future is sad to look upon. Yes our situation is dangerous. We therefore look to you for protection and Equal Rights, with the privilege of purchasing A Homestead — A Homestead right here in the heart of South Carolina.*

*We pray that God will direct your heart in making such provision for us as freedmen which will tend to unite these states together stronger than ever before. May God bless you in the administration of your duties as the President of these United States is the humble prayer of us all.*

Unfortunately for freedmen, Johnson opposed federal suffrage and rights and had little interest in God.

Primary sources are lacking from his early years, but Johnson's parents may have been Baptist, and perhaps he expressed affinity for the Baptist faith. An early biographer, Robert Winston, seemingly straining to interpret his subject as religious, claimed that Johnson "was a Baptist, holding with Thomas Jefferson that the United States Government was organized on the same general plan as Baptist churches; that each state, like each church, was a separate entity."

Winston also wrote of how the "Catholic church interested him because in it he found a saving virtue: No class distinctions in its worship." Johnson rarely attended religious services, however, and there is no evidence he ever joined a church of any kind.

To the contrary, many Americans considered Johnson an infidel. As a congressman he sought to dispel such talk by declaring, "so far as the doctrines of the Bible are concerned, or the great scheme of salvation, as Christ himself taught, and practised by Jesus Christ Himself, I never did entertain a solitary doubt."

Perhaps also in response to his irreligious public persona, Congressman Johnson in 1849 offered a resolution stating:

*Resolved, That the ministers of the gospel belonging to the different denominations be, and they are hereby, invited to attend and open the proceedings of this House, while in an unorganized state, with sincere prayer to the Giver of all good for a speedy and satisfactory organization and a despatch of the public business.*

The resolution was never acted upon.

A few pro-religious public statements aside, even Johnson's Methodist wife, Eliza McCardle, failed to persuade him to embrace organized religion. If "he could have found an organization based on the personality of Christ," biographer Winston intoned, "without creed or dogmas, without class distinctions or the exaltation and deification of money, he was willing to join it 'with all his soul.' But so far as he could make out, there was no such Church."

Yet class, racial and wealth dynamics played key roles in Johnson's administration as the president expressed affinity with white common folk, ignored freedmen's pleas for justice in the name of God, and forged alliances with elite white southerners.

With southern votes critical to his hopes for election in 1868, Johnson in the months following his succession to the presidency voiced reconciliatory language toward former Confederates.

Encouraged, the rebels quickly set about resuming political power. Many southern states passed Black Codes, binding former slaves into a form of servitude similar to slavery. Johnson even allowed Georgian and former Confederate vice-president Alexander Stephens to return to the U.S. House of Representatives, while vetoing an expansion of the Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency established to assist former slaves.

Outraged, northerners fought back. Over Johnson's objections, a Republican Congress extended the Freedmen's Bureau; passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866, protecting black citizens; and shepherded the adoption of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, enshrining citizenship rights and equal protection for African Americans.

In response, Johnson blocked Reconstruction Acts designed to provide suffrage to freed slaves and prevent former Confederate leaders from taking political offices. He also pardoned many ex-rebels and systematically sought to purge from high levels of government persons supportive of Southern Reconstruction.

As a result, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives impeached Johnson on Feb. 24, 1868. In his subsequent Senate trial the president promised to uphold Reconstruction Acts and work with Congress, thereby avoiding senatorial impeachment by one vote. Undeterred, Johnson returned to the vetoing of reconstruction bills, leading to congressional vetoes of his presidential vetoes.

Unpopular in the North and warring with Congress thereafter, Johnson lost the presidential election of 1868 to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. Returning to Tennessee and nursing grudges, the former president won re-election to the U.S. Senate in 1875, only to die from a stroke mere months later.

Two years prior to his death, while suffering from cholera and fearing the end was near, Johnson, yet defiant of organized religion, had declared:

*I have performed my duty to my God, my country and my family. I have nothing to fear in approaching death. To me it is the mere shadow of God's protecting wing. Beneath it I almost feel sacred. Here I know no evil can come; there I will rest in quiet and peace beyond the reach of calumny's poisoned shaft, the influence of envy and jealous enemies, where treason and traitors in State, backsliders and hypocrites in Church, can have no place, where the great fact will be realized that God is truth, and gratitude is the highest attribute of man.*

Freedmen, abandoned by Andrew Johnson, knew only too well that the president had not performed his duties to God and country. A white supremacist and incompetent administrator who spectacularly failed to bring about justice and instead inflamed the wounds of post-Civil War America, Johnson is considered by many historians as the nation's worst president. **NFJ**

# Ulysses S. Grant (1869-1877)

By Bruce Gourley

Born in 1822 in Point Pleasant, Ohio, as the son of a Whig supporter and abolitionist, Ulysses S. Grant came from a military lineage. His great-grandfather fought in the French and Indian War, his grandfather in the American Revolution.

**E**nrolling at West Point, he proved an expert horseman and afterward fought capably in the Mexican-American War. Marriage to Julie Boggs Dent and a station out West followed. Although allegations of drunkenness surfaced, he resigned in good standing in 1854.

A move to Missouri and financial struggles followed. Despite mounting debts, Grant freed his only slave, whom he had inherited from his father-in-law. He also opposed southern secession.

Upon the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in April 1861 and U.S. President Abraham Lincoln's subsequent call for soldiers, Grant raised a company of volunteers and returned to military duty. During the Civil War he emerged victorious in crucial battles, receiving promotions despite lingering alcohol-related concerns. In March 1864 Lincoln bestowed command of Union armies upon Lieutenant General Grant.

On April 9, 1865 Grant accepted the surrender of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee at Appomattox, effectively ending the war and sealing his legacy as a great military leader. A commission as general of the Army followed in July 1866, making Grant the first to wear the four-silver-star insignia.

Angered at President Andrew Johnson's refusal to pursue racial justice in the South, Republicans chose General Grant as their 1868 presidential candidate. Although a



national hero in the North and among freedmen, Grant's selection stoked controversy.

In December 1862 he had issued an order against Jews in his military department, only to reverse course following a public outcry and opposition from Lincoln. The stigma of the anti-Jewish order remained.

During the 1868 campaign he contritely declared: "I do not sustain that order. It would never have been issued if it had not been telegraphed the moment it was penned, and without reflection."

Easily winning election, Ulysses S. Grant, 46, became the youngest president thus far.

Remarkable national advances marked Grant's two terms in office. Completion of the Transcontinental Railroad took place in 1869, followed by the establishment of the world's first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872. Immigration surged; iron and steel production soared; manufacturing and

industry expanded rapidly; and western resources of gold, silver and lumber spurred the economy.

At the same time, America's cities bulged as many citizens abandoned farm life for urbanity. Robber barons emerged, industrialists who utilized monopolies to provide consumer goods and services ever more cheaply, exploiting laborers while hoarding great personal wealth.

Alongside expansion of capital, resources, land and infrastructure, Grant and Congress turned their attention to Southern Reconstruction. Although pardoning some Confederate leaders, the president and Republicans sought protection for former slaves.

The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, granting black men the right to vote, achieved ratification. The 1871 Ku Klux Klan Act, seeking to limit violence against blacks, received backing by federal troops stationed throughout the South.

Although easily winning a second term, white southern opposition and administrative scandals marred Grant's latter presidential years. Northern commitment to protect freedmen faded in the face of white supremacist intransigence. Meanwhile, Grant, militarily accustomed to trusting subordinates, seemed hapless as corrupt appointees granted favors and enabled monopolies in return for financial benefit.

In 1876 near the end of his second term, Grant apologized for failures "of judgment, not of intent," lamenting, "It was my fortune, or misfortune, to be called to the office of Chief Executive without any previous political training."

Out of favor with Republicans, Grant declined to run for a third term. Yet when the 1876 election resulted in a tense Electoral College standoff that threatened civil unrest, a lame-duck Grant garnered bipartisan approval for his handling of the crisis. His post-presidential years further restored his reputation.

In matters of personal faith, Grant, like many earlier presidents, displayed ambivalence at best. Although raised in a Methodist family, Grant never joined and rarely attended church. At West Point he criticized mandatory chapel services as "not Republican," refusing to attend.

Chaplain James Crane, serving under Grant during the Civil War, later wrote a saintly account of his former commander. While acknowledging Grant's lack of religious affiliation, Crane claimed that Grant expressed "the highest esteem" for religion, sometimes attended his family's Methodist Episcopal church, and encouraged and occasionally attended camp religious services. Crane also dismissed accounts of Grant imbibing alcohol.

Indeed, President Grant periodically attended Metropolitan Methodist Church with his wife Julie, a devout Methodist. And in his memoirs Grant expressed an affinity for the Bible: "I believe in the Holy Scriptures, and whoso lives by them will be benefited thereby. Men may differ as to

the interpretation, which is human, but the Scriptures are man's best guide."

On the other hand, Grant's youngest son, Jesse, recalled that his father thought "very little about the question of immortality of the soul and things like that. He believed Christianity to be a good thing, and so were all the other religions of the world. Each had its place, and each would be found on the other side of death, or else nobody at all would be there. He was probably what would be called a pure agnostic. I never heard him talk about religion."

Like his predecessors in the White House, President Grant upheld church-state separation. "No political party can or ought to exist when one of its cornerstones is opposition to freedom of thought and to the right to worship God 'according to the dictate of one's own conscience,' or according to the creed of any religious denomination whatever," he insisted. "Nevertheless, if a sect sets up its laws as binding above the State laws, wherever the two come in conflict this claim must be resisted and suppressed at whatever cost."

Grant brought official closure to a petition by some Christian ministers to amend the nation's secular Constitution and make America a Christian nation. The failed amendment sought to add to the Constitution's preamble language acknowledging "Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Ruler among the nations, and His revealed will as of supreme authority."

President Grant also sought to prevent schools receiving public monies from teaching religious tenets. He did so as the nation's growing Catholic population sought government assistance for their schools, generating Protestant opposition. Many interpreted Grant's position as anti-Catholic, although his close friend Gen. William T. Sherman insisted the decision was made "because of the ceaseless clamor for set religious exercises in the public schools; not from Catholics, but from Protestant denominations."

In his public appointments Grant made no distinctions based upon religious faith. Appointing more Jews to public office than all prior presidents combined, he spoke against international persecution of Jews.

Also Grant appointed a number of Catholics to administrative posts. New York Baptist minister Thomas Anderson praised Grant for appointing Thomas Murphy the "collectorship of New York," denouncing Protestant accusations of Murphy "as a bigoted Roman Catholic and likely to prostitute his office to the purposes of promoting his faith." Following his presidency, Grant visited Ireland, the first American president to do so.

In an address to Congress in 1875, Grant voiced opposition to preferential treatment for religious institutions. Speaking of the "evil" of "the accumulation of vast amounts of untaxed church property," he called for equal taxation of "church and corporation" property.

Nonetheless, President Grant, in the forceful resettling of Indians upon reservations, solicited federal partnership with religious denominations "to Christianize and civilize the Indians."

Collectively, Grant's presidential religious positions and pronouncements reflected tensions between America's official secular identity, Protestant pride in empowering a new era of westward growth and national prosperity, and ascendant religious minorities boldly placing their own imprints upon the American landscape.

Suffering from cancer and near death in 1885, Grant with pride noted that "The Protestant, the Catholic and the Jew appointed days for universal prayer in my behalf."

Upon his passing Grant was remembered and mourned in the nation's synagogues and churches. Some 500,000 Americans flocked to New York for his funeral. Among the 34,000 marching behind his horse-drawn carriage were members of the 69<sup>th</sup> New York Regiment of the Irish Brigade. **NFJ**



# An ancient game of 'thrones'

By Tony W. Cartledge

**A**pparently, King Hezekiah meant business when he set out to do away with shrines devoted to gods other than Yahweh, the God of Israel.

The historian behind 2 Kings 18:3-4a says that when Hezekiah became king, "He did what was right in the sight of the Lord just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole."

This activity would have taken place across the kingdom, wherever worship to Baal, Asherah or other gods officially took place.

One of those places, it turns out, was Lachish, a city about 30 miles southwest of Jerusalem. Lachish was second in size and influence only to Jerusalem itself during much of the First Temple period, though it was destroyed during the Assyrian king Sennacherib's campaigns in 701 BCE, about midway through Hezekiah's reign (715-687 BCE).



Perhaps it was the Assyrian threat that led Hezekiah to try getting Judah on the road to repentance.

Signs of his reform campaign recently came to light when Israeli archaeologists digging in Lachish's large city gate discovered that the last of the six gate chambers in the eighth-century level contained a shrine almost certainly dedicated to other gods, because the temple in Jerusalem was the only authorized center of worship to Yahweh during that time.

Inside the chamber was a plastered bench where offerings to the local deity could be left, and an opening in the back part of the chamber led to a small "holy of holies,"



Archaeologists remove a stone toilet seat that had been placed atop the altar in Lachish's gate shrine. Photo by Israeli Antiquities Department.

according to Sa'ar Ganor, excavation director on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Two altars with horns were found there along with lamps, bowls and stands typical of worship sites.

So where does King Hezekiah enter this picture?

The customary "horns" protruding from each corner of the stone altar had been intentionally broken off, rendering it unfit for further use. As if that were not enough, a stone toilet seat was then placed atop the altar.

Samples taken from beneath the toilet suggest that it was not in active use for pit stops. Yet its presence alone was enough to desecrate the shrine and keep would-be Baal

or Asherah worshipers away.

Interestingly enough, the Bible records a similar action when King Jehu sought to eliminate the worship of Baal in Samaria a century earlier:

"They brought out the pillar that was in the temple of Baal, and burned it. Then they demolished the pillar of Baal, and destroyed the temple of Baal, and made it a latrine to this day" (2 Kgs. 10:26-27).

The find at Lachish is the first archaeological confirmation of the practice — topping an altar with a stone toilet in an ancient game of thrones. **NFJ**

—For Tony's blogs related to archaeology and a variety of subjects, visit [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net).

# A very good answer

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Nothing provides a good night's rest like having the whole family under the same roof. It is a rare and treasured experience for me at this stage in life.

A few years ago I casually coined the term "dawghter" when referring to our first-born — now a graduate of the University of Georgia (home of the Dawgs) who works for a public relations firm in Atlanta. Our other "dawghter" is a freshman at UGA now.

Both were home for the same weekend last fall. When the younger one came down for breakfast on Saturday morning I asked about her new bracelet with the letters "H.W.L.F."

She said it was the idea of a friend's brother who is a student at Georgia State



University. He felt like his W.W.J.D. bracelet deserved an answer.

After contemplating "What would

Jesus do?" he settled on this one: "He would love first." Hence the new bracelet with the four letters: "H.W.L.F."

In a time of quick judgment and condemnation and narrow pronouncements of politicized faith, it is refreshing to know that these young Christians are getting in touch with the reality of Jesus' life and teaching.

It's one thing to raise a good question. It is another to find a good response. And that is a very good answer!

For those who might want to spread the word, visit [hewouldlovefirst.com](http://hewouldlovefirst.com). **NFJ**

Check out the ongoing blogs at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net).

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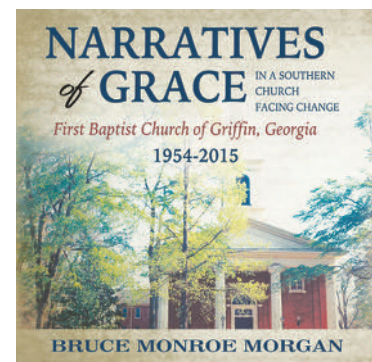
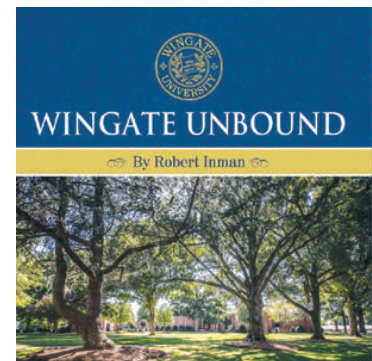
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—Dr. William L. Hardee, Pastor  
First Baptist Church, Griffin, Ga.

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# Questions Christians ask scientists

Taking into account scientific calculations for the size and expansion and age of the cosmos, what is your view of the spiritual significance of humans in the universe?

Imagine standing in a rowboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, looking through a telescope at the horizon. No matter how good your telescope is, you can see no further than a few miles.

This is because the earth is spherical and the ocean curves down and away from you in every direction. The horizon is the limit of what you can see. But because you know about the shape of the planet, you're also aware there's a whole lot more you can't see.

Three miles in every direction: that's all you'll ever get. The geometry of the problem is non-negotiable.

That's what it's like for us on the earth, only our cosmic horizon is much further away — about 40 billion light years away in every direction. (A light year is the distance light travels in a year, about 6 trillion miles. It is not a measure of time.)

Within that distance there are approximately 100 billion galaxies, each containing billions of stars and planets. But just as the great majority of the Pacific Ocean lies outside the three-mile limit as seen from the rowboat, most of the cosmos is permanently out of reach of not only our best present technology, but also of any technology whatsoever.

To say that the earth is a drop in the ocean of space is so frantically understated as to be laughable. We would need to compare a single drop of water to 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 Pacific Oceans to begin to get a decent comparison. And this is only the space within our horizon.

It is cozy compared to what lies beyond: untold light years' worth of galaxies and stars and planets that in principle we cannot ever see or know about. And who knows what kind of life is out there, both inside and outside our view?

A similarly dizzying picture can be drawn with respect to time. Imagine compressing all of cosmic history into a single year, so that the Big Bang happened on Jan. 1 at 12 a.m. and right now is the ringing-out of the year

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BY PAUL WALLACE



on midnight Dec. 31.

The year contains 31.5 million seconds, and recorded human history — since the invention of writing by the Sumerians 5,300 years ago — spans only 12 of them. We are newcomers, to say the least!

We are one of millions of related species, billions if we consider the whole history of life. We share lineage not only with chimpanzees and gorillas, but also with whales and okapis and lichen and oak trees. All life is related (and, don't forget, there may be a lot more life than we can imagine out among the stars).

How then are we significant? How then are we special?

Let's consider three possible responses. First, we could admit that humans are not special at all. Physical insignificance and spiritual insignificance go together in this view.

Since we are unimaginably tiny and brand new compared to the cosmos, and since we occupy no special location in the universe, and since there are all these other species to which we are genetically related, and since our ancestors were not human, then we must be mere organisms pretty much like all the others and that's all there is to it. In this view all life is basically the

same, and all of it is physically and spiritually insignificant.

This view is obviously contrary to Christianity, for it has the effect of removing the word "spirit" from our language altogether. All life is devalued here, and if life is not spiritually significant, nothing is. So this is not an option.

Second, we could say that none of these facts of science matter, that there is no relationship between the physical and the spiritual. We can be the most significant of creatures in God's eyes even if we are incomprehensibly tiny, newly arrived, surrounded by intimately related species and possibly by a whole cosmos full of extraterrestrial life.

Our unique spiritual souls and the life to come are all that really matter, not this present world. From a truly spiritual point of view it would make no difference if the cosmos were very much smaller and younger, if we were not related to other life, and if there were no possibility of there being intelligent creatures out there among the galaxies. The details of the cosmos simply do not matter.

This view is also unsatisfying. Christianity, more than almost any other major religion, insists that the physical and the

spiritual are not opposed but are instead deeply related. God created all things and called them very good.

We believe that the divine nature is somehow revealed in the cosmos; therefore the material and physical worlds cannot be separated. This principle finds its ultimate expression in the incarnation of God in the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth. At the very least we, as followers of that same Jesus, cannot simply disregard facts about the material cosmos. These facts have something important to tell us. But what?

The Old Testament book of Job offers a clue to a third way of looking at this question. In that story Job is a wise and righteous man and a generous advocate of the poor and needy. He is a prominent man who sits atop the social pyramid. In his world this means that it is not only his fellow man but also God who favors him; his material and social status is a sign of his righteousness before God. There is no question about it: Job is significant.

As the story unfolds, Job loses his family, his health and his wealth. But,

importantly for us, he loses something else: his significance. He finds himself on the outside, no longer important to anyone. He no longer holds a position of wealth and power. He longs for the significance he once had, and wonders why it was taken from him. Is it possible that he is really, truly insignificant — even in God's eyes?

After many chapters of arguing about this with his friends, Job hears God speaking. But God does not explain Job's loss of significance. There is no apology or theory about why bad things happen to good people. Instead, God points Job toward creation.

Job is taken on a tour of the cosmos. First he gets an eyeful of the earth and the sea and the stars. He is then shown an array of strange animals, creatures that occupy the outer fringes of his consciousness and of his human world, thriving in places where he could never survive.

These beasts have no connection with Job's world of commerce and religion and justice. They do not value what Job values. God shows Job that the mountain goat, the wild ass, the ostrich, the wild ox, the vulture

and many others form communities of their own, communities from which Job's own world looks small and peripheral.

During the tour God points out repeatedly how these animals are divinely cared for. The eye of God is on all of creation, not just the tiny piece of it that concerns Job. God is not preoccupied with humans; instead, God's providence balances the needs of all creatures, meeting each one at its own level.

God knows every part of creation and is fully present to all things. There is not a star or stone or fish or bird that God does not sustain. The love of God is sufficient for the whole cosmos, including the deer, the lion and the eagle.

It is also sufficient for Job. In the end Job is satisfied with God's answer. He is set free to no longer worry about his own significance, because he has experienced the love of God. So it goes for us. In the face of such cosmic love we are not only free to forget about our own importance, but also are set free to love one another, all creatures and, indeed, all things. **NFJ**

*"Paul Wallace is an astrophysicist who writes with magic . . ."*

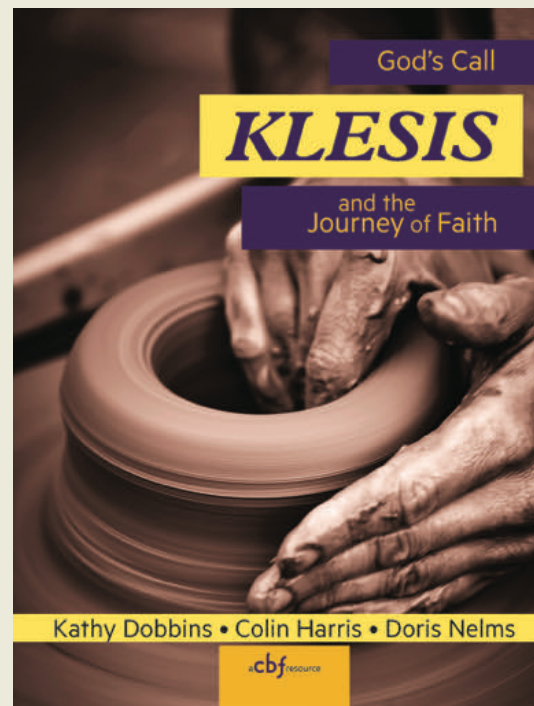
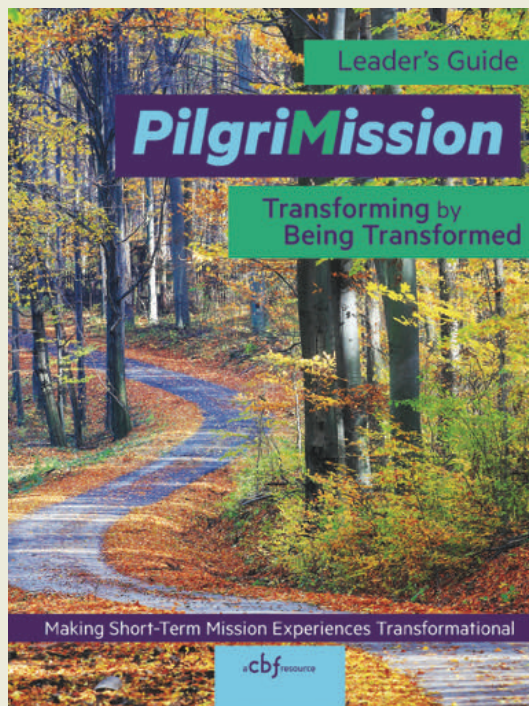
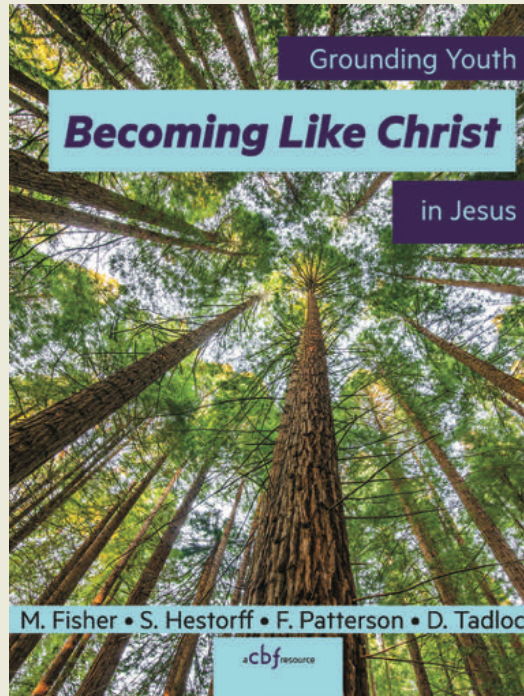
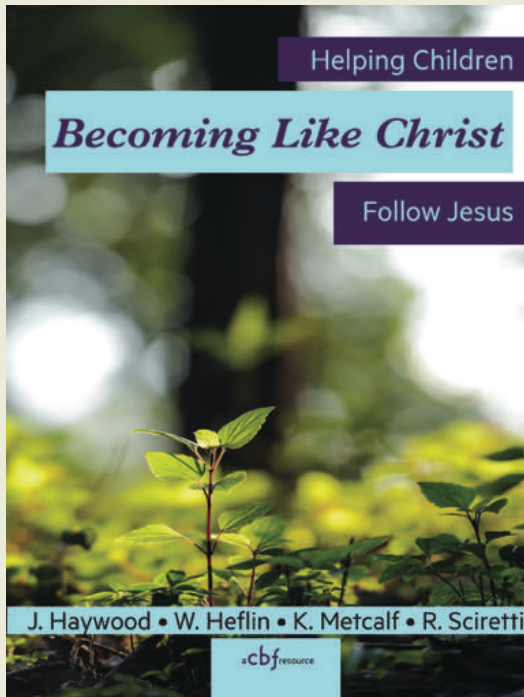
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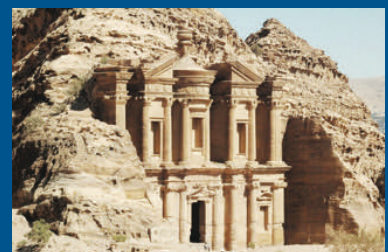
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# New normal

Pastorally pushing the congregational reset button

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. — Pastoral opportunities are often tied to current events, said Knoxville pastor Mike Smith to a fall gathering of ministry peers here.

He pointed to two events that occurred within two weeks in 2015: the racially motivated murders of African-American church members in Charleston, S.C., and the U.S. Supreme Court decision calling for nationwide legal recognition of same-sex marriages.

“You could feel it as a pastor,” Smith, pastor of Central Baptist Church of Fountain City, said in a presentation at the Mercer University Preaching Consultation.

Such moments offer fresh contexts, he said, for the “ongoing ministerial task of helping congregations and individual Christ followers to hit the reset button.”

## DEFAULT

Ministers spend much time and energy on helping congregants hit the reset button, he reminded his peers, from life-changing personal issues that rescue a person from self-defeat to altering familiar congregational practices such as using baked bread instead of communion wafers.

Particularly, Smith focused on the pastoral challenge of helping Christians “reset their approach to the interpretation and application of the Bible.” The starting place he commended is found in discerning the “existing default.”

“Through observation and conversation,” Smith said he determined that love of Jesus and the Bible remains high among church members who also, when asked,



Pastor Mike Smith; photo courtesy of Central Baptist Church of Fountain City in Knoxville, Tenn.

agree that all scripture is to be read and interpreted in light of Jesus.

With diversity of thought regarding theology, politics and social backgrounds, the congregation finds that “the Jesus-centered approach to interpretation and application helps them live alongside one another, give one another some space, and even build community,” he said.

Yet when facing “a matter of keen dispute,” he noted, there is a tendency to default to a “flat-Bible approach” that bases one’s opinion on an isolated text or texts.

## CHRIST FOLLOWERS

The pastor’s task, Smith noted, is one of helping members see the difference between their profession and practice.

“I ask myself how I might help them better remember that Jesus — not Moses, for example — is Lord for Christ followers.”

This pastoral role, he said, enables congregants to “not only see but feel the quandaries and tragedies generated by a

‘flat-Bible’ approach to interpretation and application.”

In doing so, he said, the larger task is to help them to be who they say they are or want to be: followers of Christ. And this task is better accomplished, he noted, when they know that you actually like them — even if they disagree with you.

Such needed pastoral work is done in a variety of ways, said Smith, but “surely preaching must be one of them.”

## JUNE 2015

Smith said his Knoxville congregation avoided common knee-jerk reactions to the big news stories of 2015 regarding racism and homosexuality. But he didn’t avoid the pertinent matters in his preaching.

Two sermons, he said, “produced some results” for the congregation.

Smith said his “behind the scenes” work through pastoral conversations increased dramatically after the racist-induced shootings in Charleston and the Supreme Court decision on marriage.

“I found myself dealing with tradition, fear, prejudice and politics,” he said. “Underneath all such matters, though, most of the members seemed to be struggling with what to do with the Bible, more specifically their framework for interpreting and applying the Bible.”

And as is often the case, many turned to the default position of a “flat Bible” and were trapped by its limits, he said.

## OPEN OR CLOSED?

Smith used as the text for his first sermon Luke 24:36-49, in which the risen Christ appeared to his confused and fearful disciples. He focused on one phrase in particular: “Then [Jesus] opened their minds to understand the scriptures.”

Pointedly, Smith asked his listeners: “Is your mind open or closed?”

He noted that the disciples’ minds were closed although they knew the scriptures well. They were “trapped in an interpretation loop of which they were unaware, a loop which led them always to the same arguments and conclusions.”

Smith pointed out that Jesus opened their minds so they might examine the familiar scriptures yet find new conclusions.

He noted that Peter and Paul had changed their scriptural interpretations too, although it caused much backlash. As a result, a new interpretive tradition — welcoming gentiles into the faith — became the new norm.

In conclusion, Smith reminded his listeners: “Minds open to revised and new interpretations of the scriptures often produce lives which honor Christ, lives which change the church and the world.”

## SECOND SERMON

In Matthew 15:3, Jesus asked some Pharisees and scribes: “Why do you break the commandments for the sake of your tradition?”

In his second sermon, Smith delved into how Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of those who used their interpretative default to evade the clear, overarching commands.

Regarding what Jesus deemed the greatest commandment, Smith said: “It’s amazing how clever religious folk can be at using religion to get them out of loving God and loving others.” He was pleased to see heads nodding in agreement.

After showing a clip from the movie *Selma* in which an older black woman is unfairly thwarted from registering to vote, he reminded the congregation that such injustices were carried out primarily by white court clerks in good standing with their churches.

He speculated that most of them knew and affirmed the command to “love God

with all your heart, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” Yet they found a way around that clear command when it came to racial equality — using the default of isolated biblical texts.

## TRADITION

Smith shared how Richard Furman, a prominent Baptist leader in the early 1800s who progressively promoted education and benevolence, could not see persons of color as his neighbors. Grounding his perspective in scripture, “he saw them as inferiors, best suited to a life of slavery.”

Slowly and painfully, the traditional perspective held by Furman and other Baptists of the South changed. “There was and will always be reinterpretive work to be done,” he said.

Smith concluded: “What the church and the world need now is what God wants the most: Christians who are willing to rethink their approach to and take on the scriptures in light of Jesus and the great commandment. Otherwise, we will always have good church folk developing religiously sanctioned ways to get out of caring for others ... [and] finding ways to keep others (even Jesus) in ‘their place.’”

He invited his listeners to join him in the hard and risky work of taking on the task of reinterpretation and application.

## A STORY

To bring home the tragedy of being caught in a deficient interpretive way of thinking, Smith told the story of “Old Man Shaw,” as he was known. The long-time church member eagerly offered public prayers and dependably taught Sunday school for seventh and eighth-grade boys.

He was also “a profound hater,” Smith recalled. “He hated people whose skin color differed from his own, people from Eastern Europe, women who thought themselves equal to men, stray dogs and Democrats.”

Old Man Shaw, said Smith, read his Bible daily and memorized its content. He claimed that the Bible was the only book he had ever read, and based his whole life on it.

He also severely beat his sons — though no one in the community said anything about the obvious abuse. To Old Man Shaw, the Bible granted him the full authority as head of the family and endorsed what he considered to be strong discipline.

“His Bible clearly told him that disobedient children ought to be stoned, but he was content to settle for a belt and a cane,” said Smith. “Old Man Shaw, of course, was a sadist masquerading as a father and Christian” — who “used his interpretive approach to scripture ... to justify breaking the great commandment and ignoring Jesus.”

## THE KICKER

Smith noted that the other adults in the rural community of his upbringing did not know how to challenge Old Man Shaw because they too were locked into the false assumption that if something can be found in the Bible, then it must be right and operative for all time.

Smith confessed: “Each time I am tempted to settle for an interpretation of the Bible that suggests God endorses hurting, shutting out or devaluing others, I remember Old Man Shaw and say to myself, ‘Never again!’”

Then he asked the congregation simply, “What about you?”

What followed were more pastoral conversations about how to interpret scripture than Smith recalls ever having in his many years of ministry. And, because of the comfort level with his congregants, many of those conversations related to human sexuality.

Emerging from this time in the life of the congregation is a phrase that gets repeated when wrestling with matters of biblical interpretation: “Are we having an Old Man Shaw moment?” **NFJ**





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