

MARCH-APRIL 2017

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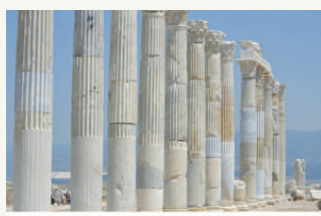


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See page 21 for more information.

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OUR TEAM

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

John D. Pierce
editor@nurturingfaith.net

CHIEF OPERATIONS OFFICER

Julie Steele
jsteele@nurturingfaith.net

MANAGING EDITOR

Jackie B. Riley
jriley@nurturingfaith.net

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR / CURRICULUM WRITER

Tony W. Cartledge
cartledge@nurturingfaith.net

ONLINE EDITOR / CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Bruce T. Gourley
bgourley@nurturingfaith.net

PUBLISHER EMERITUS

Walker Knight

DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT

John F. Bridges
jbridges@nurturingfaith.net

CHURCH RESOURCES EDITOR

David Cassady
david@thefaithlab.com

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Vickie Frayne
vickie@nurturingfaith.net

CUSTOMER SERVICE MANAGER

Jannie Lister
jannie@nurturingfaith.net

BOOK PUBLISHING MANAGER

Lex Horton
lex@nurturingfaith.net

EDITOR EMERITUS

Jack U. Harwell

* * *

OUR COLUMNISTS

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WAS JOHN CALVIN A FIVE-PONT CALVINIST?

By Ben Self

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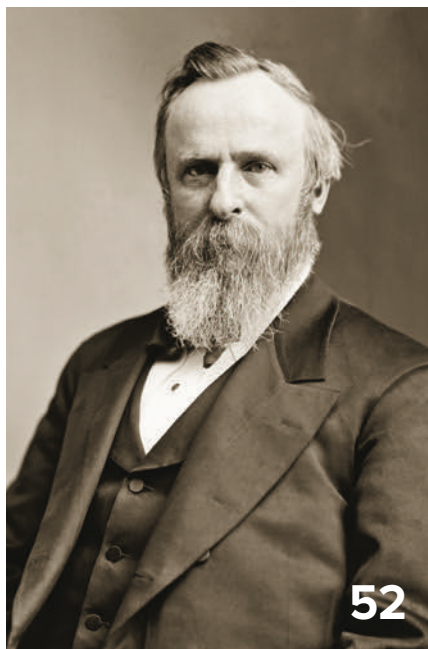
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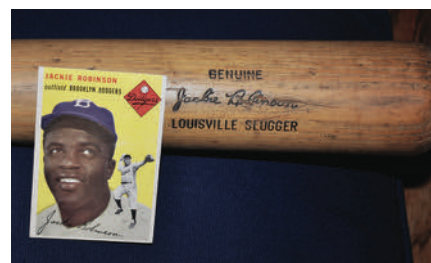
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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. When Lori Davies Barfield first made bracelets out of old belts she had no idea her creativity would lead to improving an impoverished community in Peru. Story on page 6.

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Faith Forward (Season of Lent)

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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 8:6-11
“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

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“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”

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In tribute

Dr. Bob Cates ‘went about doing good’

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Dr. Robert M. (Bob) Cates of Rome, Ga., died Dec. 28, 2016. For many people hailing from this Northwest Georgia community, he was the first person they ever met.

Dr. Cates delivered a bunch of babies into the world and competently cared for women throughout his distinguished career in obstetrics and gynecology. However, I got to know Bob and his wife Martha during their retirement years — and quickly came to appreciate them as great friends.

In the Acts of the Apostles (10:38), Luke writes about the anointing of Jesus by the Spirit of God — and then speaks of Jesus as one “who went about doing good.” Not all who claim to be followers of Jesus would be identified likewise.

However, the easiest way to track down Dr. Cates was to find where something good was being done — especially something that served a divine purpose in the lives of those with struggles — and he would likely be found in the middle of it. His gentle and caring heart and hands were engaged in a variety of “good-doing” in his community and beyond.

Bob was a faithful and supportive multi-term director and former vice chair of the independent, national board that guides our Nurturing Faith publishing ministry. And he was a strong advocate back home. Some of you are readers of *Nurturing Faith Journal & Bible Studies* and supporters of these efforts because Bob pestered you to do so.

At times Bob would ask me about the mechanics of our publishing ministry, then add: “I don’t know anything about how that’s done... but if you need someone to deliver a baby...”

Well, that medical need never arose but I did call Bob and Martha from the



emergency room in Rome a few years ago when I fell on a slippery hill there and broke my wrist. Bob was very helpful in getting guidance from an orthopedist friend who advised me to return home for the surgery.

That night Bob and Martha welcomed me into their home as an unexpected guest where he administered pain meds and she made a tomato sandwich that brought equal comfort.

My reflection on that experience is less on the foolishness that led to my accident and the resulting pain, but more on the graciousness of these two friends.

The term “servant leader” describes how one can provide influence through modeling and encouraging good rather than demanding excellence of others from a distant point of authority. The son of well-respected Baptist minister O.M. Cates, Bob was that kind of humble Christian leader whose life emulated the life and teachings of Jesus.

Bob was a faithful member of First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga., and, not surprising, served on the pastor search committee that recently brought Matt DuVall to the Rome pastorate.

In this recent time of transition, the mission-engaged congregation — following several listening sessions — described its core values in terms such as “caring,

NURTURING FAITH HAS RECEIVED GIFTS IN MEMORY OF ROBERT M. (BOB) CATES FROM:

Joel and Nannette Avery
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Jack and Barbara Glasgow
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Drayton and Mary Etta Sanders
Ernie and Mary S. Smith
Scott and Beth Smith
Ed and Sarah Timmerman
Joseph R. Walton

Additional gifts to be listed in the next issue of Nurturing Faith Journal.

integrity, friendliness, service, trust and inclusive.”

Those descriptions reinforce why Dr. Cates was an integral part of this church family and the larger community. This dear man, whom so many of us loved, was accepting and inclusive of others, friendly and caring, trustworthy and honest, and eager to serve others in the name of Christ.

He always did so with gladness and joy — rooted in a delightful sense of humor.

Much was made about the loss of so many well-known personalities from around the world during the past year. Dr. Bob Cates was not listed among the celebrities who died in 2016. However, his generous life continues to be celebrated with love and gratitude by those blessed to experience his goodness.

Words can never match our feelings from such loss. So perhaps our best response to the gratitude and grief we experience is found in that simple, ancient directive: Go about doing good.

Well done, Dr. Cates. Well done. **NFJ**

Crafting better lives

Cuffs link a creative idea to improving an impoverished community

**STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE**

ROME, Ga. — It wasn't five loaves and two fishes but a few crisp \$5 bills and a creative idea that started Lori Davies Barfield down an unexpected path that now has Peruvian women improving their own lives and others — and has Lori shipping and receiving materials that become artistic expressions of faith.

ONE SUNDAY

A couple of years ago, pastor Joel Snider (who retired recently) concluded Sunday morning worship at First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga., by giving each person a \$5 bill with limited instructions to “do something good.”

Over lunch with her husband, daughter and parents, Lori asked what they planned to do with the money entrusted to them. With no firm ideas coming quickly, she suggested they compile their resources.

Lori took the \$25 to Goodwill and bought used belts that she fashioned into leather bracelets with words of hope and inspiration.

“About three years ago I'd bought a bracelet online with a message on it,” said Lori. “I'm kind of crafty and thought, ‘I could have made that.’”

In fact, she gathered some materials to do so but “was not into it” at the time. But the \$5 project resurrected the idea.

CREATIVITY

Lori made about 15 of her own stylishly designed and well-crafted cuffs. Her mother sold them to friends at church on Wednesday night.



Lori Barfield (left) and Tamara Smathers look over the unique cuffs crafted by women in Collique, Peru.

Lori's teenaged daughter, Olivia, suggested the proceeds benefit the church's youth mission efforts — and the funds were directed to that purpose.

So the entrusted money had been creatively multiplied and used for something good. Job done — or so Lori thought.

But she began receiving requests from others wanting the custom leather bracelets — including memorial bracelets made from the old belts of loved ones who had died. Soon she was buying up belts online and fashioning them into more creative cuffs.

“People wanted them so badly that I couldn't stop making them,” Lori recalled.

She had started something with life beyond a single project. Yet she never imagined where the idea would soon take her.

NEEDED WORDS

The messages conveyed on the bracelets are simple but important, said Lori. “People need to hear, ‘Fear not,’ and they are desperate for ‘Love never fails.’”

Her favorite, she said, is “Love stays,” which she popular on memorial bracelets — which she

says are crafted along with her prayers for those who are grieving such loss.

Lori started selling the well-crafted bracelets online and then in three stores — which she is now seeking to expand. The mission project had grown beyond what she ever imagined or even hoped.

At a church meeting, the deacons chairman John Head asked Lori how the bracelet business was going and she replied honestly, “I'm overwhelmed.”

He responded: “What do you think about going to Peru and teaching some people to do this?”

For the past six years the Rome congregation has been engaged with Operación San Andrés (OSA) in Collique, Peru, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship mission effort spearheaded by South Main Baptist Church in Houston.

Mission teams assist locals in providing medical care, children's ministries and other services to an impoverished community near Lima.

“It is the least of these,” said Lori of the extreme poverty there.

FROM NO TO YES

Lori admits her default was set on “No” when it came to accepting leadership roles in the church where she was raised and returned to as an adult. “I’m very particular about how I use my time.”

So she surprised herself with a series of “Yeses” that led to teaching youth Sunday school and attending a meeting for prospective deacons where this new opportunity would arise — the expansion of her crafting ministry to South America.

Lori packed anvils, hammers and leather for the trip to Collique last October.

“I’ve never seen this kind of poverty,” she said. “I felt foolish thinking I’m going to help these people.”

She learned that Operación San Andrés had been named for the disciple who brought to Jesus the meager resources of fish and bread that were multiplied. That perspective, said Lori, was “what I needed to hear.”

With the aid of a translator, Lori taught five Peruvian women to make the leather bracelets with simple messages — some in English, some in Spanish.

“I’d brought enough [supplies] to make maybe 100 cuffs,” Lori recalled. “We started with the word ‘hope.’”

She was impressed by their craftsmanship. In less than three days the women had made 104 bracelets. “They do good work,” said Lori.

BACK AND FORTH

Due to the poverty there, the market for the bracelets would be outside the community where they were fashioned. So Lori made plans to bring them back to the U.S.

“However, I sold 40 before we returned,” she said of mission volunteers and others buying them before reaching home.

Lori then worked with Operación San Andrés leadership to determine the appropriate wages to pay to those who crafted the bracelets and personalized the backsides with their names. The additional proceeds support job training and other projects such as addressing domestic abuse among Peruvian women.

With such steady productivity, Lori stopped making bracelets herself — except for custom memorial cuffs — and now focuses on gathering and shipping supplies to Peru and then marketing and selling the returned bracelets so the proceeds can support the craft persons and others in the community there.

“It’s working,” said Lori. For the first month she sent approximately \$1,100 to Operación San Andrés to be distributed accordingly.

BACKSTORY

Lori said her proclivity for saying “no” to various opportunities has, at times, moved to a reluctant “yes.” So she agreed to share with her church family about her life and the expanding mission of Collique Cuffs.



Collique Cuffs: Words of Hope
Handcrafted from upcycled belts by women of Collique, Peru, these unique leather bracelets are available at colliquecuffs.net. Proceeds provide jobs, training and other services through Operación San Andrés. To invite Lori to share her story, email her at bbbhhi@gmail.com.

“The church’s response to my speaking and the bracelet project was so supportive,” she said.

Then an eighth-grade boy in the Sunday school class she teaches nominated her for deacon — a role that brought another reluctant “yes” but opened a door that led to her ongoing involvement with the women of Peru.

“It’s a story of going from ‘no’ — due

to experiences that exhausted me — to ‘yes,’” she said.

Being open to new possibilities seems to be just what God is looking for, said Lori, who grew up in the Rome church where her father was a longtime minister.

A philosophy major at Belmont University, Lori moved back to Rome from Nashville, got married and became a parent, and spent some of her time “hobbying.”

The last thing she expected to do was to use her creativity and reluctant “yeses” to improve the lives of Peruvian women. But that is what has happened.

“I have learned to do things I didn’t know how to do,” Lori said of building a web site, selling and shipping bracelets, and speaking about the project wherever invited.

MULTIPLICATION

Tamara Tillman Smathers, minister of education and administration, said the congregation has done the \$5 project twice — with interesting stories of creativity and multiplication.

Lori added that Tamar’s mother, Carolyn Tillman, made a lot of money from baking coconut cakes. But nothing has turned into an ongoing, international effort like Collique Cuffs.

“This is a story of incredible networking,” said Tamara, noting the congregation’s engagement with mission partners in Texas and Peru. Lori said the unexpected ministry “just keeps unfolding at the right moments.”

At times, she is asked about the bracelet she wears — with follow-up questions ranging from “Do you sell these?” to “Can you put these in our store?”

While the words on the bracelets are simple, Lori said they speak to deep needs.

The project fits the congregation’s “mission culture,” said Tamara, and is about more than creativity and adornment. “This is justice.”

And all the good that may come from these efforts, said Lori, flow from the power of “yes.” **NFJ**

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Worth Repeating

“We don’t get the role of religion in people’s lives. And I think we can do much, much better.”

—*New York Times* Executive Editor Dean Baquet, telling NPR that the media often doesn’t understand the role religion plays in people’s lives (*Business Insider*)

“You’re standing in headquarters.”

—Mark Wingfield, associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church, when asked by a visiting reporter to the Dallas church what “headquarters” might think of the congregation’s openness to LGBT persons (Facebook)

“The last thing the world needs is another religious institution where everybody looks and thinks the same.”

—Pastor Griff Martin of First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas, excluded from the Baptist General Convention of Texas after affirming LGBT Christians’ participation in “the full life of our community” (BNG)

“Many of us choose civility and polite avoidance to meaningful engagement with the underlying roots of racism and hatred.”

—Pastor Alan Sherouse of First Baptist Church of Greensboro, N.C. (Baptist News Global)

“The Holocaust did not begin with killing; it began with words. The Museum calls on all American citizens, our religious and civic leaders, and the leadership of all branches of the government to confront racist thinking and divisive hateful speech.”

—From a statement released by the United States Holocaust Museum

“Uniformity demands that every member of a group be in total agreement on every aspect of their shared life... Unity, on the other hand, recognizes that differences will inevitably exist among us...

People committed to unity will work diligently at finding ways of overcoming those differences, even while maintaining them.”

—Doug Dortch, pastor of Birmingham’s Mountain Brook Baptist Church and moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (*Fellowship!*)

“Religious beliefs may affect patients’ beliefs about the afterlife and help frame their illness in a context that medical professionals need to understand.”

—Eliza Blanchard of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, urging greater religious literacy in health care (RNS)

“The good-news tone gets lost in partisan acrimony.”

—Author Philip Yancey on the negative connotation of “evangelical” (Patheos)

“I pray a simple prayer every day that I have for almost 30 years. And it’s just this, ‘Lord, lead me today to those I need and to those that need me, and let something I do matter eternally.’”

—Six-time Grammy winner Amy Grant (*Fox News*)

“It’s no longer shameful to be a racist.”

—Ryan Lenz, editor of the Hatewatch blog at the Southern Poverty Law Center (*New York Times*)

How about a Jesus worldview?

By John D. Pierce

Use of the terms “biblical worldview” or “Christian worldview” should come with a warning label. Often these designations abuse isolated biblical texts in order to excuse all kinds of unkind and unchristian attitudes and actions.

So beware of the many attempts to elevate personal perspectives to divine status by suggesting that such affirmations represent an exclusive “biblical” or “Christian” worldview.

Such claims are often built on isolated biblical texts that appear — and can be made to appear — to support a favored position on various contemporary issues. The case most often made is that since the Bible is fully inspired, one’s interpretation of a particular text is therefore consistent with Jesus — even when it is obviously in contrast to Jesus.

Merriam-Webster traces the first known use of “worldview” back to 1858. The simple definition offered is “the way someone thinks about the world.”

The compound word is used widely since most everyone, it is hoped, thinks about the world. And, for certain, those “ways of thinking” vary greatly.

Too seldom, however, is enough thought given to the lenses through which the world is viewed — created by religious and cultural teachings and experiences. And, too often, false assumptions are made that one’s own worldview is superior to all others and in less need of critique.

Or, as in great evidence today, some who profess to be Christian and affirm the Bible’s authority conclude that their personal, particular and often political perspectives on issues of the day represent the “biblical” or “Christian” worldview.

As a result, the Christian faith — or one branch such as evangelicalism — gets

defined by such perspectives grounded in claims of biblical authority.

Barna Research Group surveys have sought to determine the degree to which Americans hold a “biblical worldview,” but their method was greatly flawed by the criteria used. Therefore, the results released in 2009 claimed that only 9 percent of American adults “have a biblical worldview.”

To be counted among the faithful, however, responders had to affirm various doctrinal positions, including a couple about the Bible and Satan that many Christians would not affirm.

Most telling: among the six criteria defining a “biblical worldview,” according to Barna, Jesus appears just once. And that single affirmation is that one believes Jesus lived a sinless life on earth.

There is nothing about affirming “Jesus is Lord,” as Christians have done for so long. Nothing about doing the hard stuff that Jesus called his followers to do. Nothing about caring for “the least of these,” which Jesus said is what separates the faithful from the unfaithful.



This survey is but one example of how “biblical” or “Christian worldview” can be misleading. More egregious than a poorly designed survey are the ways the terms are used by preachers and politicians to advance narrow ideologies that reflect very little if any of Jesus’ life and teaching, but are offered in the name of biblical faithfulness.

Examples are plentiful, from exclusion and the absence of compassion to fear-based hostilities toward those with different values and perspectives to blind allegiance to the modern Israeli government that disregards the human rights abuses of many (including Christians) and lessens the chances of peaceful solutions.

None of us who claim to follow Jesus has a perfect “Christian” or “biblical” view of the world. But trying to align our views of the world with the life and teachings of Jesus is a wise and faithful approach.

Yet we look through marred glass — smeared by all the misguided, self-serving ways the Bible calls sin. Resulting humility should cause us to consider more carefully what we’re looking through before claiming with great certainty what we see.

Perhaps the best approach to seeking a faithful biblical, Christian worldview may come from taking the same advice often given by auto mechanics and HVAC technicians: Check your filter. **NFJ**

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Paul Powell remembered for ‘unequaled leadership’

Baptist leader Paul Powell died Dec. 28 at age 83 in Tyler, Texas, where he had served earlier in his career as pastor of Green Acres Baptist Church for 17 years. He was also a former dean of Baylor University’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

“Paul Powell was a wonderful, dedicated servant of God whose contributions to Baylor and Baylor’s Truett Seminary were immeasurable,” said Baylor Interim President David Garland, according to a university press release.

Garland became Truett’s dean in 2007 when Powell retired. Powell’s other positions of leadership included president

and CEO of the Robert M. Rogers Foundation and president and CEO of the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (now GuideStone Financial Resources).

According to the Baylor release, Truett’s enrollment more than doubled to 381 students and the seminary’s endowment increased to more than \$38 million during Powell’s six-year tenure. Under his leadership, the seminary also opened its Baugh-Reynolds campus at



Baylor in 2001.

The seminary’s 550-seat chapel is named for Powell, who was honored as dean emeritus upon retirement.

“No one since George W. Truett has better borne the title ‘Mr. Texas Baptist’ than Paul Powell,” said Joel Gregory, who holds the George W. Truett Endowed Chair of Preaching and Evangelism at Truett Seminary.

“His influence and legacy were already legendary during his life and will only grow in stature and significance now that he has entered the life beyond. He towered over generations with unequalled leadership.” **NFJ**

Makeup of the new Congress overwhelmingly Christian

BY EMILY MCFARLAN MILLER

Religion News Service

The United States Congress has about as many professing Christian members today as in the early 1960s. Nearly 91 percent of members of the 115th Congress describe themselves as Christian, compared to 95 percent of Congress members serving from 1961 to 1962, according to data compiled by CQ Roll Call and analyzed by Pew Research Center.

That comes even as the share of Americans who describe themselves as Christian (now at 71 percent) has dropped in that time, Pew researchers noted. And, as a whole, Congress is far more religiously affiliated than the general public.

“Why have the ‘nones’ grown in the public, but not among Congress?” asked Greg Smith, associate director for research at Pew, referring to people who check “none” on surveys asking their religion. “One possible explanation is people tell us they would rather vote for an elected representative who is religious than for one who is not religious.”

Smith pointed to past Pew polls, including one in January 2016 that asked whether voters were more or less likely to vote for a presidential candidate who does not believe in God. More than half said they’d be less likely to vote for a non-believing candidate.

And in 2014, Smith said, 60 percent of adults in the U.S. told Pew it was important to them that members of Congress have strong religious beliefs. “Being a nonbeliever really is a political liability,” he said.

While the 115th Congress mostly looks like the last (and the 87th that convened in 1961), the current Congress does include seven fewer Protestants, four more Catholics and six fewer Christians as a whole.

That mimics a shift in the general public, according to Aleksandra Sandstrom, lead author of the Pew report: Like the rest of the country, Congress has become less Protestant. The share of Protestants in Congress has dropped from 75 percent to 56 percent since the 1960s, while the share of Catholics has jumped from 19 percent to 31 percent.

And 13 percent of its new members affiliate with non-Christian faiths, nearly double the share of non-Christian incumbent members, according to Pew. More than half of those non-Christian freshmen are Jewish (8 percent), the largest share of Jews in any freshman class, researchers noted, though Sandstrom said that data only was available back to 2011-2012.

Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, aren’t the only demographic to outstrip the general population in Congress. There also is a larger share of Jewish members of Congress (9 percent) than there is of Jewish Americans in the country as a whole (2 percent).

Representation by Buddhists, Mormons, Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Congress is roughly proportional to their population size.

But the growing number of religiously unaffiliated Americans, including atheists and agnostics, remain underrepresented. Nones make up 23 percent of all Americans, according to Pew, but only Rep. Kyrsten Sinema, a Democrat from Arizona, describes herself as religiously unaffiliated. **NFJ**

Better bridges

NC churches building interfaith relationships

BY RICK JORDAN

Our communities are growing increasingly diverse and experiencing both positive and negative reactions to the “strangers” among us. Churches face the question of how to relate to religious persons who are not Christian.

Tom Allen of First Baptist Church in Southern Pines, N.C., likes connecting people. During an earlier ministry at Ridge Road Baptist Church in Raleigh, he encouraged members to build bridges through personal relationships.

“We discovered that you must first create an atmosphere of trust,” he said. “Look for the shared light; have meals together; share stories of events and rituals. Listen to one another about how faith spoke in times of loss and grief.”

Of course, Christians see Jesus and the afterlife differently than other faith traditions, he said. And there will be times for such discussions.

“As we build trust and show respect, we can talk about those differences and have a productive dialogue,” said Allen, who is now the minister of education and administration at the Southern Pines church, which has a large military community. Sessions on interfaith understandings have been led by world religion professor George Braswell and by military personnel.

“The special forces guys have seen Islam at its best and its worst and can speak to that,” said Allen. “They have fought the Taliban, and they have been welcomed by Muslims who just want to raise their families in safety and peace.”

Every three years the local Jewish

rabbi leads a Seder meal at the church, he added, as “a positive way to help Christians remember and appreciate our Jewish roots.” There are great benefits, he added, to hearing directly from adherents of different faiths.

Some religious leaders may be leery when first invited into interfaith dialogue with a Christian church, said Allen, who suggests meeting ahead of time to discuss ground rules for the discussion and to assure the representatives of no intent “to lock the doors and force you to convert.”

In Concord, N.C., pastor Steve Ayers of McGill Baptist Church invited Barbara Thiede of the Jewish community there to speak to his congregation. “As Barbara tells it, she received her call to be a rabbi during this time at a Baptist church,” said Ayers. Later, her Jewish congregation, Temple Beth Or Olam, began meeting as guests of the Baptist church.

“The benefits have been exponential,” said Ayers. “We have both gained a positive appreciation for the other. We went to see the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit in Charlotte together. We also helped them restore their Torah.”

This enriching relationship has continued for 12 years.

“Barbara will be addressing one of our adult education groups to explain Paul from a Jewish perspective,” said Ayers. “In the past she has helped us flesh out the Genesis verses of creation with the Jewish tradition of dialoging with the text.”

David Jordan, teaching pastor at Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte,

takes groups to the Holy Land. Orientation sessions include sharing various perspectives on conflicts between Jews and Palestinians.

“I invite Jewish and Muslim friends to tell their stories and to offer their perspectives on Jewish-Palestinian relationships,” said Jordan. “We had the Jewish panel in September and the Palestinian panel in October. Otherwise, there is too much tension between the strongly pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian perspectives. But these are both perspectives we need to hear, and to hear from the people who are involved.”

Many American Christians, he noted, are surprised to learn that there are Palestinian Christians.

“The discussions are fun and informative,” he said. “International conflicts affect the daily lives of these ordinary people. These are very complicated stories that we are privileged to hear.”

These Baptist ministers are concerned that more churches do not have interfaith community building on their radars. “Probably the hardest part for most congregations is the lack of contacts,” said Ayers, noting a tendency of some churches to be “fairly insular.”

Jordan acknowledges that he has received some criticism for his efforts, but more affirmation.

“At our first Wednesday night session, we had Middle Eastern food and many Muslim folks joined us,” he recalled. “After the program a very conservative church member gave me a big hug. He said, ‘I thought this was ridiculous when I first heard about it, but now I realize this is the first time I’ve heard Muslims talk about their lives and families. It has changed me.’” **NFJ**

—Rick Jordan is church resources coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina.





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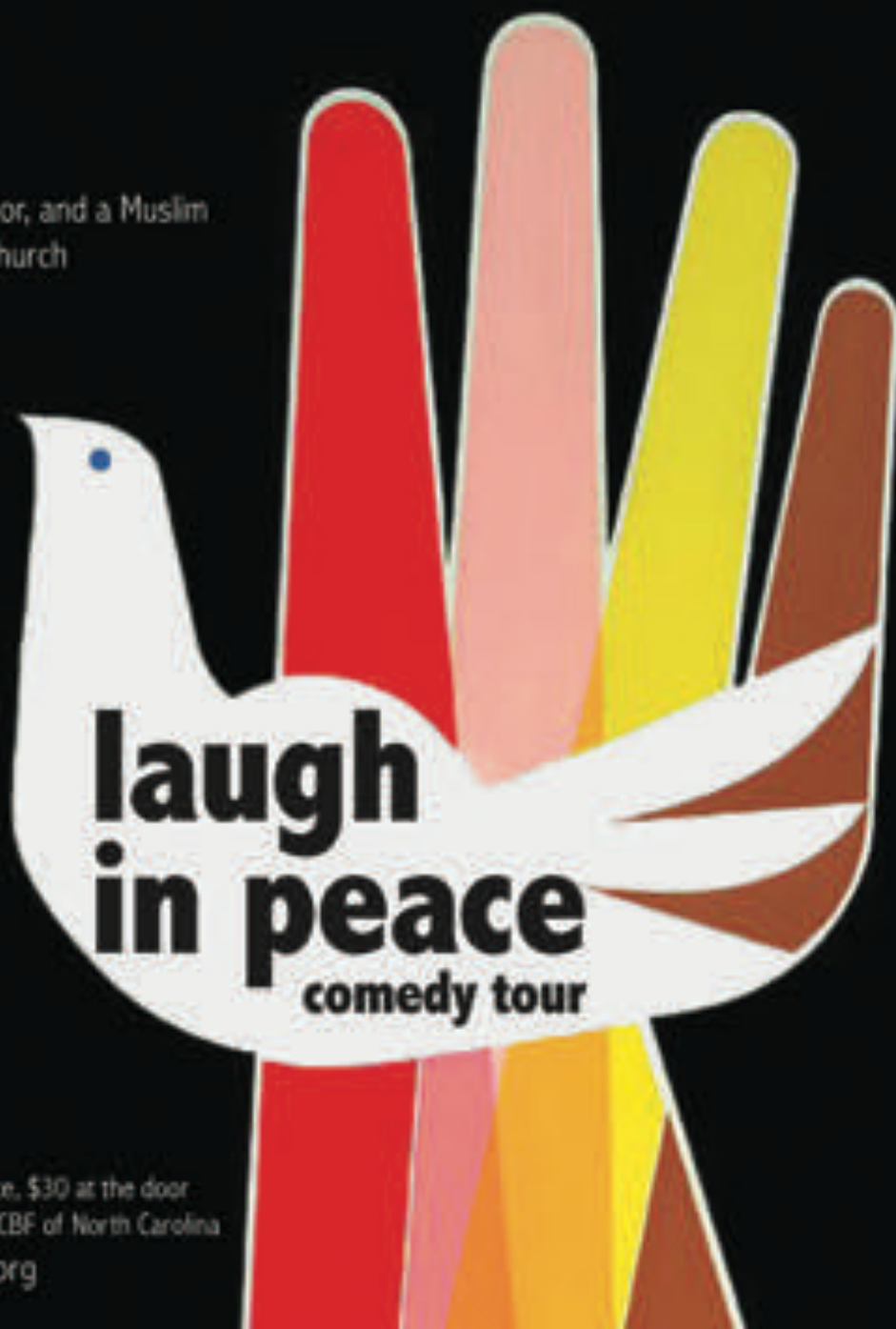
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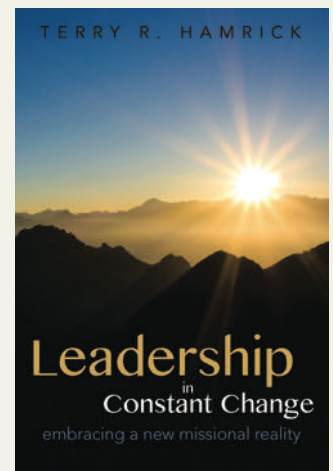
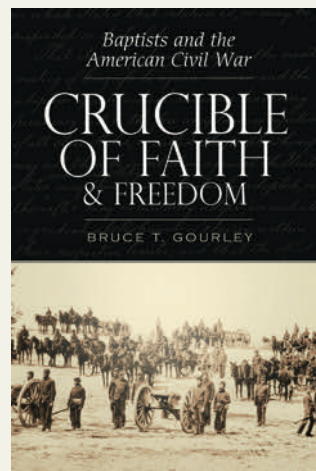
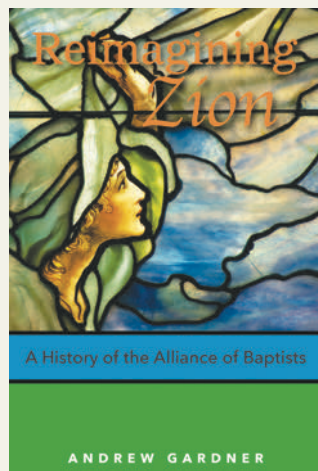
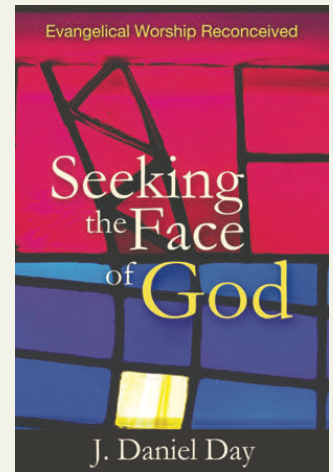
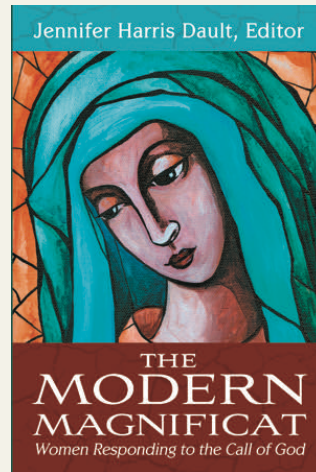
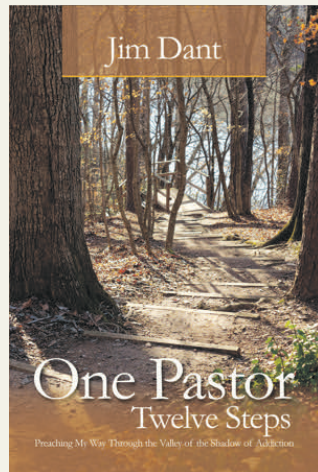
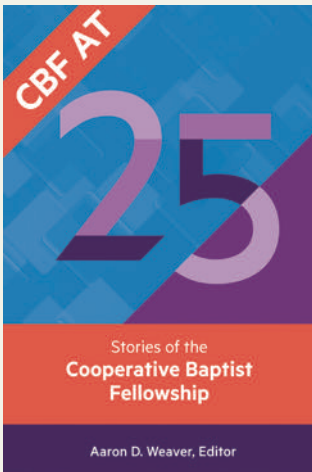
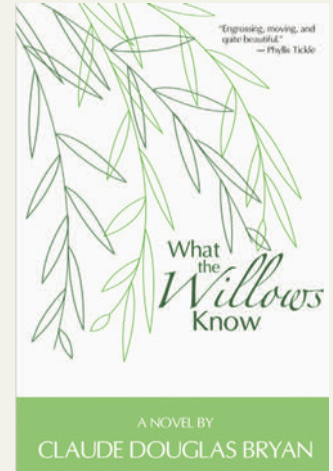
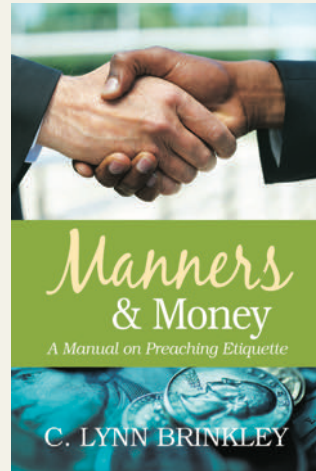
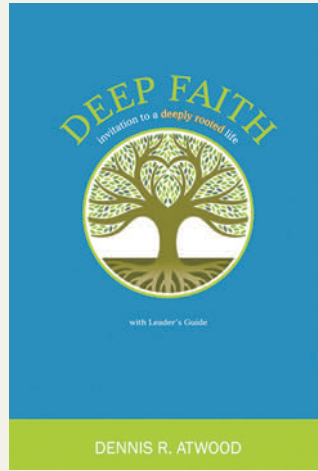
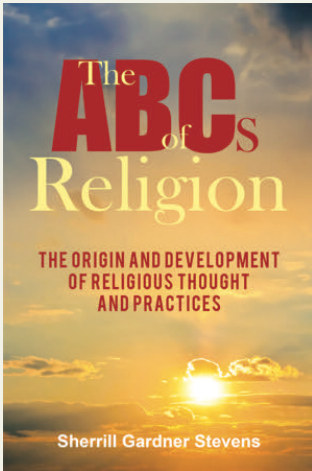
The Crossing at Hollar Mill
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A Rabbi, a Pastor, and a Muslim
walk into a ... church

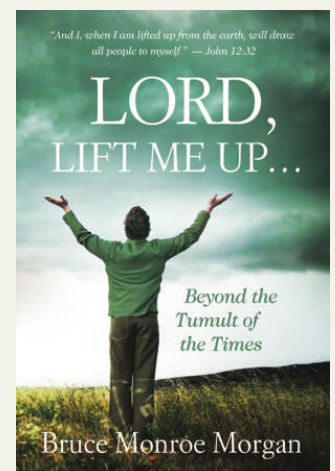
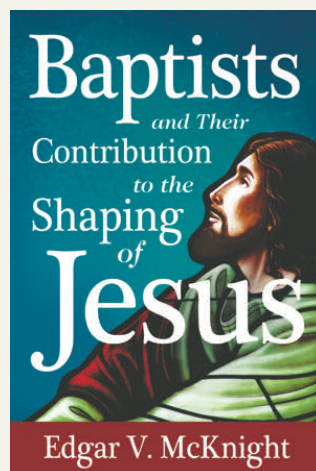
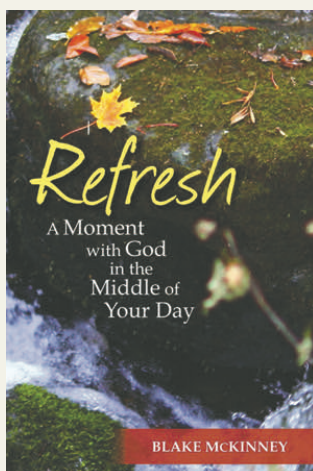
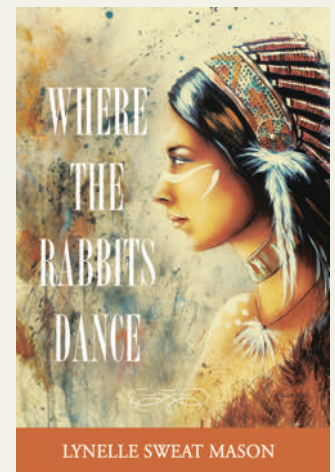
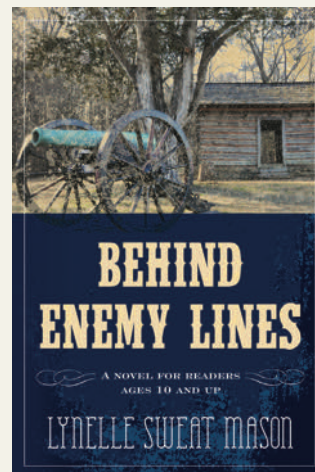
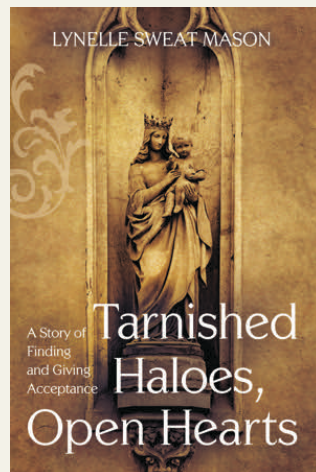
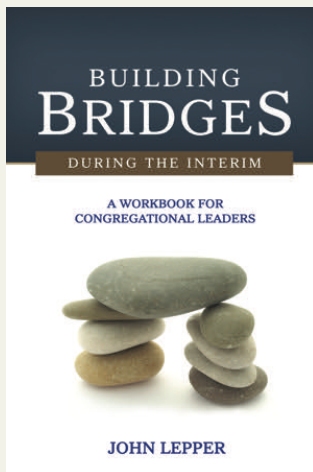
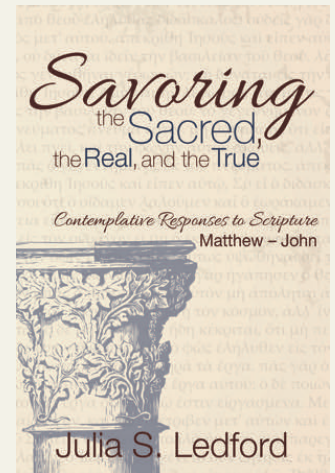
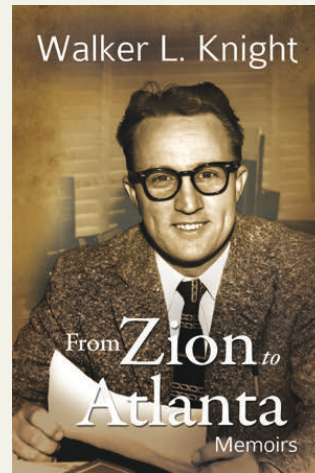
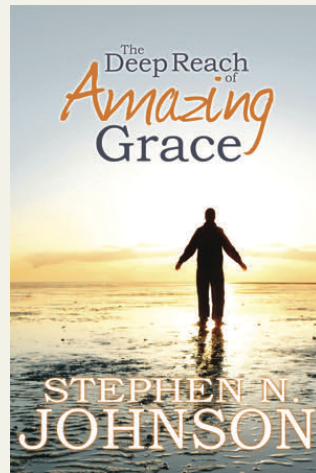
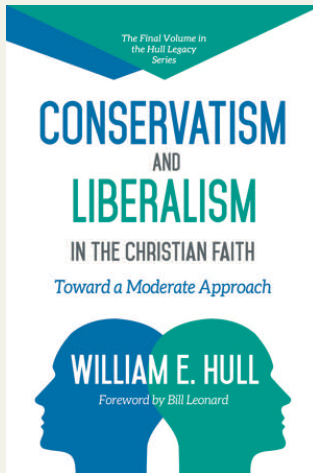


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After THE fires

Bill Black visits a burned-out site in Gatlinburg where he once lived.

Gatlinburg ministry rebuilding more than structures

**STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE**

GATLINBURG, Tenn. — On a pre-dawn morning in mid-December, Christmas lights sparkled and a full moon illuminated the mountain peaks in the resort town of Gatlinburg. The numerous pancake houses had yet to open for their belt-loosening customers.

However, the Dunkin' Donuts sign was on and the door unlocked. I asked the young man who poured my coffee if he had been working on the Monday after Thanksgiving when the wildfires came to town. He pointed toward the nearby ridge where he witnessed the approaching flames.

"I got out of here," he said. He added that the nearby place he had rented for a home was among the many dwellings consumed.

"But that's OK," he said. "Because I was fine, and there are a lot of good people around here who help."

Not everyone fared so well. Grief from human loss and the many challenges from material losses will continue for some time. Fourteen persons died; 14,000 were evacuated; and approximately \$500 million in property damage resulted from the Nov. 28 blazes.

Behind those numbers were individual lives in need of love, comfort, assurance and practical assistance. And, indeed, there were good people around with caring hearts and helpful hands, reaching out to those displaced and grieving.

GOOD PEOPLE

Weeks after the deadly wildfires hit this popular resort community, Bill Black was still going nonstop. For 35 years he has led Smoky Mountain Resort Ministries (SMRM) and has built trusting relationships with business owners, government leaders, visitors and many of the hourly-wage employees within the hospitality industry.

He has a big heart, especially for those working in hotels and restaurants whose meager housing and all belongings were wiped out by the wildfires. Bill became a trusted broker between those eager to give and those in desperate need.

Bill's cell phone seemed glued to his ear as he moved about town pairing up needs with aid. He is trusted among the numerous workers from Honduras, many who feared seeking formal help even though they lost their homes and all possessions.

Housing was the most immediate need, said Bill, with "people living on top of one another."

The fires spread so quickly that many of these working families had no time to gather their possessions, and in several cases lost their vehicles as well as their homes. Bill matched up 30 donated vehicles with persons having the greatest needs for transportation.

"This is going to be a fun phone call," said Bill, a bright smile overcoming an



Kent Anders (right), co-owner of Ober Gatlinburg, expresses appreciation to Bill for Smoky Mountain Resort Ministries.

intense look. When the call is answered, he exclaimed: “You’ve got a car!”

A body shop owner in middle Tennessee was set to drive the donated car over to Gatlinburg. Bill and the delighted person on the other end of the call arranged to meet at the courthouse for the transfer.

Bill moved quickly to the next matching of resources with recipients. An out-of-state visitor to Gatlinburg’s First Baptist Church wanted to help six families who lost their homes. Bill made those connections.

Earlier that morning he met with a family that had lost a loved one in the fire — offering pastoral care along with some gift cards and furniture they needed. He sees each opportunity as more than a coincident.

“God nudges me,” he said. The wildfires, he added, have given way to fire of the Holy Spirit.

HELPING HANDS

Pastor Eric Spivey of First Baptist Church of Cornelia, Ga., chairs the board of the non-profit resort ministries. He came up for three days right after the fires to assist Bill — and has set up a fund to receive gifts.

Eric described his time in Gatlinburg as a profound spiritual experience in seeing how lives are changed in the midst of crisis.

Rita Ponder of The Oaks Baptist Church in Lyons, Ga., wasted no time rallying support for the victims of the wildfires. Two days after the fires, the small congregation had collected \$1,500 to send to the cause.

Learning from Bill of specific needs, Rita said church friends filled her pickup truck with new small appliances, brooms

and other household items. She didn’t just make the delivery from southeast Georgia, but stayed for several days to assist with cleanup and the distribution of resources.

Rita joined other longtime SMRM supporters. Leisel Burns of Cross Plains, Tenn., who grew up in Honduras, was particularly helpful in communicating with the many displaced workers from her home country. Duffy Betterton, of Hendersonville, Tenn., who provides the SMRM web site, came to help as well.

“It’s about us loving people and sharing Christ’s love,” said Duffy. “It’s about relationships.”

Pastor Amy Mears of Glendale Baptist Church in Nashville has a long history with SMRM from her time as a student worker to currently serving on the board. She headed to the mountains soon after the fires burned out.

Her friend’s art-filled cabin in Rattlesnake Hollow was gone. “I sighed, then wept a little,” Amy said. But then her thoughts turned to gratitude that her friend had gotten out safely.

Driving away from the site, Amy saw a large black bear moving across the charred mountainside. She paused to celebrate such life.

Amy’s experiences as a college student with the resort ministries, she said, taught her many skills — including leading worship in campgrounds, meeting strangers, talking (and especially listening) about faith, and much more.

“Now, Smoky Mountain Resort Ministries continues to teach me by allowing me to grieve with people whose lives have been devastated,” she said.

Amy described the people she encountered in Gatlinburg as being “in active trauma” — seeking to integrate this tragedy into their lives. “They startle easily,” she said. “... They are highly energetic one minute and sluggish the next.”

Understandably, some are weary of help, fearing they’ll be scammed in their vulnerability, said Amy.

“They require time, and quiet, and calm, and relentless presence,” she added. “That is the ministry best offered to hearts and minds and spirits, just now.”

CONNECTIONS

“Ober Gatlinburg has a long-term relationship with Smoky Mountain Resort Ministries,” said Kent Anders, co-owner of the popular ski, snowboarding and skating destination with its highly visible aerial tramway that takes visitors from downtown to the mountaintop.

Bill Black is his close friend, he said, as well as a minister to his family and employees.

“He’s a great supporter of our foreign student workers,” said Kent, noting that Bill and his volunteers gather the international students for meals and to celebrate the holidays with them.

Getting Gatlinburg back to normal operation was an important goal for all involved, he said. That included opening the ski slopes where Bill leads worship on the mountain each Sunday.

Bill and others with Smoky Mountain Resort Ministries share in all the joy experienced by those who vacation in this scenic mountain setting. Yet they continue to see the charred hillsides and the broken hearts that need more than just words of cheer.

Many organizational efforts are aiding the recovery in and around Gatlinburg. On a very personal level, however, SMRM provides an opportunity to help in immediate and long-term ways.

For information on providing support or bringing volunteer groups to help with rebuilding efforts, visit the Smoky Mountain Resort Ministries web site (smrm.org). And one more thing, said Bill: “Come to Gatlinburg — and tip extravagantly!” **NFJ**



Bill Black talks with foreign students who’ve arrived in Gatlinburg to work on the ski slopes and in other tourist venues.

“Listen to him!”

By John R. Franke

On Feb. 26 many churches observed Transfiguration Sunday in memory of the Transfiguration of Jesus, one of the major events in the gospel narratives of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In these stories Jesus undergoes a metamorphosis, a transformation that results in a significantly altered appearance as he experiences a moment of divine radiance in which, according to Luke, “his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.”

As if this development wasn’t startling enough, we’re told that Peter, James and John next saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah!

Peter is so amazed that he proposes making three dwellings, one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Doubtless, Peter views it as a great honor for Jesus to be included with two of the greatest and most revered figures in the Hebrew tradition.

Imagine his surprise when a cloud envelops the group and a voice says, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” After which Moses and Elijah are gone and Jesus is found alone.

The sparseness of the accounts we have (nine verses in Matthew, seven in Mark, and nine in Luke), coupled with the remarkable story they tell, leaves us with many questions. In the midst of our curiosities, one of the common convictions of the early Christian witness to Jesus is captured in the words spoken by the voice from the cloud: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

The presence of Moses and Elijah with Jesus is significant in that they represent

the pinnacle of the Law and the Prophets. Moses is the one through whom the law was given, and Elijah is the great prophet who was taken up into heaven by a whirlwind (2 Kgs. 2:11). The command from God to listen to Jesus points to his superiority to Moses, Elijah and all others who came before him.

John the Baptist is pictured as “Elijah who is to come” (Matt. 11:14), the last link in the great chain of witnesses who anticipate the coming of the Lord. He summarizes the relation of the prophetic tradition to Jesus (John 3:30): “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

The Gospel of John makes an explicit comparison between Moses and Jesus: “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

Now keep in mind that the law itself is a good gift from God. But it was not the very life of God, the Word who became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14).

A similar comparison can be made with the New Testament. It bears witness to the coming of Jesus and the promise of new life, but it is not itself the Word made flesh. For this reason, we are exhorted to listen to Jesus because, as important as the Law and the Prophets are, as important as the New Testament would become, they are writings, the Word of God written — but not the Word of God in the flesh.

I may love the Bible, but the Bible doesn’t love me. The one to whom the Bible

bears witness is the one who loves me. As important as the Bible is in the process of knowing Jesus Christ and the will of God, it must never be confused with Jesus Christ himself. We must listen to him above all else because he *is* the living truth.

Because we are a people who listen to Jesus and confess that the Word became flesh and lived among us, we must cultivate the practice of bold humility in our witness to the world.

Our witness must be bold because we are entrusted with the gospel and sent into the world in the same way that God the Father sent Jesus — to proclaim the love of God for all people that leads to reconciliation, goodness and human flourishing.

At the same time our witness must be humble. We do not know all there is to know about truth and the workings of God in the world. But even more importantly, our witness must be humble because the way of God in Jesus Christ is not “our” truth.

It is not the triumph of our way of thinking over others, not something we in our wisdom have created. Rather, it is a divine gift to us, as it is a gift to the world.

We are called to live out this truth in the way of Jesus, who did not consider equality with God a privilege to be asserted, but humbled himself and took the form of a servant. Let us follow his example and thereby demonstrate that we are people who truly listen to him. **NFJ**

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



BEING CHURCH IN CHANGING TIMES

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

Health care crisis in churches calls for creative, caring response

Mike Queen

A move to shift the cost of benefits from churches to ministers has unfolded at an alarming rate. This is driven by rapidly escalating health care costs, namely health insurance.

A few years back the U.S. Congress passed the bi-partisan Affordable Care Act that provided the opportunity to purchase health care benefits for millions of previously uninsured adults and children. The current administration and legislators have promised to repeal the ACA and replace it with something to be determined in the future.

Meanwhile, far too many ministers are left twisting in the wind wondering how they will provide health care for themselves and their families.

Recently I asked some churches to share with me how they provide these benefits. Of the 42 churches that responded, the results ranged from churches that still offer full family coverage for all ministers to one church that noted: “We just decided to get out of the insurance business.”

Inequities abound, influenced by a myriad of forces but primarily shrinking church finances. While loathing to cut missions, church programs and salaries, and being required to pay property and casualty insurance along with utility and building costs, an easy place to cut is employee benefits.

In my work with young pastors this may be the single biggest shock they experience entering ministry. Most new employees in the secular world (there are exceptions) are offered a salary plus a benefit package for health care coverage and retirement

contribution. However, many churches have started offering a “salary package.”

One minister thought he was getting a \$50,000 salary, which he considered generous and appropriate for the setting. Later he learned that out of that \$50,000 he would have to pay \$19,000 for health insurance, \$5,000 for a retirement contribution, plus all of his ministry-related expenses (travel, continuing education, conventions, books, etc.). His actual salary/housing amount proved to be just under \$23,000.

Another minister who has served the same church for more than a dozen years is actually taking home fewer dollars today than when she began. She received a few pay raises over the years, but the church shifted benefit costs to her that eroded the gains she had made.

Several churches gave ministers a “one-time pay increase” to cover assuming insurance costs at that time. Yet the ministers were then left to cover all future increases, whatever they might be.

One church recently transitioned to a Health Savings Account (HSA) that costs less but carries a \$7,000 deductible and no prescription benefit. Essentially, many churches have moved or are moving toward a form of low cost catastrophic coverage.

My purpose is not to affix blame to anyone about this crisis. But when those who work for the government have defined and guaranteed health care benefits, as do

many professionals in the business world, what can be done to ensure that our ministers and their families are not broken by the system?

Allow me to offer a few modest suggestions. We simply must think about this in ways that have not been necessary before.

Smaller churches that have long had a full-time pastor may no longer be able to afford that luxury. What about two churches finding a way to share a pastor in order that they might be able to provide decent pay and benefits?

What about smaller churches merging to form a more vibrant congregation that is able to provide for ministers and reduce the expenses of two churches? What about larger churches with too much staff? When a vacancy occurs, might it be helpful to reassign work responsibilities and use those saved funds in order to cover health care for the rest of the staff?

As someone who is retired and on Medicare, I have no dog in this fight; but it is unconscionable to me that some churches expect their ministers to bear the full brunt of health care costs. Amid all the regulatory uncertainty there are things congregations can do to make it right. If in your churches you have any voice at all in this matter, please use it. **NFJ**

—Mike Queen, pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church of Wilmington, N.C., is a consultant with the Center for Healthy Churches and the co-author of *Hopeful Imagination: Traditional Churches Finding God’s Way in a Changing World (Nurturing Faith)*.



Worship receiving line etiquette

By Brett Younger

After Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth, the congregation tried to throw him off a cliff. Since then many churches have instituted a receiving line as a way to ease tensions and avoid an unfortunate end to a worship service.

Like the widow at a funeral, the preacher shakes hands and listens to inappropriate comments. The minister is usually stationed at the door through which most people leave, but smart preachers leave room for the disgruntled to escape without comment.

At its best, the receiving line gives church attendees 15 seconds to say, "I was here and want credit for being here." The preacher has an opportunity to connect with the congregation and graciously deflect the praise that follows a good sermon.

The receiving line has become as much a part of worship as faulty sound systems and bored teenagers, but we have not been given the guidance that will make the receiving line the heartfelt exchange it could be. We have awkward conversations, because of our lack of attention to receiving line etiquette. Here are some things you should not say after a sermon:

"Good try."

"I'm sorry my baby screamed through the sermon. I couldn't hear anything either."

"What do you think the weather is going to do?"

"How long has it been since you preached on Revelation?"

"Do you have a cold?"

"I'm just saying ... it's 12:15."

"Every sermon you preach is better than the next one."

"How many preaching classes did you take at seminary?"

"That used to be one of my favorite texts."

"I'm glad you don't feel like you have to challenge us every Sunday."



"Do you ever listen to Andy Stanley?"

"What's the website where you get your sermons?"

"I don't think that's how you pronounce Capernaum."

"Where do you get your hair cut?"

"I'll give you five bucks if you say the word *zamboni* next Sunday."

"Did you know there was a bee flying around the sanctuary?"

"Do you know if we're using real eggs for the Easter egg hunt this year?"

"Our last preacher had a different take on that text."

"Here's what I would have done with the sermon."

"Are there books on how to preach?"

"Have you heard the saying, 'You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar?'"

"I don't come to church to be preached at."

"Let me respond to the tiniest bit of minutiae from your sermon."

Preachers secretly wish the critics would go out the side door. On occasion your pastor wants to ask:

"How could that comment possibly be helpful?"

"Is that really what you got out of the sermon?"

"Do you understand that you're why my friends from seminary are selling insurance?"

We can do better. You can do better.

The receiving line is your opportunity to be your preacher's favorite — and with so little

effort. There are so many good things to say. Try one of these on Sunday:

"If you had been my preacher 20 years ago, I wouldn't be a corrupt politician today."

"You almost make me want to read the Bible."

"When you came here, I thought you were too old for this job, but now you're just the right age."

"Your sermon reminds me of something I read in *The Lighter Side*."

"I never thought about that text in that way."

"I like the Jesus you preach more than the Jesus I grew up with."

"I talk about prayer a lot, but today I prayed."

"I feel less tired than when I got here."

"I remembered some things that matter."

"I did not enjoy the sermon, but I will think about it."

"I have a neighbor I haven't spoken to in 10 years. I'm going to talk to him this afternoon."

"Thank you for being honest."

"I am going to be more aware of God this week."

"This is the first time in years that I've cried during worship."

"I want our church to do more for hungry children. How should I start?"

"I think I heard the Spirit invite me to do more."

The best response to a sermon is not the words you offer the preacher, but a renewed openness to God. As you leave church on Sunday you might say, "I want to be a Christian." The best preachers will respond, "I do, too." **NFJ**

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



The Bible Lessons that anchor the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies are written by Tony Cartledge in a scholarly, yet applicable, style from the wide range of Christian scriptures. A graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Duke University (Ph.D.), and with years of experience as a pastor, writer, and professor at Campbell University, he provides deep insight for Christian living without “dumbing down” the richness of the biblical texts for honest learners.

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 5, 2017

Romans 5:12-21

Righteous Failure

The season of Lent comes in the spring, so it's not surprising to learn that the word "Lent" derives from a word that means "spring" – the Old English *lencten*, which was related to the German *lenz* and the Dutch *lente*. Linguists think it may derive from an earlier word meaning "long," a nod to the days getting longer in springtime.

In church tradition, however, Lent has nothing to do with spring: it's about preparing for Easter, which just happens to come in the spring. Lent begins on "Ash Wednesday," a day devoted to recognizing our sins and entering a season of repentance. We would expect the lectionary to mark this season with texts on the subject of sin and grace, and we are not disappointed. Our lessons for the next five weeks come mainly from Paul's letter to the Romans, all dealing in one way or another with the issue of human sin and divine redemption. 


Modern readers may find some problematic interpretive issues in today's text. Paul focuses much of his argument on what appears to be a literal understanding of Genesis 4, while many contemporary scholars and readers consider both creation stories (Gen. 1:1-2:4a and 2:4b-25) to

Romans 5:18


"Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all."

be symbolic stories of faith rather than historically or scientifically accurate records. For many, the story of "the Fall" in Genesis 3 can be appreciated as a testimony that humans have sinned from the beginning while regarding Adam and Eve as metaphorical, rather than literal, characters. (For more on this, see "The Hardest Question" online).


Jewish teaching considered each person to be responsible for his or her own choices, whether for good or evil. The prominent rabbis of Paul's day did not accuse Adam of dooming all persons to lives of depravity. Paul, however, saw in Genesis 3 a convenient theological rationale for his argument that humans were incapable of righteousness, lost in inherited sin that could only be redeemed by Christ.

Thus, Paul not only spoke of Adam as a literal person, the founder of the human race, but also as the one responsible for its proclivity to sin. Readers who share that view will not be troubled by Paul's arguments. Those who see Adam and Eve as symbolizing humankind (their names mean "human" and "life") can look beyond Paul's literalism and still appreciate his argument. 

Paul clearly understood the point of Genesis 3: humans have sinned from the beginning, and sin has negative consequences. Whether one

regards Genesis 3 as a metaphorical faith story or as a historical narrative, the pervasiveness of human sin throughout history is affirmed, and few of us would question it. 

The legacy of sin (vv. 12)

The literary structure of Rom. 5:12-21 is exceedingly complex and subject to varying interpretations. Is there a logical progression, or is Paul repeating himself? Here's what seems to be the most likely way to understand how the passage works: Paul begins with a statement in v. 12 that he leaves open-ended, then launches into a series of parenthetical statements (vv. 13-17) before returning to his main thought in v. 18. 

Paul begins his argument by saying that sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin (v. 12a). Lest we think that Paul lays all the blame at Adam's feet, however, note that he adds "and so death spread to all *because all have sinned*" (v. 12b). Paul reasons that sin entered the world through Adam, but all humans since have followed his lead. This suggests a bit of a paradox: humans seem destined to sin, but they also sin by choice. In this part of his argument, Paul stresses the innate fate of inherited sin – but in other places, such as Romans 6, he puts more stress on sin as a personal choice.

The story in Genesis 3 expresses a belief that humans have sinned from the beginning, but also that we've also sought to weasel out of it from the start. The story credits both Adam and Eve with trying to "pass the buck" and blame their sin on someone else.

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Adam not only blamed Eve for giving him the fruit, but also dared to indict God for putting her in his life. Eve, in turn, blamed the serpent. It's always tempting to shuffle off our wrongdoing on someone else, but we cannot avoid personal responsibility for the choices we make.

The gift of grace (vv. 13-17)

As mentioned above, vv. 13-17 can be read as parenthetical statements in which Paul further builds on his differentiation between Adam and Christ. He does this through an excursus on sin, death, and the law in vv. 13-14, and a series of comparisons in vv. 15-17.

In v. 13, Paul begins with an obvious statement that sin existed before the law was given to Moses. He posits, however, that sin was “not reckoned” – that is, not counted as sin – when there was no law. Perhaps Paul means that sin could not be labeled as such until it was later defined, but the effects of wrongdoing were not different: he acknowledges that “death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses” (v. 14). In a world without a written law, someone may cheat, steal, and kill without officially breaking a legal dictum – but the deathly effects of those actions are no different.

The story in Genesis 3 is set long before the introduction of Mosaic law, but the account assumes that God had identified unacceptable behavior (Gen. 2:16-17). Other stories from the primeval history indicate that humans were held responsible for their sins long before Moses and the covenant law. Adam, Eve, and Cain all suffered consequences for their errors. The flood narratives begin with a claim that “The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of

their hearts was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). While Paul might argue that sin was not officially a “transgression” until there was a law to transgress, his purpose is to show that Israel's possession of the law gave them an even greater responsibility for obedience.

God's free gift of grace in Christ differs from our legacy of sin in Adam, Paul says, because the gift of grace brings life, not death (v. 15). Both have widespread effects. “Many died” through Adam's sin, but Christ's gift of grace “abounded for the many.”


Expressing the contrast in more theological terms, Paul contends that the judgment following Adam's sin brought *condemnation*, while the free gift of grace in Christ brought *justification* (v. 16). By participating in Adam's legacy, we fall under condemnation due to our misbehavior. By accepting Christ's freely offered grace, we are justified (put into a right relationship with God) despite our many sins.

In more practical terms, the legacy of Adam brings the dominion of death, but those who receive the abundant grace Christ offers may exercise dominion in life through the power of Christ (v. 17). The power of death is a fearsome thing, but it is no match for the living Christ, who offers abundant and eternal life to those who live in grace. Paul emphasizes the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness to remind the reader that Christ alone is responsible for our redemption from sin.

The importance of choice (vv. 18-19)

In v. 18, we finally come to the closure of Paul's governing comparison. The first half of the verse repeats the thought of v. 12, and the second half finishes the comparison: “Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for

all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.”

On first reading, this verse (along with v. 19-21) may seem very deterministic, as if Adam made everyone sinners, and now Christ has made everyone righteous. Paul is not teaching universalism, however. He is very careful in his use of verbal tenses and moods to show that the choice of sin is an accomplished fact, while the way of righteousness is a possible path – not a forced destination. 

As James R. Edwards has noted, “This is not necessarily to assert universal salvation, however. In v. 17 Paul spoke of ‘those who *receive* God's grace and righteousness.’ Salvation by grace is not salvation by fiat, much less coercion. Grace is only grace where it grants the other freedom to receive – or reject – Christ's self-sacrifice for forgiveness at the cross.” (*Romans, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011], 152).

Paul's message is clear. Sin came into the world as quickly as humans understood they could make choices about their behavior. Since that time, none save Christ have escaped its dominion.

Whether we're as comfortable as Paul in blaming the introduction of sin to a literal Adam, we all can acknowledge that wrongdoing is a universal phenomenon, and always has been. Now, however, though sin has persisted and increased, God's grace has abounded.

Indeed, Paul says it has “super-abounded,” adding as a prefix the Greek root of our word “super” (v. 21). Believers can be super grateful for that: those who choose to accept God's grace need no longer fear the death that comes through sin, but may anticipate the hope of eternal life. NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 12, 2017

Romans 4:1-17

Trustful Faith

When the investment firm of Smith-Barney needed a spokesperson for its television commercials back in the 1970s, the leadership chose veteran actor John Houseman. With his craggy looks, gray hair, and weathered voice, Houseman assured viewers that Smith-Barney gained their money “the old-fashioned way,” insisting: “We *earn* it!”

The theme for the memorable commercials reflected American values: we respect people who earn their wealth more than those who inherit it or gain it by cheating the system. Perhaps that is one reason why it is so hard for many persons to accept God’s offer of *grace*. We want to have a good relationship with God and the hope of eternal life, but we want to *earn* it by our own works. To think it could be freely given seems like cheating, or too good to be true.

We earn it!
(vv. 1-4)

The “old-fashioned” mindset of needing to earn things has an ancient history, including the idea of earning one’s salvation. Paul often dealt with it in his missionary work and his writings. Many of Paul’s contemporaries took pride in earning a righteous standing

Romans 4:13

“For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.”


with God through observing the laws and rituals of Judaism. Paul, however, had come to believe that God’s operating premise was one of grace.

In the previous chapter, Paul declared that Jesus Christ had revealed the depths of God’s free grace toward humankind: “... since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:23-24). Jesus himself had suggested that nothing brought more joy to God than the opportunity to grant grace to a repentant sinner (Luke 15:7).

Paul was concerned because some believers who had come to trust in Jesus believed that they must continue observing Jewish law. To counteract the inherent legalism in their faith, Paul challenged them to look to the past and consider the foundation of their heritage. Even Abraham, the illustrious ancestor of the Hebrews, had been saved by faith and not works, Paul said.

Adopting a favorite style of rhetoric, Paul posed a question that his hearers might ask, and then answered it. “What about Abraham?” he asked (v. 1). Shouldn’t “Father Abraham” be a prime example of one who was saved through works? After all, Gen. 26:5 claims that God had praised the patriarch, saying: “Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my

statutes, and my laws.”

Even so, Paul insisted that Abraham’s faithfulness was not motivated by a desire to earn God’s love, but a belief that God had already shown grace to him. Paul recalled Gen. 15:6, where God renewed a promise to make of Abraham a great nation who would become a blessing to all peoples. In response, the narrator said, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Thus, Paul argued, not even Abraham could boast of having earned his relationship with God (v. 2). 

In Paul’s mind, Abraham’s faithfulness in keeping the law, his good works toward others, and his unquestioning obedience to God’s commands were all a reflection of his faith in God – not an attempt to earn God’s favor. If Abraham had worked for his reward, he would have earned it (v. 4), but instead he put his trust in God’s promise, receiving God’s blessing through the medium of God’s grace.

He saves us!
(vv. 5-8)

Abraham experienced God’s grace, but the scriptures portray him as being faithful from the beginning. What about those who are not so righteous as the iconic Abraham? Paul called upon another ancient example of faith and trust, one whose reputation was less sterling. David was remembered as Israel’s greatest king and a man after God’s own heart, but everyone knew that David also had a dark side. In his most glaring lapse, David had not only committed adultery with Bathsheba, but also tried to cover his crime by ordering that her faithful husband

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Uriah be sent to a certain death in battle (2 Samuel 11). Can God's grace also justify sinners (v. 5)?

Paul answered in the affirmative. David cried out to God for forgiveness and experienced God's cleansing grace (v. 6). To illustrate, Paul could have described David's penitent prayer of 2 Samuel 12, but quoted instead from the opening verse of Psalm 32.

Like many others, Psalm 32 was commonly attributed to David. The psalm expresses the joyful relief of one "whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered," the overwhelming release of "one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin" (vv. 7-8). The remainder of Psalm 32, like the more familiar Psalm 51, suggests that the psalmist experienced God's grace for one simple reason: he acknowledged his guilt and asked for forgiveness. 📖

Us means all (vv. 9-17)

Some of Paul's readers may have brought up the issue that both Abraham and David were Jews: perhaps God's grace is more evident toward them than toward Gentiles. Shouldn't non-Jews have to do something to earn their right to relationship with God (v. 9)? Can the uncircumcised expect the same rights and privileges as those who bear the mark of God's covenant people?

Paul answered the question with another, returning to his initial appeal to Abraham: "Was God's grace shown to Abraham before or after he was circumcised?" The answer can only be *before* – that is, while he was still technically a Gentile (v. 10). Abraham had been born in southern Mesopotamia and lived much of his life in Haran. According to the stories in Genesis, Abraham was 75 when God called him, but was not circumcised until he had been in Canaan for 24 years. 📖

God's grace toward Abraham clearly predated his circumcision, so Paul argued that circumcision was given to Abraham as a "seal" of the righteousness he had already experienced *by faith* – an outward mark of an inner relationship. Thus, Paul presented Abraham as the father of all believers, circumcised or uncircumcised, who put their trust in God (v. 11). He is the hope of the Gentiles as well as the Jews, the ancestor of *all* believers – Gentile or Jewish – who follow his example (v. 12). 📖

Paul's argument was not complete. He knew that someone might ask "But what about the law?" If circumcision was irrelevant to receiving grace, Paul argued, then the law was even more so. By Paul's reckoning, Abraham was "regarded as righteous" several years before his own circumcision and hundreds of years before Moses. Paul saw the giving of the law as a guideline for living as people that God has already redeemed, not as the means of entering a relationship with God

If the law had set up a new means of relating to God by elevating obedience over faith, Paul argued, then the Abrahamic covenant of faith would become void and God's promises to Abraham's descendants would no longer apply (vv. 13-14). But, he claimed, the blessings of keeping the law were overshadowed by the curse of *not* keeping the law (the "wrath" of v. 15) – and it is quite evident that no one can keep the law perfectly.

Thus, Paul contended that a right relationship with God is not based on the conditional covenant of the Mosaic law, but the prior Abrahamic relationship of faith and promise (v. 16a). Otherwise, he argued, we would be hopeless. But, because God still relates to his creation through grace, all people still have the option of finding forgiveness – God's grace is

"not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham" (v. 16b). The promise to Abraham was not for the Jews only, Paul insisted, for God had said "I have made you the father of many nations" (v. 17a, citing Gen. 17:5).

Abraham's faith was such that he believed in a God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (v. 17b).

God had promised to make Abraham the father of many nations, but he remained childless, even when he was very old and his wife Sarah was long past menopause. Yet, Abraham believed that God could bring life from their aged bodies, which were "as good as dead" (cf. vv. 18-19). When Abraham weighed all the reasons why he *could not* have children against the promise of God that he *could*, he chose to believe in God.

The result of Abraham's faith is that he became not only the physical ancestor of the Jewish people, but also the spiritual ancestor of many peoples – of all who follow his example of trusting faith in God.

Today, believers who read this text may find Paul's theological argument to be less than exciting, for Christianity has long accepted the principle of salvation by faith, and don't need analogies based on Abraham to convince us. Even so, we can find in this text a powerful reminder of the influence one person can have. Nearly two millennia after Abraham's era, Paul remembered his example and pointed to him as a model of faith.

What kind of legacy are we leaving for our descendants? Will they remember us as one who trusted in wealth and achievements apart from God, or as one who trusted a promise that goes as far back as Abraham and as far forward as our future hope? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 19, 2017

Romans 5:1-11

Hopeful Peace

The subject of pride is always a paradox for Christians. When we are young, parents or teachers encourage us to dress neatly or to work hard by “taking pride” in our appearance or our work. “Taking pride in yourself” is a southern euphemism for having a strong self-image and positive self-esteem.

Coaches of organized sports often preach team pride so players will try harder and support the other members of the team. Persons who have minority status often emphasize pride in their heritage or their identity as a way of claiming their place within the larger society.

There are positive aspects to the issue of pride. But there is also a flip side. I remember childhood Sunday School lessons in which we were taught that “pride goes before destruction” (Prov. 16:18), and that “the boastful pride of life” is a wicked, worldly thing (1 John 2:16).

Pride, then, like other human attitudes, can be a mixed blessing. We need a healthy amount of pride in who we are and what we do – but we must be careful not to let personal pride overshadow our concern for others and our humility before God.

In today’s text, Paul talks about

Romans 5:1

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

three aspects of Christian faith that are proper causes for pride. Paul speaks of how believers can “boast” of the eternal *hope* they obtain through faith in Christ (vv. 1-2), in the *sufferings* they endure for the sake of Christ (vv. 3-5), and in the Lord who has made possible their *reconciliation* (vv. 6-11).

Boasting in hope (vv. 1-2)

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith” (v. 1) connects chapter 5 with the previous two chapters, in which Paul had established that salvation comes through faith, not works. 📖 Now he moves on to explain how salvation brings peace with God through Christ (v. 1). A faithful Jew could have faith in God, but Paul believed that salvation came only by faith expressed through Christ, “through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand” (v. 2a).

God’s grace has been ever-present, and was often evident in the Old Testament narratives. The work of Christ, however, makes God’s grace more accessible to all persons. Paul taught that Jesus came into the world for our sakes, that he died for our sins, that he was raised as our example. As we trust in Christ, we can experience forgiveness of our sins, an ongoing relationship with God, and hope for eternity.

Paul reminds us that our free access to God is not because of our good works or high standing, but because of God’s grace. God has chosen to save us, and this alone is the key to our standing. Being chosen is a special thing. We take delight in being chosen for a sports team, for an honorary society, for a scholarship, for a job, for membership in an invitation-only club. We have access to God because God *chose* to redeem us through Jesus Christ, and because we have chosen to accept God’s gracious invitation.

Because of our new standing with God, we can joyfully “boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (v. 2b). Paul believed that our present life of fellowship with God through the Spirit is just a foretaste of the life that lies ahead, when we will share the glory of God in his fullness.

In a book titled *Surprised by God*, James W. Cox tells a story about an African-American preacher from Chicago named D.E. King. Someone asked Rev. King why black Christians were always joyful in their worship, even when they faced many difficulties and things were not going well. The pastor explained, “We rejoice in what we are going to have.”

Those of us who mourn for the loss of loved ones can rejoice in the hope of “what we are going to have” as we contemplate a joyful reunion. Those who are oppressed and downtrodden in this world may yet have hope and rejoice “in what we are going to have” in the eternal inheritance prepared for God’s children. This hope brings both peace and joy. 📖

In his commentary on Romans, F.F. Bruce notes that “peace and joy are

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twin blessings of the gospel: as an old preacher put it, ‘Peace is joy resting. Joy is peace dancing.’” Take some time to think about the many ways in which peace and joy are intertwined, and how they both grow from hope.

Boasting in suffering (vv. 3-5)

Lest his readers be carried away and think that Christian living is a piece of cake, Paul reminds them that suffering is not past. Believers will experience suffering just as other people do, and have no reason to expect anything different. Paul uses the word *thlipsis*, which can refer to tribulation, trouble, hardships, and suffering. The world brings suffering enough for us all, and being Christian does not make us immune. Indeed, there are times when following Christ may even *add* to our suffering, especially in times of organized persecution or prejudice against people of faith.

Even so, there is a difference in the way Christians approach the issue of suffering. Paul argued that believers could take pride even in suffering, because we know that “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (vv. 3-5). 📖

We can boast in our sufferings because we can see past the present difficulty to the future blessing. Like an athlete who endures the pain and discomfort of training for the hope of improved skills and conditioning, we can accept suffering as an essential step in the development of faithful patience and Christian character.

Through patient endurance, Paul says, we can develop character that has been proved by testing. As a

structural engineer may test potential bridge components by putting them under stress, so our own character is proved and even strengthened through testing.

For Christians, the ultimate outcome of suffering is *hope* in the future God has prepared for us. Hope will never disappoint us, because it is ever-present. When all else is taken away, we still have hope. Persons who have lost loved ones to death know what it is like to be tested. In times of trauma or loss, it may be hard to have faith, but that is when we discover the incredible power of hope.

Even when we may find it hard to *believe* some things as firmly as we once did, we can *hope* them more than ever. We learn that faith, in a sense, is nothing more than hope with feet on it – hope to the point of commitment. Hope has a power all its own, a power that does not disappoint.

Can you think of a personal experience in which *hope* has helped you through a period of suffering or trial? Have you been able to share that hope with others?

Boasting in reconciliation (vv. 6-11)

Paul has argued that we may have hope to boast in both suffering and peace. In vv. 6-11, he focuses on Christ as the source of that hope. Paul uses four descriptive adjectives to portray our former state of lostness, which has been transformed by the power of Christ: we were *weak*, we were *ungodly*, we were *sinners*, we were *enemies* of God. 📖

“While we were still *weak*,” Paul says – while we were still living under the world’s pervasive sway, “at the right time Christ died for the *ungodly*” (v. 6). The word *asthenēs* often means “sick,” but can also mean “weak,” or “without influence.” We were weak

and unable to save ourselves, Paul said. Who would want to save us – especially if saving others required one’s own death, and if the people to be saved are not only weak, but also living in opposition to God?

“Christ died for the ungodly,” Paul says. The enormity of that simple statement becomes evident with vv. 7-8. On some rare occasions, we might hear of someone who was willing to die for another person – usually someone who was innocent and worthy of sacrifice on the part of others. The amazing thing about Jesus is that he died for us “while we were still *sinners*” (v. 8).

Our past experience gives rise to present hope. If Christ has truly justified us through his death on the cross, then we have confidence of a sure salvation (v. 9). According to his custom, Paul speaks of salvation in the future tense (compare Rom. 5:10; 9:27; 10:9, 13; 11:14, 26). When we trust in Christ, we are granted a right standing with God (justified), but the time of ultimate salvation lies in the future. If God loved us enough to reconcile us to himself through Christ’s death “while we were *enemies*,” then surely he will love us enough to continue that saving work through Christ’s resurrection life (v. 10). 📖

This gives us abundant cause to boast in our God who reconciles us to himself through Jesus Christ. The word translated as “reconcile” comes from a root word that means “to exchange.” Here, it means “to exchange enmity for friendship.” Wherever “reconcile” or “reconciliation” is used in the New Testament, it is always God who does the reconciling, and humans who are reconciled by virtue of God’s work in Christ. We didn’t (and don’t) deserve the reconciling love of God – but we can certainly take pride in knowing that God has chosen to extend such love to us. NfJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 26, 2017

Ephesians 5:8-14

Illuminated Fruit

The season of Lent is a most appropriate time for focusing on renewal in the area of personal righteousness – working to overcome old, sinful behaviors, and to replace them with positive behaviors that bring goodness into the world.

What a struggle this is! Try as we might, favorite sins keep popping up. Familiar ways of thinking are chemically hard-wired into our brain, and making lifestyle changes is a lifelong task.

The young Christians in Ephesus faced a similar problem, for they came from a largely pagan background, and continued to exhibit many troublesome behaviors.

The city of Ephesus supported a substantial industry in making images of a goddess known to the Greeks as Artemis (Acts 19:23-41) and to the Romans as Diana. In Greek mythology, Artemis was the sister of Apollo and the daughter of Zeus. She was known as the goddess of wild nature and of huntsmen, and is often depicted in the company of mountain and forest nymphs.

Ancient gods were not as static as one might expect, but were ascribed varying characteristics in different regions. The syncretistic version of

Ephesians 5:8

“For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light ...”

Artemis worshiped in Ephesus also bore some of the characteristics of Semitic fertility goddesses such as Astarte and Ishtar, or the Phrygian goddess Cybele. She was worshipped as a nature goddess in control of the earth’s fertility. While Greek and Roman art depicted Artemis as a beautiful and shapely young woman, Artemis of Ephesus was typically sculpted as a woman whose entire torso was covered with breasts or breast-shaped appendages. Her cult was so influential that the Ephesians celebrated a month-long festival, called the “Artemesion,” in her honor. ↓

It is no wonder that Paul worked so hard to draw his Ephesian readers away from their former religions and toward a new life directed by Christ. Artemis was only one of many gods who were worshiped in Ephesus, and none of them were associated with morality or ethics in the manner of Christianity.

Today we would be hard-pressed to find modern Christians bowing before a goddess named Artemis, but is it not true that many persons are devoted to sensuality? The image of Artemis with her many breasts could be an appropriate metaphor for our sex-obsessed society. Paul’s message to the Ephesians applies to modern believers, too.

From darkness to light (v. 8)

Today’s text is one of several occasions in which Paul urged the Ephesians to

leave their former way of life behind and to behave as Christians. In 4:17-24, Paul had focused on the image of the old and the new: “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:22-24).

Paul then challenged the believers to speak truth to one another (4:25), to control their anger (4:26-27), to do honest work instead of stealing (4:28-29), to speak positively instead of negatively (4:30), and to overcome bitter wrath with kindness and forgiveness (4:30-32) as imitators of Christ (5:1-2).

The list of behaviors to avoid continued in vv. 3-7. It includes fornication, greed, impurity of any kind, and obscene or vulgar language. Those verses set the stage for today’s text, in which Paul continues to contrast the old and new way of life through the metaphor of darkness and light: “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light . . .” (v. 8). ↓

The use of darkness and light as theological or philosophical metaphors was common in the ancient world. Paul would have been familiar with the Essenes, who made it a central tenet of their theological system. They thought of themselves as the “sons of light,” while all others were the “sons of darkness.”

“Once you were in darkness,” Paul says. Before coming to Christ, the Ephesians had lived the same misguided lives as their neighbors.

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“But now in the Lord,” he says, “you are light.” Those who come to Christ have come to the “light of the world” (John 8:12), and are called to live in his light (1 John 1:7). God has transferred them from the dominion of darkness to the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13).

As he often does, Paul now moves from the indicative to the imperative. Indeed, as the late New Testament scholar Malcolm Tolbert used to say, it is the indicative that makes possible the imperative. “But now in the Lord, you are light,” Paul says, so “live as children of light.” The word translated as “live” (*peripateō*) literally means “to walk about,” implying that we are to reflect Christ’s light as we go about each day. To walk in the light is to live according to the truth revealed by the light (cf. Matt. 5:16, Phil. 2:15).

Take a few moments to mentally list some of your favorite behaviors: Would you characterize them as ways of darkness, or of light?

From bad fruit to good (vv. 9-13)

The evidence of walking in the light is this, Paul says: a life filled with those things that are good and right and true (v. 9). The Greek words are all nouns rather than adjectives: goodness and righteousness and truth. They mean just what they say, and they suggest that Paul was especially concerned with issues of morality and ethics. As Paul spoke elsewhere of the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22), these could be called the “fruit of the light.”

Walking in the light is not an automatic response for humans. It is not doing what comes naturally. Therefore, believers must consciously “try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord” (v. 10). “Try to find out” translates a word that means something like “to prove by testing,” or “to find out from experience.” It takes an effort

to learn what is pleasing to God, but Paul believed it was also a Christian responsibility (compare Rom. 12:2; 14:8; 2 Cor. 5:9; 1 Thess. 4:1; Col. 3:20).

We do not learn what pleases God by living in isolation or by contemplating abstract ideas, but by fully engaging life and responding to what it brings to us, and to do so every day. As we confront each new situation, Paul would have us to ask the question “Would this please God?” Those who make the effort of raising the right question are much more likely to make the right response.

While Paul points out the good fruit of the light in v. 9, he insists that the realm of darkness is inherently “unfruitful,” since nothing comes of darkness but death. Those who learn to do what pleases God will avoid participating in these unfruitful works of darkness, but will work instead to expose them for the shams that they are.

How are we to do this? Preachers sometimes think to “expose the works of darkness” by using the pulpit to criticize practices they judge to be immoral. For this reason, many persons think of the word “preach” as having a negative, judgmental connotation. But do public descriptions of lurid behavior accomplish anything more than feeding our own prurient interest in what we condemn?

Paul said “it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly” (v. 12). By publicizing the “secret sins” of others, we may add credibility to unhealthy practices, and may even plant the seed of temptation in the minds of our hearers. To the Romans, Paul suggested that even speaking against something could tempt the hearer to try it (7:7-11).


There are times when it is necessary to speak specifically about evil

– after all, Paul does it on a number of occasions – but the best way to expose wickedness is not by emphasizing the darkness, but by magnifying the light (v. 13). Those who live in the light reveal by their good example what a pitiful alternative the darkness is.

From death to life (v. 14)

Paul reminded the Ephesian Christians that they had once lived in darkness, but had been transformed by the light and brought into its realm. The light of God had the power not only to expose their former wickedness, but also to transform their lives into goodness and light.

Paul then quoted from what may have been a hymn as a reminder of his point: “*Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you*” (v. 14b).

The quotation must have been familiar to Paul’s readers. He introduces it (“Therefore it says”) in the same way he normally introduced Old Testament quotations, but it could not have come from the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps Paul was quoting from a hymn typically used during baptismal services, since Christian baptism symbolized a dying to the old self, and rising from the dead to a new way of life. 

By using the quotation here, Paul challenges his readers to remember their baptism and to reaffirm their commitment to leaving darkness behind for a new life of walking in the light.

Take a few moments to reflect on your own baptism and the challenges it set before you. What does it mean to “die to the old self” and live as a new person in Christ? When we meet someone new, what would they see in us – the darkness of self-oriented living, or the light of Christ? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 2, 2017

Romans 8:6-11

Mindful Spirituality

Spirituality is a crucial dimension of human life. Seminaries and divinity schools develop programs of spiritual formation. Both ministers and laypersons seek trained spiritual directors to serve as life coaches of a higher order. Ministers, rabbis, yogis, and other disciples of the inner life promote quiet retreats or daily meditation to nurture one's spiritual life.

Corporality is less talked about, perhaps because we're all familiar with the hard pull of hunger for physical gratification through food and drink, sex and play, chilling out and being entertained. We don't need special training to help us focus on desire, idolize our bodies, or obsess over financial security.

The Apostle Paul knew what it was like to be torn between the spirit and the flesh. He devoted considerable discussion in Rom. 7:14-8:5 to the inherent tension between spirit and body, good and evil, aspirations to godliness and the reality of failure.

Where does one find the power to overcome temptation and move beyond? Paul celebrated a belief that "the law of the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death"

Romans 8:6

"To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."

(Rom. 6:2).

Still, Paul knew that spiritual liberation is not a one-time experience: we live in our bodies every day of our lives, and are constantly subject to temptation. ⬇️ ⬇️

Spirit and flesh (v. 6)

Paul began Romans 8 by celebrating the redeeming work of Christ, which has "set you free from the law in and of death" (vv. 1-2). He believed that Christians find true life in voluntarily submitting our will to the Spirit of Christ, rather than leaving our thoughts to be blown about by worldly whims.

The default mode for humans is to think as our culture thinks. Paul often used the Greek word for "flesh" (*sarx*) to describe the nature of a human without Christ. In this he sets "flesh" and "spirit" against each other as two poles of human experience, not as a separate body and soul. While "of the flesh" can refer in a literal sense to the physical body, Paul more commonly uses it in the sense of a person's determination to trust in self rather than God.

In Paul's mind, trusting in self can lead only to death. Thus, he wrote "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace (v. 6). Some translations avoid the uncomfortable word "flesh" and speak of those who are "carnally minded" (KJV) or have "the mind of

sinful man" (NIV). Maintaining the word "flesh" reminds the reader that our minds are firmly interconnected with our bodies and in touch with our physical desires. ⬇️

For Paul, the results of following the way of the flesh or the way of the Spirit are self-evident and the proper choice between them is obvious. It involves choosing between hurtful behaviors that lead to disquiet and death, or helpful actions that promote peace and life. The character and quality of our daily experience, as well as our eternal destiny, are determined by the direction in which we set our minds. ⬇️

A mortal mind (vv. 7-8)

The power of the mind is an awesome thing. We are familiar with the significant effects of positive thinking or negative thinking. We may have read articles or heard testimonies of people who credit their health or success to positive mental attitudes. Doctors agree that hopeful and positive attitudes are important aids to healing.

We may also have observed persons who enter a downward spiral because of negative thinking. We may have experienced it ourselves. Unhealthy thinking habits can ultimately affect our emotional and physical health. These ways of thinking can become "hard-wired" into our brains, and are difficult to overcome.

Behavioral coaches sometimes teach the art of "reframing," of literally training our minds to think in more positive ways. Paul understood the need for believers to "reframe"

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their thinking by setting their minds on the Spirit rather than on the flesh. This, he believed, was essential for both life and peace.

Having established the basic “flesh vs. spirit” dichotomy in v. 6, Paul elaborates in vv. 7-11. The mind that is “set on the flesh” is hostile to God, Paul said: “it does not submit to God’s law – indeed it cannot” (v. 7). A “fleshly” mind cannot submit to God because it has already submitted to self. As Jesus reminded us, no one can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24).

Paul saw nothing but danger in being sold out to the worldly idea that a person can be self-sufficient, that one does not need God. The acclaimed southern writer Flannery O’Conner gave voice to that idea through a crazy, obsessed character named Hazel Motes. At some point in the short story entitled “Wise Blood,” someone mentioned the subject of redemption. In response, Hazel sneered, “Any man who owns a good car don’t need redemption.”

As long as we think our own efforts can achieve all the security that matters, our mind cannot submit to God or please God (v. 8), because God is not even in the picture. The “mind of the flesh,” by definition, is opposed to and closed to the mind of God.

A spiritual mind (vv. 9-11)

Having pointed squarely to the mindset that leads to death, Paul challenges his readers to steer clear of that rocky shoal and anchor their minds firmly in the safe harbor of the Spirit: “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (v. 9a). Those who belong to Christ also possess the Spirit of Christ, and the Spirit of Christ possesses them (v. 9b). Thus, having the Spirit is not a “second

blessing” for super-surrendered Christians, but an *essential* aspect of what it means to live in relationship with Christ.

Paul speaks of the indwelling of the Spirit as both present and future. He indicates that the believer’s new position in the realm of the Spirit came about at the moment he or she trusted Christ, and that the Spirit of God continues to indwell the believer: “But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (v. 10).

Note that Paul makes little distinction between the “Spirit of God,” the “Spirit of Christ,” and “Christ in you.” These are equivalent expressions, all referring to the same reality, and suggesting that something approaching a Trinitarian view was present in Paul’s thought.

Scholars have spilled much ink over the meaning of Paul’s assertion that, while “the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.” He seems to be saying that, even for believers, our physical nature is still destined for a physical death, even as those who live in the flesh are destined for an eternal death.

Though our bodies are mortal, where the Spirit is, there is life and true righteousness. Believers who trust God’s Spirit experience a new kind of life (Rom. 6:4), a fruitful life (Gal. 5:22-23), the abundant life that Christ has promised (John 10:10).

Paul believed that life in the Spirit also has a future component. The Spirit who dwells in us is the same Spirit responsible for raising Jesus from dead. Thus, he said, the Spirit will also raise us, even our mortal bodies, from the dead (v. 11). The Christian belief in resurrection retains a hint of the ancient Jewish belief that the body is somehow connected to the spirit even after death.

In some way beyond our understanding, our resurrection with Christ will have a physical, as well as a spiritual, component. As we often remind ourselves in funeral eulogies, “this mortal shall put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:53).

To the Corinthians, Paul described Christ’s resurrection as the “firstfruits,” assuring his followers that they would participate in a full and final harvest of life (1 Cor. 15:23). Thus, the Spirit now present in us will bear fruit in our future resurrection and full participation in the kingdom of God. This assertion brings us back to where we began in v. 6: a mind set on the flesh leads to death, but a mind set on the Spirit leads to life.

Paul effectively uses this promise to remind readers that their thinking should include a future component. While it is wise to avoid the dilemma of being “so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good,” Christians know there is more to the equation than what feels good at the moment.

Our human side wants to enjoy luxury, leisure and financial security. We want to feel good, have fun, and experience pleasure. Paul would not suggest that we be fiscally irresponsible or deny every pleasure, but he clearly called upon believers to revamp their priorities. While more money in the bank and a vacation home to call our own might be nice, generosity to the poor and personal involvement in missions might be better.

Salvation involves more than the promise of “pie in the sky,” but God’s promise is nothing to be sneered at. Paul believed we have been promised an eternal home with Jesus, an everlasting experience of joy and peace.

To sacrifice our future hope on the altar of present pleasure is a bad deal – a deal Paul hopes his readers will be wise enough to reject. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 9, 2017

Matthew 21:1-11

Royal Humility

Imagine it: listen carefully, and perhaps you can hear the crowd. Off in the distance, a muffled roar, indistinguishable words, then a cheer, and a growing chant: “Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna!”

If you squint just a bit, you can see the bright holiday clothes of festive pilgrims gathering in Jerusalem. The Passover is not for several days yet, and the people are restless. A rumor draws them from their eating, sightseeing, or napping. “Jesus plans to become king! He’s on his way to Jerusalem!”

Go into your imagination, and feel the press of people, maybe thousands, packing the road from Bethany to Jerusalem. You can smell the dust, and the donkeys, and the unmistakable odor of too many unwashed people in too small a space.

You can sense the almost palpable excitement in the air, and soon you find yourself running into a field to tear a limb from a small tree, and then straining to see through all the other waving branches. You may even find yourself shouting “*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!*”

But who is this man on the donkey that the people are treating like a king?

Matthew 11:5

“Tell the daughter of Zion, ‘Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

If he really is a new king, am I supposed to be his subject? If so, what will he expect of me?

The donkey king (vv. 1-5)

It was the last week of Jesus’ earthly life, the crucifixion only six days away. The story begins in a village called Bethphage, which early pilgrims located a bit closer to Jerusalem than Bethany, where Jesus often lodged with his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Bethany was about a mile and a half from Jerusalem, on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives.

The Mount of Olives, from which Jesus began his descent into the city, stands about 100 feet higher than the city, with the deep Kidron Valley between them. People standing atop the ridgeline had an unrivaled view of the impressive Temple Mount and the proud walls of Jerusalem.

As reconstructed by Herod, the Second Temple was so amazing that the Talmud famously said “Whoever has not seen Herod’s building has not seen a beautiful building in his life.” There was more than beauty to the Temple Mount, however: the southeast corner was home to a tower and fortress called the Antonia, where a contingent of Roman soldiers kept a watchful eye. The temple also had its own security detail of armed guards. For any who opposed the normal way of doing

things, the city bristled with danger.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem despite the hazard, because there were still things he needed to say and do. One of his actions spoke more loudly than words: he rode a donkey into town. 🇺

And why is this so significant?

The Gospels never speak of Jesus riding on anything but a boat before this, but always portray him as walking with his disciples. He ate and slept and sweated in their midst. Often he drew apart from them for prayer, but he never expected any special privilege. But now Jesus had sent two of his disciples to fetch a donkey for him to ride.

Why would Jesus want to ride a donkey? Jesus knew that in Israel’s heritage, royals typically rode donkeys or mules, especially during times of peace. 🇺 As King David neared death and named his son Solomon as his successor, he ordered his officials to “have my son Solomon ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon. There let the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan anoint him king over Israel” (1 Kgs. 1:33-34).

Thus, entering the city on a young donkey was a symbolic way for Jesus to assume a royal persona. As crowds longing for a royal messiah shouted “Hosanna,” he heard their plea for deliverance and accepted their praise.

In times of war, a king might ride to or from the city on a fearsome warhorse or in a chariot pulled by strong steeds, but Jesus chose to ride a donkey, a symbol of peace. Despite the crowd’s insistence, he refused to become the military messiah that the people – even some of his disciples – wanted.

We note that Jesus chose a young colt that had not been ridden. This

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suggests the sacred aspect of his journey to Jerusalem. Only animals that had never been used as beasts of burden could be considered suitable for sacred purposes (Num. 19:2; 1 Sam. 6:7). Jesus came not only a king, but also as the divine king. His final entrance to Jerusalem was not a political occasion, but a sacred one. 🇺🇸

The adoring crowd (vv. 6-9)

Imagine what Jesus' disciples must have been thinking as they stood on the Mount of Olives, looking across the Kidron Valley at the impressive temple complex and city of Jerusalem. As Jesus prepared to climb on the donkey's back, a string of excitement must have snapped within them and freed their pent-up hopes.

They knew that Jesus was perfectly capable of walking, and not so uppity as to think he should ride. Jesus never did anything without a purpose, so he must have been saying something. Gradually it dawned on them that Jesus was accepting the title of "king."

The disciples had longed for this, but thought it would never happen. Once they realized what was on his mind, though, they did all they could to orchestrate a more royal procession. They draped their cloaks over the donkey's back to make Jesus' seat more comfortable and to make the donkey look more presentable. The road was already crowded with pilgrims, and many of them knew about Jesus, so it was not hard for the disciples to stir up the crowd's excitement.

Soon the road was jammed with pilgrims and locals alike. They joined the disciples in laying their cloaks across the path to show Jesus honor. They broke branches from nearby trees and waved them in the air, and spread them on the road. 🇺🇸

While the cloaks and branches

suggested a royal procession, the cheers of the people (v. 9) were even more significant: *Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

The shout was a loose quotation of Ps. 118:25, where "Hosanna" precedes "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Both quotations were used in the liturgy of the Jewish feast of tabernacles, when pilgrims would commonly wave branches in the air and pray for God's help. (See "The Hardest Question" online for more on the meaning of "Hosanna").

The kicker in the people's shout is their identification of Jesus as the "Son of David" who comes "in the name of the Lord." Based on beliefs incorporating various prophecies (Isa. 11:1, Jer. 30:9, Ezek. 34:23-24, among others), with roots going back to God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7, many Jews anticipated the coming of a Davidic descendant who would arise as a "new David" and lead Israel not only to independence, but also to preeminence among the nations. That would be cause for praise, indeed.

The unfinished story (vv. 10-11)

As we study this scene, we must remember that the story continues. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people all about took notice. Matthew tells us "the whole city was stirred and asked 'Who is this?'" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

When we read this story, we must also ask, "Who is this?" In particular, we should consider, "Who is Jesus to me?"

The problem with palms is that once you cut the branches from the tree, they don't live long. The problem with that first Palm Sunday is that the

excitement of the crowd soon faded, and when the disappointing events of Good Friday rolled around, many of the same voices who had shouted "Hosanna!" on Sunday were likely shouting "Crucify him!" Their love for Jesus was shallow and based entirely on their hope of what exciting things he could do for them.

Many pilgrims would happily follow Jesus on the road to the throne, but not on the road to the cross. They would wave palms before the coming king, but they could not accept the Suffering Servant.

The entrance to Jerusalem was significant in many ways. Jesus knew that the end of his earthly ministry was near. It was time to do what he had come to accomplish. It was now or never. This was Jesus' opportunity to be obedient to the will of God, and to accomplish the purpose set out for him.

It was a day in history that speaks to Christians of every age. Are we also so shallow that we will wave palms on one Sunday a year, and sing occasional hymns of praise, but refuse to obey the Servant King?

There is a life ahead of us, and a purpose for us. None of us knows just how long our lives will be, just how much time we have.

None of us can know all that the future holds. We don't know how long we will be on this earth. But we can know that God has a purpose for us.

We are called to love God and love others with the kind of love that makes a difference. Jesus has challenged us to speak out words of truth, to reach out our hands, to hold out our hearts.

We are called to do that *now*. Many people hold the ideal of one day being truly faithful to Christ, but not yet.

Serious believers recognize that day is now. We don't know how many more days there will be. 🇺🇸 NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 16, 2017

Jeremiah 31:1-6

Everlasting Love

Easter Sunday, for followers of Christ, is without question the holiest day of the year. On this day we celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead, a sign of victory over sin and death that brings the possibility of life to all people.

It is a day for hallelujahs and happiness, and it happens in springtime, when new beginnings are in the air and bright clothes signal the hope of good days to come.

Can you imagine celebrating Easter, though, before it happened?


The lectionary text before us today is not from the Gospels, but from the prophesies of Jeremiah, a man who lived through the darkest days of Israel's life. He saw the city of Jerusalem burned, the holy temple lying in ashes, and the leading families of Judah marched into exile.

It was a bad time – and yet, Jeremiah also saw through the slaughter and smoke to another day, a day of deliverance, a day when God would call all people back from exile and establish them anew in the sacred precincts of Zion.

Jeremiah's words offered much-needed hope to the bedraggled remnant of Israel and Judah, but what is that to us? We live on the other side of Easter,


Jeremiah 31:3b

"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."

in a time when God's saving work has stretched far beyond the borders and hopes of a renewed nation for the Hebrews. 

Considering Jeremiah's hopeful words on Easter Sunday reminds us that God's love doesn't give up: the good news Jeremiah offered was ultimately fulfilled in the promise of life in a "new Jerusalem" to all who put their hope and trust in God.

Hope in distress (v. 1)

Today's text falls within a section of Jeremiah generally known as the "Book of Consolation."  After many chapters devoted to scathing predictions of Judah's coming downfall, but before Jeremiah's narration of Jerusalem's destruction (chs. 37-39), we find an unexpected but welcome collection of oracles and prose that offer words of hope.

The oracles were probably uttered after the downfall of Jerusalem, as they address an audience in distress. In the final version of the book of Jeremiah, however, they are set before the narrative description of Jerusalem's destruction. This may have been a purposeful way of indicating that, even before using the Babylonians to mediate punishment upon a sinful people, God already had plans to bring them back from exile.

The lectionary text begins with Jer. 30:1, which is actually the closing

verse of a previous oracle that began at 30:18: "Thus says the LORD: I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwellings; the city shall be rebuilt upon its mound, and the citadel set on its rightful site."

The hopeful oracle included a divine promise that "you shall be my people, and I will be your God" (30:22). This recalls a much older pledge to the Hebrews who lived in Egyptian captivity: "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (Exod. 6:7). The promise was repeated in Lev. 26:12: "And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you will be my people." Jeremiah had echoed the same theme in 24:7.

The repeated formula evoked memories of the covenant between God and Israel, one in which God promised to bless the people with material provision and protection from enemies, and the people promised to serve only God and to be obedient. The negative side of the covenant is that God also promised curses if the people looked to other gods and became disobedient. Jeremiah was one of many who believed that kingdoms of Israel and Judah had been defeated and their people exiled precisely because they had not proven faithful to God.

But, Jeremiah saw past the punishment to a day of forgiveness and restoration, when once again God would say "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people" (31:1). The emphasis on "all the families of Israel" pointedly includes people from the northern kingdom, called "Israel," who had

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fallen to the Assyrians long before, in 722 BCE. The northern tribes had become so scattered and intermingled with other people as to become nearly invisible, but God had not forgotten them.

Grace in the wilderness (vv. 2-3)

With v. 2, Jeremiah begins a new oracle, marked by the messenger formula “Thus says the LORD.” He begins with a declaration of God’s everlasting love (vv. 2-3), and concludes with three promises that would lead to future joy.

As v. 1 called to mind God’s promise to Israel in Egypt, vv. 2-3 recall God’s faithfulness to Israel as the people traveled from Egypt and through the dangerous wilderness on their long trek to the land of promise.

“The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness,” said the prophet (v. 2a). After escaping from the Egyptian army (Exod. 14:15-30), the Israelites had to fend off an attack by Amalekites (Exod. 17:13-18). Later, they were ambushed by both Amalekites and Canaanites (Num. 14:41-45) before prevailing against the Canaanite king of Arad (Num. 21:1-3).

The historical memory of Israel’s deliverance in the wilderness was designed to remind Hebrews who suffered under Assyrian or Babylonian rule that God had delivered Israel before, and God had not forgotten them. It may have seemed to them that God had become distant, but “when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away” (vv. 2b-3a), declaring “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you” (v. 3b). 🇺🇸

God’s love for Israel had persevered from the call of Abraham through the wilderness wandering, the years of the monarchy, and into the exile. Jeremiah,

like Hosea, believed that Yahweh loved Israel too deeply to let them go (Hos. 11:8). Jeremiah could not have known it, but that same abiding love would see its crowning fulfillment on a Sunday morning just outside Jerusalem, when God’s manifestation on earth – Jesus – rose from the dead in victory over sin and death.

Joy in Jerusalem (vv. 4-6)

The present oracle related to something more tangible for Israel: a return from exile, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and a renewed flourishing in the land. The prophets believed that Israel’s exile was due to years of unfaithfulness and worshipping other gods, so the people were hardly virginal, yet Yahweh would renew them as an innocent youth, portrayed as a virgin maiden going out to celebrate a time of victory and joy: “Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers” (v. 4).

The construction of buildings would be matched by a restoration of fruitful agriculture to the land: “Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit” (v. 5).

Jeremiah’s inclusion of “the mountains of Samaria” is significant: Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom, which had been defeated more than a hundred years earlier. Jeremiah saw a day when all of Israel would be restored, including the northern tribes. The image of planting vineyards and enjoying the fruit envisions a time of peace that would allow time for planting and cultivating the vines, with adequate time for them to mature and produce fruit.

The northern kingdom again comes into play with v. 6. When Israel

split from Judah after Solomon’s death, the new king Jeroboam built rival temples at Dan and Bethel so the northern tribes would no longer venture to Jerusalem for worship. Jeremiah saw a day when such divisions would end, and all the families of Israel would again worship in Jerusalem.

The heartland of the northern kingdom had been the hill country populated by the leading tribe of Ephraim. Jeremiah saw a coming day when the schism would be erased and the tribes reunited, “when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: ‘Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God’” (v. 6).

The people of Judah did return from exile, though they were limited to a small area around Jerusalem under Persian rule. Eventually, Alexander the Great conquered the Persians but died soon thereafter, leaving Palestine and its diverse population to be torn between Egyptian (Ptolemaic) and Syrian (Seleucid) rule. A Jewish family known as the Hasmoneans led a rebellion that threw off the Seleucids and regained independence for about a century, but infighting led to internal weakness and the land came under Roman occupation.

Jeremiah’s beautiful vision still awaits fulfillment – the same eschatological promise for which Christians also hope: a day when all people will be drawn to a new Jerusalem to live in harmony and service to a God whose love is everlasting and whose faithfulness will not let go.

The celebration of Easter reminds us, more clearly than any prophecy, of the extent to which God has been willing to go in our behalf. In Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, God’s love has reached from heaven to earth and back again, bringing hope that all people may join in singing praise to the Lord whose steadfast love never fails. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 23, 2017

Psalm 16

The Path of Life

Was King David a prophet – and did he predict the resurrection of Christ? The question may seem far-fetched, and yet both the Apostle Peter and the Apostle Paul cited Psalm 16 as a prophecy that God would not allow death to claim Jesus.

Before exploring that question further, we need to dig into Psalm 16 itself, which a superscription describes as “A Miktam of David.” In the Bible used by Protestants, 116 of the 150 psalms have superscriptions that attribute authorship, suggest the occasion of writing, or provide liturgical instructions for the psalm’s use in Israel’s worship. The superscriptions were almost certainly not original to the psalms, but were added in antiquity as the psalms were collected and compiled into what is often called “The Psalter.”

The Hebrew word *miktam*, like *selah*, defies certain definition. It appears in the superscriptions of six psalms, all of which are associated with David, and all but Psalm 16 occur consecutively (Psalms 56-60). Four of those five include specific descriptions of some peril the scribe imagined that David had faced. Since Psalm 16 concludes with a testimony that

Psalm 16:11

“You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

Yahweh had saved the psalmist from Sheol and granted life instead of death, it is likely that this psalm’s original setting may have been a time of crisis. Whether the threat came from enemies or illness, the psalmist turned to God for help.

A hopeful entreaty (v. 1)

The psalm begins with a plea: “Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge” (v. 1). The prayer for protection implies the existence of a serious threat. Was the author being pursued by enemies who wanted to kill him? Was he weakened by illness or injury? We have no way of knowing the source of the problem, but the psalmist leaves no doubt how he will deal with it: he will pray for God to protect him.

The verb translated as “seek refuge” is used mostly in poetic texts, or with a figurative sense. The psalmist does not think of God as a cave-like hideaway, but as a protective presence with the power to shield him from death.


This is what he will do. In the next few verses we learn what he will *not* do.

A loyal assertion (vv. 2-4)

Verses 2-4a are notoriously troublesome to translate. Hebrew poetry is a challenge to read in the best of circumstances. When it includes unexpected verbal forms, rare words, and ambigu-

ous syntax, any translation remains tentative.

The question begins with the first word, the verb for “say,” which most translations render as “I say,” even though it is written as a second person verb and vocalized as feminine. As written, it would be translated “You say.”

A second issue concerns who is speaking and just what he or she means. Some translators assume that vv. 2-4a are the words of an acquaintance who dares to worship both Yahweh and other gods. Others believe the psalmist speaks for himself, setting himself apart from those who worship other gods. 

Whatever the specifics, that some worshipped other gods is implied in the psalmist’s pledge. Unlike those who seek the aid of other gods by bringing them offerings, he said, “their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out, or take their names upon my lips” (v. 4). Hebrew religion included drink offerings, but always of wine (Exod. 29:40, Lev. 23:13 and others), never of blood. The notion of taking – literally, “lifting up” – the name of a god was often an allusion to taking oaths or vows in that god’s name, usually promising an offering or action in return for the god’s aid.

Though the precise translation is obscure, the message of vv. 2-4 is clear: others might turn to other gods in time of need, but the psalmist will trust in Yahweh alone, declaring “I have no good apart from you.”

A confident testimony (vv. 5-11)

The latter part of the psalm expresses complete trust that God will provide the protection requested. Or, more

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likely, vv. 5-11 were probably written after the danger had passed, as a personal testimony of God's deliverance.

Verses 5-6 call up a historical image of the apportionment of the land of promise to the tribes, each of which further subdivided their territory among clans, and then among families. The land was to be worked and passed down within the family through inheritance. Apparently, tribal officials cast lots for predetermined plots of land, and some families received more fertile or appealing acreage than others.

For the psalmist, a fortunate allotment of land and a bounteous cup of wine (from fruit of the fields) served as a figure for Yahweh's presence and provision (v. 5). Under God's care, he said, "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage" (v. 6).

The psalmist's life had been so good that he wanted to publicly "bless the LORD who gives me counsel" (v. 7a). He must have believed that God also inspired his own heart to impart wisdom: the parallel line declares "in the night also my heart instructs me" (v. 7b). The word translated "heart" actually meant "kidneys." The kidneys were thought of as the seat of one's emotions or moral character. English speakers are more likely to associate emotions and character with the heart, which is reflected in modern translations. One could avoid naming any organ, but imagine divine instruction from one's "inner being."

Trusting God for counsel and safety, the psalmist declared "I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved" (v. 8). To think of keeping God both "in front of me" and "at my right hand" is not a contradiction in terms. To keep God before one

implies a commitment to following in God's way. When Hebrew kings held court, their most influential counselor would stand just to their right – hence our image of "my right hand man" as someone's most trusted assistant or advisor.

The psalmist's expression demonstrates his trust in God's counsel and his commitment to God's way: because of that, he said, "I shall not be moved," or "I shall not be shaken."

An unshakeable faith (vv. 9-11)

The word for "be shaken" in v. 9 and the Hebrew word for "die" are very similar: the consonants for "to shake" are *mwt*, and the consonants for "to die" are *mwt*, the difference being a slightly different "t" sound between the final *tet* of "shake" and the *tav* of "die." The psalmist may have used this expression intentionally as he segued into an affirmation that God had preserved his life.

Because of his determination to remain close to Yahweh, the psalmist could declare "Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit" (vv. 9-10). Ancient Hebrews believed that everyone, good or evil, went to an underground abode of the dead known as Sheol when they died. "The pit" was used in poetic contexts as a synonym. Having passed the crisis that led him to cry out to God in v. 1, the psalmist can now praise God for having delivered him from death.

Perhaps we are to gather that Yahweh's wise counsel of vv. 7-8 has guided the psalmist through the trial and to renewed life. Thus he could conclude "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (v. 11). "The path of life" may carry a double meaning, describ-

ing both the obedient path that leads to a good life with God, and the particular path that led to the psalmist's survival of a life-threatening crisis.

But what of our initial question? Psalm 16 is clearly a personal testimony of a happy man. Though he may have hoped others would follow his example and find deliverance, his intention was never to predict a coming Messiah whom God would preserve from death.

Rabbinical exegesis of the Old Testament, however, did not hesitate to draw connections between ancient scriptures and what might be seen as a contemporary fulfillment. Thus, in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter drew on a loose quotation from the Greek translation of Ps. 16:8-11 as evidence of the resurrection, "For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption" (Acts 2:27).

Later, as the Apostle Paul preached to the Jews of Antioch of Pisidia, he called on both Psalm 2 and Psalm 16 to speak of God's son (Ps. 2:7) who God raised from death, as "he has said in another psalm, 'You will not let your Holy One experience corruption'" (Acts 13:35).

The psalmist never intended to be a prophet, but we can understand why early Christians found in Psalm 16 a reflection of Christ's work: while the psalmist found confidence and guidance to survive death (at least temporarily), Jesus entered full-steam through death's door, but was delivered from its clutches. And in his work, the evangelists proclaim, Jesus enabled us to claim the promise, too: God will not abandon us to death, but has shown us the path to life.

Thus we may gladly join the psalmist in praise to the God of our salvation: "In your presence there is fullness of joy." **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 30, 2017

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19

Paying Vows

Have you ever been at death's door, or felt as if you were? Sickness is always a problem, but consider the difference between being ill in the modern world and the ancient world.

Today an attack of appendicitis or gallstones, along with many other internal diseases, can be diagnosed, treated, and cured with little drama. Broken bones can be repaired and worn-out joints replaced. Infections can sometimes be challenging due to the rise of drug-resistant bacteria, but are usually curable. Even many cancers can now be treated with success.

Imagine living in a world where cleanliness is a constant challenge and antibiotics are unknown. A broken leg could lead to a permanent deformity, and a nasty cut could lead to a serious infection. Issues relating to internal organs were basically untreatable. Abdominal puncture wounds suffered in combat could lead to a lingering and painful demise. A serious case of the flu or a routine case of pneumonia could become life-threatening – or at least leave people thinking they were at death's door.

The book of Psalms contains many prayers of people who believed they were in danger of dying, whether from

Psalm 116:12-13

“What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.”

illness or from enemy action. Without quality medical care, an appeal to God might be someone's only hope.

Testimony and trial (vv. 1-4)

Last week's study of Psalm 16 was the testimony of someone who had escaped a narrow scrape with death. Now 100 psalms later, we find another hymn that celebrates survival after someone prayed for deliverance in the face of mortal danger.

Psalm 116 has no superscription. We have no idea who wrote it, nor do we know the specific illness or issue that threatened the writer's life. This can be a good thing: though we often like to know more about the original setting, the lack of specifics allows later readers to apply the psalm's lessons to their own situations. 🇺🇸

The psalmist writes from a post-crisis standpoint: he or she had faced a perceived life-threatening situation, probably an illness of some sort, and had cried out to Yahweh (“the LORD” indicates the divine name) for help, promising to offer public praise and a thank-offering if he survived. With health restored, the exuberant psalmist now acts to fulfill the vow.

The psalm begins with a declaration of love: “I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications” (v. 1). Yahweh had proven true to

the psalmist's belief that faithful obedience would lead to blessing, according to the covenant made between God and Israel at Sinai, introduced in Exod. 19:6. The book of Deuteronomy expanded on the covenant theme, promising a host of blessings to the Israelites if they remained faithful, and threatening concomitant troubles if they did not (see Deuteronomy 28, for example). Stories found in the books of Joshua through 2 Kings illustrate practical ways in which both individuals and the nation found prosperity or peril in keeping with their faithfulness or rebelliousness toward God.

Israel's part of the covenant was summarized in Deut. 6:4-5, famously called the “Shema” because the first word is *shema*, an imperative verb meaning “hear” or “listen.” And the first commandment is to love God. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

The people were challenged to love God with all of their being, period. As with humans, however, love grows best in the context of a mutual and reciprocal relationship. Partners in a marriage grow in love as they do things for each other. God, having created and redeemed us, is worthy of our love from the beginning. Still, as we actively engage in relationship with God, as we experience God's love and blessings, our love for God grows more intense.

The psalmist believed God heard and responded to his prayers (“he inclined his ear to me,” v. 2a), leading him to trust that God would always be faithful: “therefore I will call on him as long as I live” (v. 2b).

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In v. 3 we find a figurative description of the psalmist's former plight in three parallel statements: "The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish."

From the depths of that wretched state, the author looked heavenward: "Then I called on the name of the LORD: 'O LORD, I pray, save my life!'" (v. 4). The Hebrew construction of the prayer is more forceful: "Please, LORD, save my life!" The word translated "life" is *nefesh*, a word sometimes translated as "soul," though it basically describes the essence of one's self, what makes a person alive. 📖

Deliverance and praise (vv. 5-11)

Having told the story in short, the psalmist now embarks on an exultant celebration of God's goodness. He first recalls God's gracious and merciful nature (v. 5), then declares "The LORD protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me" (v. 6).

The word translated as "simple" does not mean "simple-minded," but was a term common to the wisdom literature that described someone who was immature or naïve, still learning to distinguish between wisdom and folly. Though he may have been lacking in maturity, God had saved him, bringing relief to the stressful anxiety that had plagued him (v. 7).

With v. 8 the psalmist again returns to the theme of deliverance from death and misery, so that he can "walk before the LORD in the land of the living" (v. 9). Interpreting vv. 9-10 seems to require the assumption that other people had downplayed God's role in saving the psalmist, or had scoffed at the notion of facing affliction with faith. That might explain the psalmist's insistence that "I kept my

faith, even when I said 'I am greatly afflicted'; I said in my consternation, 'Everyone is a liar.'"

While humans offered no comfort, and may even have added to his distress, the psalmist found both health and rest in God.

Promises and fulfillment (vv. 12-19)

The content of vv. 12-19 tells us that the psalmist had done more than pray for deliverance: he or she had made a vow. While modern folk think of vows as unconditional promises, such as wedding vows or monastic vows, for the Hebrews and their neighbors in the ancient Near East, vows were expressly conditional. Narrative vows consisted of two parts: a specific request from God, and a promise to give or do something for God if the request was fulfilled. The Old Testament's legal materials contain rules about vow making (Numbers 30), and the narratives include stories about people who made vows. 📖

Vows can also be found in the psalms, though the form varies. In some cases, such as Psalm 116, we find references to vows that were made offstage. In all cases, vows were considered serious business: if made, they must be paid.

Psalmists often made vows, sometimes including sacrifices, though they were more likely to promise God that they would offer public praise and testimony of God's goodness. The author of Psalm 116 appears to have promised a drink offering and a thanksgiving sacrifice in addition to public praise, all introduced by the question "What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me?" (v. 12).

"I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD" (v. 13) probably refers to the pouring

out of wine as a drink offering to the accompaniment of praise to God. Such libations were commonly associated with thanksgiving sacrifices, as in Exod. 29:40-41, Lev. 23:18, 37, and Num. 28:7. Here, the thanksgiving sacrifice is mentioned in v. 17. Verses 13b-14 and 17b-18 are identical: both the drink offering and the thanksgiving sacrifice take place in the context of calling on – that is, praising or glorifying – the name of Yahweh, and "in the presence of all his people." The closing verse clarifies the location: the vows are to be paid, not only in public, but in the courts of the temple in Jerusalem, the only place sacrifices could be acceptably made (v. 19).

Still living, the psalmist declared that God cares about both life and death for those who are faithful (v. 15), 📖 and he or she clearly identified as being counted among them: "O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl" (v. 16).

The translation "serving girl" translates a word used for female slaves who belonged to a master: her children would belong to the master, too. Such language is discomfiting in our current culture, but was a natural analogy for the psalmist, who lived in a society in which slavery was an accepted way of life.

Have you ever prayed to God when in trouble, promising some gift, service, or change in lifestyle if God will only provide healing or release from a sticky situation? If such a prayer met with a positive answer, did you keep your promises? "Testimony meetings" aren't as common as they used to be: perhaps we should consider bringing them back, and offering a natural opportunity for us to offer public thanks and praise to God for the blessings we have received. **NFJ**

RECOGNITION & REMEMBRANCE

Jon Appleton died Nov. 27, 2016 in Athens, Ga., where he served as pastor of First Baptist Church for 23 years before retiring in 1999. Earlier he directed campus ministry programs for the Baptist convention in his home state of Alabama. Previous pastorates included First Baptist Church of Opelika, Ala. He and his wife Virginia were married for 60 years. A book of his sermons and meditations will be published later this year by Nurturing Faith.

Matt DuVall is pastor of First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga. He previously served as director of development for Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology and earlier as minister to students at First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga.

Paul Duaine Eppinger died Nov. 10, 2016 at age 83. He had served as a missionary to Japan and a pastor in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Kansas and Arizona. He was a founding leader of the Arizona Interfaith Movement and represented American Baptist Churches on the National Council of Churches Interfaith Relations Commission. He is survived by his wife, Sybil, of 58 years.

J.T. Ford died Nov. 23, 2016 in Atlanta, where he was founding pastor of Wieuca Road Baptist Church. Earlier pastorates included First Baptist churches of Huntsville, Ala., Birmingham, Ala., and Alexandria, Va.

Max Lennon died Nov. 29, 2016 at age 76. The former president of Clemson University (1986-1994) and Baptist-related Mars Hill College served his alma mater in Western North Carolina, now Mars Hill University, from 1996-2002.

Sally Sarratt and **Maria Swearing** are co-pastors of Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., coming from Greenville, S.C. Sarratt served as an associate chaplain in the Greenville Health System and Swearingen as associate chaplain at Furman University. **NFJ**

Minister of Contemporary Worship and Young Adults

First Baptist Church, Wilmington, N.C., is seeking an individual to provide leadership for contemporary worship and for ministry with young adults.

Applicants should have the ability to:

- Recruit, lead and develop a praise band of highly skilled volunteers that include both vocal and instrumental musicians.
- Facilitate a creative and multi-faceted approach to worship.
- Provide appropriate oversight to the technological and audio/visual aspects of worship.
- Work in a collaborative worship environment that includes the gifts and abilities of both staff and lay leadership.
- Serve as the lead minister focusing on the spiritual needs of young adults.
- Connect the experience of worship to the larger identity and mission of our congregation.

Our church is a diverse congregation. Any candidate should feel comfortable serving in a church in which:

- A breadth of theological and political diversity is celebrated.
- Women are embraced in any and all levels of congregational leadership.
- Mission and ministry are intentionally holistic focused on both the material and spiritual needs of persons.

While our church has significant ties to CBF, we are open to candidates of a variety of denominational backgrounds as long as they can affirm the values and beliefs we hold in common as a community of faith.

Please send all inquiries, recommendations and résumés to searchcommittee@fbcwilmington.org with the subject line as "Worship and Young Adult Position."

Children's Minister: First Baptist Church, Clayton, N.C., dually aligned with SBC and CBF, seeks a part-time children's minister to plan and coordinate a comprehensive program of ministry to children birth through fifth grade. Candidates should have a passion for children and an understanding of family dynamics. Send résumés to FBCClaytonPersonnel@gmail.com.

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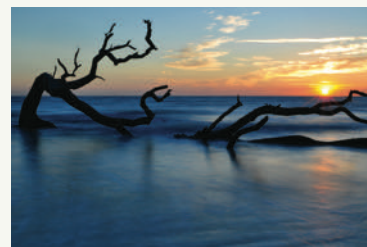


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What is at stake?

By Les Hollon

Our voice is in danger of becoming background noise, especially among Millennials and Gen-Xers. The future witness of Christians in general, and Baptists in particular, is at stake by how we give witness to moral truths.

If we speak as self-righteous bullies, then we give witness to our own egos and not to God's moral beauty. If we speak as though anything goes, with the attitude of "who am I to judge?" then we surrender to the deceptive temptations that there are no moral truths — only our perceptions of what is right or wrong.

Shaping clarity during complex times is our 2017 challenge. For guidance we can prayerfully read Scripture, think and feel, talk and listen, research and develop, act and reflect. Typically, the path forward emerges from a guiding line of thought.

This is why the early church formed the first creed of Christian faith and the only one I will sign: "Jesus Christ is Lord." Loving obedience to Jesus enables us to give a moral witness that heals hurts and builds hope in our fractured world.


Baptists tend to fuss about how conservative we need to be in order to stand together. Our unity is challenged as we give moral witness on issues related to sex, race, war, poverty, abortion, politics and more. Along the way, we must resist the temptation of reducing the gospel to our own political leanings — framing the gospel as red or blue policy positions.

Recently I was with a Baptist group grappling with such issues — and among those speaking from the microphones. The clarifying line of thought that guided me was: How will the passage of these motions help us to share the gospel with spiritual seekers?

In summary, my "guiding thought" helped form these conclusions: The outside world already knows that we are conser-

vative. We don't need to keep reassuring ourselves by making additional position statements about what people already know about us, and what we know about ourselves.

If certain motions pass, most seekers will only see us as the harsh caricature of an unloving stereotype. They will feel like we are talking at them, and not with them. As has been said, "What you do speaks so loud, I can't hear what you say."

Church historian Roland Bainton said of the Enlightenment: "Man is like a clumsy juggler. First he drops one ball to the ground and then another. In all their wondering whether the Christian religion was true they forgot what the Christian religion can do." 

People hunger to know the reality of both the truth of Christ and the power of Christ. We must give an attractive witness to all generations of seekers.

We must be strengthened by our strengths (our core identity) and not waylaid by our weaknesses (our fussiness). The best of our identity is an attractive orthodoxy and powerful orthopraxy that combines the moral witness of believing and doing as follows:

1) Personal Faith and Responsibility (priesthood of the believer and believer's baptism): People ache for authentic faith. A direct personal faith in Christ is the bedrock of salvation and the cornerstone of our beliefs. This sets a moral tone for our lives.

2) Independence and Interdependence of the Local Church (congregational autonomy): For Baptists, no other ecclesial body

has organizational authority over a local body of believers. They don't want to be dictated to by outside groups, but they do want to make a gospel contribution by effective cooperation.

3) Scriptural Truth (biblical authority): People hunger for godly truth, not manmade creeds. By our faith we can read the Bible and let the message be authoritative in our lives. At times we struggle to align our interpretations with one other, but we can agree that the Bible is God's inspired message for our lives.

4) Respecting People's Spiritual Rights (religious liberty): Everyone has the spiritual right to know about God's love in Christ Jesus, so: a) We believe that everyone is made in God's image and is to be loved. b) There are major differences among the world religions, and we respectfully need to talk about our differences while working on common concerns. c) Everyone's faith or non-faith is to be protected in society. d) Therefore, we are free to passionately share our faith without forcing our faith on anyone.

5) Compassionately Sharing Our Faith (missions and evangelism): People hunger to fulfill a divine purpose and to invest in what really matters. Believers can use their talents and spiritual gifts to serve and to share the gospel.

Those who have trouble hearing our voice need for us to be a bold and humble witness of the gospel — following the Apostle Paul's advice: "For we preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus, and ourselves your servants for his name's sake." **NFJ**

—Les Hollon is pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas.

CONTEXT *g* AND *considerations*

For Christians and congregations in conversation about homosexuality

Today many churches, including many Baptist churches, are engaged in conversations about homosexuality.

Last November a commission of the European Baptist Federation issued a helpful statement (ebf.org/resources-theology-and-education), and then in early December seven theologians in the British Baptist Union issued a more thorough one (somethingtodeclare.org.uk/) on the subject.

In November the Baptist General Convention of Texas notified two of its outstanding churches, First Baptist of Austin and Wilshire Baptist of Dallas, that they are no longer in good standing with the convention because of their policies of welcoming and affirming homosexual persons.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has launched an Illumination Project whose assignment is “to create models of dialogue and decision-making” by which the CBF and its member churches can have conversations about volatile subjects such as homosexuality without separating from each other (cbf.net/illuminationproject).

Of course, many Baptists are not interested in having a conversation about homosexuality. I am writing this article for those who are interested and who are either having a conversation now or are thinking about having one. My intention is to provide information and to offer insights that will be useful in such conversations.

AMERICAN SOCIETY

In the U.S. the context within which such conversations take place is a society that has changed its mind about homosexuality.

In 1974 the mental health establishment dropped homosexuality from DSM-II, its manual of mental disorders. In 1994 the Clinton administration adopted a “don’t ask don’t tell” policy for military personnel. At the time those actions were progressive. Today they seem merely quaint.

As we all know, in 2015 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that homosexual men and women have the right to marry and to enjoy the legal benefits of marriage. The Pew Research Center reports that at present about 68 percent of Americans approve of homosexual relationships and about 55 percent support homosexual marriage.

It now seems clear that many people — the exact percentage of the population is uncertain, but 5 percent may be close — experience an involuntary same-sex orientation just as most people experience an involuntary heterosexual orientation. In males the same-sex attraction remains throughout life, though in females it sometimes can be somewhat more fluid.

Many homosexual persons — gays — who are Christians choose not to engage in sexual activity because of the traditional Christian teaching that homosexual activity is sinful. Others choose to enter into homosexual relationships and to make commitments to be faithful to each other for life just as heterosexual people do.

In the recent past it was widely thought that gays could overcome their same-sex

attractions and acquire attractions to persons of the opposite sex. Various therapies, both Christian and secular, were designed to help them do this.

It is now clear that these therapies were not successful. For example, in 2013 Exodus, the large network of Christian programs for changing people, announced that it had stopped providing conversion therapy, and it apologized to those who had been hurt by its therapy. The use of conversion therapy for minors is now illegal in California, Illinois, New Jersey, Oregon, Vermont and the District of Columbia.

CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS

Christians hold different views concerning homosexuality. Here are four of those views:

1. Many Christians think that same-sex attraction is sinful. They believe that people choose these feelings and that they can lose them. Many of these Christians support the use of conversion therapy.

2. Many Christians think that even if same-sex attractions are inherited rather than chosen, gay sexual activity is always sinful. They encourage their fellow Christians who are gay to live celibate lives.

3. Some Christians think that gay sexual activity is not inherently sinful. They encourage their fellow Christians who are gay to enter into committed relationships. However, they don’t think the church should conduct gay marriages.

4. Some Christians think that gays who enter into committed relationships should be given the privileges given to married heterosexual people. These Christians support gay marriage.

THE BIBLE

Christians who believe that homosexual feelings and activities are always sinful appeal to seven Bible passages:

1. God created human beings male and female (Gen. 1:27).
2. Some men in Sodom wanted to rape Lot's male visitors (Genesis 19).
3. It is an abomination for a man to lie with a man as with a woman (Lev. 18:22, 20:13).
4. No Israelite can be a male prostitute in the temple of a pagan god (Deut. 23:17-18).
5. Idolatrous men do shameless things with men, and women with women (Rom. 1:26-27).
6. Homosexual offenders will not inherit God's kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9).
7. The behavior of homosexual offenders does not conform to sound teaching (1 Tim. 1:10).

These passages seem to say unambiguously that homosexual sexual activity is sinful. Part of the reason the passages seem unambiguous is that we Christians come to them with an awareness of the church's ancient tradition that homosexual sexual activity is sinful.

It is always appropriate for Christians to be respectful of Christian traditions. However, we should not forget that some of our traditions have been mistaken. For example, Christians, drawing upon many passages from the Bible, developed traditions about women and about black people that we today feel are not God's will for the church.

From our experiences with patriarchy, slavery, and racial segregation we know that some traditions need to be reformed. It is in this spirit that many churches are today engaging in a reconsideration of the tradition concerning homosexuality.

RECONSIDERATIONS

When we take a closer look at these seven biblical passages, here are some things we notice:

- Genesis 1 doesn't say anything about homosexuality.
- Genesis 19 is about gang rape.

• Leviticus 18 and 20 are part of a vast set of legal instructions, many of which Christians today do not believe is God's will for them. For example:

- A father may sell his daughter into slavery (Exod. 21:7).
- Execute anyone who works on the Sabbath (Exod. 35:2).
- Do not touch the skin of a pig (Lev. 11:24-26).
- Do not plant different crops side by side, and do not wear garments made of two kinds of material (Lev. 19:19).
- A man may have two wives (Deut. 21:15-16).
- Stone a disobedient son to death (Deut. 21:18-21).

In light of instructions such as these, it is certainly appropriate to ask whether the condemnations of same-sex sexual acts in Leviticus apply to Christians today.

- Deuteronomy 23 is about pagan worship.
- Romans 1 is part of an extended passage about idolaters who have "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator." The conduct it describes as shameless may be shameless because of its association with that idolatry.
- In 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, Paul used a Greek word (*arsenokoitai*) whose exact meaning is far from certain. He may have been referring to pederasty (an adult man engaging in sex with a boy).

I am not sure whether all these revisionist interpretations are correct. Knowledgeable Bible scholars disagree about them, but I am sure they all deserve to be taken seriously.

BIG QUESTION

In one sense, interpreting these passages is complicated. But in another sense, it is simple because there is only one question to be answered: **Does the Bible teach that it is sinful for two adult Christians, who have felt only same-sex attractions since adolescence, to freely choose to love each other and to enter into a relationship of faithfulness to each other?**

The Bible certainly condemns some kinds of sexual activity between persons of the same sex under certain conditions, but

do those condemnations apply to homosexual relations between devout Christians in faithful, committed relationships?

It is important to note that while the Bible condemns certain kinds of relations between heterosexual people under certain conditions, it doesn't condemn all such activity. Does it condemn all sexual relations between persons who are homosexual?

Today Christians are giving three different answers to this question:

1. Some say yes: They say that the Bible condemns all homosexual relations as practiced by Christians today, and those relations are sinful.

2. Others say they do not know: They don't know whether the Bible condemns homosexual relations as practiced by Christians today. They don't know whether all homosexual relations are sinful.

3. Others say no: They say that the Bible does not condemn homosexual relations as practiced by Christians today. Homosexual relations are not sinful.

DIVORCE PARALLELS

In order to understand why many churches are engaging in conversations about homosexuality, I want to suggest that there is a parallel between the three ways Christians understand the biblical teaching about homosexuality and the ways they understand the biblical teaching about divorce and remarriage.

There is no record that Jesus ever said a word about homosexuality. However, he clearly condemned divorce and remarriage as a form of adultery: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery" (Mark 10:1-12).

People give three answers to the question, **Would Jesus condemn divorce and remarriage as practiced by committed Christians today?**

1. Some say yes: They say that Jesus condemns divorce and remarriage as practiced today by committed Christians. Divorce is always sinful.

2. Others say they are not sure: They don't know whether Jesus would condemn divorce and remarriage as practiced today by committed Christians. They don't know whether divorce and remarriage are sinful.

Welcoming Remarried Divorcees

Churches understand that marriages sometimes break down irretrievably.

Churches create a safe space for divorcees. Divorcees know that when they come to church they will not be embarrassed or singled out for condemnation.

Churches allow divorcees to participate in the life of the church as teachers, musicians, committee members, etc.

Churches care for the spiritual well-being of divorcees and minister to them and their families. They do not treat them as second-class Christians.

Welcoming Gays

Churches understand that some persons are gay and are attracted only to persons of the same sex.

Churches create a safe space for gays. Gays know that when they come to church they will not be embarrassed or singled out for condemnation.

Churches allow gays to participate in the life of the church as teachers, musicians, committee members, etc.

Churches care for the spiritual well-being of gays and minister to them and their families. They do not treat them as second-class Christians.

3. Others say no: They say that Jesus would not condemn divorce and remarriage as practiced today by committed Christians. Divorce is not always sinful.

In my lifetime many Christians and churches in America have changed their minds about divorce. Whereas they once thought that divorce is always or almost always sinful, many no longer think that.

They believe that Jesus' teachings about divorce and remarriage were given in a world in which most divorced women had no means of financial support other than prostitution, and that they do not therefore apply in our world where divorced women have honorable ways of supporting themselves financially.

The same kind of change is now happening concerning homosexuality. Many Christians and churches that once thought homosexual relations are always sinful no longer think that. This is true of some conservative Christians as well as of more liberal Christians.

Two organizations of conservative Christians who think homosexual love is not sinful are Ralph Blair's Evangelicals Concerned (ecinc.org) and Justin Lee's Gay Christian Network (gaychristian.net). David Gushee, Distinguished Professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University, has clearly explained and ably defended this view in his book *Changing Our Minds*.

Churches that no longer think homosexual relations are always sinful are free to welcome gays fully into the life of the church. Above are some parallels between

the way churches welcome remarried divorcees and the way they welcome gays:

GAY MARRIAGE

When churches welcome gays in this way, they come face to face with the issue of whether to give their blessing to gays who enter into permanent, committed relationships just as they give their blessing to divorcees who enter into a second marriage. The 2015 ruling of the Supreme Court has forced this issue on American churches sooner than expected.

Some Christians and churches that welcome gays in the ways described above nevertheless have reservations about conducting weddings for gays. Their reasoning is that Christianity has a settled understanding of marriage, and it involves a man and a woman.

This is a serious concern, and I will attempt to address it by asking and answering two questions about gay marriage.

First, what can churches hope to accomplish by refusing to give their blessing to gay marriages? Churches hope that, by refusing to bless gay marriages, they will uphold and defend traditional Christian marriage.

Here we need to distinguish between marriage as described in the Bible and marriage as understood by Christians today. It is sometimes said that the biblical teaching about marriage is found in Genesis: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24).

At first glance this seems to be the case, but in fact that is not the whole story. I will mention just one of several differences between Genesis 2:24 and marriage practices in the Bible.

Many Israelite marriages were polygamous. King David had a harem with many wives — and the prophet Nathan said that God (!) was willing to give David even more wives (2 Sam. 12:7-8). David's son, King Solomon, had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kgs. 11:1-4).

Presumably these marriages were entered into for political reasons, but they still show that in the Bible there are differing understandings of marriage. Although the church never embraced polygamy, there seem to have been polygamists in the early church; that would explain why there are instructions to choose only monogamists as church leaders (1 Tim. 3:2 and Titus 1:6).

What about the more recent Christian tradition concerning marriage? Is it upheld and defended by refusing to conduct gay weddings? It is upheld. However, in my judgment it is not particularly defended.

Many people assume and assert that gay marriage constitutes a threat to heterosexual marriage, but I think this is mistaken. The fact that two persons of the same sex want to enter into a covenant to live together in love and faithfulness does not constitute a threat to my covenant with my wife that we will live together in love and faithfulness. I recognize that marriage is at risk today, but I don't see gay marriage as part of the risk.

Second, what can churches hope to

accomplish by giving their blessing to gay marriages? One thing is that it represents the church's full welcome of gays into the life of the church. This is important. Paul wrote: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7).

A second thing is that gays are helped to enter into and to maintain loving commitments and thereby to avoid the promiscuity and sexual addiction, which in the past were assumed by many people to be the natural lifestyle of gays.

A third thing is that gays acquire the kinds of legal benefits that heterosexual couples already have such as tax benefits, hospital visitation rights, survivor benefits and the like. For these reasons I believe it is appropriate for churches to perform gay weddings.

I am aware that some people will find this difficult or even impossible to accept, and I think I understand their concern. "Where," they ask, "will it all end? Are there no kinds of sexual conduct we should condemn?"

Of course there are. We should and do condemn forcible sexual activity: rape.

We should and do condemn infidelity and betrayal of one's wedding vows: adultery. We should and do condemn adults engaging in sexual activity with children: pedophilia.

We condemn these and other behaviors because in each one there are innocent victims. But there are no innocent victims in the relations of Christian adults who love each other and live together in faithfulness.

CONCLUSION

Many churches, perhaps most, have sincere, faithful members on both sides of the issue of homosexuality. Interestingly, the Gay Christian Network has members on both sides of the issue. Some believe that homosexual behavior is sinful, and others believe it is not.

It is a great achievement when these two groups manage to live together harmoniously. Homosexuality is a volatile issue, and it takes maturity and restraint for the two groups to respect each other and not to engage in community-destroying conflict.

In Romans 14, Paul provided guidance for dealing with situations in which church members have sincere disagreements. He gave specific instructions to those ("the

weak") who were unwilling to set aside traditional practices and also to those ("the strong") who were willing to move in more progressive directions.

I believe a church that follows Paul's counsel about this can welcome and bless gays and remain a harmonious fellowship even though all members do not agree. In fact, I know this is the case, because I belong to such a congregation.

A surprising thing about Baptist Church of the Covenant in Birmingham, Ala., is how infrequently the subject of sexuality comes up. We have had a conversation about homosexuality, and it has brought us to a good place. I am glad that many other churches are having similar conversations.

I hope that what I have written here may be of some use to them, and I wish them well with their conversation. As the wonderful John Claypool used to say, "Brave journey." **NFJ**

—*Fisher Humphreys taught theology from 1970-2008 and now lives in retirement in Birmingham, Ala. His e-mail address is fisherhumphreys@gmail.com.*

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Seeking clarification

Was John Calvin a Five-Point Calvinist?

BY BEN SELF

John Calvin was a leader of the Protestant Reformation. The Council of Dort (also called Dordrecht) issued a declaration of beliefs that became known as stating five important views of Calvinism.

But was John Calvin a Five-Point Calvinist? If we are thinking historically, John Calvin was not, strictly speaking, a Five-Point Calvinist.

Calvin lived from 1509 to 1564. The Council of Dort proclaimed its statement in 1619. So Calvin had died more than half a century before the Council of Dort expressed its views.

If, however, we are thinking theologically, we might ask if John Calvin would have approved Five-Point Calvinism as it became known. I think he would have mostly approved, but not completely.

He might have had reservations about how Five-Point Calvinism can be misleading. The history of Five-Point Calvinism includes both Calvinism and some opposition to it.

Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) taught Calvin's beliefs but began to doubt some of them. Various followers of Arminius (the Arminians) issued the Remonstrance, which stated Five Arminian Articles.

The Five Arminian Articles were as follows:

1. Election conditioned on foreseen faith (God chooses for salvation those whom he knows ahead of time will be believers.)
2. Universal atonement (The benefits of Christ's death are available for all but will be received only by believers.)
3. The need for regeneration (But might people be able to contribute in some way?)
4. The resistibility of grace
5. The uncertainty of the perseverance of the saints (Will all believers endure to the end?)



Portrait attributed to Hans Holbein the Younger

Calvinists were alarmed, perhaps enraged. They thought the Arminians were going against Calvin, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession and, of course, the Bible.

Calvinists contradicted the Five Arminian Articles with the Canons of Dort in 1619. Those canons became known as the Five Points of Calvinism, which were then symbolized by the acronym TULIP.

The first point of Five-Point Calvinism is perhaps the one most likely to be mislead-

ing. The point is total depravity (T). It is not clear why the officials at Dort thought they had to make such a statement.

While Calvin did believe that we are all sinners and deserving of hell, the Arminians did not question this view. They did not claim that people have a large amount of human goodness; they clearly stated that people need regeneration.

The actual disagreement — which is not sufficiently clear in Five-Point Calvinism — was over how regeneration occurs.

REFORMATION TURNS 500

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation that continues to shape the Christian Church in its various forms. Traditionally, the movement is traced to an event in 1517 when Martin Luther, a monk, protested the Catholic Church's practice of selling indulgences — a way to raise money by dispensing purposed doses of grace.

Luther's rebellious act was the nailing of 95 theses (stating his opposition) to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany, on Oct. 31, 1517.

The long ensuing debate and division led to dramatic changes within the Roman Church and to new expressions of the Christian faith with an emphasis on freely-given grace.

Beyond the schism, efforts at Christian unity have also occurred over the past five centuries, especially more recently when commonality is emphasized over doctrinal disagreements. This was reflected in Pope Francis joining Lutherans in Sweden to mark the start of this commemoration.

The bridge-building religious leader affirmed the journey of reconciliation between divided communities of faith — calling for “a common path” that moves from controversies to understanding.

Lutherans and other Christian bodies directly or indirectly influenced by the Protestant Reformation are marking this historic milestone in a variety of ways throughout the year — culminating on Oct. 31 when the spotlight again shines on one dissenter's protest that sparked a movement of unimaginable influence. **NFJ**

Calvin believed that humans need regeneration but are totally deprived of the ability to save themselves. Even if humans could perform some good works, those good works would not save them for eternity. Only God has the ability to save.

What especially distressed Calvin's followers was the thought that Arminians might regard faith as a human contribution to regeneration.

Calvin and the Calvinists viewed faith as a gift from God, a gift for which humans should not take any credit. It is easy for this concern about how regeneration occurs to get lost in discussions about moral depravity, a subject about which all sides apparently agreed.

Centuries later we might wonder if the officials at Dort should have thought a little more carefully. It might have been better for them to have said at one point, “God alone provides the regeneration needed by humans for salvation and does so without any human contribution.”

Calvin might have preferred such a statement to — or at least in addition to — the undisputed declaration about total depravity.

If the officials at Dort believed that the corruption of sin completely deprived people of any ability to respond to the gospel message, they should have clearly said so as a major point. The declaration on total depravity is in accord with Calvin's thinking, but it can be misleading by not giving his full thought.

The second, third and fourth points of Five-Point Calvinism (U, L and I) appear to be properly stated in accord with Calvin's views. He did believe in unconditional election (people have nothing to do with whom God chooses for salvation), limited atonement (Christ died only for those elected by God), and irresistible grace (God's will cannot be refused or thwarted).

The fifth point of Five-Point Calvinism, as many have noted, can also be misleading. The point is the perseverance of saints (P).

Officials at Dort were clearly contra-

dicting one of the Five Arminian Articles (on the uncertainty of perseverance of the saints). However, the phrase “perseverance of the saints” can suggest that the saints have something to contribute toward the perseverance. Calvin would not have supported such a thought.

Many have suggested that perseverance of the saints, though perhaps inelegant as a phrase, might have been a more accurate representation for Calvin. Another possibility would be to say, “God assures that those whom he chooses will persevere to the end.”

From a historical perspective, Calvin was not a Five-Point Calvinist (because he died before there was such terminology). From a theological perspective, he was very close to being one.

Or perhaps we should say that the officials at Dort were very close to Calvin but could have improved some of their expressions.

I am not a Five-Point Calvinist (although a family member supposedly is). I am simply trying, in a friendly manner, to clarify what is involved.

I wonder what would have happened if the officials at Dort had decided to summarize Calvin's teachings rather than emphasize a response to dissenters. There is, after all, more to Calvin's theology than five points.

I wonder if Calvinists today would be interested in providing a comprehensive but concise statement of Calvin's whole theology. If so, could they also present striking phrases and a memorable acronym?

As a Baptist, I think it would be good for some reasonable Calvinistic Baptists to work with some reasonable non-Calvinistic Baptists (someone may think of a better name). The goal would be to produce a respectful summary of their main agreements and disagreements. If there is already such a summary, where may it be found? **NFJ**

—*E.B (Ben) Self of Hopkinsville, Ky., is the author of Ways of Thinking About God: The Bible, Philosophy, and Science (Nurturing Faith Publishing).*

Editor's note: A gift from the former William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society supports better understanding of the historic principles of biblical justice and religious freedom.



HISTORICAL CONTRADICTIONS

American Christianity continues its long struggle
to embrace freedom and inclusion

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

From its beginning, American Christianity — a unique offshoot of authoritarian European Protestantism — has reflected the Jewish Old Testament more than the Christian New Testament.

The first colony, Jamestowne, Va., was established in 1607 “for the glory of God.” Its first legal document, titled “Articles, Laws, and Orders, Divine, Politic, and Martial for the Colony of Virginia,” spelled out religious mandates.

Attendance at daily religious services was required. Failure to do so resulted first in the withholding of food. A second offense merited a whipping, while a third infraction sent the offender “to the Galleys for Six Months.”

A number of other religious offenses meted the death penalty, including speaking “impiously” or “maliciously” against the Trinity, blaspheming “God’s holy name,” or voicing derision of “God’s holy word.”

The various punishments reflected the harshness of Old Testament legal codes, while ignoring Jesus’ teachings of grace and mercy toward unbelievers.

PURITY

In similar fashion, the Plymouth Colony in present-day Massachusetts was established in 1620 “for the glory of God, and the advancement of the Christian faith.” The “Pilgrims” viewed themselves as a “Chosen People of God” on a mission to establish a “New Jerusalem.”

Colonial laws mandated church

attendance and Old Testament morality. “Scoffing” at Christianity was a crime, as was slandering a minister or the church. Religious dissent was illegal. Fines included prison, stocks, whippings, banishment and, in some instances, death.

En route to the New World aboard the ship *Arbella*, John Winthrop, Puritan leader and first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in 1630 penned “A Model of Christian Charity,” a statement of the Puritans’ guiding principles.

Therein he insisted that the little band of believers must love one another on the one hand, yet on the other hand demanded “strict” obedience to the “purity” of God’s “holy ordinances” in “every article.”

An Old Testament “holy experiment” and “Bible commonwealth,” the Massachusetts Bay Colony granted full citizenship only to male members of the state church. Religious dissent was not allowed. Penalties included prison, stocks, whippings, banishment and death. In particular, Baptists, Catholics and Quakers were harshly persecuted.

In 1691 the Plymouth Colony merged into the Massachusetts Bay colony. State-sanctioned, Christian persecution of religious dissenters continued.

DISSENT

Each an example of theocratic religious authoritarianism, the early Virginia, Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies diligently strove to enforce Old Testament morality through legal, social and cultural means.

Most citizens, in agreement or not, would conform out of fear. The few who publicly resisted were dealt with harshly.

Anne Hutchinson, wife of a prominent merchant in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, ran afoul of authorities for reasons both theological and gender-related. She angered colonial leaders by publicly teaching that outward morality was insufficient for salvation. The fact that as a woman she claimed a religious authority greater than the state made her offense all the worse.

In 1637 the General Court of Massachusetts banished her from the colony, after which the Congregational Church excommunicated her. From Massachusetts she fled to the Rhode Island Colony, recently established by English immigrant Roger Williams.

Williams himself had been banished from the Massachusetts colony in 1635 for voicing “new and dangerous opinions against the authority of the magistrates.”

In exile he founded Providence Plantations (later Rhode Island), a colony that granted freedom of conscience and religious liberty to all persons. Leaders in Massachusetts and other theocratic New England colonies rejected such New Testament convictions.

In Rhode Island in 1638, Williams also founded the first Baptist church in America. As in England, the religious sect was devoted to the New Testament freedoms Williams advocated.

Six years later Williams wrote a book that scandalized England, Old and New. *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for the Cause*

of *Conscience* attacked religious and political intolerance on both sides of the ocean. Criticizing church-state unions, Williams insisted that Jesus freed all of humanity from religious bondage and discrimination:

“It is the will and command of God that, since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries.”

Demanding equal rights for all persons, Williams echoed other dissenters. The Rhode Island leader voiced an inclusive New Testament vision of human freedom starkly at odds with authoritarian Old Testament discrimination enshrined in a number of colonies North and South.

The lopsided battle between establishment authoritarianism and discrimination on the one hand, and outsider freedom and inclusion on the other, stretched across generations. Among dissenters, Baptists led the way.

As late as the Revolutionary War era, many Baptists remained victims of government-sanctioned, Christian-led punishment and terrorism. Persecutions included beatings, imprisonment, whippings, waterboarding and more.

Not until the 1791 enactment of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution that separated church from state and granted equal religious liberty to all — something passionately supported by Baptists — did dissenters rest easily.

UNRESOLVED

Nonetheless, the inherent contradictions between the early Virginia, Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies on the one hand, and the Rhode Island colony on the other, remained far from resolved.

Although the Rhode Island model of freedom for all triumphed in the First Amendment, the resulting free marketplace of religion allowed for theocratic-minded Christians to advocate for a return to legal discrimination in the name of religion. The clamor for discrimination began all too soon.

In the early 19th century many adherents of formerly-establishment religious

denominations remained angry at the creation of the United States as a secular government, and were bitterly disappointed that the nation’s early presidents honored church-state separation in the First Amendment.

In an effort to make America a Christian nation, they rallied around a campaign to repeal Sunday mail delivery. Baptists especially opposed that effort on constitutional and religious grounds, arguing that governmental legislative recognition and preferential treatment of the Christian holy day would be discriminatory against other persons of faith, as well as persons of no faith.

Their view prevailed, and Sunday mail delivery continued throughout the century (See Bruce Gourley, “Religious liberty: then & now: Baptists and the battle over Sunday mail delivery,” *Baptists Today*, February 2015).

At the same time many white Christians of the South, ascending the socio-economic ladder and now beneficiaries of the southern slave economy, determined that black persons were not deserving of freedom. Claiming biblical conservatism, they religiously justified racism and the physical bondage of black persons as God’s will.

Christians of the North, white and black, disagreed. Bodily freedom and basic human equality, many insisted, reflected the teachings of Jesus.

Citing Mark 12:31 (“Love thy neighbor as thyself”) and Gal. 3:28 (“ye are all one in Christ”), they helped secure the eradication of slavery in the North and called for the abolition of Southern slavery. Many also advocated for women’s rights. In both instances progressive Christians expanded upon the freedom heritage of colonial dissenters.

These two 19th-century ideological strands of Christian thought and practice — the authoritarian/discriminatory school of conservative Christianity and the inclusive/freedom school of progressive Christianity — mirrored religious tensions of the colonial era. They have framed the inherent contradictions of American Christianity ever since.

DISCRIMINATION

The authoritarian discriminatory school of thought traces its dominant-themed history through the religious persecution of dissenters; early opposition to America’s secular government; defense of black slavery; anointment of the slave-based Confederacy as God’s chosen nation; resistance to Reconstruction efforts to empower freedmen; utilization of the Ku Klux Klan and brutal Jim Crow laws designed to subjugate, terrorize and murder black persons and resistance to equal rights for women, black persons, and other minority groups in the name of conservative, white “religious freedom.”

Ultimately unable to prevent desegregation and the extension of civil rights to black persons in the 1960s, many white conservative Christians, refusing to accept integrated public schools, established hundreds of white-only private schools.

In the following decade white evangelical leaders unsuccessfully rallied behind fundamentalist Bob Jones University, in a dispute with the Internal Revenue Service, to continue racially discriminatory practices on campus.

Simultaneously, the Republican Party, soliciting white voters by opposing minority rights, sensed political opportunity over a new issue: abortion.

Prior to 1980, conservative Christians remained divided over the propriety of abortion, their nuanced views often taking into account the silence of scripture. Nonetheless, Reagan-era efforts to position opposition to abortion — alongside opposition to women’s rights, homosexual rights, and welfare for poor black families — as a white Christian political recruitment tool proved to be the glue of an unbreakable political-religious alliance of the Republican Party and the “Religious Right.”

Although calling themselves “pro-life” in advocating for government protection for fetuses, critics contended that conservative Christians often discriminate against America’s children and families by opposing equal rights and assistance to poor children and their mothers.

TRAJECTORY

Today the authoritarian/discriminatory school of Christian thought is on the ascendency. As in theocratic colonial days, the modern version of dominant Christianity is crystallized in Old Testament law — with the push to display the Ten Commandments in public spaces as just one example.

Conversely, the trajectory of the inclusive/freedom school of thought has been and remains one of struggle.

The assertion in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” paid verbal homage to the theme of human equality, yet legal subjugation remained the reality for black persons and women of all skin color. Abolitionism as advocated by progressive Christians led to the eradication of slavery in the defeat of the Confederates States, yet freedom’s achievement gave way to renewed white dominance over black persons.

Concurrently, a long and successful struggle for voting rights for women supported by progressive Christians resulted in national women’s suffrage in 1920, only to be followed half a century later by the conservative Christian-led defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment.

In similar fashion, late 20th-century civil rights victories for racial and ethnic minorities led by progressive Christians gave way to conservative Christian-fueled, lesser-blattant but deeply entrenched discriminatory government legislation and marketplace practices that ensured continued favoritism toward whites. Examples include bipartisan criminal justice system reforms that targeted black persons, along with corporate, predatory lending practices that intentionally victimized persons of color.

Also during this time, progressive Christians fractured over the issue of abortion, typically determining that women’s lives, and that of children, should be given priority over fetuses. Although representing the majority of Americans, the progressive pro-women’s choice stance provided emotional ammunition for anti-abortion conservative Christians.

Even so, the presidency of Barack Obama, America’s first black president

and frequent ally of progressive Christians, brought newfound hope in the fight against discrimination. Political victories on behalf of women, black citizens, the LGBT community, ethnic immigrants and religious minorities offered tangible encouragement for advocates of inclusion and freedom.

POLITICS

In the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, as in all elections since the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the vast majority of white, conservative Christian voters remained committed to the Republican Party, while most progressive Christians — white, black and otherwise — gravitated toward the Democratic Party.

Yet in significant respects, conservative Christians’ embrace of Donald Trump was highly unusual. An outsized egotist and admitted sexual predator, he often repulsed many conservatives and progressives alike. When pressed about his sins, Trump declared no need to ask God for forgiveness.

Despite the ugliness of his campaign, the New York billionaire promised conservative Christians a return to power in politics, culture and society.

Enamored of this promise, more than 80 percent of white Christian voters cast ballots for Trump, gravitating toward that which conservative American Christians since colonial times have frequently embraced.

Robert Jeffress, pastor of the influential First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, during the presidential primaries, recalled being asked if he would prefer a candidate who embodies Jesus’ teachings and governs according to the Sermon on the Mount. His

repeated response was, “Heck, no!”

Jeffress said that he would run from such a leader “because the Sermon on the Mount was not given as a governing principle for this nation.” He added: “I want the meanest, toughest, son of a you-know-what I can find — and I believe that’s biblical.”

IMAGINATION

Authoritarian and discriminatory Old Testament legalism is again a dominant political force in America. North Carolina minister William Barber, architect of the “Moral Mondays” protests in his state, is but one Christian leader rallying resistance to a resurgence of white supremacy.

“Prophetic imagination,” he said, must precede “political implementation” of acts of justice and equality.

Post-Civil War Reconstruction and late-20th-century Civil Rights efforts yielded incomplete inclusion of and freedoms for minority Americans, said Barber.

“We need a moral movement to revive the heart of American democracy and build a Third Reconstruction for our time,” he said.

For Christians, the focus of politics and public policy should not be religious legalism, said Barber. Rather, he insists, the question is, “What Would Jesus Do?”

Dissenters in Colonial America knew the answer. So, too, did abolitionists and Civil Rights advocates: inclusion, freedom and equality for all.

Such is the American ideal, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. And authoritarian and dominant forces have never been able to squelch this transcendent dream. **NFJ**

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Bruce Gourley is the online editor and contributing writer for Nurturing Faith, an award-winning photographer and owner of the popular web site yellowstone.net. To begin exploring any of these opportunities, contact Bruce at bgourley@nurturingfaith.net.

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Rutherford B. Hayes (1877-1881)

By Bruce Gourley

The son of a farmer, Rutherford B. Hayes was born in Delaware, Ohio, in 1822. His father died when Rutherford was a mere 10 days old.

Raised by his mother and older sister, with the financial assistance of an uncle, young Rutherford attended Kenyon College and then Harvard Law School. Afterward he became a prominent criminal defense lawyer in Cincinnati. There Hayes, vaguely Protestant but unchurched, married Lucy Ware Webb, a good works-oriented Methodist.

Politically, Hayes affiliated initially with the Whig Party. Changing to the Republican Party in 1854, he served as city solicitor of Cincinnati from 1858 to 1861.

Opposed to slavery, the outbreak of the Civil War led Hayes to leave politics for service as an officer in the Union Army. Wounded five times, he earned a reputation for exceptional bravery and rose to the rank of brevet major general.

During the war Hayes evidenced an interest in economics. In an 1862 diary entry he asked a friend from home to “bring me Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*,” the classic 18th-century treatise addressing the problem of wealth inequality with a proscription of what is now known as traditional capitalism.

In the war’s closing months, Cincinnati Republicans nominated Hayes for the House of Representatives. Refusing to campaign, he declared, “an officer fit for duty who at this crisis would abandon his post to electioneer ... ought to be scalped.”

Nonetheless, he won handily. During his one term Hayes criticized President Andrew Johnson’s leniency toward former Confederates, complaining of “Rebel influences ... ruling the White House.”

Returning home, from 1867 to 1876 the popular Hayes served three terms as governor of Ohio. As governor he advocated for equality for blacks.

Yet in his latter years as governor, Hayes, like many Protestants, evidenced anti-Catholic sentiments. He and state Republicans repealed the brief-lived, Democratic-led and Catholic-influenced Geghan Bill, legislation guaranteeing state prisoners access to “ample and equal facilities” for the practice of their religious beliefs.

Nominated by Republicans in 1876 for the presidency, Hayes garnered support from renowned Americans, including Mark Twain. However, the November election returns proved too close to call.

Disputed outcomes in Louisiana, South Carolina and Florida led to months of uncertainty. With no end in sight, Congress in January 1877 appointed an Electoral Commission of eight Republicans and seven Democrats that decided the contest for Hayes with a final electoral count of 185 to 184.

Democrats, controlling the House of Representatives, allowed the Electoral Commission’s decision to take effect in return for the withdrawal of remaining Northern troops from the South. Thereafter, many white Republicans followed suit, leaving white Democrats firmly in control of the states of the former Confederacy.

The fortunes of Black Republicans, politically empowered during

Reconstruction, fell swiftly. Southern Democrats during Hayes’ presidency began working to exclude blacks from the region’s politics. The president’s efforts to protect the rights of Southern blacks largely fell victim to Democratic opposition.

Hayes as president otherwise focused on advancing education, civil service reforms and economic recovery from an extended depression that had begun in 1873. Labor unrest marked his first year in office.

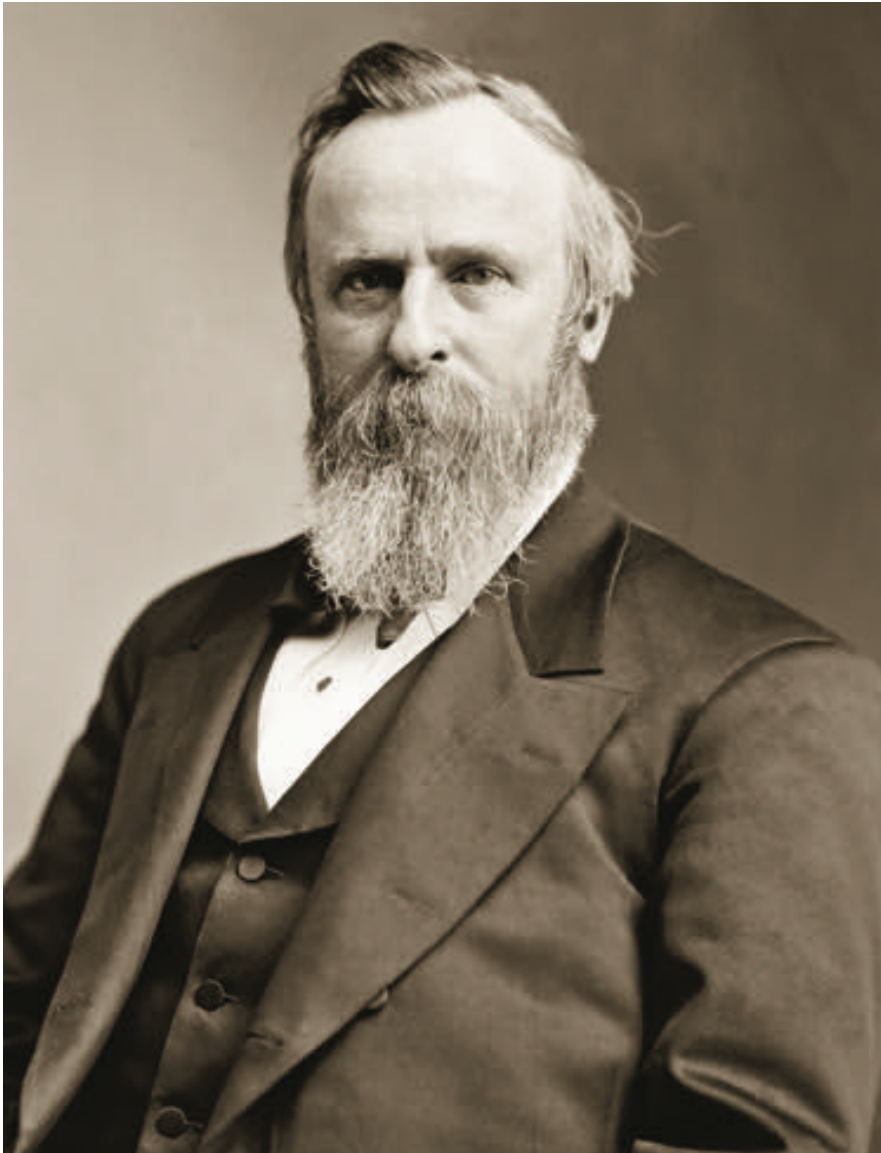
A widespread uprising by rail workers in protest of wage cuts and poor working conditions amid distrust of wealthy capitalists became known as the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. Under pressure, a reluctant Hayes dispatched federal troops to quell worker unrest. As a result of the strikes, labor unions became better organized and some railroads began offering pension plans for workers.

Indian policy also played a prominent role in the Hayes presidency. Wars between the U.S. military and Western Indian tribes continued, including the Nez Perce War of 1877. Hayes’ subjugating policies furthered the assimilation of native peoples into white Christian culture, focused on the division of Indian land into household allotments, and effected reforms in the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Signifying the importance of the expanding West, Hayes in 1880 became the first sitting American president to travel west of the Rocky Mountains. His stops included a visit to Yosemite in California, a future national park revered by spiritualist and naturalist John Muir.

When in Washington, President Hayes sometimes attended religious services with

This is the 19th 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.



his wife Lucy, yet still refused to affiliate with any denomination. Nonetheless, at Lucy's urging he banished wine and liquor from the White House, reflective of an ascendant national prohibition movement spearheaded by Methodists and other Protestants.

Although initiated for personal reasons, the anti-alcohol policy also served political purposes. In addition to ingratiating Protestant ministers to Hayes, it led many prohibitionists to vote Republican.

Despite earlier anti-Catholic political actions as governor of Ohio, President Hayes voiced affirmation of church-state separation. Echoing the sentiments of previous presidents, he noted "the cause of good government and the cause of religion both suffer by all such interference."

Making good on a pledge not to seek re-election, upon completion of his lone presidential term Hayes returned to Spiegel Grove, the family's upper Ohio estate. Remaining a loyal Republican, he became a prominent advocate for public education.

Supporting an effort to provide federal education subsidies for all children, he perceived education as the best route to societal unity and individual improvement. Still working for racial equality, he helped provide college scholarships to African Americans and took a progressive stance on racial reforms.

Wealth inequality also troubled Hayes. As had Adam Smith, the father of capitalism, free markets and modern economics, a post-presidential Hayes spent much time pondering possible ways to distribute

wealth more equitably among citizens. He also considered ways that government might restrict business practices that contributed to wealth inequality.

In his writings Hayes echoed Smith: "... free government cannot long endure if property is largely in a few hands and large masses of the people are unable to earn homes, education, and a support in old age...."

He also wrote that once while "in church it occurred to me that it is time for the public to hear that the giant evil and danger in this country, the danger which transcends all others, is the vast wealth owned or controlled by a few persons. Money is power. In Congress, in state legislatures, in city councils, in the courts, in the political conventions, in the press, in the pulpit, in the circles of the educated and the talented, its influence is growing greater and greater. Excessive wealth in the hands of the few means extreme poverty, ignorance, vice, and wretchedness as the lot of the many."

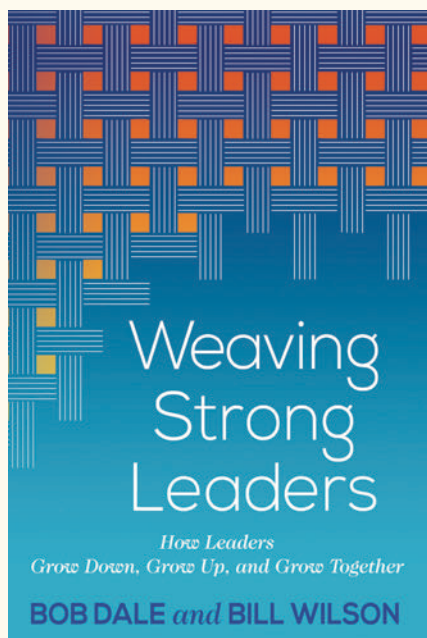
Despite attending church at least occasionally, Hayes remained "a non-church member, a non-professor of religion." Neither was he a "subscriber to any creed." Yet "in a sense, satisfactory to myself and believed by me to be important, I try to be a Christian, or rather I want to be a Christian and to help do Christian work."

Hayes also acknowledged: "to worship ... is a deeply seated principle of human nature." Reflecting late-19th-century triumphant Protestantism, he declared: "the best religion the world has ever had is the religion of Christ. A man or community adopting it is virtuous, prosperous, and happy." And, "what a great mistake is made by him who does not support the religion of the Bible!"

To Hayes' great sadness, Lucy died in 1889. Four years later, mere days from his own death, the former president asserted: "I am a Christian according to my conscience in belief, not of course in character and conduct, but in purpose and wish ... not of course by the orthodox standard. But I am content, and have a feeling of trust and safety."

Hayes, increasingly religious but never churched, died Jan. 17, 1893. His last words were, "I know that I'm going where Lucy is." **NFJ**

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Translating with an agenda is a disservice to Bible readers

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

Sometimes Bible scholars make mistakes because they lack understanding or adequate information. That is regrettable, but understandable.

Scholars — or those claiming to be scholars — may also err in order to promote a personal agenda. Worse than regrettable, that is a disservice to those who depend upon their work.

A recent case in point is a revision of the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible, favored by many conservative Christians who want a near literal translation that is easier to read than the King James Version.

ESV translators include archconservatives Wayne Grudem, J.I. Packer and others who favor a so-called “complementarian” view of male-female relationships in which women are supposedly equal to men but expected to live in submission to them.

These adherents often cite Gen. 3:16 in support of their view. It is from the story often called “the fall,” when Adam and Eve (interpreted as literal characters) ate from a forbidden tree and fell under a divine curse.

God’s curse on the woman, as translated in the NRSV, reads: “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”

The verse clearly indicates that this is not an ideal situation: the writer believed that God had created the man and woman fully equal, but he lived in a culture where men routinely dominated women.

The Garden of Eden story is an etiology that sought to explain why reality did not match the ideal. Because of Adam and Eve, women were doomed to have a strong

“desire” for their husbands, even though it would lead to a painful experience in childbearing and a subordinate role.

However, the new version of the ESV translates the penultimate phrase as: “Your desire shall be *contrary to* your husband.”

This appears to be inexplicable, since the Hebrew preposition (*’el*) clearly means “to” or “towards.” It can rarely take on meanings such as “at” or even “against” (after having moved up to something), but never in the sense of being opposed or contrary to.

Much of the discussion about the change has focused on what seems to be assigning a blatant change in meaning to the preposition. The change does result from an unusual translation choice, but I suspect it is not the *’el*.

Rather, the translators seem to be following the lead of the New English Translation (NET). Produced by the folks behind bible.org, the NET is a generally reliable translation, and one I recommend to my students, largely because it includes thousands of translation notes.

In Gen. 3:16, I believe the NET translators (also from the conservative end of the spectrum) missed the boat. They translate the last part of the verse as: “You will want to control your husband, but he will dominate you.”

In an explanatory note, the translators argue that the word *teshukah*, typically translated as “desire” or “longing,” should be rendered as a desire to control.

The word *teshukah* is used only three times in the Hebrew Bible. In the Song of

Songs 7:11 it has the typical meaning: “I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me.”

The word also appears in Gen. 4:7, part of God’s warning to the recalcitrant Cain that “sin is lurking at the door, its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

The NET translators’ argument is that sin, metaphorically personified, had a desire to control Cain, so the word must carry an element of control in other contexts. Thus, the NET translators don’t change the meaning of the word for “towards” but stretch the meaning of “desire” so that it means a “desire to control.”

I suspect it is this argument, rather than an obviously unsupportable mistranslation of the preposition, that led the ESV’s male-dominant oriented translators to justify the translation: “your desire shall be *contrary to* your husband.”

The implication is that women are hard-wired to be antagonistic toward their husbands — but should be submissive to them anyway. The translation demeans women even more than the mistaken idea that God wants women to be eternally subordinate to male domination.

This translation not only twists the meaning of the words to suit the translators’ patriarchal belief system but also fails to reflect the text’s clear indication that conflict between the sexes and female submission are not the ways God intended things to be.

The author behind most of Genesis 2-4 sought to explain why a corrupt human society did not reflect God’s true desire for humankind — not to reinforce its degraded practices as God’s intent. [NFJ](#)

Check out the ongoing blogs at nurturingfaith.net.

Church and technology

Will the faithful face up to the changing world?

BY WILL DYER

Sitting on the couch I watched my 3-year-old daughter, Miriam, hold my iPhone in her tiny hands. It is a rather common experience in our house: my two girls taking pictures with my phone and laughing at the faces they make to the camera.

But something different just happened. I listened, with a bit of surprise, as she said with assurance, “Hey Siri, my name is Miriam!”

Siri, the intelligent personal assistant on Apple products, responded, “Hello, how can I help you?”

The conversation ended at that point, but I was struck by something in that moment. My two girls will grow up talking to computers and fully expecting the computer (or phone, tablet, car, refrigerator, etc.) to answer.

In the same way we carry on conversations with friends and family, we have entered an age when computers intelligently navigate the complexity of the English language in order to help us make reservations, find our way around a city and even tell us jokes.

Technology is changing everything about our world. Jobs are being automated — not just blue-collar factory jobs, but increasingly white-collar jobs that require college degrees. Homes are becoming “smart” with the widespread popularity of devices such as Amazon’s Echo and Google’s Home.

The technology of today is increasingly reminiscent of the sort of things in Hollywood science fiction. The world, as seen by my little girls, is going to be vastly different from the one I grew up in.

As a pastor, I’m concerned that the



church, in general, has been silent on issues of technological change and how Christian people should interact with and consume technology.

So I attended the Center for Faith and Work’s 2016 conference on “The Wonder and Fear of Technology.” The Center is the “cultural renewal arm” of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, one of the largest churches in New York City.

For two days attendees listened to a variety of speakers, most of them not pastors, teach about the rapid pace of technological change and how the church can, and should, engage with new technologies to bring hope and the message of Jesus to the world.

The topics covered were broad and far-reaching, with speakers talking about the nature of work in a technological world along with the effects of social media on in-person relationships and how things such as Facebook and Snapchat alter our capacity for empathy with others.

A defining moment for me was when Redeemer pastor Tim Keller asked the simple question, “Is technology good or bad?” Then his response was simply, “Absolutely.”



Keller’s presentation set the tone for the conference. He elaborated on his “absolutely” response in helpful ways for Christians to think about life in a technological age.

On the positive side, said Keller, the Bible commands technological advancement. The creation stories in Gen. 1-2 provide the first command by God to use technology for the good of humanity and the glory of God.

In Gen. 2:15 God instructed Adam to “till” the Garden of Eden and take care of it. In other words, Adam was to use “technology” to release the potential of the earth and cultivate the riches of creation. By plowing the earth, technology is used to create a more efficient way to grow fruits and vegetables.

In this respect, technology is not only good, but also is commanded by God. The problem arises when technology is used for something other than its intended purpose.

To see that problem, Keller said to look no further than two chapters later in Genesis 4. There we find two scenarios where technology — in this case, bronze- and iron-clad tools — is used as weapons for the murder of Abel and the poor unfortunate soul who wounded Lamech in Gen. 4:23.

Therefore, technology is used for cultivating in Gen. 2, and then very quickly used for murder in Genesis 4. So the answer to the question of whether technology is good or bad, according to the Bible, is “absolutely.”

Humans have been developing and refining technology since the beginnings of humanity, and the trend is not likely to stop anytime soon.

Computers that once took up entire buildings now fit in the palm of our hands. It won’t be long, some leading computer scientists claim, until the computers we now hold in our hands will swim in our bloodstreams through “nanomachines.”

For those who see the positive

possibilities, these molecular computers will eradicate disease, lengthen our lives, and strengthen our brain function through a constant connection to cloud-based technology. While this sounds like the stuff of science fiction, there are many who predict this technology will be available by 2045.

As one presenter noted, Wall Street and Silicon Valley are pouring billions of dollars into this new technology because it will produce huge revenues for their businesses. This is a problem for a number of reasons, most importantly, because when influenced solely by the economic interests of corporations, these new technologies will lack any sort of moral framework.

It will be the first time in the Western world where large-scale technological innovation has occurred without reference to the moral guidance of the Christian faith.

However, “Can we produce a technology?” is just one important question. “Should we produce it?” is quite another.

As long as the church sits on the sidelines with regard to emerging technologies, we have no voice in the moral

parameters that shape our culture for the foreseeable future. This is particularly striking when we consider that the Protestant Reformation was fueled, in no small part, by the church engaging with emerging technology: the printing press.

Nigel Cameron, president and CEO of the Center for Policy and Emerging Technologies, noted in his presentation that most churches are not even thinking about the revolution in technology that is happening as we go through daily routines.

However, big changes call for big ideas, and it seems as if the church is currently willing to let economic interest shape the world while we sit silent. We can and we must do better.

On a very practical level, Derek Thompson, a senior editor at *The Atlantic*, addressed the automation of jobs across the blue/white-collar spectrum. According to Thompson, we live in a culture where we define ourselves by the work we do.

The first question often asked of someone we meet is: “What do you do for a living?” When persons are no longer defined

by their work, what will define us?

As the church, we should teach and preach a better message: that no one is defined by what he or she does “for a living” or how much money one makes.

The better news is that each person, no matter one’s station in life, has dignity and infinite worth because of being created in the image of God. While I hope we are living out that message in our churches now, there will come a time when neither doctor nor assembly line worker will have that same work to do.

The church is in a prime position to teach men and women about where they find their worth and to speak a word of criticism, as well as encouragement, to the emerging technology of our time.

But first we must be willing to admit that our children aren’t living in the same world we inhabited as kids. It can be scary while at the same time exciting, and it is up to us to decide how we will view it. **NFJ**

—Will Dyer is associate pastor of First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga.

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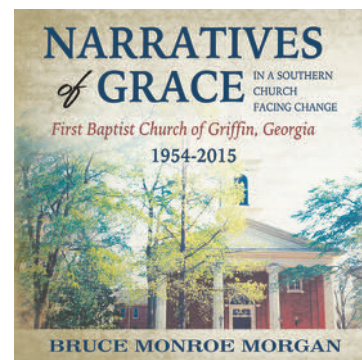
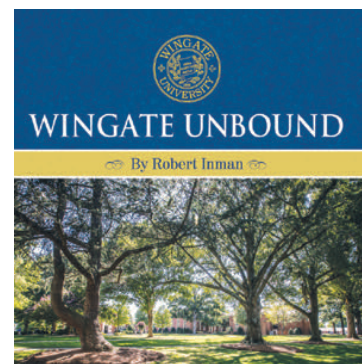
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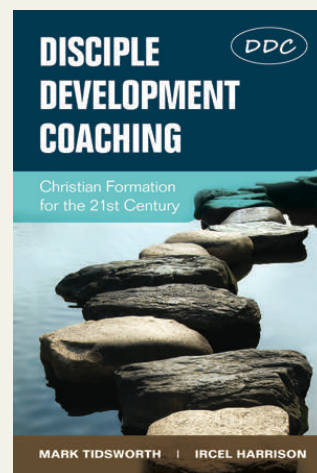
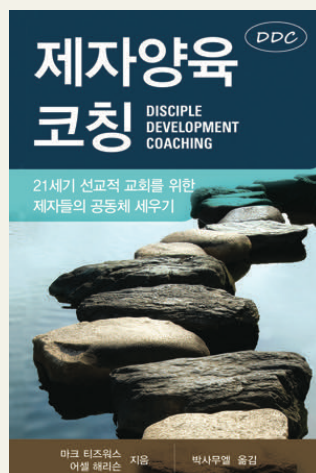
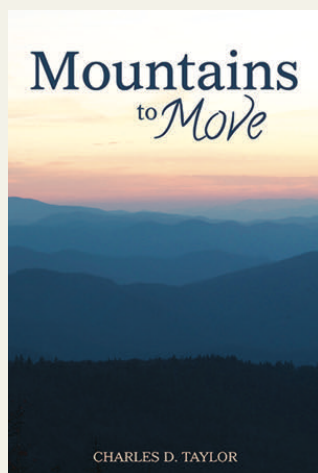
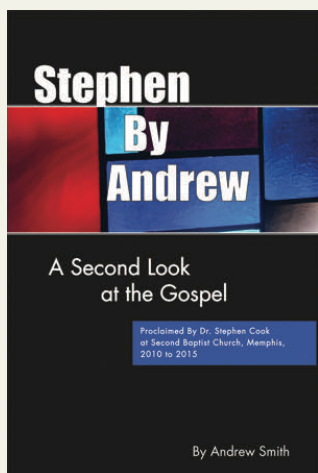
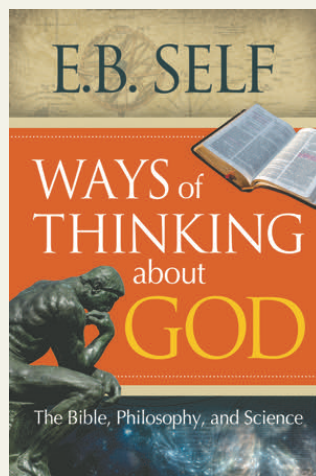
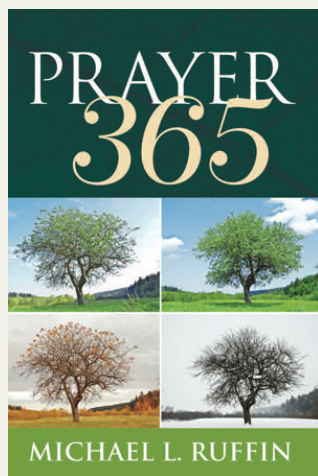
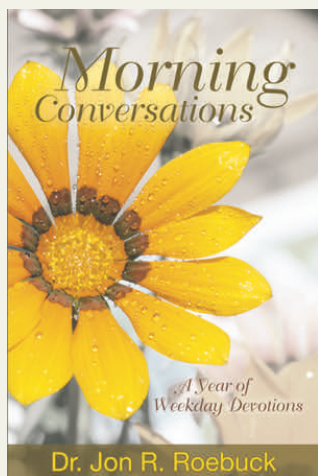
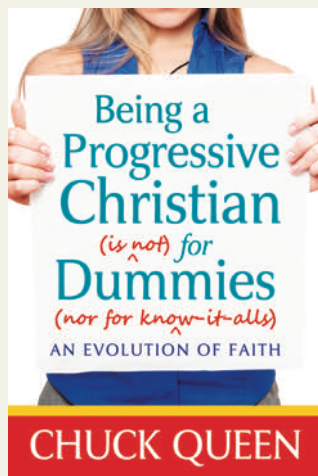
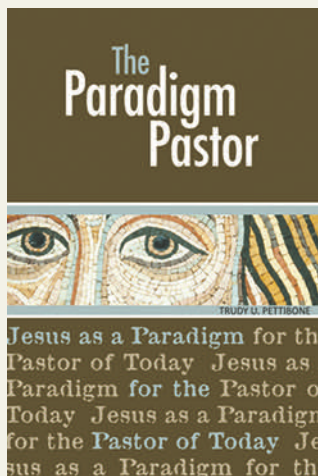
The team that managed the editing and designing of our book of history did a remarkable job helping us to format our history with the inclusion of photographs that made us proud of the finished product and grateful to their staff. It was a great experience to be guided by professionals who were so detail-oriented and created a timetable to get our published history in advance of the time we would need it. Their suggestions related both to content and layout resulted in a product that exceeded our expectations.

—Dr. William L. Hardee, Pastor
First Baptist Church, Griffin, Ga.

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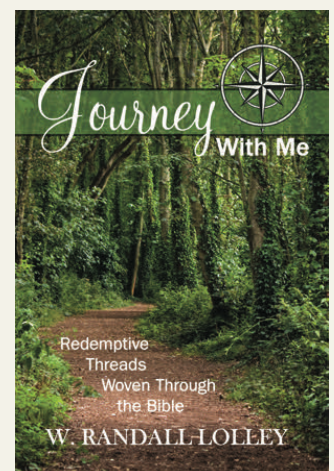
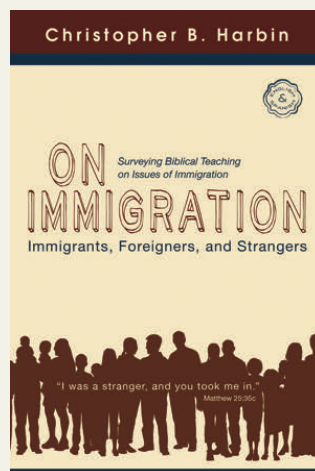
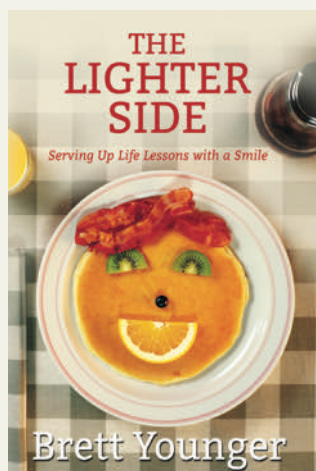
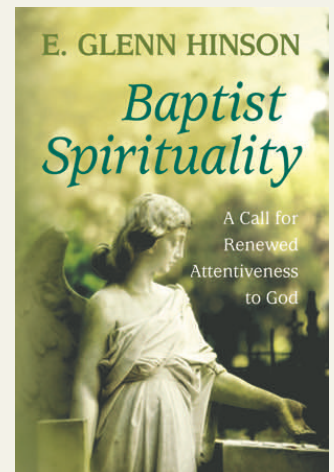
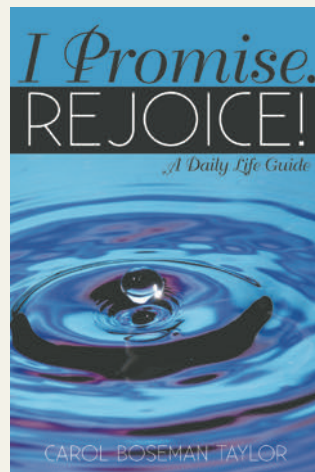
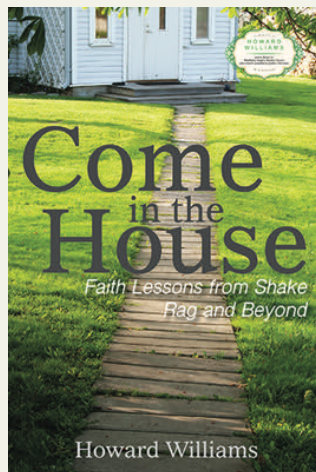
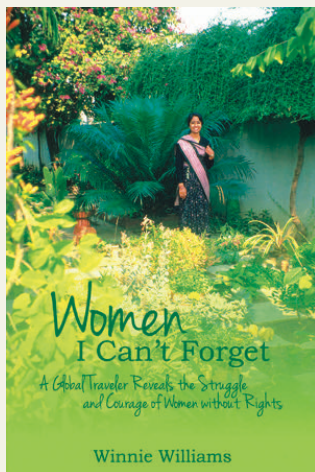
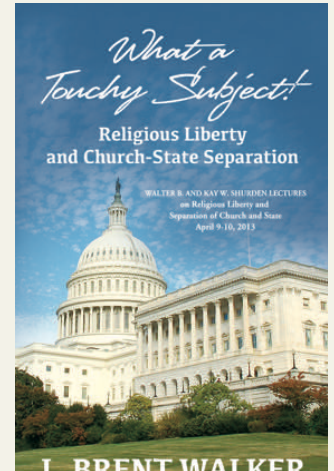
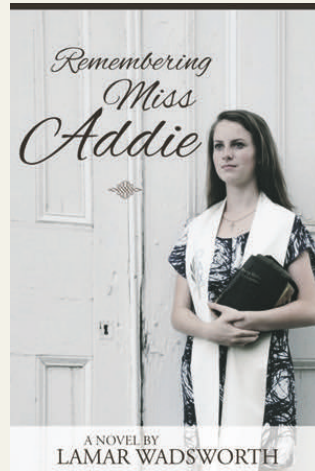
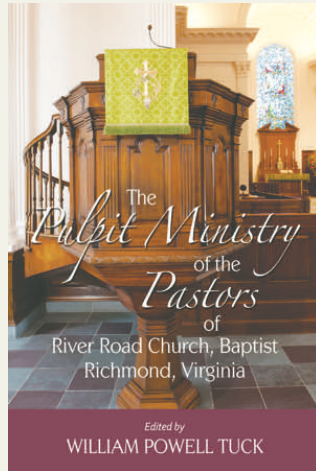
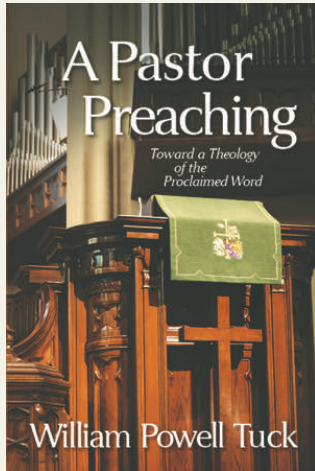


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FAITH & FORTITUDE

Jackie Robinson improved more than baseball 70 years ago

The movie *42* hit theaters on April 12, 2013 — the first of three times I viewed it with friends or family, each time in a different city.

It tells the challenging and inspiring life story of Jackie Robinson — a remarkable athlete and disciplined person — who became the first African American to play Major League Baseball. His uniform number, 42, is now retired in tribute throughout the majors.

Robinson played first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers on opening day, April 15, 1947. The 70th anniversary of that momentous occasion is now before us.

SETTING

Historic Engel Stadium in Chattanooga, Tenn. — former home of the Chattanooga

Lookouts along with teams of a bygone era when baseball like most of society was clearly separated by race — had a starring role in the movie as Ebbets Field. The cozy stadium in Brooklyn where Robinson broke baseball's color barrier has long disappeared.

The film was also shot in Macon, Ga., where Brooklyn street scenes and Florida spring training settings of the 1940s were recreated. Old stadiums in Macon and Birmingham were used as well.

Much of the storyline dealt with Brooklyn Dodgers boss Branch Rickey's steeled determination to integrate baseball against a tide of opposition; his calculated selection of the right player/person who could handle the emotionally difficult situation; and the reaction to this bold social move by teammates, baseball executives and managers, fans and the nation as a whole.

But always at the center was a 28-year-old man who looked different from the 399 other major leaguers at the time.

OBSTACLES

The best of Hollywood ingenuity cannot fully convey the racial realities of those times. Blacks in some Southern states in 1947 were still unable to vote, and their children were not offered the same educational opportunities as whites. Most everything in American society reflected racial segregation and inequalities.

The biggest challenges were rooted in the attitudes of superiority that white Americans generally held toward African Americans — even those who had just risked their lives in the successful efforts of a second world war.

Robinson's donning of Dodger blue in 1947 is often called "breaking baseball's color barrier." Yet, the barriers were multiple.

In his 2007 book, *Opening Day: The Story of Jackie Robinson's First Season*, author Jonathan Eig chronicles the events as well as the significance of this so-called "test case."

"Here was a chance for one person to prove the bigots and white supremacists wrong, and to say to the nation's 14 million black Americans that the time had come for them to compete as equals," wrote Eig, quickly adding that the noble effort hinged on several "ifs."

Some variables were tied to Rickey, fellow players, fans and others. But the heaviest weight fell squarely on the strong shoulders of Robinson, whom Eig said "understood exactly what he was getting into."

Awareness didn't make the task easy, however, for the man "filled with fear and fury."

MOTIVES

The architect of this moment was widely regarded as the brightest mind and shrewdest hand to ever work in the sport. The degree to which this "experiment" was a commitment to advancing social justice as opposed to seeking a winning edge and drawing new fans for financial benefit has been debated.

Rickey possessed all of those interests. Whether revealing his heart or just strategizing, he told a secret meeting of Dodgers directors in 1943 that he wanted to pursue black players for the team to "first, win a pennant" and second because "it's right!"

Many recollections of Robinson's breakthrough include Rickey's moving account of coaching at Ohio Wesleyan where Charlie Thomas, a black player, was rejected by the team's hotel until Rickey agreed to share his room.

Later, Rickey described seeing the student athlete pulling at his dark skin — a scene that Rickey said haunted and motivated him to do something about it.

RELIGION

Robinson's story is filled with religious references — regarding himself, Rickey

and others. Born in Georgia and raised in California, Robinson had an influential and spiritual mother — a devout Methodist who modeled "cheek turning" by fighting back with kindness and taking risks she considered divinely directed.

In college Robinson was influenced by a young minister, who pushed him from the streets to teaching Sunday school. It was Robinson's disciplined lifestyle, along with his fire, that made him attractive to Rickey over more-gifted black players.

Rickey knew that the African-American community would play a role in the successful integration of baseball too. So he summoned black leaders in Brooklyn to seek their help.

In response, African-American newspaper columnists and preachers warned against bad behavior at the ballpark that resulted from drinking and cursing. The irony, of course, is that Ebbets Field never resembled Sunday school with the lighter-toned, faithful fan base often getting drunk, fighting in the stands and taunting opposing players.

However, the dress of fans — black and white — when Robinson made his debut reflected the best of Sunday mornings.

A pivotal and early part of the story came when Rickey made his one demand of Robinson before putting him on the field: never respond to the racial attacks. He used the biblical image of turning the other cheek.

But the fiery military veteran and UCLA multi-sport standout, who had played with white teammates before, heard the demand as a call to weakness and asked Rickey if he wanted a player who didn't have the guts to fight back.

Rickey replied famously that he wanted "a ballplayer with guts enough to *not* fight back." Robinson, as hard as it was for him, became that person — despite isolation and opposition, racial taunting and death threats as well as times of affirmation, encouragement and support.

Eig noted that many of the players, managers, coaches and executives of that era worked hard in later years to create a more accepting image than was displayed at the time. Such was the case with Cardinals catcher Joe Garagiola and Dodger teammate

Dixie Walker, the Alabama native and best hitter on the team — who denied leading efforts to keep Robinson off the team and then requesting a trade when the efforts failed.

LEGACY

The experiment would not have been successful if Robinson had failed to handle the pressures in a disciplined way or failed in his performance on the field. Both goals were accomplished.

On the field, Robinson was an important part of the 1947 Dodgers becoming National League champions. He was a skilled hitter, led the league in bunts and stolen bases, and was chosen Rookie of the Year by *Sporting News*.

Many people played a role in the compelling story of Jackie Robinson: his mother, his wife Rachel, the instigator Branch Rickey, supportive players such as pitcher Ralph Branca, pioneering black sports writer Wendell Smith and others.

But only Robinson, grandson of a slave, withstood the onslaught of bigotry that came with becoming the first African American to play at baseball's highest level.

After fighting many health challenges, Robinson died in 1972 at age 53, the same age at which Babe Ruth — who earlier ruled the world of all-white baseball — died in 1948, one year after Robinson took the field in Brooklyn.

Jackie Robinson changed more than uniforms 70 years ago. He changed more than the face of baseball, and the opening of doors of opportunity for other African-American players to move to the level their talents deserved.

Jackie Robinson played a significant role in changing America in its often slow pace toward living up to its highest ideals. Civil rights activist Vernon Jordan called Robinson "a trailblazer for all black people and a great spokesman for justice."

Remembering his life's work seven decades ago can continue to inspire faithfulness in the ongoing pursuit of justice — rooted in the biblical ideal of all persons being created equally in the image of God. [NFJ](#)

Questions Christians ask scientists

How have you furthered your faith through your work as a scientist?

Before answering this question, I should explain how I view the relationship between God and the cosmos. To put it simply, I think of creation as a window.

In Genesis we read that God created all things and called them very good. An artist and a work of art provide a common metaphor for this foundational Christian belief: just as an artist's thoughts and personality are revealed in a painting or a song or a poem, the cosmos reveals something of the (very good) divine nature.

This is helpful as far as it goes, but I find that it doesn't go far enough. When a human being creates a work of art and walks away from it, the meaning or significance of the painting is not affected; this is because the creation is external to its human creator and, although it continues to reveal something of the artist, the work is not diminished by the artist's absence.

The problem is that the artist is fully external to the creation, and I don't believe God is fully external to the cosmos. Instead, we and the cosmos "live and move and have our being" *in* God.

The cosmos — all of it, celestial, terrestrial, biological — is a great window, a window marked with color and life and sound and motion. God made this window in order to shine through it.

If God walks away from it, the creation may still exist in some form, but it goes dark. The colors fade, life stagnates, dynamism vanishes. That is, creation loses its beauty and vitality and meaning. (In this way the cosmos functions somewhat like an icon.)

As a scientist, I am one who explores the window. The job is to find new sections and panels and colors. The window of creation is an infinite and variegated and ever-changing thing, and exploring it has kept many people busy for thousands of years. There is no end to this exploration.

My work in science has drawn me

Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to editor@nurturingfaith.net.

BY PAUL WALLACE

closer to God because to explore the window is to see the light more clearly, or to see it in new patterns or new colors or new details. That is, to explore the window is to not only learn about the window but also about the light.

It is thrilling to glimpse a slice of the window — and its ray of light — no one has ever seen. This has happened to me twice.

My first glimpse occurred deep within a particular atomic nucleus we call phosphorous-30. Such a nucleus is a tiny buzzing jumble of protons and neutrons — 15 of each — and sits at the center of a phosphorous atom the way the sun sits at the center of the solar system. An atom itself is a vanishingly small speck, so the nucleus itself is tiny beyond comprehension.

But the swirl of protons and neutrons we call phosphorous-30 is not random; there is a fixed set of paths along which these particles can move, and there are lots of ways of arranging them on these paths within the nucleus. ("Paths" is a manner of speaking here, not a scientific concept.) What I found, as a graduate student, was a new way of arranging the protons and

neutrons on their pathways in phosphorous-30.

This discovery merited a congratulatory smile from my advisor and a few sentences in a single journal article 20 years ago. Nothing has been said about it since. It was a modest discovery and I knew it. But I was elated. It was my first time to unearth a brand new fact, to see a tiny slice of the cosmos unseen by anyone in all history.

That it was out-of-the-way and utterly peripheral to everyone else on the planet mattered not at all. I had experienced what Richard Feynman called "the pleasure of finding things out," and what I might call "the joy of seeing the light."

My second glimpse was a bigger deal and had to do with the peculiar nature of a galaxy called 3EG J2006-2321. This thing is as big as atoms are small, and as remote as atoms are near.

It resides some 10 billion light years away and is probably about 100,000 light years across (a *light year* is the distance light travels in a year, about 6 trillion miles; it is not a unit of time). It is a *gamma-ray blazar*, a rare beast, a galaxy caught in its

earliest stages of formation. More of these galaxies have been discovered since, but at the time it was important enough to merit a full journal article.

Like my phosphorous-30 discovery, my identification of 3EG J2006-2321 did not make headlines or upend any established scientific theories. But in both cases I was thrilled by the sense of having learned something no one had ever known. They were for me small but undeniable glimpses into what Stephen Hawking is fond of calling the “mind of God.”

Between these nuclear and galactic extremes, the cosmos stretches out in my imagination. As a scientist and professor, I have had the opportunity to study and teach about some of it, and my understanding of the cosmos, limited though it is, has had a profound effect on my faith. It has deepened my wonder and my gratitude for life.

Some of my happiest glimpses through the window of creation have not come while working in an official scientific capacity. They did not happen near the

extreme ends of the scale. They have not been about physics or astronomy. They were not even discoveries in the full sense of the word. That is, these findings were new to me but not to humanity. Mostly they had to do with birds.

I could tell many bird stories, but it suffices to say that birds are my constant companions. Every species has its own way of being in the world, and even individual birds have their quirks. Familiar ones attend daily to the feeders in my yard.

I live near a large creek and visit as often as possible. I take my binoculars and my field guide. Down there I know where the red-tailed hawk keeps its nest, when to expect the pileated woodpeckers to show up, and how the ruby-crowned kinglets join forces with the Carolina chickadees when they forage.

I see new species during the fall and spring migration seasons. Even quick trips to the creek make me happy. Every time, without fail, I learn something new.

I am not an expert on birds. It is easy

and fun to learn new things about them. Such glimpses through the window are open to everyone. You don't need to be a scientist to fall in love with creation and to see God shine through it.

Not that being a scientist doesn't make a difference. The most powerful lesson I have learned from science — and there may be no other way to learn it in the way I'm talking about — is that we are profoundly ignorant. The world is not finite. We have no complete knowledge of anything. In science as in life, we see through a glass darkly. No window is perfectly transparent.

And no explanation is ever complete. This is definitely true in science: every theory, no matter how successful, multiplies questions while pushing them deeper.

The cosmos is not self-explanatory. We know next to nothing about reality. Internalizing this fact leads to what I call “feelings of a small self,” that is, humility — a virtue Jesus calls us to embrace time and again. **NFJ**

"Paul Wallace is an astrophysicist who writes with magic . . ."

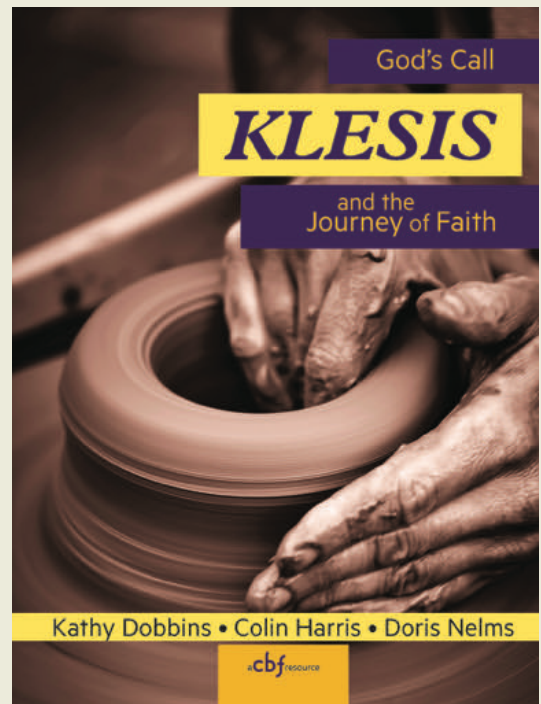
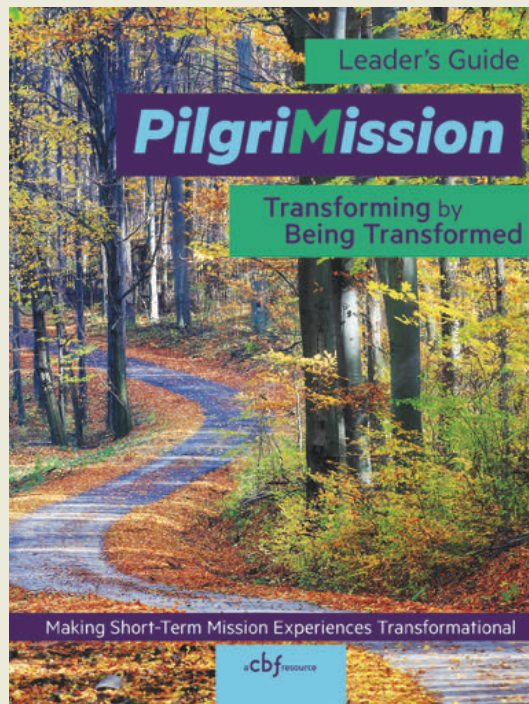
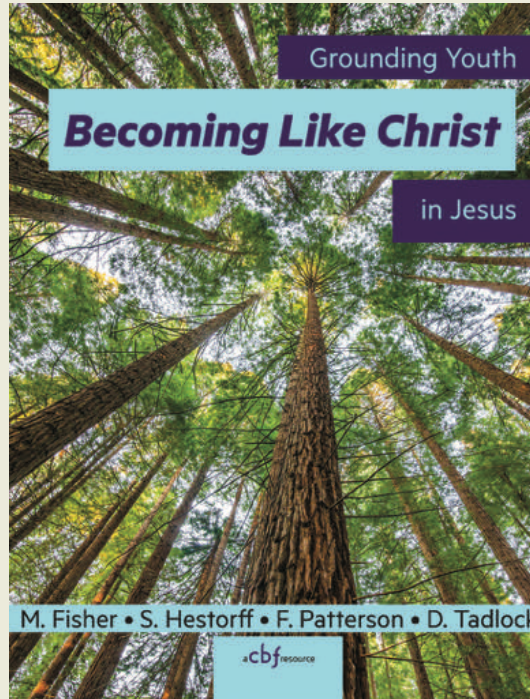
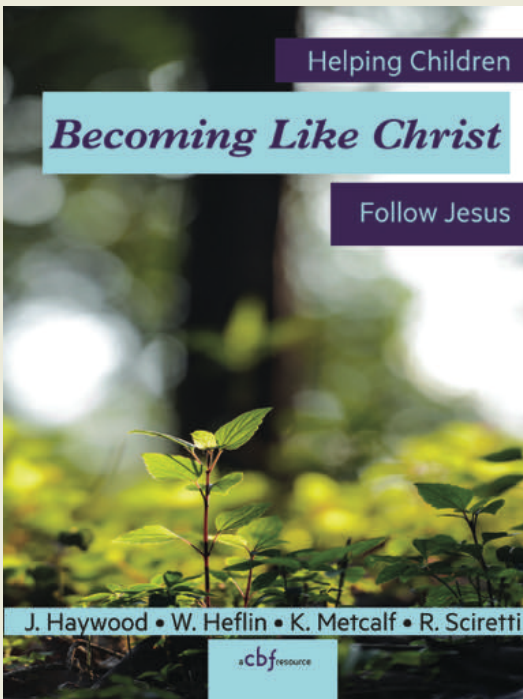
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