

JULY-AUGUST 2017

NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

Kirby Godsey
*honored,
interviewed*
nurturingfaith.net

LIVING NEIGHBORLY

*Some firsts
at First on Fifth*

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is right?**

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IS EXTRATERRESTRIAL
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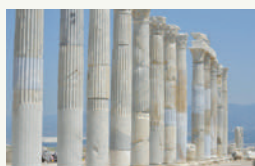


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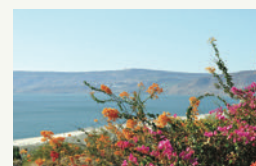
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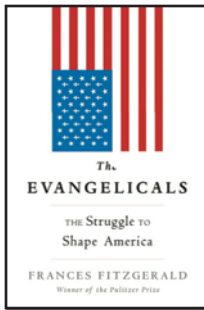
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Review by David Gushee

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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. Emily Hull McGee (left) and Amy McClure of First Baptist Church on Fifth in Winston-Salem, N.C., are among a growing number of younger women providing pastoral leadership of historic Baptist churches. **Story on page 4.**



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Living Neighborly

FACING SOME FIRSTS AT FIRST ON FIFTH

STORY AND PHOTO
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — Stately churches with rich histories find themselves in a whole new world from decades, even centuries ago. The prestige of membership and civic influence of the golden days has passed.

And, often, large configurations of aging buildings require high maintenance costs and offer more space than a congregation and its partners need. Such sobering realities may bring churches to fresh considerations — including looking to young women ministers for pastoral leadership.

Such is the case with First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, N.C., known locally as “First on Fifth.” That downtown location symbolically defines the congregation’s ministry said pastoral leaders Emily Hull McGee and Amy McClure.

TWO DOORS

The front door opens onto the downtown business community from which many of its members have long come. The back door of the massive church complex faces some of the city’s low-income housing.

“The church sits in the middle,” said Amy, a Campbell University Divinity School graduate who joined the staff in 2015 and works with children and senior adults and also provides pastoral care. “We kind of like that visual because we have all kinds of people in our church.”

The church is seeking to engage with various communities around the church facilities through an emphasis on “living neighborly.” For example, during Lent, members were encouraged to meet 40 neighbors in 40 days.

“It’s catching on,” said Emily, a third-



FOR THE CHILDREN — Cynthia Jeffries (center) directs the Children’s Center of Winston-Salem’s First Baptist Church, a weekday childcare and early education program drawing 150 children. The church’s ministers, including pastor Emily Hull McGee (left) and associate pastor Amy McClure, provide a weekly chapel service for the city’s first racially integrated childcare program.

generation Baptist minister and graduate of nearby Wake Forest University School of Divinity, of the neighborly emphasis.

She assumed the Winston-Salem pastorate in 2015, coming from Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., where she was minister to young adults. She is just the 12th pastor of the historic church founded in 1871, long before Winston merged with the neighboring town of Salem.

MATTERS

Through the search process and into her early years as pastor, Emily said she has heard one concern above all others: “A hunger for their church life to matter.”

To that end, said Emily, the church continues to discern and work toward a future that respects but doesn’t fully resemble the past, while seeking new ways to fulfill its historic mission in the city.

Because Sunday services are televised,

Emily said she is careful to use consistent and purposeful language so both the congregation and those who might tune in from around the community can grasp the church’s mission to love broadly and deeply, and to create a “flourishing church life.”

Some of that is defined by common language, she said, such as “beloved community” (used in her first sermon series) and “living neighborly.”

Coming from good Baptist ministry stock, Emily knows that the pace of change is important. But she senses the congregation being ready to carve out some new ways of being church in a changing society.

During the interim period prior to her coming, Mike Queen, retired pastor of First Baptist Church of Wilmington, N.C., warned the church that this is “not a time to be safe, but bold.” Calling a 30-something woman as pastor, said Emily, was evidence that the message was received and embraced.

ASSETS

Sometimes historic congregations that recall fuller pews and expansive building programs underestimate the less visible but important resources within. First Baptist on Fifth has much to leverage in effective and faithful ministry. Examples are plentiful.

In her pastoral care role, Amy guides a ministry program created by a generous gift left to the church by one family. It provides mental health counseling for more than 100 persons annually.

“Arts are a huge piece of the city’s identity,” said Amy, noting that the art district is just two blocks from the church. Connections are made through the congregation’s Open Doors Arts Ministry.

Among the church’s collaborative ministries is the Winston-Salem Street School, a private high school alternative based on Christian principles that guides students toward completion of their education.

Some ministries are directly connected to the church while others are independent, with church members deeply involved.

A signature ministry — seen and heard throughout the week — is the Children’s Center that serves 150 children from 8-weeks-old to preschool, with after-school programs for those up to age 12. Emily’s three children are in the faith-based, childcare program, causing her to slip around when in that portion of the building to avoid being spotted.

Founded 50 years ago, the Children’s Center was the first such program in the county to be racially integrated and continues to serve a diverse community.

One ministry, tied to a separate non-profit organization in which several First Baptist members are involved, builds ramps for persons needing easier access to their homes. Started in 2001, the volunteers completed their 1,000th ramp earlier this year.

Through these varied ministries, said Amy, “we want people in the community to know they are loved.”

The church’s four missional priorities, under which these and other ministries fall, are education, arts, poverty/hunger and hospitality.

PAST AND PRESENT

“We’re not trying to recapture the past,” said longtime member and historian Paul McCraw of First Baptist Church on Fifth in Winston-Salem. Rather, he said, the church is recovering the sensibility that strong ministerial and lay leadership work together to meet the needs of today.

The historic congregation, he noted, was long known for its worship — with excellent music and preaching — as well as a commitment to missions.

Missions, however, was largely defined by support for overseas missionaries until a shift occurred in the 1950s, influenced by American Baptist minister and theologian Harvey Cox who paid a visit.

“We became very strong in local, urban ministry,” said McCraw, “and we are recovering this now.”

SPACE

Large, sprawling buildings give the church high visibility but don’t necessarily meet the congregation’s current ministry needs. For example, said Emily, the five large gathering spaces are more than needed, while green space is limited.

So the church is taking bold steps to better align their facilities with needs and to be better stewards of resources.

“We want to show how old space can be reimagined and used to serve a purpose today,” said Emily.

One recent example was taking a former parlor that had become an underused library and renovating it into a gathering space prior to worship.

Even bigger changes are in the works. A “special committee on buildings and mission” was created to explore and propose bold moves “to align the mission of the church with its physical assets.”

Change is continually taking place at old First Baptist on Fifth, a name that distinguishes the congregation from the historic African-American First Baptist Church on Highland Avenue in Winston-Salem.



CHANGE

The church is marked by long-tenured pastorates, a sign of church health. Before the interim period and Emily’s calling, David Hughes led the church through changing times for 22 years before his retirement in 2013.

Other long-tenured pastors included H.A. Brown, beginning in 1877 and serving for 40 years; John Jester, who served from 1922–1935; and Ralph Herring, 1936–1961.

Randall Lolley was pastor from 1962 until resigning in 1974 to become president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. “Randall casts a large shadow — in a good way,” said Emily.

Some of today’s current members were married by Lolley in the church’s chapel, Emily noted, and have fond memories of those years in church life. Yet they desire for their church life to matter today in fresh new ways.

Not only does pastoral leadership look different now, she said. “Another shift has been in the behind-the-scenes way things function,” such as the work of committees and deacons.

Efforts are being made, said Emily, to “bridge the gap between older members and new families coming into the church.”

Healthy, historic congregations face rather than fear change — although risk is a natural companion of bold faith. These young pastoral leaders sense a congregation willing to embrace such uncertainty balanced by purposefulness.

“We’re learning to be OK with the unknown,” said Amy. “To lean into the unknown and follow the Spirit, rather than trying to find a formula.” **NFJ**

PHOTOS BY
BRUCE GOURLEY



PRAISE FOR CRITICS — Author and educator Kirby Godsey, during a “conversation” with editor John Pierce, recalled his retirement after 27 years as president of Mercer University when he thanked his critics for making him a better leader. “You have to realize that the people who are being critical aren’t bad people; they may be wrong, but we have to remember they are just as much people of God as we are.”

Educator, author Kirby Godsey honored, interviewed at annual Judson-Rice event



SWEET MUSIC — The Atlanta jazz ensemble, Jody Mayfield and Friends, provided beautiful and inspiring music courtesy of Johns Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Ga., hosts of the 17th annual Judson-Rice Award Dinner.

ALPHARETTA, Ga. — While Kirby Godsey is widely known for his 27 years as president of Mercer University, he is also “a poet in the stunning way he uses words, a professor in the provocative way he teaches, a preacher in the charismatic way he speaks, and a prophet in the forthright way he challenges,” said church historian Walter B. Shurden.

Shurden, retired from Mercer University, presented his tribute on behalf of the Board of Directors of Nurturing Faith/Baptists Today, Inc., at the 17th annual Judson-Rice Award Dinner, April 27, hosted by Johns Creek Baptist Church north of Atlanta.

TRIBUTE

“Kirby Godsey is an intellectual who thinks both critically and fairly,” Shurden added, and “a collegial, visionary and imaginative leader.”

Young would-be leaders, said Shurden, would do well to “save their leadership books for a rainy day and simply sit in a committee meeting [Godsey] chairs and watch carefully, listen attentively and make meticulous notes.”

Above these many gifts, Shurden added, Godsey is “a man of abundant grace and enormous generosity” and “is as good and stimulating company as one can find.”

A denominational leadership award is somewhat ill fitting, said Shurden, in that Godsey was often at odds with denominational leaders, and “I happen to know that the fewer denominational meetings he attended, the happier he was.”

Yet, Shurden gave “four of many reasons” the award named for Baptist pioneers Adoniram Judson, Ann Hasseltine Judson, and Luther Rice is appropriately given.

First, he pointed to Godsey’s advocacy of Baptist ideas such as religious liberty and freedom of conscience, saying, “He is a best friend to Baptist convictions.”

Second, Shurden commended Godsey for pulling and stretching the Baptist community to be its best self. He quoted from Godsey’s 2005 book, *Centering Our Souls*: “Baptists were not called to become one more corporate giant in neon lights; Baptists were called to be simple priests, bearers of light, a family of faith living out the reality of God’s presence in the world.”

Third, he affirmed, “we honor Dr. Godsey because of the way he urged us as Baptists to join our faith with critical and careful thought; ... he taught us that faith and learning are dear friends, not cruel enemies.”

Fourth, Shurden noted, Godsey has “quietly, sometimes clandestinely, held up the various arms of denominational life.” He particularly thanked Godsey for his support of *Nurturing Faith* (formerly *Baptists Today*) as an independent source of news and practical resources.

Director Cynthia Holmes of St. Louis, Mo., presented the Judson-Rice Award to Godsey, on behalf of the Nurturing Faith/Baptists Today Board of Directors. Following the tribute and award presentation, *Nurturing Faith* editor John Pierce conducted a “conversation” with Godsey on a range of subjects.

CRITICS

Concerning his role as “a loyal critic of the Christian church in America,” Godsey said “We should be faithful critics, but

not arrogant in our criticism — because sometimes we can be wrong in our criticism or late.”

He pointed to issues such as slavery, segregation and gay rights as times the church has been late in standing up for injustice and inequality.

When asked about the cure for what Godsey has called “the plague of certainty,” the Mercer University chancellor responded: “Faith is the cure for certainty.”

However, he acknowledged, “fear often prevents us from having faith” although “we are, first, people of faith.”

Godsey was asked how he handled harsh criticism — such as being branded a heretic by Georgia Baptist Convention representatives in 1997 and called “an unmitigated theological disaster” by one Southern Baptist leader — with remarkable grace. He shared a personal experience that puts such matters in perspective for him.

Walking out of the Baptist meeting in Perry, Ga., at which state convention representatives affirmed the heresy charge against him, Godsey said he received a call from his daughter telling him her husband had died from a brain tumor.

“I realized that you have to keep life in perspective and not to take criticism too personally,” he said. “You have to realize that the people who are being critical aren’t bad people; they may be wrong, but we have to remember they are just as much people of God as we are.”

Godsey recalled a celebration of his retirement from Mercer at which he thanked his critics. “My critics made me a better president,” he said. “They made me a better Baptist, and critics help you realize what you believe and why you believe something.”

INFLUENCES

Concerning the influencers in his life — personally, spiritually and professionally — Godsey pointed first to three women: his grandmother Janie, his mother Chloe and his wife of 58 years, Joan.

“My mother was two months pregnant with me when my father was killed in an accident,” he recalled. This created a challenge for his mother, who already had two sons, and for his grandmother who

helped raise them in rural Hackleburg, Ala. A borrowed cow provided the milk and butter they needed.

“My grandmother Janie taught me about grace,” he said. “She didn’t just talk about it; she lived it.”

“She believed that life should be defined by our hopes rather than our fears, by our dreams rather than our troubles” he said. “And my mother taught me fortitude and determination.”

He credited his wife’s influence, insights and support as being most influential in his life: “Joan Stockstill Godsey is the greatest human being I have ever known.”

Philosophically and theologically, Godsey credited Paul Tillich (for teaching him to “always look for larger language to describe God”); Alfred North Whitehead (for teaching him “that God is present in every creative event”); Martin Buber (for teaching him “that we know God best in our relationship to one another — I-Thou”); and Nels Ferré (for insights about “ultimate universal redemption”).

LEADING

Regarding leadership and strategic thinking, Godsey offered three words of advice — beginning with good listening: “Listening is perhaps the most underrated habit of a good leader.”

Second, he said, a leader has to genuinely respect those he or she is called to lead.

And, third, a leader must be willing to take a stand and make a decision.

“There’s a time to consider; there’s a time to think; and then there’s a time to decide,” he said. “Some leaders wait, hoping for the perfect decision to be made.”

“What is needed, however, is not a perfect decision,” he added. “What is needed is a good decision.”

Godsey commended *Nurturing Faith* for providing needed information and resources, saying Baptists have never needed this “voice” more so than today. He affirmed the expanding publishing ministry’s respect for religious diversity, and encouraged efforts to continually “struggle to maintain religious and intellectual freedom.”

“There is no other voice like *Nurturing Faith*,” he added. **NFJ**

Worth Repeating

“Everybody is kind of related in some way, 'cause they came from God.”

—Child’s response when asked by video company Cut to describe God (HuffPo)

“... [T]he way we treat marginalized and vulnerable people, those Jesus described as least among us, is the way we treat God.”

—Judge Wendell Griffen, pastor of New Millennium Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark. (Justice is a Verb! blog)

“If Jesus could welcome the Samaritan woman; love the rich young ruler; heal the beloved servant of a Roman centurion; and help the Syrophenician mother and her troubled little girl, then God’s way is unmistakably clear: Loving, accepting communities are of God; isolation and loneliness are not.”

—Pastor Bill Coates of First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga. (*Gainesville Times*)

“It’s a double-edged sword for the [Chinese] government. They think religion can maybe provide some stability in a society that is racing forward and doesn’t have a center of gravity. ... But religion creates values that are above any government values, ideas of justice, of righteousness, of truth and these things can come back to haunt the party.”

—Ian Johnson, author of *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao* (*USA Today*)

“Racism and racial bigotry is a gospel issue, and overcoming our human divisions in a new multi-cultural community was at the center of the vocation of the early church.”

—Jim Wallis, president of *Sojourners*

“My ‘sincerely held religious belief’ should not allow me to discriminate against others on the basis of things they cannot change. No workaround to the First Amendment and existing law is needed to solve this ‘problem,’ because it should not be a problem if we follow the Golden Rule.”

—Mark Wingfield, associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas (*Dallas Morning News*)

“New Christian dietary rules introduced by Benedictine monks around the year 1,000 forbade people from eating any four-legged animals during fasting periods. Chickens and their eggs were the perfect loophole, making chickens suddenly a far more appealing menu item.”

—Science writer Alasdair Wilkins on how Christianity contributed to the advancement of chicken dinners (*Vocativ*)

“Representing Christ means respecting the God-bestowed dignity of all human beings, and affirming the rights which are theirs by virtue of their humanity.”

—Kerry Walters, professor emeritus of philosophy at Gettysburg College (HuffPo)

“Partisan politics have no place in our pulpits. In fact, it’s the absence of that very thing — partisan politics — that gives us the power to speak with moral authority on issues of the day.”

—Suzii Paynter, executive coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (*cbfblog.com*)

“I love the church, but I also know that we can’t fix what we refuse to acknowledge.”

—Sarah Bessey, who started the trending hashtag *#ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear* (HuffPo)

“The goal is to show and to educate people about the many ways that the Bible has impacted America, not just our history but in terms of civil rights and social justice to fashion.”

—Steve Bickley, vice president of marketing for the Museum of the Bible, set to open in Washington, D.C., in November (*Fox News*)

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Why does American Christianity reflect so little of Jesus?

By John D. Pierce

Much of what is presented as Christianity in America seems way off base from what Jesus revealed as truth and life.

Some will argue with the premise, but the evidence is staggering. What gets advanced as “Christian” in America is largely defined by alignment with ideologies unrecognizable in the Gospel accounts of the one in whose name we were baptized.

This devolution of faith and practice can be traced to various points of political and theological shifting, and the eroding of basic ethical principles of truthfulness, justice, humility and compassion.

Here are three ways many expressions of American Christianity veered off track:

One: Formularizing salvation into an easy, multi-step process allowed for this shift.

Salvation became an end rather than a starting point — a “plan” rather than a journey.

For well-intended evangelistic purposes, a stop sign, rather than a yield sign, was erected at the end of the Roman Road. This formularized faith allowed for signing onto Bill Bright’s “Four Spiritual Laws,” often at the cost of Jesus’ two.

An emphasis was placed on following the precise steps that lead to verifiable faith, rather than the lifelong journey of discipleship to which Jesus called all who dared to follow. Doubt was sold as the enemy of faith.

Encapsulating the salvation experience into a neatly packaged one-and-done process produced a welcomed certainty that eliminates mystery and struggles and risks.

In doing so, the gospel was turned on its head by the very people claiming the strongest allegiance to scriptures in which

it’s contained.

This approach to salvation produced an attitude of exclusivity and arrogance: “I’ve got it right; everyone else has it wrong.”

Two: Christian ethics were redefined in purely political terms.

No more is Christ-like behavior the standard by which one is deemed Christian. Rather it is one’s unwavering support for particular political positions ginned up in recent cultural wars.

The consistent biblical calls for justice, equality and humility — voiced and demonstrated at great cost by prophets and God’s own

Son — have been squeezed out by a new, narrow ethical standard: primarily political opposition to homosexuality and abortion.

As convenient, other political positions get tossed in with these two and branded as “Christian.” Just listen to what gets cast as “the Christian” perspective in America today.

There is a left-sided political approach to Christianity, as well, but not nearly as definitive and powerful as the religious right that has turned evangelicals into a voting bloc and the so-called Christian faith into a political agenda.

Placing such political allegiance above Christ-like behavior allows for mean-spiritedness and dishonesty, excused as means on the way to a greater end. Therefore, “Christian” for many today means to ostracize and condemn the very people on the margins of life that Jesus embraced.



While baffling on the surface, this shift is understandable underneath. Just listen to what drives this brand of Americanized religion: Fear.

Fear of diversity. Fear of uncertainty. Fear that God may be unmanageable. Fear of any new light.

Compassion is the casualty of fear, although Jesus said it should be the other way around. He repeatedly said, “Fear not!” and showed compassion at every turn.

The whole prophetic tradition built on speaking truth to power and standing up for the marginalized — often at great cost — is now lost. Instead, the emphasis is on gaining toe holds in the political structure aimed at benefitting one’s own causes and gaining a prime seat at the table of power.

Three: Hard, ongoing aspects of discipleship have been traded for an affirmation of narrow doctrinal beliefs.

A restrictive, inflexible and cocksure approach to biblical doctrine has created an aura of exclusivity that portrays the kingdom of God as a clubhouse to be guarded rather than a life-giving, sacrificial way of living.

This approach equates narrow interpretations of biblical doctrine as the only authoritative embrace of the scriptures — while ignoring such hard questions as: “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?”

American Christianity is in need of salvation. If, indeed, conviction comes first: let us check the attributes associated with such religious/political perspectives as compared to the life and teachings of Jesus. It is hard to call people to Jesus if he is unrecognizable. **NFJ**

The big however

More education means less religious commitment — unless you're Christian

BY EMILY MCFARLAN MILLER

Religion News Service

It's a popular belief: The more educated a person is, the less religious he or she likely will be. And it's mostly right, according to an analysis of Pew Research Center surveys released in April.

"It's certainly our sense that, if anything, that might be the conventional wisdom that higher levels of educational attainment are linked with religiosity. That said, I am aware there are scholars, sociologists, who in recent years have begun to call that into question," said Gregory Smith, associate director for research at the Pew Research Center.

"This is our attempt to weigh in with data from the Religious Landscape Study."

American adults with higher levels of education do report lower levels of religious commitment by most measures, according to Pew's analysis.

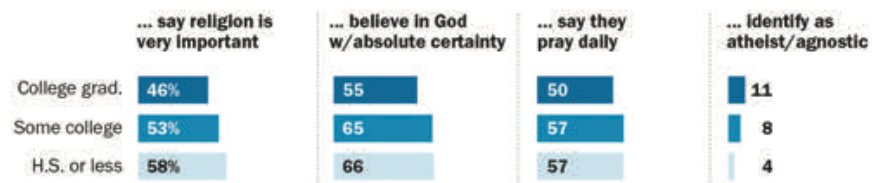
"I think the answer is, 'Well, it's complicated.' On the one hand, if you just look at the public as a whole, there's no question people with the highest levels of educational attainment tend to be less religious than those with lower levels of educational attainment," Smith said.

Fewer than half of college graduates, or 46 percent, say religion is "very important" in their lives, compared with 53 percent of those who have completed some college and 58 percent of those with no more than a high school education, according to Pew. College grads also are less likely to say they believe in God "with absolute certainty" and pray daily.

But there are exceptions. The "big however," Smith said, is that Christians — the majority (71 percent) of American

Compared with others, fewer college graduates pray regularly, say religion very important in their lives

% of U.S. adults with each level of education who ...



Source: 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. "In America, Does More Education Equal Less Religion?"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

adults — don't seem to fit the pattern at all.

Christians with higher levels of education (70 percent, combining all measures) appear to be just as religious as those with less schooling (73 percent of those with some college and 71 percent with some high school), according to the analysis. They are almost equally likely at all education levels to pray daily, attend worship services weekly and say they believe in God with absolute certainty.

In fact, highly educated Christians are most likely (52 percent) to say they are weekly churchgoers, compared with 45 percent of those with some college and

46 percent with at least some high school, according to Pew.

Fully three-quarters of college graduates still are affiliated with some religion, not much different from those with some college (76 percent) or high school (78 percent), for example, according to Pew. College graduates also report attending weekly religious services at similar rates as Americans with less education.

But more college graduates identify as atheist or agnostic: 11 percent, compared with 8 percent with some college and 4 percent of those with no more than a high school education, according to the analysis. Those aren't large numbers, but Smith pointed out that still makes college graduates almost three times as likely to identify as atheist or agnostic than those who have no more than a high school education.

While the numbers are not huge, they are statistically significant, he said. Most of the data analyzed comes from Pew's 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey of more than 35,000 Americans reached on randomly dialed cellphones and landlines. The margin of error for results based on the full sample in that survey is plus or minus 0.6 percentage points. **NFJ**



Students walk through campus at Gordon College during the spring of 2016. Photo by Mark Spooner, courtesy of Gordon College

Philosopher who argued for God wins Templeton Prize

BY CHRIS HERLINGER

Religion News Service

American scholar Alvin Plantinga, a pioneering advocate for theism, or belief in God, as a serious philosophical position within academic circles, was named the winner of the 2017 Templeton Prize.

Plantinga, 84, a retired professor at the University of Notre Dame, won the award for revolutionizing “the way we think,” said Heather Templeton Dill, president of the John Templeton Foundation, which awards the annual prize.

“Alvin Plantinga recognized that not only did religious belief not conflict with serious philosophical work, but that it could make crucial contributions to addressing perennial problems in philosophy,” said Dill, announcing the award.

Because of Plantinga’s influence, it is no longer unusual for philosophy professors to bring their religious commitments to bear on their work, whether they be Buddhist, Jewish or Muslim, the Templeton

Foundation’s statement said.

Until Plantinga, many philosophers viewed theistic belief as logically incompatible with the reality of evil. Countering that, Plantinga, whose own religious tradition is Dutch Christian Reformed, argued that, “in a world with free creatures, God cannot determine their behavior, so even an omnipotent God might not be able to create a world where all creatures will always freely choose to do good,” the announcement said.

Plantinga’s landmark 1974 *God, Freedom, and Evil* is now “almost universally recognized as having laid to rest the logical problem of evil against theism,” the foundation noted.

In a statement, Plantinga, who taught at the University of Notre Dame for 18 years until retiring in 2010, struck a modest note, saying that if his work played a role

in transforming the field of philosophy, he “would be very pleased.”

“I hope the news of the prize will encourage young philosophers, especially those who bring Christian and theistic perspectives to bear on their work, towards greater creativity, integrity, and boldness,” Plantinga said.

The Templeton Prize, worth about \$1.4 million, was established in 1972 by the late investor and philanthropist Sir John Templeton. It is one of the world’s largest awarded to a single individual and “honors a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life’s spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works,” according to the foundation, which is based in West Conshohocken, Pa.

Previous Templeton winners have included Mother Teresa, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The 2016 Templeton laureate was Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth. **NFJ**



The Bible – helpful, but not read much

BY ADELLE M. BANKS

Religion News Service

The Bible may be a source of wisdom for many Americans, but most don’t read it for themselves, a new survey shows. More than half have read little or none of it, reports LifeWay Research.

“Even among worship attendees, less than half read the Bible daily,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of the evangelical research firm based in Nashville, Tenn.

The survey of 1,000 people found

disparate approaches to the Christian Scriptures. For instance, Northeasterners are less likely to give it a look than people in other regions. And men are less inclined than women to pick it up.

One in 5 Americans have read the entire Bible at least once — including 9 percent who have read it through multiple times. Just over half (53 percent) have read relatively little of it, and 1 in 10 haven’t read it at all.

Researchers found that Americans tend to view the Bible positively, with half (52 percent) saying it is a good source for

morals. More than a third say it is helpful today (37 percent), true (36 percent) or life-changing (35 percent). And far fewer say it is outdated (14 percent), bigoted (8 percent) or harmful (7 percent).

So why don’t people read the Bible? They:

- Don’t prioritize it (27 percent).
- Don’t have time (15 percent).
- Have read it enough (13 percent).
- Disagree with what it says (10 percent).
- Don’t read books (9 percent).
- Don’t see how it relates to them (9 percent).
- Don’t have one (6 percent). **NFJ**

Hospitality in unexpected places

BY DEVIN HARRIS-DAVIS

Nine months before my wedding day, I found myself in a housing dilemma. The lease on my apartment was ending, my roommates were dispersing, and I worked at a nonprofit with a salary too modest to afford housing on my own.

Fortunately, I knew that a professor from my alma mater, Georgetown College, had housed several recent graduates in his family home during periods of transition. I nervously approached him and his wife to ask for a temporary room in their household. We met for dinner to discuss the details, and they invited me into their home for those nine months.

The day I arrived, with boxes and furniture in tow, they told me that they were expecting a baby to be born toward the end of my stay. Even though their lives were about to change with the birth of a second daughter, they assured me that space was plentiful.

It became quickly evident that this act of hospitality extended beyond space and into their lives. We shared a living room, dining room and kitchen, but more. We shared meals and conversations. I shared wedding plans and details of our move following the wedding. They shared stories of doctor appointments and encounters with neighbors. Their lifestyle encouraged me to live sacramentally, finding the beauty in life's little moments shared in community.

Life under the same roof has its occasional challenges. We exercised patience as we maneuvered around each other in their small kitchen. We rearranged cabinet storage to make room for everyone's groceries, and we spent many nights tip-toeing around the house to avoid waking a sleeping child. The pouring out and receiving of grace are necessary in order to live alongside others, especially in close quarters.

To this day, the five of us, including my husband, share a friendship. We go to their house for potluck meals and spend time

catching up. I keep their younger daughter while her mother works on freelance projects.

Those nine months had a great impact on my life and my way of understanding community. Even more important, those months were an incredible depiction of hospitality as exemplified through the compassion of Christ Jesus.

Years later I find myself experiencing hospitality in a new context. In 2015 I was asked to serve on the board of Scott County Hospitality House (SCHH) in Georgetown, Ky. SCHH provides a transitional home for women and children working toward financial stability.

The home contains laughter, tears, hopes and dreams. Friendships have begun and flourished as families find a new, sustainable normal. Our social enterprise, Makin' It, in which we make and sell candles for our mission, leads to time spent pouring wax over life conversations. After months of hard work and intensive community, residents are celebrated through a graduation service attended by staff, volunteers and friends.

Hospitality is poured out through the support of our community, but also found in the daily running of the house. Women and children are doing life together, alongside our dedicated staff and generous volunteers. The gospel story is lived out through care and love for the other who has become neighbor.

One resident blossomed from an already impressive, creative person into one who knew her own potential. Her face lit up as she volunteered at the church next door, where she helped community members find warm clothing in the middle of the cold, Kentucky winter.

Though I was unable to attend her graduation ceremony, I heard of the

inspiring words spoken by other volunteers, residents and staff. My husband shared those same sentiments after helping her move some belongings to her new apartment.

My role in this organization is unique. In the non-profit sector, resources are limited and staff members often wear thinly veiled looks of exhaustion. Ministry, whether in a congregation or a nonprofit, is far more sustainable if the staff receives care, too.

I work alongside the three women on staff who take care of the daily responsibilities, from grant writing to case management to candle making. I serve as a sounding board when days are tough. I roll up my sleeves when candle orders are overwhelming. And I celebrate when we receive word of additional grant funding.

Transformation in the house is not without pain and struggle. Ministry certainly has its shadow side burdened by loss, grief and failure. In places of hospitality there are also broken dishes and hardened words.

While many residents emerge from the program having found stability, there are some whose life patterns are difficult to escape. When a resident leaves the program prior to graduation, everyone involved in the community feels the loss.

Vulnerability in sharing a home with others allows you to experience some of life's greatest joys, but it also opens you up to experiencing the pain of unfulfilled expectations. Our community is journeying together through both the excitement and the disappointment.

I find hospitality in practice here, in the grain of a wax-laden table, in the dirty dishes that fill the sink, in the flowers in the yard planted by our biggest supporters. There is hospitality here, just as I found it when a home was first extended to me in my time of need. **NFJ**

—Devin Harris-Davis is a student at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky in Georgetown, Ky.



BEING CHURCH IN CHANGING TIMES

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

Learning to navigate diversity

Barry Howard

One of the most enriching and fatiguing things about church life these days is the vast diversity within most local congregations.

Here are 10 areas of church ministry that illustrate this proliferation of diversity:

- **Generational diversity:** There are now four to six generations present on any given Sunday in many multi-generational churches.
- **Translation diversity:** Members of our congregation read a variety of Bible translations, and I am sure there are a dozen or more different translations present each time I preach.
- **Racial and ethnic diversity:** There are multiple races, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds present within most congregations.
- **Worship time diversity:** Many churches have multiple worship services.
- **Worship style diversity:** Our church has two Sunday morning worship services, each involving a different style of worship.
- **Curriculum diversity:** Rather than a standard denominational literature, our church uses multiple curricula in Sunday school and Bible study groups.
- **Missional partnership diversity:** Rather than having a singular missional partnership, many of our churches contribute to and network with multiple mission partners.
- **Denominational background diversity:** Unlike years ago when most new members came from another Baptist church, today there are persons from various denominational traditions represented in our congregation.
- **Political diversity:** Whereas in my first church the congregation seemed to be pretty evenly divided between the two primary political parties, today congre-

gants may be affiliated with political parties, subsidiary groups within each party, PACS and lobbying groups.

- **Theological diversity:** Multiple strands of theological influence, from both academic and folk theology, are represented in the DNA of most local congregations.

Unfortunately, there was no course offered in seminary on “Navigating diversity.” Churches basically are going to do one of two things in regards to diversity.

They will either limit diversity, by becoming a highly specialized and homogenized church. For example, they will focus on ministry to one or two generations, allow “only” one Bible translation, or promote only one theological perspective. Or, they will embrace their diversity and leverage it for kingdom purposes.

Does this expanded diversity have a positive or negative effect on a congregation? I think it depends on how ministers and ministry leaders circumnavigate the diversity.

From a potentially negative perspective, there are many ways diversity makes ministry more challenging:

- It becomes more challenging to communicate across diverse platforms.
- Planning a program of discipleship, ministry initiatives or activities for a diverse congregation can become cumbersome.
- Navigating the tension created by extraordinary diversity can weary the staff.
- The greater the diversity, the greater the potential for conflict.

But from a positive perspective, a high level of diversity provides many kingdom opportunities and benefits:

- Those in a diverse congregation learn to respect varying points of view.
- Multiple generations, ethnicities and spiritual backgrounds tend to provide multiple perspectives that enrich the overall ministry of the church.
- If a diverse congregation is diligent “to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace” (Eph. 4:3), that congregation can be a powerful witness to the transformative power of the gospel.
- A diverse congregation usually is composed of diverse spiritual gifts, talents and skill sets.
- A highly diverse congregation is a vivid picture of the diversity of God’s universal family.

Congregations are more diverse today than at any point in their history. And indications are that diversity will increase exponentially. To effectively navigate diversity, it is imperative for any church, especially a highly diverse congregation, to share a common commitment to following Jesus, to look to the Bible as their spiritual compass, and to covenant to engage in worship and ministry in a sphere of mutual respect.

Ministers and church leaders are discovering that negotiating and arbitrating diversity in a “big tent church” is highly demanding, a task requiring non-partisan pastoral guidance.

However, churches that embrace their diversity and learn to navigate it wisely may discover their diversity to be a wellspring of kingdom potential. **NFJ**

—Barry Howard is pastor of the First Baptist Church in Pensacola, Fla.



Religion and our nation's unrest

By G. Todd Wilson

Much unrest in our country today has to do with religion. When our nation was founded some people wanted to make the U.S. a Christian nation (Protestant and white in nature), but the founding fathers decided on a secular state with guarantees of religious freedom and without religious tests.

The nation did not pursue a strict separation, however, and there was a fair amount of intermingling such as chaplains and prayers in Congress, oaths in courts, and prayers and Bible readings in schools. From the beginning the U.S. has lived in the tension of some seeing the nation in a special relationship with God and others focusing on the free exercise of religion.

Most would agree that Christianity has been an important part of upholding America's moral and political health. Yet the nation has struggled when the majority has faced other religious traditions.

When Catholics came to the U.S. in considerable numbers in the 1850s, many U.S. citizens felt that the hierarchical structure of the church threatened our American experiment. This did not abate until the election of John Kennedy as president.

By the 1950s, thinking progressed to the point that Will Herberg suggested the faith community consisted of Protestant-Catholic-Jew. Still, white Protestants remained the most visible face of American religion and would do so for the first two-thirds of the 20th century.

Beginning in the 1970s two factors marked a significant change. In addition

to lower birth rates among white Americans there was considerable immigration from Asia, bringing more ethnic, racial and religious (Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.) minorities. The other critical factor is the increasing number of religiously unaffiliated young whites who now comprise one in five Americans.

Earlier, southern evangelical churches in particular supported slavery — quoting chapter and verse from the Bible. Then many of them supported the Jim Crow laws and opposed the Civil Rights Movement. They also opposed women's rights and now oppose gay rights.

Surveys suggest the top three attributes young Americans associate with religion are anti-gay, judgmental and hypocritical. Ironically, every major moral advance has been led by people of faith, but the last place of resistance has been in churches.

There is also an economic factor to the current unrest. With globalization and technological developments, less-educated whites in particular are concerned about competition for jobs. Still, studies show the real concern is more cultural than economic.

Immigration, terrorism, abortion and gay rights are seen as threats to our country's way of life. As a result, a rising nationalism — that thrives on xenophobia — is challenging globalization.

What used to be a fairly homogeneous society is now quite diverse. This is disturbing to many who think America's moral and spiritual core is being lost.



Anxious about the loss of the old order and the emergence of the new one, they see themselves struggling for survival in a post-Christian society and fear a loss of identity.

In a sense we are testing what it means to be an American and how religion fits into that. We have never faced such diversity as we do now, so we are struggling.

Candidly, some Christians believe it would betray their faith to be inclusive. Also, studies show little substance to the faith of many contemporary churchgoers. Theirs is a blend of American nationalism and generic ethics, more of a civil religion.

Shallow faith is simply not strong enough to deal with the challenges of such a diverse culture. Therefore, many fight for a more restrictive understanding of the American family and desperately want cultural and governmental sanction of their beliefs.

There is hope that others can lead the way in tolerance, humility and respect. What is crucial is that we get to know one another and learn there are very good people who hold different perspectives.

With the Internet and social media cutting down on personal communication, we are in danger of becoming a society of strangers. Yet when we take the time to get to know one another, we learn that the other is not to be feared.

Theologian Hans Küng was correct that peace among religions is essential to peace among nations. We can demonstrate that in our homeland, overcome our division and be at peace. Then we really can be a beacon of light and an instrument to bring peace to all nations. **NFJ**

—Todd Wilson is retired from the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Clemson, S.C.

Worldwide restrictions on religion increased, study shows

BY EMILY MCFARLAN MILLER
Religion News Service

The number of countries with “high levels” of restrictions on religion due to government policies or actions of people increased in 2015, reversing a downward trend, according to a new study.

A total of 40 percent of surveyed countries registered “high” or “very high” levels of overall restrictions, according to Pew Research Center’s annual study on global restrictions on religion, released in April. That’s up from 34 percent in 2014, according to the data.

The percentage had declined during the previous two years, tumbling from 43 percent in 2012 to 39 percent in 2013, according to Katayoun Kishi, the primary researcher on the study.

Of the 198 countries Pew surveyed, 25 percent reported “high” or “very high” levels of government restriction, up just slightly from 24 percent in 2014. And 27 percent reported “high” or “very high” numbers

of acts of religious hostility by individuals, organizations or groups, a jump from 23 percent in 2014, according to the data.

That happened in a year when European countries welcomed an increasing number of refugees, religion-related terror attacks rocked France and people with albinism were targeted for rituals by witch doctors in sub-Saharan Africa, the report said.

Kishi said it’s too soon to tell if the increase is a blip or a trend.

Of the five regions surveyed by Pew, the Middle East-North Africa region had the highest percentage of countries registering government harassment or use of force against religious groups: 95 percent.

But Europe saw the largest increase, with 53 percent of the countries in the region experiencing an uptick in government harassment or force between 2014 and 2015. It came in second to the Middle East-North Africa with 89 percent of European countries experiencing harassment or force, according to Pew.

Some of those instances in Europe

could be linked to the influx of refugees to the region, according to Pew.

The number of people seeking asylum in Europe nearly doubled in 2015, reaching 1.3 million migrants. Of those, more than half were from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, where the majority of the populations are Muslim, and Kishi noted some European public officials made the assumption most refugees also were Muslim.

The uptick came as Europe experienced several religion-related terror attacks, such as the shooting at the offices of Charlie Hebdo and the shootings and bombings at the Bataclan concert hall and across Paris, attacks later claimed by ISIS.

Overall, Egypt had the highest levels of government restrictions on religion in 2015, and Nigeria, the most social hostilities toward it.

Pew’s eighth study of global restrictions on religion rates 198 countries using two 10-point indexes, the Government Restrictions Index and the Social Hostilities Index. **NFJ**.

U.S. commission: Russia a major violator of religious freedom

BY LAUREN MARKOE
Religion News Service

The State Department should add Russia to its list of the worst violators of religious freedom, a U.S. commission declared in its annual report.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, founded to advise the federal government on the issue, comes out with its own list of shame each year, citing the most abusive countries in a lineup consistently longer than the State Department’s.

This year, the USCIRF report included a dissenting report from its vice chair criticizing the commission for failing to investigate Israel.

In April, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. designate Russia as a “country of particular concern,” for

wielding an anti-extremist law to violate the religious freedom of Muslims and other minorities. Most recently, Russia banned Jehovah’s Witnesses, labeling them “extremist” and ordering the state to seize their properties.

“They’re treating these people like they’re terrorists,” said Tom Reese, a Jesuit priest who chairs USCIRF, referring to Russia’s treatment of the Witnesses. Globally, “the commission has concluded that the state of affairs for international religious freedom is worsening in both the depth and breadth of violations,” Reese said.

USCIRF’s list this year differs from its 2016 list with the addition of Russia, but also the dropping of Egypt and Iraq, a move that may surprise some given continuing deadly attacks on Christians in those countries. But Reese said that

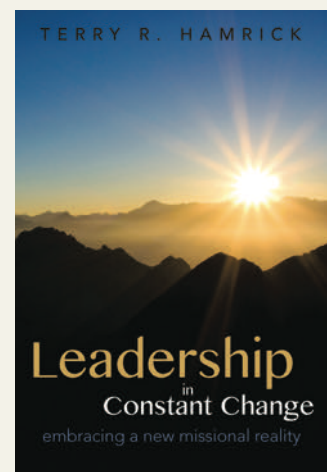
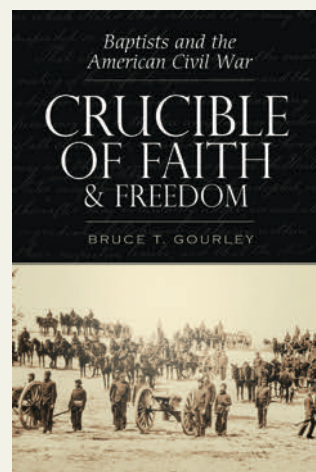
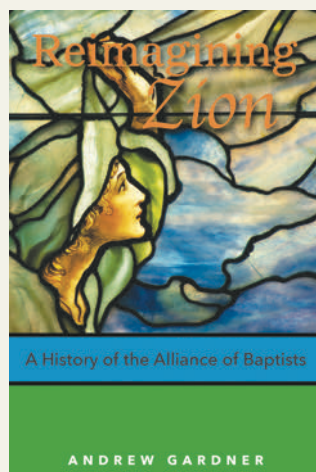
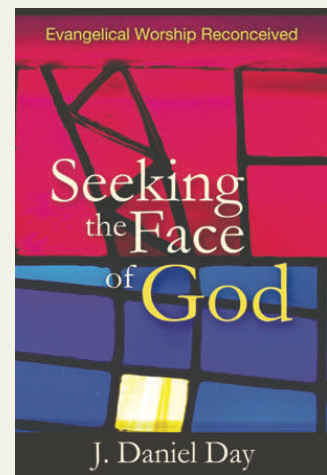
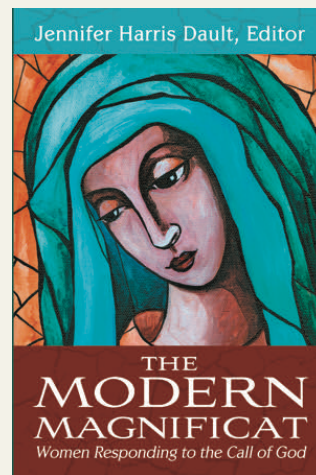
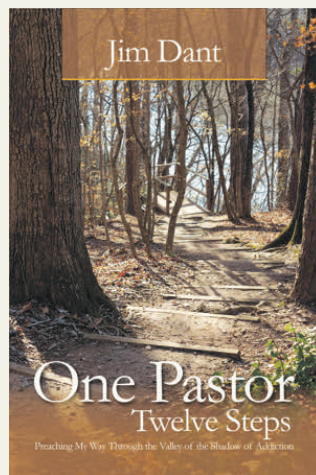
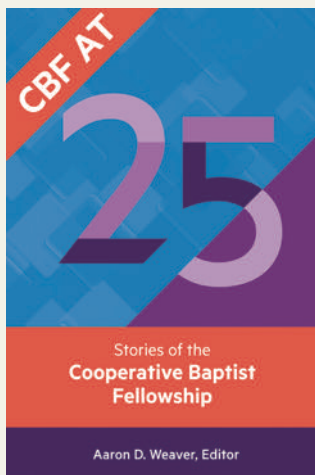
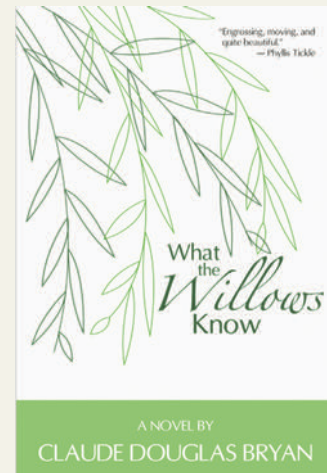
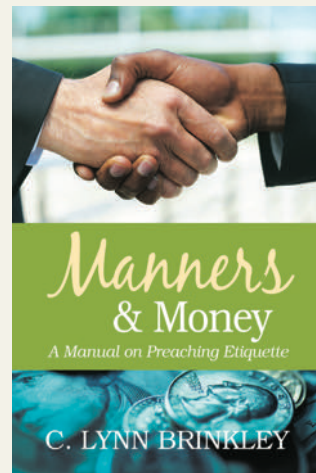
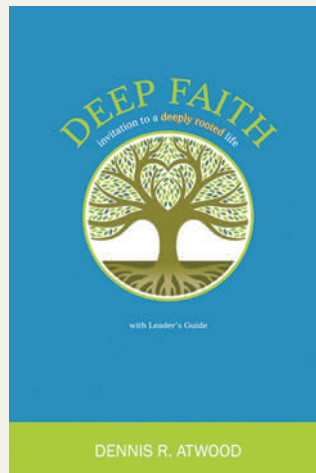
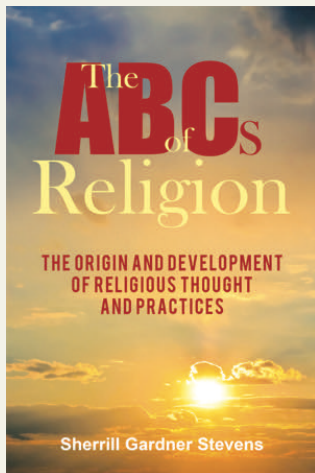
while violence against Christians in those nations remains a horrific problem, the commission wanted to highlight the concrete steps that both governments have taken to protect religious minorities.

Still, Egypt and Iraq are on USCIRF’s list of “Tier 2” countries, which are considered violators of religious freedom, but not as problematic as the CPCs.

These 16 countries are on USCIRF’s 2017 list of CPCs: Burma, Central African Republic, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

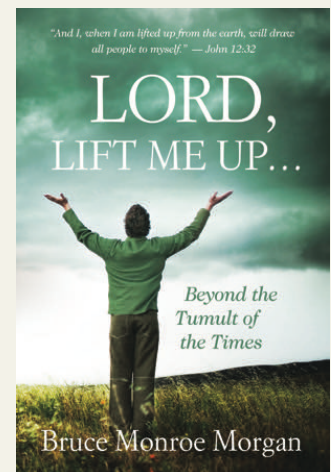
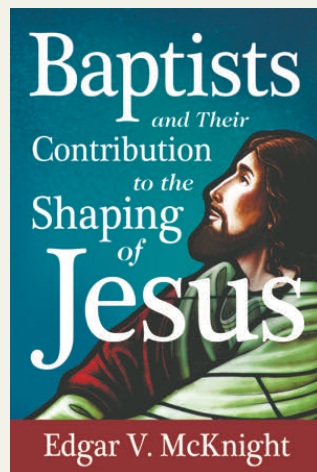
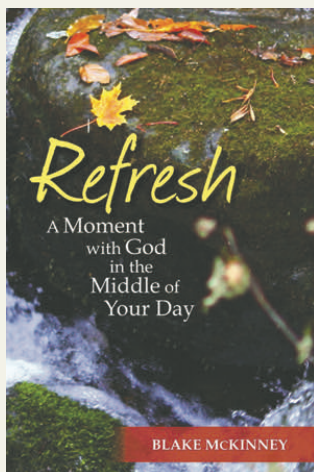
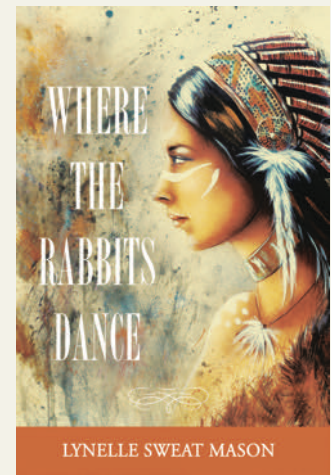
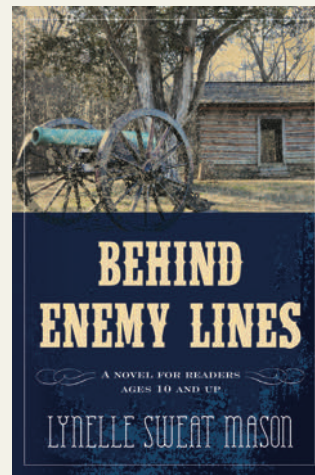
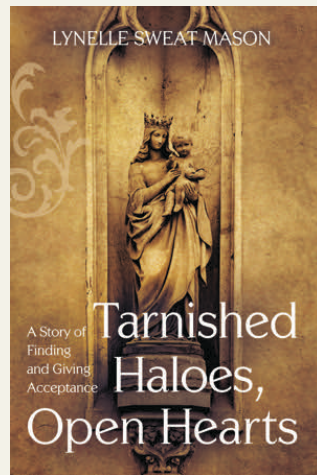
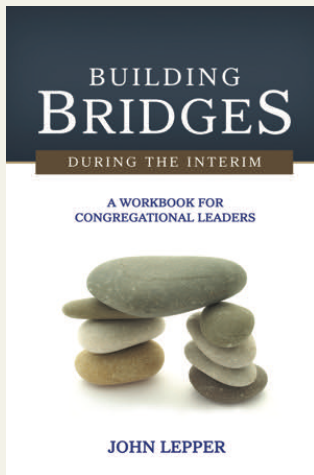
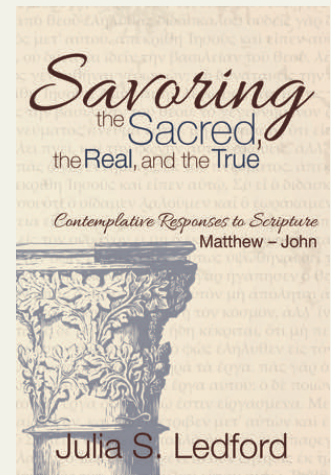
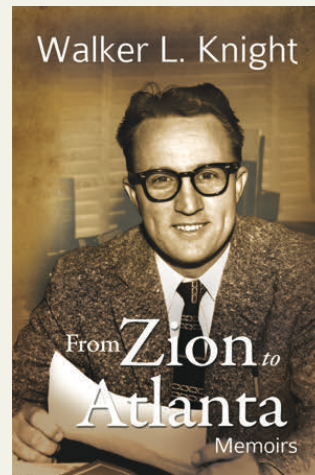
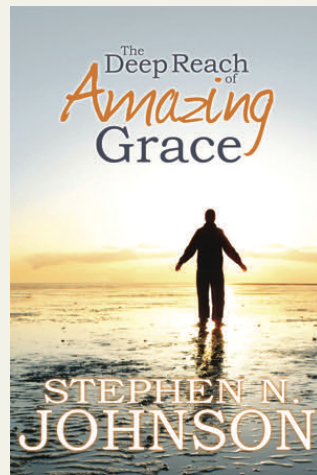
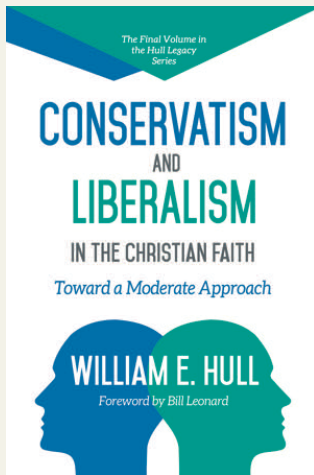
The 10 countries on the State Department’s list of prime religious freedom offenders, designated in 2016, are: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. **NFJ**

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One Faith, Many Voices

By John R. Franke

In the letter to the Ephesians, the church is urged to “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” because there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

At the same time, the story of the manifestation of the Spirit at Pentecost found in the Acts of the Apostles reminds us that the one faith is expressed in many voices.

In relating these many voices to the one faith of the church, we turn to the metaphor of the church as a body provided in chapter 12 of Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth.

Here we read that the Spirit is at work forming one body, one church out of many parts in which a diversity of gifts are given for the edification of the whole church:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (vv. 4-7, NRSV).

The many voices of the Christian faith represent the work of the Spirit in enabling the church to bear witness to the kingdom of God, with each one providing particular understandings on behalf of the whole for the edification of the whole in witness to one common Lord.

In addition, the various voices in the church are interdependent. They need

each other. They cannot fulfill the mission to which they are called apart from their relation to the whole, for no single voice can comprehend or say all that needs to be said. Hence, none of the voices in the church is independent of the rest.

The perspectives and theological insights of one segment of the church are intended for the benefit and edification of the whole, but none of these are adequate for all times and places.

This serves as another caution against the temptation of a universal theology. In learning from the voices of various theological traditions and perspectives and acknowledging the significant contributions of each, all theologies and traditions of reflection are enriched.

The contextual and situated character of any single perspective points to the need for a plurality of voices in the task of bearing witness to the one faith. No single voice will be adequate to account for the diversity of the biblical witness and the traditions that have emerged in Christian history.

In fact, the exclusive reliance on one voice in the articulation of the gospel of Jesus Christ will lead to a distortion of the one faith. Faithful witness requires a diversity of voices in relationship to each other. All voices must be expressed and heard, if the church is to bear witness to the kingdom of God that is good news for all people.

This poses a particular challenge for those who represent the dominant streams of theological reflection because of the

power differential that exists between these traditions and those outside of the dominant streams.

In order to promote the Spirit-guided flourishing of the many voices in the church, those with power must be willing to make use of it in such a way that enables other voices to be expressed and heard in the life of the church.

While the task of decentering the dominant voices and traditions in the church will be difficult and often painful to those who have been formed and privileged by them, such a process is necessary for the witness of the church to the character of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For the sake of the gospel and the community called to bear living witness to it, we must in humility consider the interests and concerns of others before our own in keeping with the example of the Lord of the church, “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil. 2:6-8).

That this is a matter of utmost importance for the witness of the gospel stems from the fact that the multiplicity of voices in the church is not simply a fact but is also the Spirit-led intention of God.

We cannot bear witness to the one faith alone. We were never intended to do so. We need each other. It cannot be otherwise. We are called to bear the image of the triune God. **NFJ**

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



The surprise in answering a call

By Allison Kennedy Owen

Some pretty key biblical figures got called to do very specific things at specific times. Mary was called to be no less than Jesus' mother. Moses was summoned to lead the Jewish people to the Promised Land. Samuel became a prophet for Israel.

We are all called — maybe not to do such Herculean tasks, but to do certain things at a specific time and place.

In 1996 I went to an Episcopal seminary. At the time I didn't feel called to be anything but a newspaper journalist. However, I sought to ground my words through further scholarship.

I was surrounded by people who would eventually become Episcopal priests. Some joked that they wanted a bishop to ordain me in the middle of the night, e.g., in secret. I'd laugh and brush them off.

Fast forward to 2011 when I took a "unit" (similar to a semester) of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at St. Francis Hospital in Columbus, Ga. By that time I had been on the religion beat for 13 years at the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*.

I knew from my seminary friends that CPE reveals your psychosocial and spiritual "hot buttons" as you walk alongside suffering people and also provides regular feedback from a trained supervisor and your peers.

From that rich experience I gained more training in a CPE residency at the same hospital, and left journalism. I became a hospice chaplain in 2012 and, over time, a call to ordination brewed.

I thought I might serve as an ordained person, both inside and outside the church walls. I went through a rigorous "discernment" process in 2014. At the end of it an Episcopal bishop has the prerogative to accept the people he/she wants, and I was not one of them.

A few months later my husband and I joined a church in a neighboring diocese

for the purpose of starting over; but after a year of worshiping and healing, I realized I couldn't go forward with the long and rigorous process. The main reason was an increased workload at my job.

So I went to talk with Jimmy Elder, pastor of First Baptist Church of Columbus. After I confided all I'd been through, he said: "You know, we don't do it that way." And I said: "Yes. That's why I've come to see you."

I had met Jimmy as I was about to leave Augusta, Ga., to go to seminary. He was serving a church in nearby Thomson at the time, and I had interviewed him for the newspaper.

We reconnected in the early 2000s, when I was at the Columbus paper and he was called to First Baptist. We enjoyed a good professional relationship, then kept up with one another during hospital rounds or as he saw parishioners at Columbus Hospice.

I admire Jimmy for many reasons, but a main one is his dedication to visiting the sick and suffering. He takes pastoral care very seriously.

In 2016 I joined First Baptist of Columbus, and was ordained there on Jan. 29, 2017. It was a glorious night of bringing

many faith communities together. Imagine the joy of having most of your favorite people under one roof.

My CPE supervisor, Sam Naidoo, flew in from Texas. Tim Owings, former pastor of First Baptist Augusta, played a stunning piano piece, during which my tears started. A former Lutheran pastor in Columbus, now serving in Atlanta, surprised me by showing up.

Many Episcopalians worshiped with us, including my first priest from Augusta and his wife; and three friends who are Catholic nuns — one of whom is my spiritual director.

In my work in religion reporting I have written about many persons representing many faiths. In my work as a hospice chaplain I come in contact with persons of all faiths, and no faith. It runs the gamut.

As I said in the ordination service, our denominational loyalties are true and real. I don't take away from any of that, nor from my many wonderful years in the Episcopal Church. Everything is formational. But when you get down to it, denominational labels must be carried lightly enough to answer a call of love. **NFJ**

—Allison Kennedy Owen is a chaplain at Columbus Hospice in Columbus, Ga. She is married to Michael Owen. They have two spoiled cats, Bisquick and Smokey.



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Protestant confession

By Brett Younger

Theologians who think Protestants do not confess sins are not paying attention. Inattentive historians mistakenly believe that Protestants stopped doing penitence during the Reformation.

They are right that Protestant churches are more likely to have a photo booth than a confessional booth. Pastors do not declare absolution for juicy sins, because church members do not tell their minister juicy sins. Protestant children do not memorize John 20:23: “Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.”

What casual observers miss is that Protestants have their own way of confession. We confess not to, but for one another. We do not need the grille that separates the priest from the penitent, because we confess face to face and in groups. We confess by proxy. We confess for those who are not present.

The priesthood of the believers is at work when Protestants act not only as priests hearing confessions, but also as sinners who should be confessing. Protestants offer the confessions that others are not ready to make.

We confess lust: “James would get in trouble if he was better looking.”

We confess sloth: “Michael knows everything there is to know about daytime television.”

We confess dishonesty: “Susan finds the truth uninteresting.”

We confess intemperance: “Why do you think bourbon is the main ingredient in Linda’s pecan pie?”

We confess anger: “Barbara and James are fighting again. James’ third wife is laughing.”

Private sins go public in prayer groups. If you can’t say something nice, make it sound like a prayer request: “We need to pray for Robert to lose 20 pounds, or we are



going to lose Robert.”

One of the few sins we don’t confess is gossip, because we confess others’ sins as a public service. We share in the interest of greater understanding.

I am curious how non-Protestants experience confession, so I asked a Roman Catholic priest to hear my confession. We were both surprised by this request.

He asked, “Do you want to have a conversation about confession?”

“No, I want to confess my sins. I want you to do the priest thing. My knowledge is limited to television shows about priests, but I think I start with a list of my sins.”

“Don’t try to list everything you’ve done wrong. That doesn’t work.”

This was reassuring, as I had no interest in counting how many of the Ten Commandments I had broken.

“Open your heart and see what bubbles up to the top. What’s getting in the way of

following Christ?”

We sat there — we were in his office, so I didn’t get a kneeler — while I waited for my heart to bubble. I do not have what many think of as big sins — no murder, no adultery, and no sorcery. I do have my share of hypocrisy, greed, and jealousy from which to choose.

After a minute that seemed longer I said, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I can’t say how long it’s been since my last confession since this is my first confession. Does that sound right?”

“Close enough.”

“Here’s my confession: I believe that God loves all people, but I love the people who love me. I covet applause and get defensive pretty fast. If someone doesn’t think much of me, then I just try to tolerate them. I am polite, but I care less for people who don’t care for me. I know that God’s grace is for everyone, but I pick who I love.”

My priest said, “That is a serious sin, but I know exactly what your penance should be.”

I thought I was about to be instructed to say 10 “Our Fathers” or have to learn what comes after “Hail Mary, full of grace.” What he told me to do was much harder: “Your penance is that you have to love them. Will you do that?”

“I will pray to do that. I will ask God’s help. I will learn to love them.”

He spoke the words of absolution: “Through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace. I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

I am a Protestant who needs to take my sins and God’s grace more seriously. **NFJ**

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



LESSONS FOR
JULY / AUGUST 2017

BIBLE STUDIES



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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- > The updated Nurturing Faith web site (nurturingfaith.net) provides a fresh look and easy access to the Teaching Resources to support these Weekly Lessons. Subscribers may log into the online resources (video overview, lesson plans, Digging Deeper, Hardest Question) by using the password.
- > Simply click the “Teachers” button in the orange bar at the very top of the homepage. This will take you to where you enter the July password (**nurture**) or the August password (**Bible**) and access the Teaching Resources. You will find the current password on page 21 (this page) in each issue of the journal for use by subscribers only.



Adult teaching plans by **David Woody**, Minister of Faith Development at Providence Baptist Church in Charleston, S.C., are available at nurturingfaith.net



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Thanks, sponsors! These Bible studies for adults and youth are sponsored through generous gifts from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (Bo Prosser, Coordinator of Organizational Relationships) and from the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation. Thank you!

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 2, 2017

Genesis 22:1-14

The Closest Call

Can you imagine being asked to bind your only child, lay him on an altar, slice his throat, and light a fire beneath him? The very thought is horrifying beyond measure. Yet, the Bible insists that God asked Abraham to do that very thing – as a test – to determine if he was truly faithful and worthy of the blessing God had already promised several times before. ↓

As it has come down to us, the story is both warmly touching and deeply troubling. It speaks of confident faith on the part of Abraham and Isaac: Abraham trusts God, and Isaac trusts Abraham. Yet, such testing seems abusive. Would God command a father who had waited 100 years for a son to take that beloved child and return him to God as a burnt sacrifice? ↓

While modern readers can certainly debate whether they believe God would have asked such a thing, the biblical writer had no doubt, and we must deal with the story from his perspective. ↓

Note how the writer masterfully evokes deep emotion without using a single word of feeling. He never speaks of fear, or pain, or heartache, or conflicting emotions – and yet the artful and often repetitive arrangement of actions and words grabs the reader's heart, and squeezes. ↓

Genesis 22:12 –

“He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’”

A terrifying test (vv. 1-8)

The story begins with a horrifying demand. The narrator knows it is a test, and the reader knows (v. 1), but Abraham knows only that God has told him to “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on the mountain that I shall show you” (v. 2).

How could Abraham not protest? Why is there no questioning? Could anyone truly trust God so ardently that he or she would slaughter a child with no word of complaint?

The author presents Abraham as an icon of trustfulness, so any recriminations or self-doubts he might have entertained remain hovering in the background. This engages the reader more deeply: we must imagine what was going on in Abraham's mind and heart and belly as he got up early the next morning, chopped wood for the sacrificial pyre, bound it onto his donkey, and gathered his son and two servants to begin a long journey fraught with uncertainty (v. 3).

Sarah does not appear in this story, though she had a prominent role in the previous chapter: the future lies in Abraham's hands alone. Will he follow through? If he does, what happens to the promise? Will Sarah

have yet another child somewhere past 110 years old?

The narrator relates the long walk in dreamlike silence. No words were spoken until the third day, when Abraham saw the mountain ahead, and told the servants to stay with the donkey while “the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you” (v. 5).

Is Abraham so trustful that he believes God will somehow let him escape the wrenching task ahead, or is he soft-peddling misdirection so the servants remain ignorant of his plans? Surely they, like Isaac, would have known that everything needed was present except the sacrifice. ↓

Tension builds as the author tells how Abraham laid the large bundle of wood on his son's back – indicating that Isaac would have been a young man of some size – while Abraham himself carried a smoldering pot of coals and a sharp knife (v. 6). The implication is that a boy might hurt himself if entrusted with such dangerous items, but both the danger and the items rest with Abraham.

As they walked, Isaac spoke for the first and only time, voicing the long unspoken question: “Father! ... The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (v. 7).

Again, we do not know if Abraham's reply reveals exorbitant trust or careful dissimulation: “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son” (v. 8). Abraham knew that Isaac was the intended victim, but God had also provided Isaac, so his response could be truthful without being specific.

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For the second time, we are told that “the two of them walked on together” – a poignant picture that needs no further description.

A tension-filled climax (vv. 9-14)

Once they had arrived at the mountain – traditionally identified as Mt. Zion, the future home of Jerusalem and the temple – the narrative moves quickly, as if the author wants to get the scary tension over with.

Abraham built an altar, no doubt with Isaac’s help in gathering large stones and fitting them into a stable platform. He laid the wood in order to facilitate lighting it on fire at the appropriate time. “He bound his son Isaac” – with no reported resistance or protest from the boy, though it’s hard to imagine such a thing could have been done in silence. He then took his beloved son and “laid him on the altar, on top of the wood” (v. 9).

The pivotal moment arrives with v. 10, as “Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.” The word for “kill” normally means “slaughter,” as in slaughtering an animal by slitting its throat.

Can you imagine Isaac lying with throat bared and terror in his eyes? Can you stand with Abraham as he took Isaac’s hair in one hand and held the knife poised in the other, trying to work up the nerve to begin the downward slice?

At what point did the angel of Yahweh step in to stop Abraham’s hand? Did he wait until Abraham had committed to the stroke, or call out as soon as he raised the knife? We don’t know, but our stomachs twist at the thought. Finally, mercifully, God spoke: “Abraham, Abraham!” Feel the hope in Abraham’s heart as he replied “Here I am!” (v. 12).^U

And then there was relief: “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (v. 12).

“*Now I know.*” Did God really need to put Abraham through such a trial in order to know he was faithful? The author does not explain: his purpose is to magnify Abraham’s trust rather than to question God’s justice. As Abraham had “lifted his eyes and saw” the mountain earlier that day (v. 4), now he “lifted his eyes and saw” a ram in a thicket of brush, held fast by his entangled horns.

Abraham caught the ram and offered it as a sacrifice in place of his son, praising God by calling the place “*Yahweh Yireh*,” usually translated as “the LORD will provide” (v. 14).^U We presume that he also loosed Isaac’s bindings so he could climb down from the altar. What Isaac thought of the whole scenario is not said.

A renewed blessing (vv. 15-19)

With Abraham having passed the test, Yahweh uttered a surprising oath, repeating and expanding on previous promises to make Abraham’s offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand of the seashore, so prosperous that other nations would share in the blessing.^U

With no further fanfare or mention of Isaac, the text says Abraham returned to the servants he had left at the foot of the mountain, and they all returned to Abraham’s camp in Beer-sheba, and then life went on.

What might this story – and Jesus’ story – say to modern believers who seek to please God? Hebrews 2:18, speaking of Jesus, reminds us that “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help

those who are being tested.” Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, insisted that “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

This dark story may seem troubling, but it is worth the stress it may cause us. It is a masterpiece of literature, written with a simple economy of style that points us inexorably toward one single question: “Could you pass this test? Would you be willing to sacrifice your child for God?”

Before we respond with a blithe, “Of course not,” we must ask if the real question is to which God and on what altar will we sacrifice them. Will we ignore our children and sacrifice them to the god of success or business or personal achievement? Will we fail to teach them the importance of love and ethical behavior, thus sacrificing them to the god of selfishness?

Will we raise our children without teaching them about the living God of the universe, sacrificing them on the altar of our own faithlessness?

There is a risk involved in teaching our children about the power of God and the love of Jesus. They may take us seriously. They may determine to love other people even when it is difficult, to serve others even when it is dangerous, or to give of themselves in manifold ways for the glory and the love of God. It’s a risk we take when we carry them up the mountain of faith and introduce them to the wild and awesome God of Abraham.

No faith, no ethic, no religion is worth having if it does not ask for sacrifice. Christianity makes no claim to be a religion without cost, a cuddle-blanket designed only to meet the needs of its adherents. What are we willing to sacrifice for God?^U **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 9, 2017

Song of Songs 2:1-17

A Time for Love

Bible studies from the Song of Songs may be even scarcer than sermons from its beautiful but mysterious poetry, but the ancients were inspired enough to preserve it as a part of the scriptures. This may seem strange, because the Song never mentions God or Israel, has no religious themes, and is frankly, exotically, erotically focused on human intimacy and sex with no real mention of marriage – or of sin. 📖

So, what wisdom might we find in this surprising book?

The Song of Songs is one of five short books that the Hebrew Bible refers to as the Megillot, and it is typically read during the Passover celebration. Some of the rabbis interpreted the Song as an allegory for the love relationship between God and Israel. The Passover marked the beginning of the Exodus/Wilderness period, which prophets later idealized as a type of “honeymoon” between Yahweh and Israel. 📖

The book is sometimes called the Song of Solomon, from its first verse: “The song of songs, which is to/of/by/for Solomon.” Solomon is an unlikely author, though a later editor either attributed the poems to him, or thought they should be dedicated to him. 📖

Song of Songs 2:10 –

“My beloved speaks and says to me: ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away . . .’”

The alternate name, “Song of Songs” is a Hebrew expression meaning “the greatest song.” Bibles favored by Catholics call it “Canticles,” after the title in the Latin Vulgate.

The short book’s 117 verses comprise anywhere from five to 50 different poems, depending on how one counts them. 📖 Some scholars have labored to identify a cohesive plot and identify speaking parts, but the book resists such an identification. The Song is a rather loose collection of love poems that may refer to more than one couple. Just how the Song functioned in Israel’s life and worship is unclear. 📖

A fascinating aspect of this book is that, despite the patriarchal character of Israel’s history, the female lover plays a positive and powerful role in the Song.

The woman is not a passive target for the man’s affection, but appears just as bold as he in describing what she admires, what she wants, and how she plans to find time with her lover. She is assertive and sexual and clearly appreciates the joy of intimacy apart from its role in procreation or patriarchal family systems. Another interesting angle is that she often speaks of her mother’s house and her mother’s bedchamber, both of which speak of female power or autonomy in lovemaking.

If there is a hint at stereotypes, it is that the woman seems primarily

interested in her partner’s embrace, while the male lover is more visual, speaking often of the maiden’s beauty, shape, and sexy attributes. The frequency with which the woman speaks suggests the distinct possibility that a woman could have written all or part of the Song of Songs.

Love desired (vv. 1-9)

Our text describes an encounter involving a young woman who could have been named “Flower” – she describes herself as “a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys” (v. 1), while her beloved describes her as “a lily among brambles” (v. 2). She likewise speaks gleefully of her beloved and the joy she takes in him. She describes her beau in lavish terms as a rare find, “like an apple tree among the trees of the wood” (v. 3). 📖

Remembering a previous rendezvous, she recalls “I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” The image of shade suggests both protection from the blazing sun and the delight of a secretive location, a figurative description of their happy and obviously sexual encounter. 📖

The notion of taste continues in v. 4, where she speaks of “the banqueting house” (literally, “house of wine”), a metaphor for the feast of love they share. She recalls asking for raisin cakes and apples for sustenance in her love-sick state (v. 5), but the cure she most desires is to be in her beloved’s arms: “O that his left hand were under my head and that his right hand embraced me” (v. 6). 📖

Enamored with thoughts of love, the maiden calls on her companions,

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the “daughters of Jerusalem,” to swear that they will not “awaken or arouse love” until “it delights” (literally), sometimes translated “until it is ready” (v. 7, NRSV). Here, as in many other places in the Song, “love” is not abstract, but descriptive of physical passion. The meaning seems to be that one should be cautious, and not arouse one’s ardor before the time is right.

Anticipating a new encounter, the maiden exults in the sound of her beloved’s voice and the sight of his approach (v. 8). She describes him as being like a gazelle or a young stag (v. 9), “leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.” Both stags and gazelles, sure-footed residents of the area’s mountain crags and open plains, were associated with male virility in the ancient Near East.

The maiden anxiously watches for his arrival, and happily spots him standing behind the wall, peeking through the lattice – a suggestion that their tryst is a secret one.

Have you ever been so enamored with a new love interest that you could not wait to see him or her again? How do you distinguish between the early glow of infatuation and the deeper bond of love?

Love invited (vv. 10-15)

With v. 10, the beloved arrives, and his voice – quoted by the woman – is heard in the next several verses. The man is just as eager to see the woman as she is to be reunited with him. In words reminiscent of an ode to spring, he bids her come away with him to relish their love amid the beautiful world of springtime.

With the passing of winter rains (v. 11) – when planting was done – springtime offered a window of opportunity for other pursuits. Kings led their armies forth to war in the spring

because the troops weren’t needed in the fields until harvest (2 Sam. 11:1). The same freedom brought the man to his beloved, declaring that spring had arrived and it was time for romance. He speaks of flowers, birdsong, fig trees, and fragrant vineyards, all possible background settings for secretive expressions of their passion (vv. 12-13).

Despite her earlier enthusiasm, the woman appears to have become fearful. The male lover speaks of her as a dove hiding in one of the many small cavities characteristic of the pockmarked rocky cliffs of Palestine (v. 14). He calls her to come out of hiding so he can see her face and hear her voice, “for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.”

With v. 15, the woman speaks again, apparently giving voice to her fears. Whether she is speaking to her lover or to a wider audience is unclear, but she appeals for someone to “catch the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom.”

Earlier, the man had spoken of vineyards in blossom, and now the woman returns to the image as a metaphor for their love, which appears to be threatened. Several of the poems in the Song speak of lovers who don’t match up with social conventions and are thus discouraged from meeting, leading them to meet at night or in clandestine outdoor settings.

Who were the foxes that threatened the couple’s love, which was just in bloom? The poem does not say, but evidence in other parts of the Song point to possible ethnic or class differences. In 1:5 she speaks of being “black but beautiful,” which probably relates more to social class than to race, for she attributes her dark skin to being forced to work outdoors as a vine-keeper.

In chapter 5, when the woman goes out in search of her lover, she is

caught and beaten by night watchmen, though the cause of her offense is not clear. Someone doesn’t want them to be together.

Love enjoyed (vv. 16-17)

Whatever obstacles they had to overcome, the lovers achieve their rendezvous, and the woman describes their mutual commitment: “My beloved is mine and I am his,” she says. Then, with a description of sex barely veiled in metaphor, she adds: “he pastures his flock among the lilies” (NRSV, or NET: “he grazes among the lilies,” v. 16). The woman hopes their encounter will last through the night (“until the day breathes and the shadows flee”), urging her beloved to “be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft of the mountains” (v. 17).

What do we do with such a frank and erotic description of love expressed so physically? Why is this in scripture?

As noted earlier, interpreters have employed a variety of approaches in trying to make sense of the text, or to make it palatable to prudish readers. While the allegorical approach may have been the most popular method, it is exegetically the least satisfying, for such an interpretation has to be imposed on a text that doesn’t invite it.

In the end, we may regard this and other texts from the Song of Songs as a welcome biblical endorsement of the wonder and beauty of love, passion, and sexual expression as being among God’s most beautiful and praise-worthy gifts.

Both the man and the woman consider each other to be a rare and cherished find. Surely that kind of joyful, devoted relationship has something sacred about it, something worthy of poetry and song – even of scripture. **NFJ**


Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 16, 2017

Psalm 119:105-112

A Lamp and a Light

Are you a person who likes rules, or someone who prefers to freewheel it through life? While some people relish the thought of life without restrictions, such an approach can lead to personal or societal chaos. Others recognize the value of holding to certain standards of behavior in individual or corporate life. They take comfort in knowing basic and acceptable guidelines for living, and seek to follow them.

The poet behind Psalm 119 was a big fan of God's rules, which he speaks of with a variety of near synonyms in referring to God's Torah, God's word, God's way, as well as God's laws, statutes, decrees, commands, precepts, ordinances, and so forth. The psalm could be described as a wisdom psalm or as a Torah psalm: those who are wise know the value of studying and following the written law. The psalmist was so enamored with following God's guidelines for life that he devoted no less than 176 verses to the subject, divided into 22 sections, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. 


As you can imagine, a 176-verse poem on the delights of God's law is bound to include considerable repetition. For this reason, a close look at one

Psalm 119:105 –

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

section can give us an overview of the entire psalm.

Light on the path (vv. 105-106)

Our text begins with one of the most familiar verses, not only in Psalm 119, but in the entire psalter. Many people can recite it from memory: “Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.” 

The psalm comes from a period when the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, had become accepted as the standard guideline for Israel's living. “A lamp to my feet is your word, and a light to my path” (a literal translation of v. 105). Here, “your word” is a reference to the Torah, to God's guidelines for living.

How do we navigate the twists and turns of life? How do we make decisions about personal behavior, about the use of our resources, about our treatment of others? Is it all a matter of how we feel at any given moment? If making our way through life is unstructured or lawless, we find ourselves in a constant state of uncertainty and unrest.

This is why the psalmist celebrated the structure and guidelines for life offered by the law. We don't have to walk in darkness or uncertainty when it comes to how we should relate to God and to others.

At the heart of the law are the Ten Commandments. The first four deal

with the most basic question: how we relate to God. We worship God alone. We don't bow down before idols or make images of God. We don't treat God's name lightly or swear falsely by it. We honor God on a special day each week, resting and focusing on the worship of God (Exod. 20:1-11).

The remaining commandments guide our relationships with others. We show respect to our parents, a reminder that the home is a training ground for the world. We don't kill people, or violate our spouse's trust through adultery. We don't steal, or tell lies about others, or lust after what other people have (Exod. 20:12-17).

The books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers contain many other laws specific to Israel: rules for eating, rules for worship, rules regarding ritual purity, rules about hygiene, rules about making cloth and sowing seed.

These regulations were designed mainly to set the Israelites apart as a distinct people: they circumcise males, who don't ever trim their sideburns. They eat *kosher* food and cover their heads when praying, but they don't crossbreed cattle or weave wool and cotton in the same garment. To one who took great pride in his or her ethnic heritage, the rules offered a clear path to living as a faithful Jew.

Christian believers don't concern themselves with the distinguishing tenets of being Jewish, and many modern Jews happily shave their sideburns and wear blended fabrics. That doesn't mean, however, that we aren't to be distinctive in our behavior, or that we have no guidelines for living. Jesus affirmed a common

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rabbinic teaching that the two laws of first importance were to love God with all our hearts, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

How can we stand apart as Christian believers? Jesus put it succinctly in “a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

Whether we have in mind the Old Testament law or the teachings of Jesus, we can be grateful that God has not left us without direction. The psalmist declared that he had sworn an oath to observe God’s righteous ways (v. 106). Jesus suggested that we avoid oaths, but called for a full commitment no less.

Obstacles on the way (vv. 107-110)

While praising God for the gift of guidelines, the psalmist acknowledged that having a map did not mean a path without obstacles. He spoke of being so “severely afflicted” that he feared for his life (v. 107), though he did not name the affliction. Whether it was illness or enemies, we do not know, though he claimed to have been willing to risk his life for God’s way: “I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law” (v. 109). 

If v. 110 further expounds on his affliction, the psalmist’s afflictions may have come from opponents he believed to have evil intent: “The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts.”

While the poet’s recitation of his troubles suggests a connection with the happy praise of the previous verses, it was precisely because he sometimes traveled a dark road that he needed God’s teachings as a lamp to his feet and a light to his path.

We wouldn’t dare drive down a dark highway without headlights, and we trust that other vehicles will be using their lights, too.

Have you ever faced a troubled or perilous time of life when the way forward seemed clouded and obscure? Many believers testify of finding their way through such trials on the strength of trusting God and seeking to follow God’s way without regard to the outcome.

Despite his trials, the psalmist found time and reason to praise God. Following the lead of other psalmists, he regarded his words of praise as an offering to God: the phrase translated as “offerings of praise” literally means “free will offerings of my mouth” (v. 108). The term for “free will offerings” typically referred to material gifts such as those offered for the construction of the tabernacle (Exod. 35:29, 36:3), for the first temple (2 Chron. 31:14), or for the second temple, built after the return of the exiles (Ezra 1:4, 8:28).

It may have been during the exile – when there was no temple and no practical way to bring a physical offering to God – that Hebrews began to think of verbal praise to God as being equivalent to material gifts.

A heart to follow (vv. 111-112)

The psalmist did not think of God’s teachings as something to be called upon in an emergency, like candles and flashlights that modern folk break out when a storm comes and the power goes out. Rather, he trusted God’s law as a lifelong guide for a lifelong journey, a source of comfort and joy as well as direction: “Your decrees are my heritage forever,” he wrote: “they are the joy of my heart” (v. 111). The poet was in it for the long haul:

“I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end” (v. 112).


Are there scripture verses that you rely on to help you through the day? Christians are less likely than the Hebrews to think of the Bible as a law book, but we will be more fervent and faithful followers if we rely on its teachings as a guide for daily life.

In Scripture we find much in the way of direction, though we must be careful to allow for context as we interpret it: many of the legalisms found in the Pentateuch were specific to Hebrew people living within a particular culture in a long-ago world.

Even so, the values expressed in the Ten Commandments remain valid guidelines for both relating to God and for civilized living. Teachings about the importance of loving our neighbors, caring for widows and orphans, showing hospitality to others, and making room for aliens or strangers (read “immigrants”) in our land are fully in line with Jesus’ call to love one another as he loved us.

If we, like the psalmist, believe other people bear harmful intent toward us, we can remember Jesus’ challenge to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile, showing kindness even to our enemies (Matt. 5:38-48).

When we face unexpected tragedy, hardship, or illness, we can recall the promise that those who love God can trust God to bring something good from even the darkest of days and the deepest of falls (Rom. 8:28).

Loving Jesus is a wonderful thing, but those who love Jesus also bear a responsibility to learn about Jesus, including the biblical testimony of God’s work among humans before Jesus’ time on earth. The psalmist loved God, but also loved and appreciated God’s law. Those who love Jesus best also love Jesus’ teachings, and seek to follow them – always.  NfJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 23, 2017

Psalm 139:1-24

A Life Exposed

How many people do you think know you very well – or do you think *anyone* really knows you? Even the most introverted among us want to be known by someone. Few things hurt worse than thinking no one understands us, and few things are more frustrating than feeling that we don't understand ourselves.

We can spend a lot of time and a lot of money in therapy, trying to gain insight from someone who is skilled at helping us to see things more clearly, and sometimes that's exactly what we need to do. Still, we would also like to feel known without resorting to professional help.

The poet who wrote today's text may have believed other people misunderstood him, but he was convinced that God knew him through and through. 📖

The form of Psalm 139, which belongs to a Davidic collection, is hard to pin down. 📖 The first 18 verses are hymnic and include elements of praise, while vv. 19-24 are more like a lament. Scattered throughout are elements of Israel's wisdom literature, including images common to the book of Job. Overall, the psalm should be read as the personal prayer of someone who appears to have been accused of wrongdoing,

Psalm 139:7 –

“Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your
presence?”

but who feels innocent of the charges. We can imagine him coming into the sanctuary and offering this prayer, asserting that the God who knows him from stem to stern, both inside and out, should also affirm his innocence.

A knowing God (vv. 1-6)

There are times when we wish God did not know us so well: it's hard to plead innocence if we know we are guilty, or to claim faithfulness when we know how often we fall – and we assume that God knows us even better than we know ourselves.

When we feel wrongly accused, however, we long for others to understand our position, especially God. It is probably in that setting that we are to imagine the psalmist coming before God and praying “O LORD, you have searched me and known me” (v. 1).

The psalmist waxes eloquent on the extent to which he believes God's knowledge extends. He imagines that God is in the heavens, far away from earth, and yet God knows not only whether he sits or stands, but every thought in his head (v. 2). No matter where he travels, where he sleeps, or what he does, God knows about it (v. 3) before the psalmist does: “Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely” (v. 4).

Verse 5 suggests that the psalmist may be ambivalent about God's pervasive knowledge: the terms used for “you

hem me in” often describe a restrictive situation, and the notion of God's hand being laid on someone can have negative connotations. The petitioner appears to think of God's fencing him in as more protective than oppressive, however. He speaks of God's knowledge as being “too wonderful for me,” and “so high that I cannot attain it” (v. 6).

A present God (vv. 7-12)

God is not only aware of his every thought and action, the psalmist believes, but present. He imagines what it would be like to try running away from God, or hiding from God's spirit (v. 7). He thinks first on a vertical axis: if he could ascend as high as the heavens, or to the depths of Sheol, he would find God there (v. 8).

The ancients did not think of Sheol as a place of blessedness in the presence of God, but as a shadowy place for the dead, where there were neither rewards nor punishments. Even so, the psalmist believes Sheol exists under God's sovereignty, and not apart from God's presence.

With v. 9, the poet thinks horizontally: if he should “take the wings of the morning” (a reference to the East) or venture to the farthest limits of the sea (the West), he would not be beyond God's presence or care: “even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast” (v. 10). 📖

If distance is no obstacle to God, what about darkness? Could the psalmist hide from God under the cover of night? (v. 11). No, for “even the darkness is not dark to you; the night

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is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you” (v. 12). God’s presence and perception know no bounds: distance means nothing and darkness means less: no one can hide from God.

Do you find that thought comforting, or intrusive? Do you delight in believing that God knows your every move, or does the thought seem suffocating? The psalmist’s reflection does not think of God as a nosy neighbor or an invasive voyeur, but as one who knows his heart and who cares about his well-being.

A creating God (vv. 13-18)

The prayerful person behind Psalm 139 believes that God not only knows him well, but has known him from the very beginning – and was in fact involved in his very creation: “for it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (v. 12).

This verse is often cited by people who oppose abortion in any circumstance to affirm a belief that every fertilized egg should be regarded as a fully human being. That goes beyond the intent of the psalmist, who was not arguing the extent to which personhood begins at conception, but rejoicing in the thought that God has known him and has been involved in his life from the beginning.

The following verse, though much beloved, is notoriously difficult to translate. The NRSV, following close to the King James Version, reads this way: “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works: that I know very well” (v. 14, NIV 11 and HCSB are similar). An alternate translation attributes the fearsome wonder to God rather than the psalmist’s frame: “I will give you thanks because your deeds are awesome and amazing. You knew me thoroughly” (NET).^U

However we read the verse, the point is clear: God’s work is frighteningly impressive and extends even into the womb. As a result, the poet believed that nothing about him could be hidden from God, whose vision can penetrate not only the womb, but also the “depths of the earth” (v. 15), where he poetically claims to have been shaped. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more on this).

The psalmist believed that God could see his future as well as his past. From the time “Your eyes beheld my unformed substance,” he said, “In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed” (v. 16).^U

How much of our future God knows may make for an interesting debate, but it doesn’t matter in the end: the important thing is the confidence the psalm affirms that God truly knows us, and God is with us through all the up-and-down days of our lives.

Such thoughts are vast and weighty indeed (v. 17), far more than we can comprehend. Fortunately, we don’t have to understand a host of divine thoughts that would outnumber every grain of sand on earth: in the end, we can believe that God is with us, and we are with God (v. 18).^U

A searching God (vv. 19-24)

Verses 19-22 seem out of joint and out of place. Having spent the major portion of the psalm praising God’s perceptive omnipresence and creative power, the psalmist suddenly turns to an imprecatory tirade against wicked people, especially against “bloodthirsty” people who appear to be threatening him (v. 19), and those who speak maliciously against God (v. 20).

We said at the beginning that this psalmist appears to have come before God in hopes of being vindicated

against some sort of charges that had been brought against him. He began the psalm by saying, in so many words, “You know me, O God. You have always known me. I can’t even comprehend how well you know me and everyone else.”

Now we learn that “bloodthirsty” and “malicious” people not only seek his harm, but speak against God. The psalmist wants it known that he is on the side of God, who knows that he is innocent. He hates those whom he believes God hates, and counts them as enemies (vv. 21-22).

Though some of his earlier musings cast God’s oversight as borderline oppressive, now he welcomes it, for he believes God will find him righteous and save him from his enemies. “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (vv. 23-24).

The word translated as “wicked” in v. 24 is from a verbal root that means “to hurt” or “to cause pain.” The word rendered “everlasting” often means “eternity,” but can indicate antiquity as well as the days to come.

The psalmist intentionally contrasts the “hurtful way” with the “everlasting (or ancient) way.” Perhaps his enemies had accused him of causing pain or grief to others, but he challenges even God to find a hurtful bone in his body. The psalmist insists that is not the way he rolls: he prefers to walk in the way of God, the ancient way that leads throughout eternity.

Do you share the psalmist’s confidence? Is your life so upright that your prayer could challenge God to search your heart and life for any harmful thought or motive? If so, congratulations! If not, what kind of prayer might be more appropriate? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 30, 2017

Psalm 128

A Blessed Man

Are you happy? Many Americans are obsessed with the subject. Surveys asking what people want most often find happiness at the top of the list. The Declaration of Independence declares that all people have inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Who doesn't want to be happy?

Yet, chances are that the more effort people put into pursuing happiness, the less likely they are to find it. Henry David Thoreau famously said "Happiness is like a butterfly: the more you chase it, the more it will elude you, but if you turn your attention to other things, it will come and sit softly on your shoulder."

Thoreau understood that happiness is more likely to emerge as a byproduct of other activities than when pursued as an end goal. Researchers consistently find that people are happiest when they focus more on others than themselves.

The author of today's text testified to the same truth more than two millennia ago: for him, the primary "other" we should be concerned with is God.

A happy walk (vv. 1-4)

Psalm 128 is labeled as a "Song of Ascents," which makes it one of 15

Psalm 128:1 –

"Happy is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways."

"pilgrim songs" collected in the psalter (Psalms 120–134). The psalm also contains clear elements of wisdom such as that expressed in the book of Proverbs, making it one of several psalms that portray obvious wisdom themes (see also Psalms 1, 36, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, and 133).

The text is only six verses long, but its intended structure is not particularly clear. We have chosen to approach it in two parts, seeing the first four verses as a didactic hymn drawn from the wisdom tradition, and the last two verses as a blessing. The psalm, in essence, says "this is the recipe for happiness" (vv. 1-4), and "hope it turns out!" (vv. 5-6).

All of us are familiar with articles or Internet posts by lifestyle gurus or even preachers who promise "Three steps to a happy life" or "Seven keys to prosperity." The psalmist believed that only one thing was required: "Fear the LORD."

In this setting, the word "fear" does not imply horror or panic, but a deep sense of reverence before God that plays out in one's daily life. Israel's wisdom teachers, professional sages employed to teach young men from well-to-do families or to serve as royal advisers, firmly believed that success in life was a contractual matter: those who showed true respect to God by carefully following the law should enjoy prosperity, while those who thought little of God and chose self-directed ways were on a road to misery.

Israel's community of the wise may have been responsible for the final compilation of the psalter, for it begins with a classical wisdom teaching. Psalm 1 insists that those who follow God's way will prosper, while the wicked will fail.

The author of Psalm 128 focuses on the positive side of the equation: "Happy is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways" (v. 1). A beautiful aspect of this psalm is the poet's identification of joy in simple and solid things: meaningful work, a committed partner, and children.

While some would describe these things as "what matters most in life," the text does not intend to suggest that those who are single or childless are incapable of happiness. Israel's sages uniformly addressed their instructions to men, and in Israelite culture every man hoped to marry and father children, especially sons ("children" in v. 3 is literally "sons").


On the other hand, women in the ancient world also assumed that happiness was found in marriage and children: unmarried or childless women were considered unfortunate at best, or cursed at worst.

Modern readers can appreciate that the psalmist was celebrating his culture's ideals without limiting our own concept of a happy life to matrimony and progeny.

Every person needs meaningful work or tasks, whether paying or not, to have a sense of purpose in life. If all we do is eat and sleep, existing in the world without contributing to it, where is the joy in that?

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The ability to “eat the fruit of the labor of your hands” (v. 2) was a sign of blessing and happiness during a time of peace when neither enemies nor poverty threatened. 

We find great satisfaction in earning our own living, or in eating food from our garden or kitchen. Even those who aren't in the workforce can find purpose and satisfaction in supporting others through cultivating meaningful relationships. Persons who have no close relatives or children of their own can still relate actively to others and feel part of the family.

For many people, including the psalmist, family is at the heart of happiness. Addressing men, he connects contentment and prosperity with a wife who is “like a fruitful vine” within the house, bearing children who would grow “like olive shoots” around the table (v. 3).

The agricultural metaphors were not accidental. Grape vines were common symbols of fertility, on the one hand, and the source of wine, on the other – both signs and sources of joy for one who has them. Sprouts near the base of olive trees can be transplanted to produce more trees and more olives. In the ancient Near East, olive trees were – and continue to be – highly valued as a source of both food and olive oil, an all-purpose product that could be used for cooking, cosmetics, medicinal purposes, lighting the home, or trade.

The metaphors are simple but profound. Happiness is not found in fame or wealth or even good health, but in meaningful work, in close relationships, and in the legacy we leave behind. Verse 4 concludes the hymnic lesson by returning to the initial thought, switching from “happy” to a near synonym, “blessed”: “Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD.”

The psalmist addressed men in his

original context, but we may be confident that the hymn applies to women, too.

A happy wish (vv. 5-6)

Israel's sages held to the traditional belief that obedience and prosperity went hand in hand, but they knew that life was not so simple. After all, the books of Job and Ecclesiastes also came from Israel's wisdom community, calling into question the whole notion of a guaranteed *quid pro quo* theology. They knew that God was more than the manager of a heavenly storehouse who dispensed blessings in return for a behavior-based coin.

Perhaps this is why the psalm closes with a hopeful blessing, a God-directed wish that the promised ideal might become reality. When we consider how this psalm would have functioned in Israel's worship, we can imagine a choir singing the first four verses, promising happiness to those who fear God and follow God's teachings. Afterward, a priest may have stepped forward to pronounce the benediction found in vv. 5-6:

“The LORD bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life. May you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!”

Do you see all the blessings tied up in those few lines? Note the prominence of Zion/Jerusalem, and remember that this is a “Psalm of Ascent,” probably associated with pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for worship. The Israelites did not think Yahweh was limited to the holy city. Even so, they believed that God's presence was powerfully associated with the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, Yahweh's blessings would come “from Zion.”

Furthermore, the prosperity of

individuals was directly tied to the prosperity of Jerusalem: neither could flourish unless there was peace in the land and the people were free to raise their crops and families, pursue economic advancement, and worship without hindrance.

The poet's benediction wishes not only prosperity, but longevity for both Jerusalem and the worshiper. He prays for the city to remain prosperous “all the days of your life,” and for worshipers to grow old enough to see their grandchildren.

Knowing one's grandchildren was a triple blessing. Aside from the inherent delight of seeing one's children bear children, the presence of both children and grandchildren implied that the happy God-fearer would not be poor or alone in old age, but would be secure in having offspring to provide for and look after him or her.

Furthermore, ancient Israelite religion did not include the concept of life after death, other than a shadowy existence in Sheol for both the righteous and the wicked. For those who wrote and sang this song in Jerusalem, one's posterity was tied to one's descendants. Without a belief in life that continued beyond one's time on earth, one's best hope was to live on through future generations who would keep his or her memory alive.

The psalmist's hope was connected to a belief that both the nation and its individual members would demonstrate their reverence for God by following God's ways. “Peace be upon Israel” is a wish that nation and people alike would – in words echoed by *Star Trek's* Dr. Spock – live long and prosper.

Do you consider yourself to be a happy or blessed person? What makes you feel that way? Have you noticed that when you trust God, work hard, and invest in others, happiness finds you? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

New password for online teaching resources is: Bible.

Aug. 6, 2017

Psalm 17:1-15

A Prayer for Justice

One of Billy Joel's biggest hits (from 1983) was built on the tagline: "I am an innocent man." Whether male or female, could you sing a song like that? How innocent do you feel?

Our response would probably depend on the context of the question. We know what it feels like to be wrongly accused of saying or doing something harmful. In those cases, it's easy to say "I'm innocent!"

If the setting were different – if we should imagine standing before God and answering for our entire lives, for example – we'd have a much harder time claiming innocence. All of us have said things, done things, or thought any number of things that could set off the buzzer and ring the bell on a guilt detector.

I'm innocent! (vv. 1-5)

Today's text involves a man who steadfastly proclaims his innocence and pleads for God not only to vindicate him, but also to punish those who seek to do him harm. The postulant insists that his cause is just and his words are true (v. 1). Thus, he pleads for God to recognize that he is in the right, and to hand down a vindicating

Psalm 17:1 –

"Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit."

judgment from the divine presence (v. 2).

Having summarized his claim to innocence, the psalmist reaffirms his innocence in vv. 3-5. He challenges God to "try my heart" and "test me," confident that God would "find no wickedness" in him, certain that his "mouth does not transgress" (v. 3). How many of us would issue such a challenge?

Unlike others who have fallen in with bad company, the petitioner insists that following God's teaching ("the word of your lips") has helped him avoid wrong turns (v. 4), so that "My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped" (v. 5).

That's quite a claim. It's hard to imagine that the psalmist would consider himself to be perfect, but he is clearly one who sought to know and to follow the law, fearing God and doing what is right. Having striven to live righteously, he would have been sensitive to any charges of wrongdoing. The psalm does not explain what accusations his enemies had made, but it matters not. Whatever the trouble, the psalmist overflows like a righteous volcano with hot protestations of innocence.

Have you ever been accused of an offense that you did not commit – or at least did not intend? Sometimes we find ourselves in the difficult situation of having said or done something that we can't deny, while someone

interpreted our words or actions as being hurtful, offensive, or insensitive. Such situations call for self-examination.

We may have embedded prejudices or attitudes that we don't recognize, but which lead to comments that cause legitimate pain to others. In those cases, we need to acknowledge careless speech and learn to be more circumspect. On the other hand, some people are inordinately sensitive and take offense without real justification.

So, we shouldn't cry "Blameless!" without a serious look at ourselves – but when we've done an honest self-evaluation and still feel misunderstood or wrongly charged, it's appropriate to uphold our innocence.

They're after me! (vv. 6-12)


Having stated his case, asking God to hear his cause and respond with vindication, the psalmist goes on to repeat those requests in different words, and to add a third: that God would protect him from his enemies (vv. 6–8).

He calls upon God in prayer because he believes God listens and responds to the requests of the righteous (v. 6). He appeals to God's desire for testimony, asserting that his vindication would also serve as a wondrous demonstration of God's steadfast love to those who look heavenward for refuge (v. 7).

The term translated "steadfast love" can also be rendered as "loving-kindness," the heart of God's character as displayed in covenant relationship with Israel. God declared such to Moses (Exod. 34:6), and the theme was so beloved that it is quoted often in the

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Old Testament.  Israel's worship was often punctuated with phrases such as "For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever" (1 Chron. 16:34; 2 Chron. 5:13, 7:3; Ezra 3:11; Ps. 106:1, 107:1, and frequently in Psalms 118 and 136, among others).

Peter C. Craigie has noted that v. 7 calls to mind Moses' celebratory "Song of the Sea" in Exod. 15:1-18. That song, which memorialized God's deliverance of Israel from the pursuing Egyptians, also employs the vocabulary of God's wondrous works, steadfast love, and powerful right hand (*Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 9 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], 163).

The psalmist grows bold in v. 8, asking God to guard him "as the apple of the eye," hiding him "in the shadow of your wings." The poetic metaphors do not imply that God has wings, but emphasize a belief that the righteous are so dear to God that divine protection would be in order. The language is not new: perhaps the poet was familiar with Deut. 32:10-11, which describes God's care for Israel in the wilderness, guarding them "as the apple of his eye" and carrying them "on wings of eagles" despite their persistent rebellion.

Do you feel so special to God that you could speak of yourself as the apple of God's eye? Perhaps not, but the Bible insists that God does think we are special — special enough to redeem us from our sin through the gift of Christ, even when we haven't been righteous.

With v. 9, we come closer to the psalmist's problem. He believes that enemies have not only spoken evil against him, but that they also are wicked people "who despoil me," and "deadly enemies who surround me" (v. 9). "Devastate" or "destroy" might be better translations than "despoil."


His adversaries are not out for financial gain alone, but want to ruin him. They are pitiless, he says, speaking arrogantly as they track him down with harmful intent, as a lion seeks to find prey and rip it apart (vv. 10-12).

Was the psalmist speaking in hyperbole, exaggerating the threat for poetic effect — or were others truly out to destroy him? We have no way of knowing, but perhaps we have felt threatened in similar ways, where the harmful words or actions of others stole our sense of security and upset our world. If that has happened, how did you respond? Did you look to God for help?

Deliver me! (vv. 13-15)

If we were considering the psalmist's response from a New Testament perspective, we might conclude that he had fallen off the wagon of innocence, for with vv. 13-14 his prayer appears to take a vindictive turn. The poet prays for Yahweh to rise against his enemies, to confront and overthrow them, delivering his life "by your sword." Does he want God to kill them, a theme not unknown from other imprecatory psalms?

We can't be sure whether the psalmist wanted his enemies to bleed or whether his prayer should be seen as a metaphorical wish for them to get what they deserve in other ways, but it's clear that he connected it to his vindication: their downfall would indicate God's upholding of his claim.

The translation and resultant interpretation of v. 14 is fraught with problems.  The text seems to suggest that the psalmist's enemies are wealthy people "whose portion in life is in this world," though a possible reading also sees them as murderers. Some read the latter part of the verse as a prayer that God will fill his enemies'

bellies — and those of their children — with the presumed payback for which the psalmist has prayed. Others see a break, after which the psalmist speaks of God blessing his "treasured ones" with abundance that will spill over to their children and their grandchildren.

However we read v. 14, the psalmist's intent in v. 15 is clear. As he had asked God to *look upon* his *just* cause in v. 2, he concludes by using the same words to speak of *beholding* God's face in *righteousness*, and being satisfied with God's likeness upon awaking.

Did the psalmist really expect to set eyes on God's face or form? It is helpful to note that the word he uses for "behold" can also have the sense of "perceiving" or gaining insight. The same word is used to describe certain prophets who claimed to have visions in which God appeared to them. This is the most likely way we are to understand it. The psalmist had prayed in v. 3 for God to test his heart by visiting him at night, when his defenses were down. Perhaps he hopes to experience God's presence or catch some assuring glimpse of God through a dream or a nighttime vision, so that he would awaken with a heart no longer troubled by his enemies, but satisfied with God.

We all know what it is like to lose sleep over broken relationships, especially when we believe the other party has done us wrong, or when our intentions have been misunderstood. Our first step, of course, should be to try and heal those relationships when we can. When we can't, the text reminds us that we can lay our cause before God, plead our case, and trust God to handle the rest. When we know that we've done all that we can do to be right with God and others, and we've turned the problem over to God, we also might know what it is like to sleep well and wake up satisfied. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 13, 2017

Genesis 37

Selling Joseph

If you have ever seen Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, you've seen how he and lyricist Tim Rice wove the disparate stories of Jacob's son Joseph and his brothers into a cohesive story. The musical takes significant liberties with the account, as one might expect, but its playful mix of differing genres of music could remind the reader of the various strands of tradition that go into the Joseph narrative – and what a narrative it is.

While we normally think of Genesis 37–50 as the story of Joseph, the text is careful to tell us it is the story of *Jacob's* family: "This is the story of the family of Jacob" (37:2). And, while Joseph has the starring role, Joseph's brothers play a significant part in the story.

Father Jacob looms in the background throughout the story until he resurfaces near the end, insists on adopting Joseph's offspring as his own (47:29–48:22), and blesses (or condemns) his sons while predicting the future of their families (49:1–28). After Jacob's death, his sons carry his body (according to his instructions) back to Canaan for burial in the family tomb at Macpelah (49:29–50:13), but they return to Egypt.

Genesis 37:3 –

"Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other children, because he was the son of his old age and he had made him a long robe with sleeves."

Though Jacob haunts the background, the lead character in our text for today is Joseph – and Joseph is in trouble. 📌

A favorite son (vv. 1-4)

The story begins with Jacob, having left Haran and survived an encounter with his brother Esau, settling into the land of Canaan, where he lived as a sojourner among the land's native peoples, probably near Hebron (v. 1, cf. 35:27).

We learn that Joseph is now 17 years old, so time enough had passed for the family to be at home in the land. Joseph, like his brothers, worked as a shepherd. He appears to have served a sort of apprentice role: a literal reading is "and he was a lad with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives." 📌 His primary function may have been to serve as an errand boy, shuttling messages and possibly provisions back and forth between Jacob's home base and the brothers' temporary field quarters.

Whether Jacob's intent had been for Joseph to keep an eye on his brothers – or whether he took it upon himself to be report on their behavior – is unclear, but the text says that Joseph brought a "bad report" of them to his father (v. 2). Nothing more is said about it, but we may assume the older brothers would have considered

him a tattletale, and would not have been pleased.

Even Joseph's snitching, however, was not as bad as his obvious position as the favored son. Jacob must have known the perils of partiality (his brother Esau has been his father's favorite), but he carried the dysfunction into the next generation, openly favoring Joseph over his other children.

Jacob's preferred treatment of Joseph included the gift of a special cloak (v. 3). It was probably not "many-colored" (a tradition that began with the early Greek translation), but long-sleeved or possibly "embroidered." The same expression is used to describe the robe worn by Tamar, David's daughter, when she was raped by her brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13).

Whatever the fashion statement, the point is that Joseph's robe was notably more special than the ordinary garments worn by his brothers. Jacob's overt show of favoritism to Joseph did not play well with his siblings, "who hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him" (v. 4).

A hated brother (vv. 5-11)

The brothers' antipathy grew even deeper when Joseph began gushing to the family about his dreams (v. 5). The first took place in a freshly harvested grain field, where Joseph's sheaf of grain suddenly stood up and the brothers' sheaves came and bowed down to it (vv. 6-7). Predictably incensed by the notion that Joseph would rule over them, the brothers "hated him even more because of his dreams and his words" (v. 8).

A second dream was even more

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grandiose: Joseph claimed to have dreamed that the sun, moon, and 11 stars all bowed down to him (v. 9). The sun and moon clearly represent his parents, though Joseph's mother was dead, and the 11 stars his brothers.

Understandably, the brothers' jealousy toward Joseph grew, and even Jacob offered a verbal rebuke, though he took no action, and "kept the matter in mind," no doubt wondering what the dream might mean (vv. 10-11).

A future slave (vv. 12-28)

With fraternal enmity fully established, the narrator fast-forwards to another day and perhaps another season, when Joseph's brothers were off pasturing the flocks near Shechem.

From Jacob's camp near Hebron, Shechem would have been more than 50 miles to the north, a journey of at least two or three days by foot. The brothers could have kept the flocks there for weeks or perhaps months at a time, so Jacob would have cause to seek a periodic report on their welfare, and that of the flocks. He dispatched Joseph to check on his brothers and bring back a report (vv. 12-14).

Joseph made his way to Shechem, but could not find his brothers. When a local man found him wandering around the area and asked what he was up to, Joseph indicated that he was looking for his brothers. In typical story-telling style, it happened that the man had been near the brothers when they decided to move the flocks to Dothan, another 15 miles to the north and slightly west (vv. 15-17).


Another day's journey and Joseph saw his brothers in the distance – but they also saw him coming. Some of the brothers proposed that they kill the troublesome dreamer and throw him into a pit, telling their father that a wild animal had killed the boy. Then

"we shall see what will become of his dreams," they said (vv. 18-19). Reuben, the oldest brother, reportedly demurred, suggesting only that they throw him into a pit without hurting him. He must have implied that they would leave him in the pit, though the narrator says Reuben secretly planned to rescue Joseph and take him home (vv. 20-22).

Reuben's plan prevailed, though some still had blood on their minds. When Joseph arrived, they stripped off his special coat and threw him into a pit originally dug as a well or cistern that was currently dry (vv. 23-24).

As the brothers left Joseph in the pit and sat down to eat (apparently, they didn't want to kill Joseph on empty stomachs), a caravan of Ishmaelite traders happened to pass by on their way from Gilead (east of the Sea of Galilee) to Egypt, loaded down with various goods.

It's likely that two different traditions have been combined in the story, for now it is Judah who speaks up to save Joseph's life, suggesting that they sell him to the Ishmaelites. In doing so they would not only avoid blood-guilt, but also make some money in the process.


The brothers agreed – apparently while Reuben was absent – and when a group of Midianite traders came by, they pulled Joseph from the pit and sold him for 20 pieces of silver (vv. 25-28). "Ishmaelite" and "Midianite" were sometimes used interchangeably for nomadic traders. 

In the meantime, Reuben returned to find Joseph gone and his plans for rescue thwarted. To cover their crime, the brothers slaughtered a goat and dipped Joseph's tunic in it, later showing it to Jacob as evidence that a wild beast had devoured his favorite son. Jacob became distraught, as one might expect, and would not be comforted (vv. 29-35).

A modern lesson

The selling of Joseph is a familiar and entertaining story, but what might modern believers gain from it?

We should first look to the narrator's purpose in telling the story: he wants us to see how God can take a bad thing (the selling of Joseph) and turn it into something good (the deliverance of Jacob's family from famine). That does not make hurtful actions commendable, but illustrates a belief that God can orchestrate human events for divine purposes.

Later, when Joseph had ascended to power in Egypt, Jacob had died, and his brothers feared that Joseph might take vengeance on them, he offered forgiveness instead: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (50:20). 

If we live long enough, bad things will happen to us. Friends or family may treat us shabbily; colleagues in the workplace may undermine our advancement.

We cannot always attribute poor treatment to God, as Joseph did, but we can believe that God can work in and through our open hearts to teach us, strengthen us, and ultimately bring something good from the situation.

Though it was not the author's primary intent, the story also reminds us of the dangers of family favoritism. When parents play favorites with their children – at any age – they sow seeds of jealousy, discord, and emotional issues that may play out over many years and repeat themselves in generations to come.

Jacob apparently learned nothing from the pain of knowing that his father loved Esau more than him, and he passed that hurt on to his children by openly favoring Joseph over his brothers. Can we learn to do better? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 20, 2017

Genesis 45:1-15

Making Peace

Have you ever “kissed and made up” with someone? A disruption in personal relationships can be exceedingly painful, especially when the other party is a spouse, a parent, a brother or sister.

Sometimes relational breakdowns grow from innocent misunderstandings, sometimes from callous selfishness, sometimes from unhealthy competition. Repairing those relationships begins with a mutual desire for reconciliation and progresses through communication that honestly confronts the issue and works toward resolution. That usually includes an apology – sometimes from both parties – and a promise to be more considerate going forward.

Making up can be hard to do, but it can also be awesome. Feeling the walls of resentment come down, receiving forgiveness, and embracing again can bring a renewed sense of closeness in a cleansing, life-giving experience.

Many things can be forgiven, but do you think you could forgive someone who had stolen your coat, kidnapped you, and sold you to a gang of slave-traders? If things had not turned out so well for Joseph, we have to wonder if the story would have ended differently.

Additional information at
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Genesis 45:15 –

“And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.”

A story of success


Fortunately, things did go surprisingly well, and a brief review is in order. After Joseph’s brothers sold him to a caravan of traders, he was taken to Egypt and re-sold to a government official named Potiphar. As an honest and impressive young man, he advanced quickly and was given charge of Potiphar’s estate before a false accusation from his master’s wife landed him in prison (39:1-20).

Behind bars, Joseph’s positive attitude and actions paid off again, as the head jailer soon had him supervising the other prisoners. While in prison, dreams – and Joseph’s knack for interpreting them – returned to the story.

The royal cupbearer promised to intercede for Joseph after he correctly explained a portentous dream, but failed to follow through (39:21-40:23).

When the Pharaoh had two troublesome dreams that none of his officials could analyze, the cupbearer remembered Joseph, who saw them as obvious indications that Egypt would enjoy seven years of plenty, followed by a famine of the same length. Joseph suggested a planned system of taxation to store surplus grain against the coming famine. The king set him over the effort, a position second in power to the Pharaoh alone (41:1-45).

Residents of Canaan had no such plan for food security, but they did face the same famine. In the second

year, the drought brought Joseph’s 10 older brothers to Egypt in search of food for Jacob’s clan. They had no idea that Joseph had risen to power there, and would not have recognized him as a fully-grown man, dressed in Egyptian style, bearing the Egyptian name Zaphenath-Paneah, and no doubt speaking in Egyptian. 

Joseph, on the other hand, had no trouble recognizing his older brothers in their common shepherd’s garb. He seems to have struggled with his emotions, and forgiveness did not come quickly. Joseph was clearly touched, but did not yet trust the siblings who had sold him down the river. Guessing that Benjamin would have become Jacob’s new favorite, he tested the brothers to see if they showed more loyalty to his younger brother than they had to him.

Joseph first charged the brothers with espionage and held Simeon in jail until the other nine returned with Benjamin (42:1-38). After that visit, Joseph again wept secretly, but had his personal silver cup planted in Benjamin’s bag of grain so he could accuse the brothers of theft (44:1-13). When Judah pleaded for his younger brother and offered to take any punishment upon himself, Joseph was convinced that the brothers deserved another chance (44:14-34).

An emotional reunion (vv. 1-3)

At last, as in some modern reality TV shows, it was time for “the big reveal.” With his brothers bowing before him (as they had in his dream of the sheaves, 37:6-7), Joseph bubbled over with emotion. He had been trying

to restrain himself, but to no avail. The text says “Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him” (v. 1). Dismissing his Egyptian assistants, Joseph began to weep so loudly that he could be heard throughout the palace (vv. 1-2).

Joseph’s tears must have been cathartic for him as he released long-held resentment toward his brothers – but it must have been equally confusing to them as the overbearing Egyptian official’s stern visage dissolved into unfettered weeping.

“*I am Joseph,*” he said, presumably in Hebrew. “*Is my father still alive?*” Can you imagine the shock? The brothers had answered that question on two previous occasions, but in a formal hearing and probably through an interpreter. Now Joseph wanted to hear it again while also affirming kinship: “*Is my father still alive?*”

How would you have reacted in such a situation? Can you imagine the brothers’ response? They were dumbfounded, just as we might have been – so shocked that “his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence” (v. 3).

No wonder they were dismayed. They knew they were guilty, and Joseph was wailing loudly. How were they to know if it was love or anger that prompted his cries?

A theological assertion (vv. 4-8)

Joseph quickly moved to calm the brothers’ fears, calling them closer so they could see him better and not be fooled by his Egyptian-style clothing, hair, and cosmetic enhancements. “I am your brother Joseph,” he said: “the one you sold into Egypt” (v. 4). They knew it was true, because no one else would have known what they had done.

Apparently believing the brothers had suffered enough, Joseph assuaged their guilt and told them of his belief that God had turned their jealous treachery into something good: he would not have been positioned to save the family – and others – if he had not come to Egypt (vv. 5-8).

The brothers drew near, but the narrator grants them not another word until the end of the encounter, when they embraced, wept, and “his brothers talked with him.”

We don’t know what they had to say, because the narrator is more interested in promoting his belief in God’s prevailing providence. “God sent me before you ...” (vv. 5, 7), he has Joseph say, “So it was not you who sent me here, but God ...” (v. 8).

Should we imagine that Joseph fully believed it was all God’s doing? There are Christians who call on texts like this one to insist that God determines everything that happens, both good and bad. “Everything happens for a reason” is a common expression that warrants closer examination.

Should we blame God for human evil, assuming that God orchestrates bad things to teach us good lessons? The narrator believed that God had brought good from the wrong Joseph’s brothers had done, but that does not support a belief that God determines everything.

God is the source of goodness, not evil. Paul affirmed in Rom. 8:28: “. . . in all things God works for the good of those who love him,” but we can credit God with working in our lives to transform pain into laughter or grief into grace without blaming God for the initial hurt.

A grace-filled moment (vv. 9-15)

The story is one of forgiveness. It was long in coming, but Joseph

eventually forgave his brothers. Once they got over the shock, they were willing to accept his forgiveness, though they remained insecure about their standing (witness their fear following Jacob’s death, 50:15-21). Joseph instructed them to return to Hebron and bring father Jacob along with the entire clan to Egypt, promising to provide for them, their children, and their flocks throughout the remaining five years of famine (vv. 9-13).^U

Words soon gave way to tears and hugs. Joseph embraced first his full brother Benjamin, then hugged and kissed (and no doubt slapped the back) of his other brothers, who finally emerged from their shocked silence and were able to talk with Joseph (vv. 14-15). What they said is not recorded, but we can be sure that the older brothers did all they could to express sorrow for their actions and gratitude for Joseph’s forgiveness. Afterward, we like to think, they may have sat together and talked freely of wives and children, of various experiences through the years. Joseph, at least, had quite a few stories to tell!

Forgiveness doesn’t work unless it is both freely given and freely received – without conditions. Only then can relationships be restored. Only then can love blossom. Only then can once-restrained persons relax and rejoice in the warmth of each other’s presence.

Doesn’t this text offer a continued challenge and promise to any of us who suffer from broken relationships? Jesus taught us that believers have a responsibility to take the initiative in seeking reconciliation (Matt. 5:24). Others may or may not respond to our efforts, but when we offer forgiveness – or an apology, if needed – the door to reconciliation is open, and the path beyond is one of hope.^U NfJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 27, 2017

Exodus 1:8–2:10

Life Savers

When I was a young boy, I loved hearing – and later reading – Joel Chandler Harris’ “Uncle Remus” stories, which featured colorful animal characters. Several of the stories feature a brash and talkative bunny known as “Brer Rabbit,” who was a constant target of “Brer Fox” and “Brer Bear,” who wanted to capture and eat him. On more than one occasion, even when caught and in desperate circumstances, Brer Rabbit cleverly tricked his captors into setting him free, making them look foolish in the process. 📖

Today’s text has a similar theme, one in which the weaker but clever Hebrews manage to consistently outwit the powerful king of Egypt. The story picks up where the book of Genesis leaves off.

After being sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph found himself in Egypt where he was often in trouble but always clever enough, like Brer Rabbit, to come out on top. Eventually, Joseph brought his entire family to Egypt, where they prospered greatly, multiplied like rabbits, and fulfilled God’s hyperbolic promise to Abraham that his descendants would become as numerous as the sands of the sea and the stars in the sky. “The Israelites were fruitful

Exodus 2:3 –

“When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.”

and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them” (Exod. 1:7).

All was good, right?

Not so much.

Too many Hebrews (1:8-14)

When we come to the book of Exodus, many generations have passed, and a new dynasty has arisen, whose Pharaoh “did not know Joseph.” In other words, whatever preferential treatment the Hebrews had received in the past was no longer honored. The actual relationship between Hebrews and Egyptians during that period is unclear. The famine that drove them to Egypt had abated many years previously.

Why had they not returned to their home in Canaan long ago? Had Joseph’s program of collecting all the money and land in Egypt and Canaan, making even the Egyptians virtual slaves to Pharaoh (Gen. 47:13-26), applied to his own people, too? (The online “Hardest Question” for the August 20 lesson discusses this).

Whatever the case, the Hebrew people were still in Egypt. Despite being numerous, they were clearly not free to leave the country, and probably had not been for some time.

The Pharaoh recognized the Israelites as a threat, “more numerous and

stronger than we” (1:9). The Israelites were not much of a threat so long as they were unarmed, but the king recognized that an invading force that could win over the Israelites and provide them with shields, swords, and spears could easily overthrow the country. Afterward, the Israelites would be free to determine their own destiny (1:10).

Thinking himself to be “dealing shrewdly” with the burgeoning Israelites, the king and his counselors decided to weaken the people by making life hard for them, forcing them into hard labor on construction projects in the Nile delta, where “they built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh (1:11).” 📖

The king’s plan failed when the Israelites continued to thrive despite the oppression. One could imagine them as the inspiration for German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous observation: “That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.” 📖

Indeed, the narrator says “the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites” (1:12). The word for “dread” implies a “sickening fear”: they were scared sick.

With growing desperation, the Egyptian taskmasters became evermore ruthless in their demands on the Israelites, “and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor” (1:14). Still, the people persevered. 📖

Two heroic women (1:15-21)

When hard work failed to reduce the Israelites’ vigor or diminish their population, the Pharaoh tried another

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stratagem, with equally ineffective results that again portray the king as powerful but foolish. He is pictured as calling two Hebrew midwives to him, instructing them to identify the gender of all newborns as they were being delivered, and to kill the males (1:16).^{U U}

Note the points of contrast: while the Pharaoh is nameless, the narrator celebrates the Hebrew midwives by name. They are Shiphrah (“fair one”) and Puah (possibly “fragrant one”).

Whether two midwives would have been sufficient to serve the teeming Hebrew people or whether they supervised others is immaterial: the point is that the great Pharaoh lowered himself to instruct the two women, who immediately ignored his commands. “But the midwives feared God,” the narrator says. “They did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live” (1:17).

Seeing that boy births continued, the Pharaoh summoned the women, who insisted that Hebrew women, unlike their Egyptian counterparts, were vigorous and gave birth easily, so that the children were often born before they could arrive (1:18-19).

The ease with which the midwives pulled the wool over Pharaoh’s eyes adds to the author’s not-so-subtle ridicule of the Egyptian monarch and his praise of the faithful midwives, who were rewarded when God “gave them families” (1:21). A literal reading is that God “made them houses,” but we are probably to think of God blessing their legacy rather than going into residential construction.

The Pharaoh may have been foolish, but remained in power. He soon traded one genocidal plan for another by ordering that anyone who saw a baby Hebrew boy should throw him into the Nile.

Commentators often note that the king’s thinking was flawed from

the start: his strategy to limit population growth would kill the boys (his source of forced labor) while allowing girls – the ones who have babies and increase the population – to live. Even if the midwives or Hebrew mothers had obeyed, the strategy would have backfired: he would have had fewer workers but still more babies. In addition, perceptive readers will note another dollop of Hebrew humor: while the Pharaoh sought to kill the males, it was females who consistently outsmarted him.

One stubborn mother (1:22–2:10)

A stubborn response to Pharaoh’s last order brings us to the birth story of Moses. His mother, Jochebed gave birth to a healthy baby boy, but did not throw him into the Nile.^U She could only hide the boy for so long, however, and by his third month his cries were too robust to remain unnoticed.

At this point the resourceful mother decided to obey Pharaoh’s command by “casting” her son in the Nile – but not without a small but well-constructed boat to keep him afloat (2:3). The basket, made watertight with “bitumen and pitch,” is pointedly called an “ark” (*tēvah*) in the Hebrew text, the same word used to describe Noah’s life-saving vessel.^U

In a story familiar through many tellings, the boy’s mother set the basket afloat among the tall reeds that lined the river banks, leaving older sister Miriam to keep an eye on him (2:4). Pharaoh’s purpose is then betrayed by his own daughter. When she came to the river to bathe (probably for some ceremonial lustration rather than a regular bath), she spied the baby in the basket, and took pity on him (2:5-6).

Had Jochebed put the child there on purpose, hoping for such an outcome? Perhaps not: having the baby boy

float by a group of Egyptians would certainly put him in a tenuous situation. A delightful aspect of the story is that the ploy, fraught with tension and danger, turned out so unexpectedly well. The narrator adds to the reader’s amusement by noting that the boy’s sister Miriam quickly volunteered to fetch a wet nurse from among the recently-bereaved Hebrew women to feed the baby for her.

Whether Pharaoh’s daughter suspected collusion is not stated: she agreed to Miriam’s proposal, and so Jochebed’s furtive finagling allowed her to keep her own son, nurse him, and get paid for it (2:8-10)! After the child was weaned – probably at about three years old – she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, who adopted him.^U

Again, Pharaoh is defeated, and again, the agents of his defeat are women: Jochebed, Miriam, and his own daughter. Perhaps unintentionally, the narrator gives a Hebrew meaning to Moses’ thoroughly Egyptian name: “She named him Moses,” he said “because I drew him out of the water” (2:10b – see the online “Hardest Question” for more).

A careful reader will note that God remains firmly in the background of these stories, mentioned only in that the “midwives feared God,” and God “gave them houses” as a reward. While the narrator clearly believes that God was ever-present in caring for the chosen people, he intentionally highlights human activity while God remains behind the scenes.

So it is that Moses is born: and long before he became God’s agent in delivering the Israelites through the sea, five named women served as God’s agents in delivering Israel from the Pharaoh and Moses from the river. God works in mysterious ways – and heaven help those who overlook the potential of women in God’s work. **NFJ**

RECOGNITION & REMEMBRANCE

Mary Alice Birdwhistell is pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, where she has served as associate pastor since 2013.

Linda McKinnish Bridges is president of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, where she served earlier as a founding professor. She has also served in various roles at Wake Forest University.

David Cassady is president of Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, housed on the campus of Georgetown College near Lexington, Ky. A Christian educator, publisher and

consultant, he is the founder of the communications and consulting firm Faithlab.

John M. Finley became executive director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society on July 1. He served as pastor of historic First Baptist Church of Savannah, Ga., for nearly 25 years.

Bruce Gourley of Bozeman, Mont., has resigned as executive director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society. He is expanding his work with Nurturing Faith Publishing. (See p. 50 for details.)

David Hull, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala., is associate pastor of Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta, while continuing to consult with congregations through the Center for Healthy Churches.

Marv Knox, editor of the Texas-based *Baptist Standard*, becomes field coordinator of Fellowship Southwest on Aug. 1. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship created this new regional network and position following the removal of prominent congregations from the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Lanny Peters has retired after 28 years as pastor of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga.

Charles Qualls is pastor of Franklin Baptist Church in Franklin, Va., coming from Atlanta's Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church where he was associate pastor.

Lee B. Spitzer is general secretary of American Baptist Churches USA. He served as executive minister for the American Baptist Churches in New Jersey.

William L. Turner died April 22 in Lexington, Ky. His pastorates included South Main Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, and three Lexington congregations: Central Baptist Church, Faith Fellowship and Liberty Road Faith Fellowship. **NFJ**

CLASSIFIEDS

Minister to Preschool and Children: First Baptist Church, Augusta, Ga., is seeking a qualified, spiritual and energetic candidate for the full-time position of minister to preschool and children. FBCA is a large faith community that values and supports its current preschool / children's ministry, and is excited to see it continue to grow and improve. The minister to preschool and children is responsible for coordinating, planning, scheduling and leading all programs associated with the ministry, including Sunday school, missions education, Vacation Bible School, and other weekday or special activities for age birth-5th grade. He/she will also be involved in, though not limited to, volunteer recruitment, training, ministering to children and families in need, and leading worship. A seminary or education degree is preferred, along with experience in children's ministry and church growth. Résumés will be accepted, beginning immediately, at childresearch@fbcaugusta.org.

Associate Pastor of Music / Worship Arts: The Memorial Baptist Church in Greenville, N.C., is seeking a full-time associate pastor of music and worship arts, called by God to provide leadership for the entire music program. Responsibilities include planning, conducting, and evaluating a comprehensive ministry of music and worship for all music genres and age levels and also providing pastoral care. A minimum of 3 years of

experience in Christian music ministry and a seminary degree or graduate study are preferred. The successful candidate must be a cooperative, enthusiastic and conscientious team member, displaying authentic Christian conduct in both private and public life. Compensation will be commensurate with experience. Please submit all inquiries, recommendations, cover letters and résumés to ministersearch@tmbc.org.

Minister of Music and Senior Adults: First Baptist Church of Southern Pines, N.C., located in a resort community with a vibrant and diverse population, is seeking a full-time minister of music and senior adults. The ideal minister will be a person of deep faith in Christ and possess a desire to model a Christ-centered devotion in his or her personal and professional life. The ideal candidate will be a dynamic worship leader to direct a comprehensive music ministry for all ages. The successful leader will cast a broad vision of music excellence with a deep appreciation for diverse, eclectic and traditional worship styles. This person will also have responsibilities for guiding the senior adult ministry with a team of qualified lay leaders. This position requires an advanced music degree from an accredited theological or divinity school. Inquiries and applications may be sent to John Kinney, 200 E. New York Ave., Southern Pines, NC 28387 or to music@fbccsp.org by July 15.

Explore God's love with the new **Shine Sunday school curriculum!** *Shine: Living in God's Light* has engaging stories and activities that will help teach children the Bible, understand that they are known and loved by God, and learn what it means to follow Jesus. Find sample sessions, Bible outlines and more at shinecurriculum.com.

Who are the Copts

— and why are they persecuted?

BY MONIQUE EL-FAIZY

Religion News Service

Egypt's Copts were sadly in the news headlines again this year, as the victims of violence. On Palm Sunday bombs exploded in two churches, including one in Alexandria where the Coptic pope had been delivering the liturgy.

Scores of people were killed, and many others were wounded. Along with sympathy, many American Christians asked: "Who are the Copts, and why are they persecuted?"

HISTORY

The Copts are the largest Christian community in North Africa and the Middle East, and one of the oldest Christian sects in the world. The church is officially known as the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, and regards the Apostle Mark as founder in the year 42.

Copts are an Oriental Orthodox church, which means they differ doctrinally from churches in the Eastern Orthodox family and from the Roman Catholic Church. Other Oriental Orthodox churches are found in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Syria and Armenia.

The Copts have their own patriarch, Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, who took office in 2012 after having his name picked from a glass chalice by a blindfolded boy.

Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church has been very vocal in his support of the Copts, and expressed his "deep condolences" following the April bombings.

According to CNN, the two church leaders shared in ecumenical prayers at a Cairo church and signed a joint, 12-point declaration reiterating the fraternity between their churches.

WHERE ARE THEY?

Most Copts live in Egypt, where the community comprises an estimated

10 percent of the country's population. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church shared a patriarch with the Coptic Church in Egypt until 1959, when it was granted its own patriarch, so the rituals of the two churches are very similar.

Copts are also the largest Christian denomination in neighboring Libya and Sudan.

The U.S. has the biggest group of Copts in the diaspora, and, though there are no good figures, it is estimated at hundreds of thousands. There are also relatively large Coptic concentrations in Canada and Australia.

Famous Copts include renowned heart surgeon Magdi Yacoub, former U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Dina Powell, deputy national security adviser for strategy for President Trump.

ARE THEY ARABS?

This is a touchy question that highlights political differences as much as anything else. Before the Muslim conquest of Egypt in the seventh century, Egypt was a predominantly Coptic country and the Coptic language, which today exists only in the church liturgy, was widely spoken.

Because the Coptic language and religion predate the arrival of Arabs in Egypt, many Copts don't consider themselves to be Arabs. But the word "Copt" itself is derived from the Greek word for the indigenous people of Egypt, so some modern Muslims identify with the word "Copt" as well.

As with many issues of identity, this one is complicated, and personal. In general terms, though, Copts do not identify as Arabs.

COPTIC LIFE

There are two contradictory answers to the question of what life is like for Copts in Egypt, and both are true.

On the one hand, Copts are integrated into Egyptian society. On the other hand, they suffer routine discrimination in ways both insidious and obvious and are frequently the victims of sectarian violence.

Official discrimination against Copts is somewhat cyclical, although they have suffered it in one form or another steadily since the Muslim conquest. While Copts have achieved success in many arenas in Egypt, discrimination against them has been subtle, and there is a glass ceiling for Copts in many military and government institutions.

Violence against Copts has been a problem for many decades, although it is often sporadic. The community was seen as complicit in the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood-backed President Mohamed Morsi, and in the days after his ouster, scores of churches across the country were set on fire and Christian-owned businesses and Coptic organizations came under attack.

With the rise of the Islamic State group in Egypt, the situation has grown more dire. The terror group claimed the deadly December bomb attack at St. Peter and Paul's Church in Cairo, which sits adjacent to the seat of the Coptic pope.

In February the group put out a video declaring Copts their "favorite prey." Around that time, several Copts living in the Sinai were murdered, prompting hundreds of families to flee their homes.

The Islamic State group took responsibility for the two Palm Sunday bombings as well. Copts are reliant upon the Egyptian government to protect them. In 2013, Amnesty International issued a report saying that security forces had failed to do that. **NFJ**

—*Monique El-Faizy is a freelance journalist based in Paris who has written extensively on the Copts.*

Chester A. Arthur (1881-1885)

By Bruce Gourley

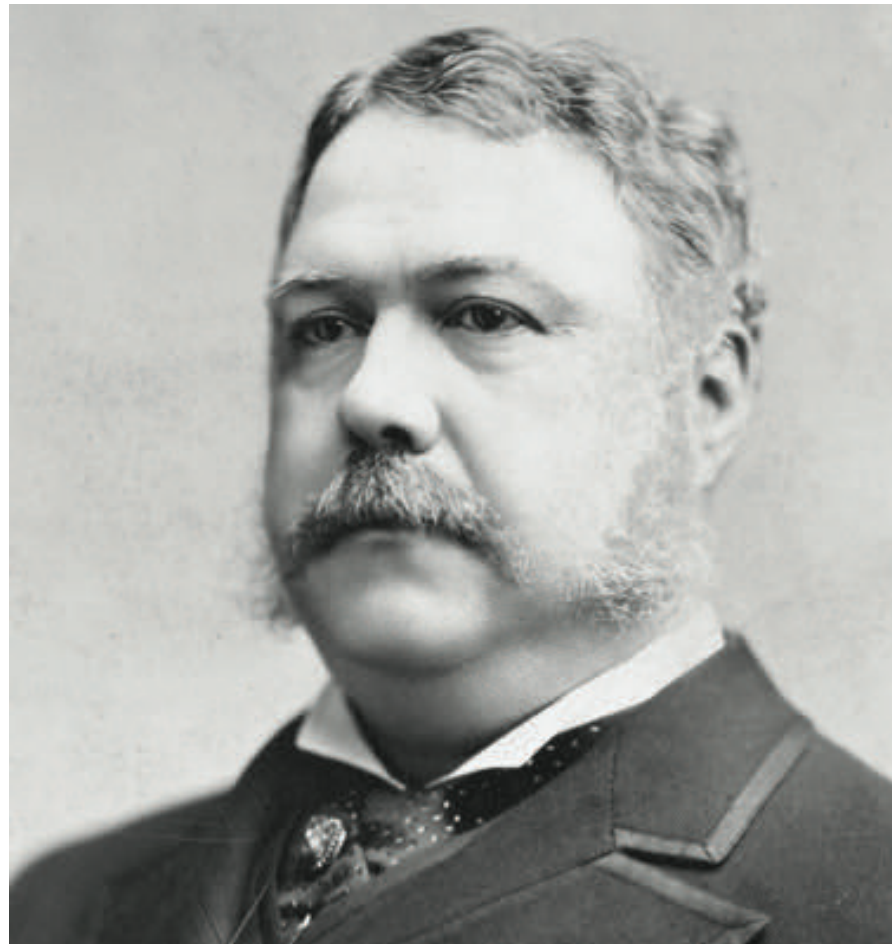
Chosen by Republicans as the party's 1880 vice-presidential candidate, Chester A. Arthur's very identity was questioned by Democrats. Had he been born in Franklin County, Vermont, or in nearby Canada?

The records of the Vermont town's North Fairfield Baptist Church could have settled the matter, but by 1880 the church no longer existed and the congregational records were long lost.

Arthur's Irish-born father, William, had emigrated to Canada, where he married Vermont-born Canadian resident Malvina Stone. A short time later the couple moved to Vermont, where William was pastor of the North Fairfield Baptist Church near the Canadian border. On at least one occasion the couple made a return visit to Canada.

Around that time Malvina gave birth to son Chester in 1829 or 1830 in an unknown location. As an adult, Chester claimed he was born in 1830; historians later settled on the year 1829. In the early 1880s some political opponents of Arthur investigated his birth and, based on less-than-conclusive evidence, claimed he was Canadian, having been born unexpectedly while his mother was visiting Canada.

Upon Arthur's ascension to the presidency on Sept. 20, 1881, following James Garfield's assassination, controversy roiled the political landscape as Democrats insisted that Arthur was not a U.S. citizen, and thus ineligible to hold the presidential office. The controversy dogged Arthur throughout his single term in office.



The birther controversy aside, Chester Arthur, most likely born in Vermont, as a young boy in the 1830s moved to New York with his family. Father William served a series of churches, resulting in frequent moves within the state. An outspoken abolitionist, William also became a co-founder of the New York Anti-slavery Society.

As a school boy, Arthur became involved in politics, joining a group of young Whigs and supporting Henry Clay. Enrollment in Union College in 1845

followed. The future president studied a classical curriculum based on educational models inherited from Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages. An outstanding student, Arthur became president of the collegiate debate society.

During winter breaks he taught school, and following graduation in 1848 took a full-time teaching position and began studying education law. Admission to the bar followed in 1854, after which Chester Arthur became a partner in the law firm of

This is the 21st 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 director of Nurturing Faith's Truth & Justice Project.

Culver, Parker and Arthur, a firm specializing in abolitionism litigation.

As a lawyer, Arthur helped lead the desegregation of New York City in the 1850s, the same decade affiliating with the newly-formed anti-slavery Republican Party.

Meanwhile, he married Ellen Lewis Herndon in 1859. Their first child, William, died at the age of three. Two children lived to adulthood. Ellen died from pneumonia in 1880.

Political connections led to Arthur's appointment to the military staff of New York Governor Edwin D. Morgan upon the outbreak of the American Civil War. Commissioned a brigadier general, he served as the state's quartermaster general, charged with housing soldiers and overseeing the distribution of food and supplies for Union troops.

Pressured to remain in service to New York, Arthur turned down an opportunity to serve as an officer of the 9th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, as well as a request to take command of a New York City brigade consisting of four regiments. Meanwhile, his expanding state military responsibilities included the raising of additional troops to meet quotas set by the U.S. government.

Deeply embedded within New York politics, in the post-war years Arthur entered national political service in 1871 by appointment of President Ulysses S. Grant as the Collector of the Port of New York. His responsibilities included the hiring of hundreds of workers and the collection of tariffs due at the United States' busiest port.

During the 1880 presidential campaign season, Republican candidate James Garfield and his supporters believed the party would need a New Yorker on the ticket in order to win the election. When their first choice declined, Garfield's supporters turned to the well-connected Chester Arthur. The election proved to be very close on the popular vote count, although the Garfield-Arthur ticket won decisively in the Electoral College.

President Garfield's prolonged, mortal wounds from an assassin's bullet in the summer of 1881 led to a crisis regarding presidential succession. With Garfield unable to function as president and uncertainty as to who should fill the void while

he yet lived, vice-president Arthur expressed reluctance to assume presidential duties. Refusing to return to the suspense-filled capital city, Arthur remained at his New York City home until Garfield passed away.

Although long known for exploiting his own political connections for the benefit of friends and allies, Chester Arthur as president surprised his critics by enacting political reforms, including the establishment of a bipartisan Civil Service Commission to monitor the distribution of federal jobs based on merit rather than political connections. He also opposed fraud in the U.S. Postal Service and sought to modernize the U.S. Navy.

Immigration, however, vexed President Arthur. Amid a period of growing nationalism, many West Coast citizens blamed Chinese immigrants for suppressed wages and economic ills. Congress in 1882 responded by passing legislation suspending Chinese immigration for 20 years and requiring Chinese Americans to register with the government.

President Arthur promptly vetoed the anti-immigrant legislation, calling it "a breach of our national faith" and criticizing the proposed "system of personal registration and passports" as "undemocratic and hostile to the spirit of our institutions."

On the other hand, Arthur's veto invited Congress to revise the legislation by reducing the time period regarding immigrant suspension, while securing the legal rights of Chinese Americans short of naturalization. Upon congressional passage of a rewritten bill meeting his terms, Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act. Suspending Chinese immigration for 10 years, the act was the first American law significantly restricting immigration into the U.S.

Quietly, meanwhile, Arthur suffered from Bright's disease, a major and often fatal kidney illness. Masking his condition from the public while in office, he chose not to run for re-election in 1884. Returning to New York following his term of service, Arthur died from the illness in 1886 at age 57.

Despite his family's religious heritage, Arthur remained religiously aloof throughout his life. Occasionally he attended Episcopalian services. Rarely did he mention

God or religion in public, and even less so in personal fashion.

The nation's ongoing conflicts with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), however, elicited action from President Arthur and provided the occasion for his one notable contribution to America's religious life. For decades in the Western territories Mormons had defied the U.S. by practicing polygamy, maintaining that their religious freedom transcended federal law forbidding the practice.

In December 1881 Arthur addressed the issue bluntly: "The fact that adherents of the Mormon Church, which rests upon polygamy as its cornerstone, have recently been peopling in large numbers Idaho, Arizona, and other of our Western Territories is well calculated to excite the liveliest interest and apprehension. It imposes upon Congress and the Executive the duty of arraying against this barbarous system all the power which under the Constitution and the law they can wield for its destruction."

Amid continued Mormon intransigence, the president followed up his verbal warning by signing the Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act of 1882, significantly strengthening federal anti-polygamy laws. Nonetheless, a stalemate remained in the face of Mormon defiance.

Although the law was not enforced during Arthur's presidency, his efforts led to the eventual federal disincorporation of the Latter-Day Saints Church, after which Mormon leaders quickly denounced plural marriage in the organization's 1890 Manifesto. Minus polygamy, six years later Mormon-dominated Utah was granted statehood.

To the faithful, LDS officials explained the 1890 official capitulation regarding polygamy as a new religious revelation. The practice of plural marriage remains officially prohibited today by the LDS Church, although practiced quietly by numerous Mormons in Utah and surrounding states.

In addition, many evangelical Christians of the 21st century, dominant in American culture, invoke late 19th-century Mormon arguments in demanding the right to violate federal laws in the name of their "religious liberty." **NFJ**



Wheels of fortune

STURDY SOLUTIONS — Rodger Keene checks out one of the mobility carts he and other volunteers in Huntsville, Ala., are producing to assist persons around the world with leg disabilities. The North Alabama group, which benefits from the skills of retired aerospace engineers, hopes to produce 100 of these sturdy vehicles this year as well as host a national gathering of volunteers.

Huntsville volunteers put persons worldwide on the move

BY JOSEPH M. JONES

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. — Worldwide, 70 million people have leg disabilities, with many of them living in low-income settings with limited health care. The need is especially great in Asian and African countries where immobility results not only from warfare injuries but also from birth defects and diseases.

Millions of persons worldwide must drag themselves through life without the use of legs. Thinking of them brings greater appreciation for the expanding manufacturing ministry of Huntsville's First Baptist Church.

Begun four years ago but now with new vigor and improved capability, a small group within the fellowship is leading a local effort to manufacture sturdy personal vehicles that can go almost anywhere, an ingenious machine that resembles an oversized tricycle powered by a bicycle-like chain drive operated by the hands.

This mobility cart was conceived by Larry and Laura Hills, United Methodist missionaries serving in Zaire in the 1980s. While the early design and development came under the auspices of the United Methodist Church, the work has now been broadened denominationally and is operated by an independent board.

With increased awareness and involvement, manufacturing has reached a rate of 6,000 mobility carts annually by 21 affiliates, and shipped primarily to Third World countries where its need is the greatest.

One of the newest of the 21 manufacturing affiliates is the Huntsville group, organized and incorporated in 2013. Since that time the group has accumulated the necessary equipment, learned the process, and built and shipped 140 vehicles overseas.

With recently expanded and improved quarters, the group is gaining new volunteers and new resources, to the point that leaders hope to produce 100 carts this year.

Throughout the world, volunteer

labor of faith-based organizations build these vehicles. Most groups have Baptist or United Methodist connections, though other denominations are involved.

The Huntsville group ("Mobility Worldwide — North Alabama") resulted from a discovery of this ministry opportunity by church member Dr. Jerry Graham, who long led medical missions to Central and South America. Founding members visited Penney Farms, a Florida retirement community, to learn about the marvelous little machine.

While a valued part of the church's mission, the organization incorporated as a separate charitable organization. The Huntsville group is funded by its members and friends and from an annual missions grant from the First Baptist Church.

Some affiliates of the larger international charity manufacture and ship various parts among themselves. However, the Huntsville group — which includes retired aerospace engineers — manufactures

all of its components, other than those brought directly from commercial sources, and completes the assembly.

For the worldwide group, executive director Scott Walters of Atlanta and Von Driggs of Lindale, Texas, provide barebones management from their at-home offices, with responsibilities for developing distribution partnerships in more than 100 countries, along with shipping.

Now simply known as a “mobility cart,” the vehicle was first called PET (Personal Energy Transportation). It is a sturdy three-wheeled vehicle that can be operated by a mobility-impaired adult or child. There are self-propelled units that come in two sizes and a pull cart model for those lacking sufficient upper body strength. More than three quarters of the units made are of the large adult size, the type made in Huntsville.

Designed to operate in the world’s most remote regions, the cart is built on a heavy wood and steel frame. It is propelled by a hand crank and fitted with three puncture-proof rubber tires. Volunteer labor, along with highly-efficient purchasing practices for commercial source components, allow each vehicle to be built at a cost of about \$300.

The center section of the cart accommodates an adult, with a back compartment allowing for food, tools, wood or other necessities. The carts are provided to users free of cost, and distributed through the guidance of and arrangement with many Christian charities and humanitarian organizations.

Key sites in the evolution of the vehicle design include Columbia, Mo., and Penney Farms, Fla., facilities that also lead in overall production.

While described accurately as sturdy, the carts are purposefully “overdesigned” (in engineering terms) so that repairs are infrequent and simple. Each unit comes with basic repair tools, chain repair links, and a maintenance guide that relies on pictures and drawings rather than words in any language.

Since 1999 all vehicles have been equipped with heavy-duty ball bearings intended to operate for a very long time. But just in case, spare bearings are sent

with each vehicle.

Early versions of the vehicle were all brightly painted, but currently only treated wood is used and the wooden portions are unpainted. Over the years design change proposals came from many builders and users worldwide, and now a standardization committee ensures that all units are built to the same design.

The Huntsville cart operation began with components being built in garages, basements and workshops of the members. Little by little, the group acquired equipment through gifts of their own and from other cart producers that went out of business. The extensive metalworking tools of member Lee Singer are of inestimable value.

From its earlier makeshift quarters, operations moved to a production site in a former building materials store rented by Willowbrook Baptist Church. On-site tools included three band saws for cutting angle iron, rods and sheet metal, three drill presses, several welding machines, and various grinders and sanders.

Since early 2017 the North Alabama group has occupied a thoroughly modern 5,000-square-foot manufacturing building thanks to the generosity of Bob Broadway, a businessman who currently serves as deacon chairman for Huntsville’s First Baptist Church.



PRODUCTION CYCLE — Volunteer Susan Keene staples upholstery to the seat bottoms and backs of the mobility carts manufactured by the Huntsville, Ala., nonprofit. The carts, produced in a new, state-of-the-art facility, are built to withstand extensive use in remote parts of the world.

“It is a wonderful facility, recently renovated with new features such as a heating and cooling system, updated plumbing and LED lighting,” said John Noblin, president of the local mobility cart affiliate. “It is a marvelous place, exactly fitting our purposes.”

First Baptist organizers have engaged representatives from other local congregations, including First Missionary Baptist Church and Jackson Way Baptist Church of Huntsville and First Baptist Church of Madison, Ala.

Every year Mobility Worldwide, the authority that coordinates mobility cart activities, conducts a symposium for cart affiliates. This year’s meeting, which draws volunteers widely, will be hosted by the North Alabama group, Sept. 28-30, at Huntsville’s First Baptist Church.

Scott Walters of the larger organization said he attended the open house for the Huntsville group’s new facility earlier this year and was impressed with its “magnificence.”

“That, coupled with the extraordinary competence and enthusiasm of the volunteers, many of whom are retired engineers with long, valuable experience, made it an obvious choice,” he said.

Experience as an engineer or crafts-person, however, is not required for volunteers.

“We have a job for every person, for every competence,” said Gordon Perry, who serves on the North Alabama affiliate board.

Tasks are varied and learned from those with more experience, such as forming and applying upholstery to the cart’s seat bottom and back, as well as painting metal components.

“We can make good use of any and all, and our number of volunteers has increased since we moved into the spacious new building,” said Perry. **NFJ**

—Joe Jones is a member of First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala., and a retired director of public affairs for NASA-Marshall Space Flight Center. For additional information on supporting, duplicating or engaging in this project, contact Joe at joefranjoness@gmail.com or (256) 655-6030.

Christian Baptism

Who got it right?

BY E.B. SELF

Christians have disagreed over baptism for centuries — before, during and after the Protestant Reformation. Feelings have sometimes been intense.

Church historians tell of those who thought that the proper response to their “reforming” opponents was to drown them.

Today the frequent ill will of the past on this subject has largely been replaced by comparative calm. The reason is not that all Christians now agree on baptism. They do not.

The relative peace may be due to weariness with previous disputes, especially when other matters seem much more important. So now may be a good time to review some of the concerns in a friendly way.

With all that has developed, we may wonder whose baptism is right. Yet I believe there were, and still are, three major meanings for Christian baptism.

CLEANSING

One meaning is cleansing, not physical but spiritual cleansing. Ancient Hebrews had ritual cleansings of various vessels used in worship. At some time, they had proselyte baptism for “unclean” heathens who converted to Judaism.

John the Baptist asked Jews themselves to have a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is understandable that many Christians have thought of baptism as religious cleansing.

At one celebration of Pentecost, Peter told a group of Jews to repent and be baptized “so that your sins may be forgiven” (Acts 2:38, NRSV). Paul claimed that a certain Ananias told him to get up and be



Callisto Piazza, *Baptism of Christ*, 1540-1545.

baptized “and have your sins washed away” (Acts 22:16, NRSV).

In an apparent reference to baptism, Paul wrote to the Corinthians that “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:11, NRSV).

As early Christians thought about baptism and the spiritual cleansing of the forgiveness of sins, some had the idea of postponing baptism until a person was at the point of death. Would it not be best to end life with all of one’s sins forgiven?

But there was another question: What if a person died before he or she could be

baptized? Would God accept a desire to be baptized?

Church officials eventually decided that it would be best to be baptized as soon as possible. There could be the sacrament of last rites or final confession, not baptism, as death was near.

What if someone was seriously ill before receiving baptism but still desired it? Immersion would not have been advisable. Some thought that “clinic” baptism might be the solution, that is, sprinkling or pouring instead of immersion for sick people.

Since water is literally a cleansing agent and can symbolize spiritual cleansing, was the amount of water all that important? But then might not sprinkling or pouring of water be both convenient and acceptable for anyone, the healthy as well as the ill?

And, as far as pouring was concerned, was there not the pouring of oil (representing the Spirit) on prophets, priests and kings in the Old Testament? Had God not promised, “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28, NRSV)? John the Baptist had said of Jesus, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 2:12).

Peter said on the day of Pentecost, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Could not the pouring of water represent both cleansing and the gift of the Holy Spirit?

What about infants? While they might not have any actual sin, were they not affected by the guilt of original sin (passed on from Adam)? What if some infants died without any provision for forgiveness of original sin? Would it not be best to have a spiritual cleansing for infants by baptizing them? Here also sprinkling or pouring would be more appropriate than immersion.

Augustine was sorry to say so, but he thought that hell was the destination for infants who died without baptism. Thomas Aquinas agreed that hell was in store for infants dying without baptism. But Aquinas thought they would go to limbo, a border or edge of hell without any physical pain. Modern Catholics are not all completely sure about what happens to infants who

die without baptism, but baptism of infants remains their accepted practice.

But would baptism be appropriate for infants, even with sprinkling or pouring, since they would not be aware of the intended meaning? The rationale could be *ex operato*. The Latin may be translated as “from the work performed.”

The idea was that spiritual power (cleansing from sin in the case of baptism) was available from performing a certain act regardless of any other factors. What about such considerations as the degree of worthiness of the person performing the act or the lack of understanding by infants? Those problems would supposedly not keep the power from being available.

There was also the idea that baptism for spiritual cleansing was necessary for salvation. Had not Jesus said, according to some versions of Mark’s gospel, “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16, NRSV)?

Perhaps there were exceptions. Maybe, for example, the blood of an unbaptized martyr could be a substitute for the water of baptism. Even if there were exceptions, they would be for God to decide.

The idea of the necessity of baptism may have been involved in the question of what was necessary *for* baptism.

The final decision of the Catholic Church had three elements. There must be water, whether used for immersion, pouring or sprinkling. There must be use of the Trinitarian formula (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) according to Matt. 28:19-20. And the person performing the ceremony must intend to do what the church intends, whether he or she believes it or not.

It has been Baptists who have most strongly disagreed with Catholics on various interpretations of baptism as spiritual cleansing. Baptists believe in spiritual cleansing but think that it occurs by God’s grace after repentance and faith rather than by baptism.

Baptists are convinced that it is faith, not baptism, that is necessary for salvation. Baptists might say that baptism represents spiritual cleansing but does not accomplish it.

Baptists reject baptism for infants

because of the conviction that only believers should be baptized. As to the fear that unbaptized infants who die may go to hell, many Baptists (probably most) accept some version of the doctrine of original sin. Yet Baptists have also maintained belief in the age of accountability, convinced that God does not hold children accountable until they are old enough to have some degree of understanding (see Isa. 7:15).

The exact relationship between baptism and spiritual cleansing remains an area of disagreement for Christians today. What disturbs some is the belief that God has designated water as a key ingredient in a ceremony that brings forgiveness of sins. There seems to be neglect, even if unintended, of Christ’s redeeming work.

Perhaps more nearly acceptable on one side would be the view that the water of baptism represents the blood of Christ and its saving power. That view might be very meaningful to some but not appeal to others.

Some have a further idea concerning baptism and spiritual cleansing: that God provides spiritual cleansing through acceptance of God’s grace by faith, even without baptism.

INITIATION

A second meaning of Christian baptism is initiation. Three thousand Jews received Christian baptism on a special Day of Pentecost and “were added” (Acts 2:41, NRSV). Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 12:13 that “in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (NRSV).

In a somewhat confusing passage in Col. 2:11-12, Paul mentions spiritual circumcision, the circumcision of Christ, and baptism. The full meaning of his thought is not completely clear, but initiation does seem to be involved.

There is general agreement among Christians on baptism as initiation of some kind. There are differences over the extent of initiation.

Baptists, who baptize only believers, think that baptism provides initiation into full church membership. That membership includes participation in the Lord’s Supper

'The idea of the necessity of baptism may have been involved in the question of what was necessary for baptism.'

and voting on church business. Baptists hope that all church members will continue to grow spiritually, but a newly baptized believer of whatever age is considered fully a church member.

Christians who baptize infants have a different view. They usually believe that baptism alone is not enough to allow admission to communion. There also has to be confirmation, preceded by catechism, for those baptized as infants. In these cases, baptism is only a partial initiation.

Many Christians think of baptism as an initiation into Christ himself, a christening. Other Christians like the idea of a relationship to Christ. They do wonder how a ceremony involving a few drops of water for an infant can be thought to accomplish or even portray such a condition.

There are Christians who do not believe there is any justification for infant baptism. Some of those Christians, however, do think it is appropriate to have a special service involving infants. The service emphasizes a spiritual dedication of parents and congregation to the infants, an initiation into Christian nurture and admonition.

John Calvin had a special understanding of baptism as initiation. He may have been seeking a justification for infant baptism that did not involve the Catholic emphasis on forgiveness of sins. And he may have considered the references in Col. 2:11-12 to baptism and the circumcision of Christ.

Calvin claimed that baptism was a substitute for circumcision. (See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter XVI, Section 4.) He believed that circumcision and baptism basically had the same meaning: initiation into God's covenant of grace. He considered baptism, like circumcision, to be appropriate for infants.

The Bible does not provide strong support for Calvin's view. There is the strange reference in Col. 2:11-12 to baptism as the circumcision of Christ, but the full meaning of Paul's thought is not clear. There is no other biblical connection

between baptism and circumcision.

Also, the earliest Christians apparently did not share Calvin's belief. According to Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost 3,000 presumably circumcised Jews were baptized. The earliest Christians evidently thought that baptism and circumcision were not the same kind of initiation.

IDENTIFICATION

A third meaning of baptism is identification. There can be identification with the church, the body of Christ; but the primary identification is with Christ himself.

Jesus was baptized, so there is some identification with him in that act. However, there is a problem with Jesus' baptism for those who emphasize the meaning of baptism as spiritual cleansing.

Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, who proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4, NRSV). But Christians regard Jesus as sinless and thus as not needing to repent. Christians cannot identify with Jesus in these ways.

Why then was Jesus baptized? When John objected, Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15, NRSV). The complete meaning of Jesus' statement is not entirely clear.

Can Christians somehow identify with Christ in his fulfilling of all righteousness? Perhaps Jesus, without sin, was showing his identification with humans.

It was Paul who gave a strong and striking interpretation of baptism as identification with Christ. In Rom. 6:3-5 Paul thinks of baptism as symbolizing death, burial and resurrection in relation to Christ. There is mention of Christ's own death and resurrection.

Paul then associates Christ's being raised from the dead with Christians' being raised to walk "in newness of life." Paul further associates the death and resurrection of Christ with the (future) death and resurrection of the baptized.

Paul's connection of baptism with

crucial events in Christ's ministry is symbolized only through immersion, not through sprinkling or pouring. Also, infants cannot identify with Christ, but believers can and do.

What if some faith groups immerse believers while also thinking that baptism has a special power? There are those who reject such immersions ("alien immersions"), reasoning that the candidates and authorizing bodies do not have the proper associated beliefs.

The supposedly wrong associated beliefs appear to overwhelm and overrule the symbolism of identification with Christ. But is the proper remedy to immerse again or to revise any unapproved associated beliefs?

CONCLUSIONS

After all of these considerations, what may we conclude from this survey of meanings? All of the major meanings of Christian baptism have some amount of biblical support. They are all "right" in that sense.

Difficulties arise when there are extended interpretations that are often debatable. We should not allow extended interpretations to overwhelm the major meanings.

But what is the relationship of the original meanings? I believe that identification with Christ, including Christian beliefs about his death and resurrection, is the most important meaning for Christian baptism.

Also, the initiation involved with Christian baptism should be understood as identification with Christ and with his followers. Further, the spiritual cleansing of sins associated with baptism comes not simply through water but through Christ.

Baptism that is right for Christians is the baptism that emphasizes Christ. He is the most important consideration for Christian baptism. **NFJ**

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



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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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Inspired Creativity

In search of a Jesus worldview

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

“How about a Jesus worldview?”

Editor John Pierce raised this question in the March/April issue of *Nurturing Faith Journal*. He noted the more-popular “Christian” and “biblical” worldviews are often no more than mirror images of one’s personal prejudices and biases.

Not surprising, many evangelicals respond defensively to the charge that they alarmingly downplay the significance of Jesus. Yet within American evangelical Christianity, often Jesus is praised as the pathway to otherworldly salvation, while his earthly worldview (kingdom of God) as evidenced in the Gospels is minimized, redefined or ignored.

It is striking to realize how often Christians will forsake the “Christ” in “Christianity” to focus on alternatives that reinforce the status quo of dominant religious and cultural structures.

According to some evangelicals, many Baptists in particular, Jesus is inadequate as the “criterion” or standard through which the Bible is to be interpreted. Why? Because Jesus’ openness as depicted in the Gospels results in a more inclusive, welcoming approach than they find comfortable — threatening their majoritarian, exclusive theology and political ideology and practices.

As heard from one high-profile Baptist leader recently, Jesus gets dismissed as too meek to deal with modern realities.

Such evangelicals, affirming so-called Christian or biblical worldviews, prefer highly authoritarian and aggressive leaders (always male) who promise privilege over and protection from “others” who threaten their power and prestige, including growing minorities, immigrants, refugees and non-Christians.

In our data-saturated world, the absence of a Jesus worldview can be verified rather than just assumed. Following is one way to do so.

Simply type the words “christian worldview” in your Google search bar. Google will provide you with multiple suggested searches beginning with the phrase and paired with additional words.

You will be prompted toward “christian worldview news,” “christian worldview videos,” “christian worldview books,” “christian worldview film,” “christian worldview radio,” and other related options,

Likewise, type “biblical worldview” in your Google search bar and you will be prompted with many similar, multiple suggestions.

Each of these suggestions, drawn from Google’s vast database of online user searches, represents popular search queries beginning with “christian worldview” or “biblical worldview.”

Now try typing “jesus worldview” in the Google search bar. What appears in the search bar?

Nothing. That’s right, nothing.

This simple exercise shows that, statistically, no one is searching for a “jesus worldview” — not news or books or films or videos or radio programs or anything else.

A Jesus worldview is not something many people think about very seriously, much less live or search for.

Nurturing Faith, however, is committed to helping Christians better understand and embrace a Jesus worldview. Our very name reflects the value system of the Jesus of the Gospels: an inclusive, nurturing faith, rather than an exclusive, authoritarian faith.

Nurturing Faith seeks to provide helpful information and resources for discerning and living authentic faith as expressed in our mission statement to provide “relevant and trusted information, thoughtful analysis and inspiring features, rooted in the historic Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience, for reflective Christians seeking to live out a mature faith in a fast-changing culture.”

This signature journal and Bible studies, along with an expanding digital presence, quality books, engaging experiences and

TRUTH & JUSTICE PROJECT

The Truth & Justice Project of Nurturing Faith, directed by Bruce Gourley, will bring a sharper focus to important contemporary issues within the context of a Jesus worldview through conversations, resources and programs designed to stimulate congregational engagement, enhance pastoral leadership, and encourage faithful Christian living.

The Truth & Justice Project will be funded by gifts above and beyond the current and needed support of the overall ministry of Nurturing Faith. One-time, monthly or annual gifts may be made online at nurturingfaith.net/give-now (designated for “TJP”) or by check.

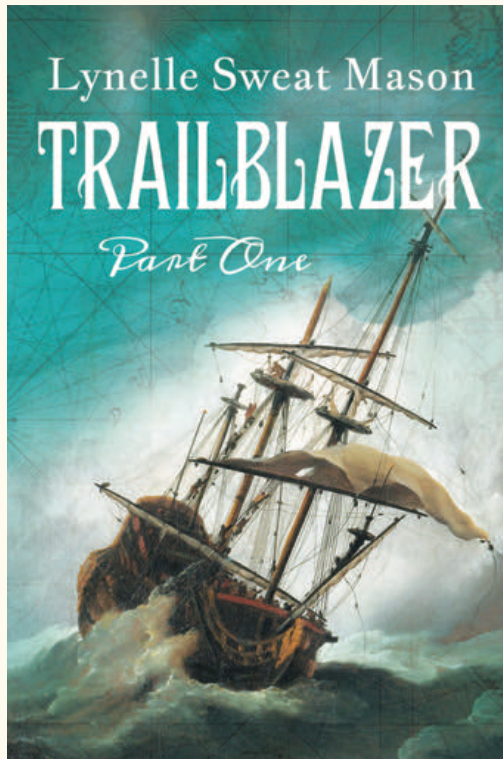
To personally discuss this expanded ministry of Nurturing Faith focused on a Jesus worldview, please contact Bruce Gourley at (406) 599-1754 or bgourley@nurturingfaith.net.

special events, all serve to help fulfill our mission. Now a new step is ahead, focused squarely on “developing a Jesus worldview.”

We are pleased to introduce this latest expansion of our ministry called “Truth & Justice Project” — that will debut in the next edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal*, yet not be confined to the publication alone. The project will consist of a special section in the journal, digital resources, congregational workshops, special events and more.

My own work with Nurturing Faith, guiding the Truth & Justice Project, will expand as support for this project grows. The goal is simple: To enlarge the Jesus worldview among those baptized in his name — and to present a public image of the Christian faith that reflects the Christ of the Gospels. **NFJ**

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The trowel of careful study and exegesis can unearth layers of meaning in the Bible that have long been overlooked. Tony Cartledge provides this type of thorough examination in his book, *Five Scrolls for All Times*, in which he tackles these tough texts:



The book of Ruth is familiar to many Christians as a story of love and devotion — but not for its deeper significance.

Esther is a lesser known heroine whose story is more convoluted and troubling than it appears.

The Song of Songs, with its frank eroticism, has frightened pious clerics into masking its message with allegory.

The dark books of Lamentations and Ecclesiastes may send readers fleeing to higher literary ground lest they become too deeply enmeshed in the hard questions of life.

Travel with Tony Cartledge as he digs beneath surface pleasantries in these five books to discover the clever, hopeful, skeptical, sorrowful, delightful, and sometimes naked characters beneath.



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THEOLOGY for the PEOPLE

The Shack: A good case for a good God

A REVIEW BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The movie adaptation of *The Shack* is a wonderful gift for anyone who believes in divine goodness and human redemption. And it's hard to imagine a greater gift than redemption.

Especially those of us from a Christian tradition — that understands God to be revealed and experienced as more than one person — should marvel at this good work. The God-persons in the movie make a more compelling case than scholarly Trinitarian formulas or a children's sermon involving an egg.

You know, with its shell, white and yolk, it remains just one egg. Yet a rare two-yolk egg has brought unplanned heresy to a few sanctuaries over the years.

To nitpick some narrow doctrinal issue with the movie is to miss the big picture — the same way fundamentalist Christians tend to view the Bible.

Like the Trinity, the movie (which is not some creed to be recited in a particular denominational setting) is three-in-one: a case for God's goodness; a creative Trinitarian expression (though a fourth and needed person arrives just in time and should satisfy those with a Father-heavy view of God); and, most of all, a remarkable story of human redemption.

It is a well-constructed theodicy (a case for the goodness of God in the face of evil) that far exceeds most "Christian" films that



shallowly address the problem of evil that theologians and all thinking persons have wrestled with for centuries upon centuries with insights but never full resolution.

The Shack constructs no straw men to be whisked away with a quoted Bible verse or the heroics of some social-outcast believer. As in real life, the question of why bad things happen to good people is not fully answered; it never will be in this earthly experience.

However, God is confronted with such troubling questions, and not let off the hook for insufficient answers. Yet God's love is as persistent as the Apostle Paul poetically described it to the Corinthians. And, ultimately, it can and does bring healing to the human heart while mysteries remain.

In the film, the deep pain of loss and sorrow is real and never downplayed or dismissed. And forgiveness is painfully hard work. Redemption comes from a gracious God but is not always easy to accept — and especially not easy to grant to those who've done great harm.

It is hard to image a better portrayal of Jesus than the one in the film. He is patient and kind and wholly (and holy) invested in a struggling individual — even in miraculous ways. He opens the door to a hopeful future by giving a glimpse into eternity. And anyone who thinks the cross is somehow absent didn't pay enough attention to his words, works or wrists.

Picking out some doctrinal deficiency seems trite in light of this moving story of a lost soul being found and restored through amazing grace. Even if compelled to do so, it would have been hard to see through misty eyes.

The criticism heard most often from some Christians is that the movie portrays a broader understanding of God's grace than one's narrowly prescribed "plan of salvation." Which leaves me wondering if such discomfort comes from the fearful, perhaps even jealous, possibility that redemption may reach beyond our well-constructed, exclusive religious clubhouses.

I'm comfortable leaving the extent of God's grace up to God. If it reaches to me, then it has the power to reach anywhere God chooses.

In light of God's great love and grace — revealed in the Bible, in this film and often in daily living — it seems quite likely, to me, that Jesus' acceptance of us is less bounded than any human concept of accepting Jesus.

The least of my concerns today is grace that goes too far. **NFJ**



First Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia is celebrating 200 years of faith and community with the publication of a bicentennial history volume.

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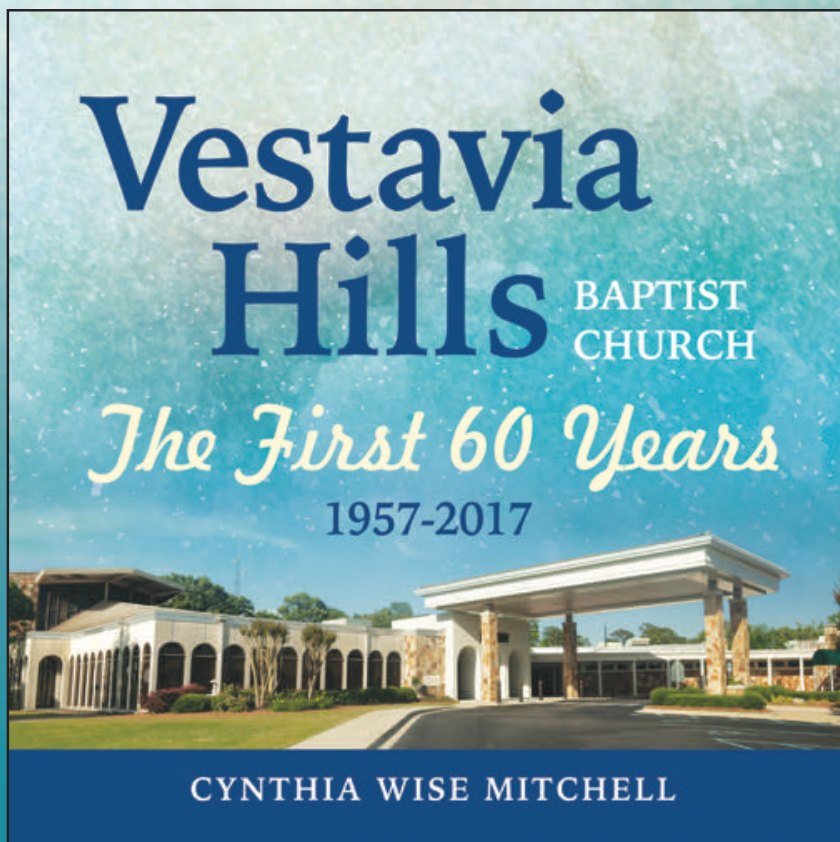
The Story of the First Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia

BY BRUCE T. GOURLEY

Published by Mercer University Press and Baptist History and Heritage Society

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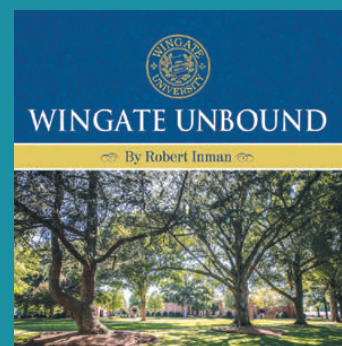
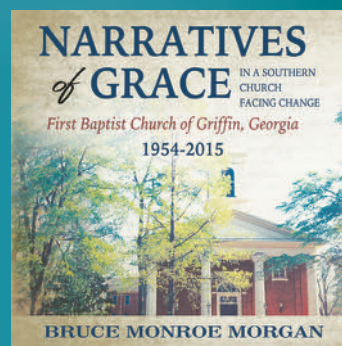
For its 60th anniversary, VHBC members wanted a history that would be accessible and inviting to old and new members alike. They embraced the idea of the church's story told largely through photographs, and are very pleased with the finished product. Editor Jackie Riley and artistic designer Vickie Frayne are so competent and professional. Getting the job done felt overwhelming at times, but they eased my anxieties and answered every question promptly. They cared about the book as much as we did.

—CYNTHIA WISE MITCHELL
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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.



Nurturing Faith Publishing provides the level and detail of service needed — whether starting with concept and writing or our receiving a completed manuscript with art. To begin the conversation, contact Managing Editor Jackie Riley at jriley@nurturingfaith.net.

Frances FitzGerald tracks how evangelicals lost their way

A REVIEW BY DAVID GUSHEE

Religion News Service

Frances FitzGerald's massive new tome, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*, is the most important new book on evangelicals in many years. Everyone who cares about religion in America must read it.

Reading this book during the Lenten season, and completing it during Holy Week, may have contributed to my primary take on the book: that evangelicals very badly lost their way. And they did so because their gospel stopped being about the love of God in Jesus Christ, demonstrated most profoundly at the cross, and instead became a reactionary jeremiad about saving America by electing Republican politicians and fighting culture wars.

The author is not an evangelical insider and does not make that claim. But she offers all the evidence necessary for me to make it, aided by nearly 40 years as a participant in American evangelical Christianity.

That's not all the book is about, of course. FitzGerald offers a comprehensive history of American evangelicals that traces their story all the way back to the 18th century. With considerable though not flawless grasp of detail, the book tells the American evangelical story with remarkable comprehensiveness.

I was especially struck by her tracing of distinctive northern and southern evangelicisms, her description of the explosive growth of Pentecostalism and her elegiac take on the arc of Billy Graham's career, whose entanglement with Richard Nixon ended up foreshadowing the later course of politicized evangelicalism.

The last half of the book slows down, covering only the period since the rise of Jerry Falwell and the Christian right in the 1970s. FitzGerald has reported directly

on conservative evangelicalism since that period, and that reporting shows up in these lengthy chapters.

Pretty much everything there is to be said about Falwell, Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, Richard Land, James Dobson and a cast of thousands of earnest (and sometimes clownish) Christian rightists can be found here.

Perhaps newer to most readers will be FitzGerald's discussion of the splintering of American evangelicalism in the aftermath of what she calls the "unfortunate George W. Bush." As a participant in much of the history she recounts, I know most of the people she describes as "new evangelicals" (for example, Joel Hunter, Richard Cizik and Jim Wallis) along with those in a still-conservative but less rigid group such as Russell Moore. She tells this post-2006 story very well indeed.

FitzGerald concludes that the old angry white guy Christian right is slowly dying out, and shows that the political energy of the white conservative Christian right mainly moved to the Tea Party by 2010 and then to the Trumpistas in 2016. That still makes them a potent political force (for a while longer), but this version of "Christian" politics is even more morally compromised and less recognizably Christian than in the Falwell-Robertson days.

FitzGerald's subtitle is *The Struggle to Shape America*. Therein lies the problem, not with the book, but with the movement. The Christian faith is not fundamentally about shaping America or any other country. It is fundamentally about nurturing a community of human beings who will faithfully follow Jesus. This is where American evangelicals went wrong.

FitzGerald knows that evangelicalism is a global community but shows that American evangelicalism is very deeply American. So even from the 19th-century, American evangelicals had a tendency to identify their own community and its concerns with that of America writ large.

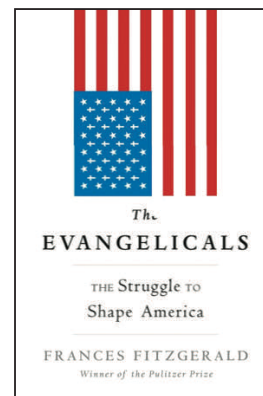
She especially shows that after the massive social changes of the 1960s, evangelicalism became very deeply white-male-reactionary American. This evangelical white-male-reactionary-Americanism came to override the Christian gospel or even to define it. The gospel was not about Jesus, but about nostalgia for a lost America where our guys, and our values, were unquestioned.

In the end, the result was an unholy marriage of top evangelical leaders to the Republican Party and conservative lobbyists and operatives. In reaction, a smaller group of evangelical progressives also became involved in similar conjugal relations with the Democrats and their lobbyists and operatives.

When religious folk get entangled with secular politicians in the political arena, the politicians always win. They have home field advantage. The earnest religious types get played. And the people in the pews start heading for the exits.

Faithful Christian discipleship does involve bearing witness to Christian convictions in public. But drawing the line between this dimension of Christian proclamation, on the one hand, and getting used by politicians, on the other, has proved very difficult for evangelical Christians since at least Billy Graham.

It's a sordid story, and it has shaped American religion and public life for more than a generation. **NFJ**



“False/misleading information is only as effective as it is believed and shared.”

Gullibility leads to false witness

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Phineas Taylor Barnum, “P.T.,” for short, may have underestimated the birthrate of suckers. And among them are many who have been born twice.

False information accepted and advanced as truth has been around for as long as humanity. However, the recent and enormous increase in the sources for dispensing such information is staggering.

Charlatan preachers who once dispensed bad theology beneath tents moved to the airwaves. Hollow political promises are now spread on Twitter rather than atop a stump. Over-hyped products are pushed on infomercials, and through annoying (but obviously effective) popup ads rather than by snake oil barkers on a wagon.

Social media create a constant swirl of misinformation that is liked, shared, retweeted and repeated without regard for its source or truthfulness.

One can rightly blame those who produce and push false information for their own advantage, but here’s one sure truth: **False/misleading information is only as effective as it is believed and shared.**

And many Christians seem eager to do both with little or no critical analysis and careful verification by reliable sources that lead to effective discernment of truth.

It is easier to copy and paste, or assume and accept what someone offers as truth, even “biblical” truth, than to actually discern the truth if it requires a little patience and homework.

Often what is embraced and shared as truth has no basis in reality, but simply sounds good and fits neatly with one’s preconceived notions. That is, it accomplishes one’s purpose or reinforces one’s preferred viewpoint.

The acceptance and spreading of misinformation as truth can result from mental and spiritual laziness. Martin Luther King Jr. said it well: “Nothing pains some people more than having to think.”

Gullibility is difficult to address without coming across as calling people stupid. But let’s face it: naïveté is rampant among American evangelicals.

And while gullibility may not be a familiar theme of sin-focused sermonizing, its result is carved in stone: Thou shall not bear false witness.

It is important to be cautious when accepting and especially sharing that which is purported to be true. Being duped, and then passing along that deception is never helpful to oneself or to others.

While gullibility is not the sole property of Christians or one segment of the church, parroting of false information is certainly an issue of concern for people who claim a strong commitment to truth.

This matter deserves our attention, and it helps to begin by tracing back to the roots.

I’d suggest that those most susceptible

to embracing and advancing unanalyzed misinformation are driven more by fear than compassion. “Truth” becomes what makes one feel more secure.

Another factor may well be how comfortable one is living with mystery.

The desire for certainty — often in the form of black-and-white answers to life’s complexities — can cause blind allegiance to autocratic, authoritarian personalities of a religious and/or political bent — who make their livings off of uncritical thinkers.

So how do we fill the gullibility gap? How do we become better known as seekers rather than suckers?

First, we must affirm Jesus’ clear proclamation that truth, not comfort, sets us free.

Just because we like how something sounds — or someone ties a biblical reference to it or speaks it in an authoritative voice — doesn’t make it true. Truth is not determined by what we want it to be.

Second, we must take the time and energy to analyze that which often masquerades as truth before embracing and sharing it as such.

Should we be suspicious? Skeptical?

Yes! Yes! We need to be cautious, critical, thoughtful — while remaining kind.

Jesus put it this way: “... be wise (shrewd) as serpents and gentle as doves” (Matt. 10:16 NASB).

Otherwise, those who claim an allegiance to ultimate truth become, even unknowingly, bearers of false witness. And that’s not the kind of witness to which we are called. **NFJ**

Blogs, daily news, events, social media connections
and more may be found at nurturingfaith.net



What the donkey dung said . . .

By Tony W. Cartledge

Archaeologists in the southernmost stretch of the Wadi Arabah recently uncovered a surprising find — clods of 3,000-year-old donkey dung in an amazing state of preservation.

The ancient ordure was found piled against the inside of a fortified wall near the gatehouse of a copper mining camp in the Timna Valley of southern Israel.

The desert site, pockmarked with mining pits and piles of slag from the refining process, has been known since at least 1934, when Nelson Glueck identified the sandstone mesa as a mining camp and called it “Slave’s Hill.”

Scoops of poop were apparently collected and dried for use as fuel in furnaces that heated the blue copper ore to extract liquid metal from it.

So why should anyone care?

Bible readers might care, because a radiocarbon analysis of the dung (along with other organic materials from the same strata) dated it to the 10th century BCE — an Iron Age site from the time of King Solomon.

Archaeologist Erez Ben-Yosef of Tel Aviv University, who began excavating the site in 2013, told *National Geographic* that scholars had previously thought it was an older, Late Bronze Age site from the 13th and 12th centuries BCE, probably operated by Egyptians.

Glueck had argued more than 80 years ago that several sites along the Wadi Arabah dated from Solomon’s time. Many later scholars laughed at his contention, but recent finds appear to be validating his views.

An analysis of preserved seeds and pollen spores in the desiccated dung tells us more: at least some of the animals’ feed was “donkeyed” in from an area near the Mediterranean Sea some 100 miles to the



Credit: Yorgos GR | Shutterstock

north. The food consisted of grape pomace (the pulp remaining after grapes are pressed in wine-making) and hay — not ordinary straw — according to Yosef’s scholarly report in the *Journal of Archaeological Science*.

The site is so desolate that everything (including water) had to be carried in from miles away, but metal was so valuable that it was worth the considerable effort.

What the three-millennia-old manure doesn’t tell us is who drove the donkeys, dug the ore, manned the furnaces, and transported the copper back to whoever was financing the project.

Archaeologists now think the most likely candidates are early Edomites — but aren’t ruling out a connection with Solomon, who claimed the area and may have either commissioned the mines or taken tax or tribute from the miners. The camp’s surprising system of fortifications indicates it was

a military target, but whether its guards were working for the Israelites or defending against them is unclear.

Biblical accounts of Solomon’s building activities, including the temple in Jerusalem, indicate that he would have required enormous quantities of bronze, which is usually about 88 percent copper and 12 percent tin. David, according to 1 Chron. 22:14, collected huge stockpiles of gold and silver, in addition to “bronze and iron beyond weighing.”

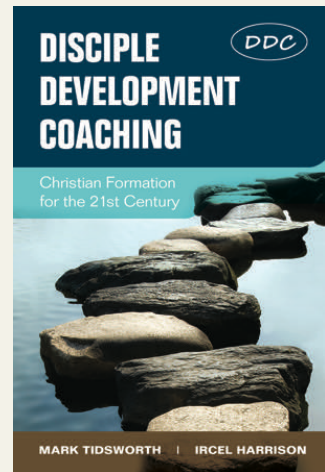
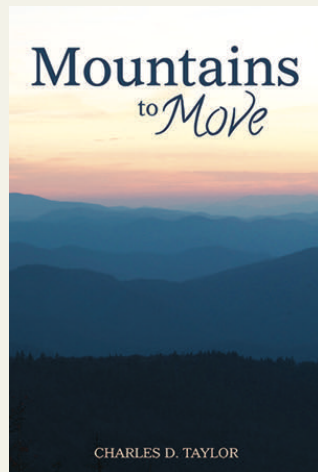
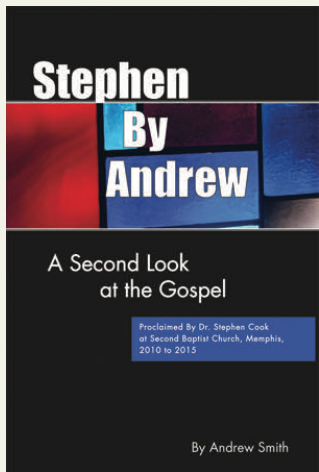
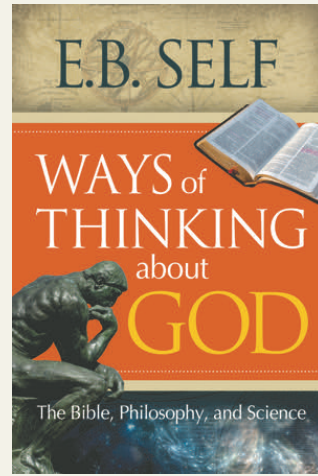
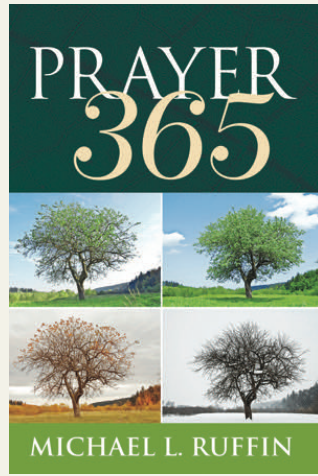
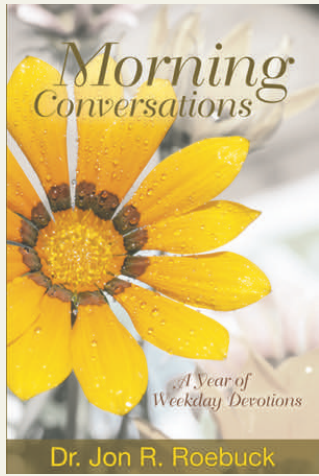
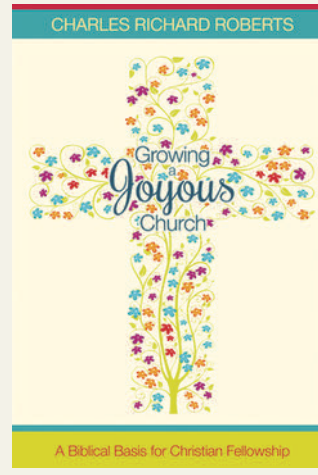
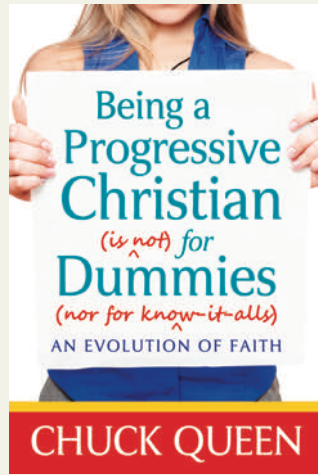
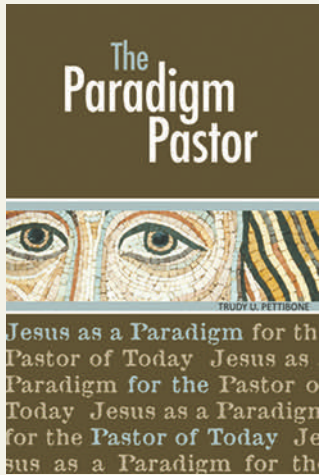
Enormous slag piles at sites in the Timna Valley, as well as at Khirbat En-Nahas (further north in the Wadi Arabah, where slag piles were 20 feet deep), testify to the large amounts of copper that were taken from the area. A good portion of it, by hook or by crook, could have ended up embellishing Jerusalem’s architecture or arming Israel’s soldiers.

The donkey’s dung doesn’t tell us all we’d like to know, but provides an intriguing glimpse into the hard lives of ancient miners and international trade.

Who would have thought it? **NFJ**

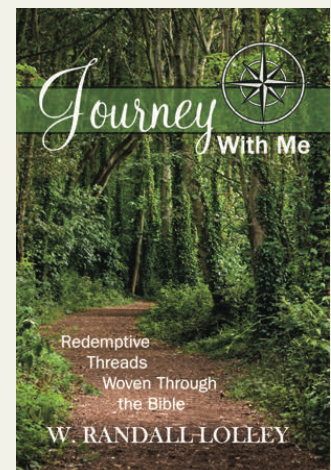
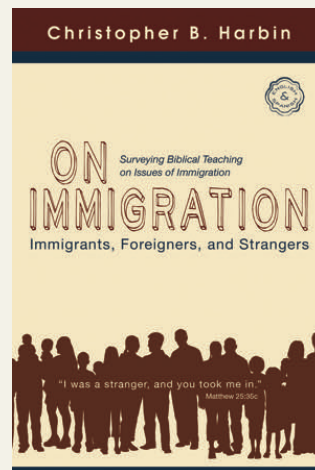
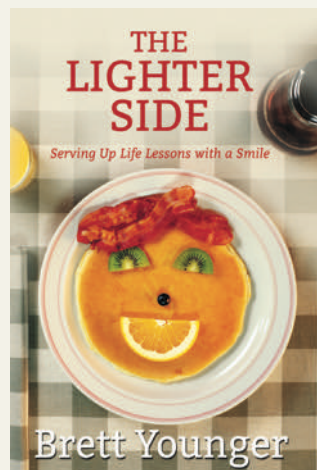
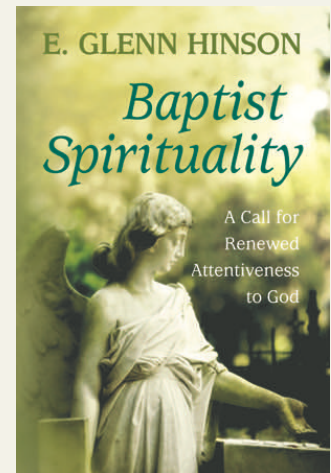
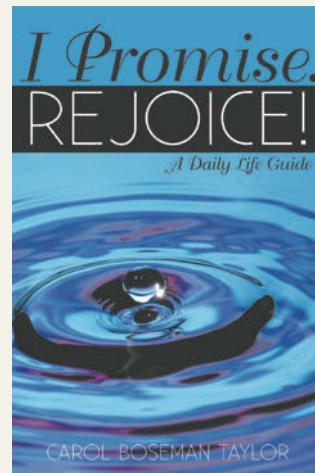
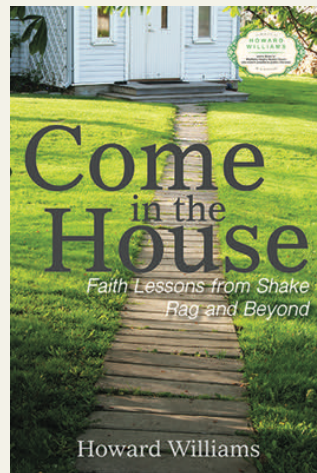
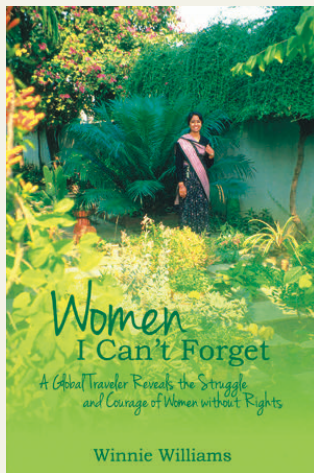
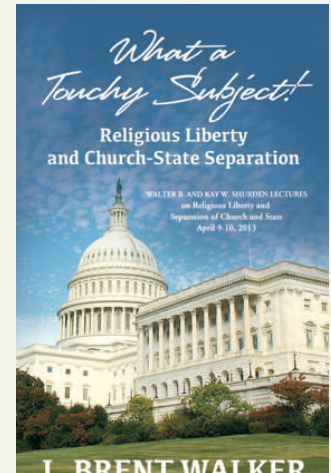
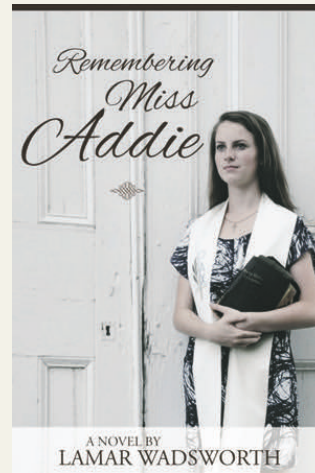
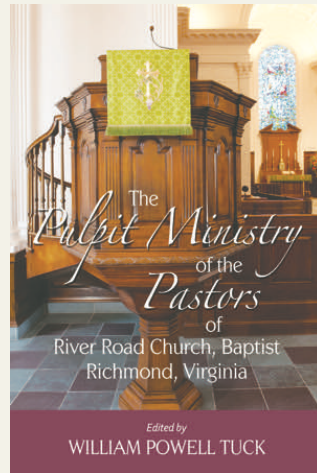
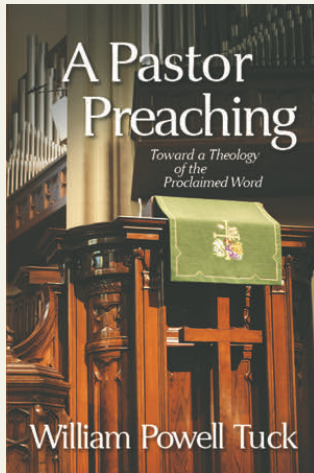


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Deep & wide

Together we can deepen our support and expand our influence

BY JOHN F. BRIDGES
Director of Development

Many of us remember the catchy Sunday school children's tune: "Deep and wide, Deep and wide, There's a fountain flowing, Deep and wide."

Since joining the Nurturing Faith team last year, I have confirmed time and again the deep and wide loyalty, devotion and commitment to this expanding publishing ministry. I commend you, and thank you for the many ways you support this good and needed work.

One of my goals as director of development is to work with you to find new ways to deepen and expand that loyalty to enlarge

the support for this beloved ministry. With your help, this can be done.

Here are a few ways:

- If you are a monthly donor, please consider increasing your gift. Even a little more each month adds up when several of us do so.
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- If you are a long-time supporter, please give prayerful consideration to including Nurturing Faith/Baptists Today in your estate plans — to secure the future of this uniquely valuable ministry.



Let me hear from you!

Please know that I would love to talk with you about ways your stewardship can make a real impact through Nurturing Faith. You may reach me at (704) 616-1725 or jbridges@nurturingfaith.net. **NFJ**

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Questions Christians ask scientists

Do you think extraterrestrial life is out there, and if so, what is its theological significance? — Maxine Williams, Atlanta, Ga.

The Christian tradition doesn't say much about extraterrestrial life. Well, actually, it says nothing at all about it.

But our faith does tell us about God, and one of God's attributes is creativity. It is in the nature of God to be endlessly inventive when it comes to life.

Genesis 1–3, Psalm 104, Job 38–41, and other passages describe the works of an innovative, imaginative, ingenious and indefatigable Creator.

The author of Genesis is clear about the deliberate care God takes with the fish of the sea and beasts of the land. The psalmist overflows with praise in the presence of God's creations: the lion, the hyrax, the cedar, the stork.

Job is taken on a cosmic tour during which God praises the deer, the eagle, the vulture and the mountain goat, among other odd and remote creatures. Throughout scripture the living world provides evidence of God's creative nature.

Today we know more about the earth's biodiversity than we did when the Bible was written. Even though there is much more for us to learn, we are sure of this: life is everywhere it can be. It thrives in the deepest trenches of the oceans and on the highest mountaintops and at the outer extremes of temperature and humidity.

In 2013 scientists reported that bacteria were found living a half-mile under the Antarctic ice. Life has also been found thousands of feet below the ocean floor — itself 8,500 feet deep — off the northwestern coast of the United States.

Some creatures are miracles of hardiness. Tiny animals called tardigrades can withstand temperatures from -458 to $+300^{\circ}\text{F}$, radiation hundreds of times more intense than the lethal dose for humans, and the vacuum of outer space.

And there's more: "[Tardigrades] can go without food or water for more than 30



BY PAUL WALLACE

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.

years, drying out to the point where they are 3 percent or less water, only to rehydrate, forage and reproduce," says Wikipedia. They like moss and lichen a lot but live nearly everywhere, from the peaks of mountains to the floor of the sea, in deserts, in rainforests, on volcanoes, in Antarctica.

Tardigrades are just one example. Earth is wholly saturated with life: there are at least 10,000 bird species; 6,000 red algae species; 15,000 moss species; a million insect species; and the list goes on and on.

Life shows up and persists and diversifies everywhere it can. This is divine creativity, praised in scripture and revealed in the world around us: gratuitous, generous, extravagant, overflowing.

It seems that, given the endless forms of life with which God has blessed and filled every corner and fold of our home planet, the same rule might apply to the cosmos itself: out among the stars, perhaps

life is everywhere it can be. Perhaps God's creativity demands it.

So, is life really out there, intelligent or not?

We've been working on this question for decades. For many years this work was largely a hunt for radio communications from outer space, but recently it has focused on finding planets orbiting stars other than the sun. Thanks to the success of this effort, the search for extraterrestrial life is in a kind of golden age today.

When I first took astronomy in 1987 there were no planets known to exist outside our solar system, and by the time I started teaching the subject in 1997 we knew of only three such planets. Many more of these bodies, known as extrasolar planets or exoplanets, have been discovered in the decades since.

There are now 3,483 confirmed exoplanets and 4,496 exoplanet candidates. The study of these planets might give us clues about the origin, evolution, and fate of our own planet and solar system. But the true driver behind exoplanet research is the question: Are we alone?

Planets are important because not even tardigrades can survive for too long on a star or in outer space. Life as we know it requires liquid water, which can only exist in regions close to stars (so the water won't freeze) but not too close (so the water won't vaporize).

Planets such as the earth, where water can exist as a liquid, are, we believe, the best possible candidate sites for life, and perhaps the only possible sites. Hence the great interest in studying exoplanets.

All of these thousands of exoplanets and exoplanet candidates are nearby, at least when measured on the scale of the Milky Way, our home galaxy. Current technology simply can't detect planets beyond our stellar neighborhood.

But if we assume that our neighborhood is not unusually rich in planets — and

we have no reason to believe that it is — there must be at least 100 billion planets in the Milky Way alone. (And the Milky Way is only one of hundreds of billions of galaxies in the visible universe.)

With such an incomprehensibly vast number of planets to choose from, and keeping in mind God's apparent tendency to squeeze life into every possible cranny and fold, it is difficult to not believe that there's some kind of life out there, even intelligent life.

But if intelligent life is out there, we don't know about it, and that's odd.

Enrico Fermi, one of the great physicists of the 20th century, is known for many things: he developed the first nuclear reactor, worked on the Manhattan Project, and did important work in several branches of theoretical physics. But he is most widely known for the so-called "Fermi Paradox."

This paradox is simply stated: If life is common in the galaxy, where is everybody? His argument is that if the galaxy hosts an abundance of life, we would know it.

If even one civilization had a million-year head start on us — the briefest of times, cosmically speaking — then it should have colonized the Milky Way by now, and its presence would be obvious. But we have zero evidence of life, much less intelligent life, beyond our own fair planet.

So we have good reasons for thinking ET is out there, and good reasons for thinking it's not.

Which is it? Both possibilities are interesting, but only the former seems to challenge traditional Christian beliefs. The Bible was written, and Christianity was developed, under the assumption that humans were the only intelligent corporeal beings in the cosmos. If this is not true, then all kinds of questions follow.

For example, Genesis 3 says that somehow, some way, humanity has been wounded. Some call Adam and Eve's disobedience a crisis of pride, some call it a fall, some call it a coming of age. Whatever it was, our eyes were opened. We saw our own

nakedness and felt shame for the first time. We were wounded, changed forever.

This change is manifested (at least partly) in alienation from one another and from God and from creation. The incarnation of God in Jesus is a divine response to that problem, a way of reconciling us to one another, to God, and to creation, of drawing us back into communion. Jesus is God's way of healing our wounds.

So if extraterrestrial intelligence is out there, we may fairly ask: Has ET been wounded? Is ET in need of God to become incarnate on its behalf? Is there a space alien equivalent of Jesus out there somewhere? And if ET has not been wounded, how have they avoided it?

This is just one avenue of theological discussion that opens up when extraterrestrial life is taken seriously. And we as Christians should take it seriously.

Our God, after all, does not seem modest when it comes to the making of living things down here on Earth. And who are we to put limits on divine creativity? **NFJ**



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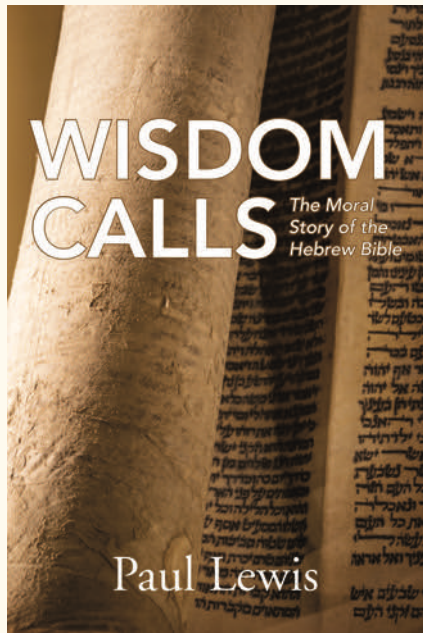
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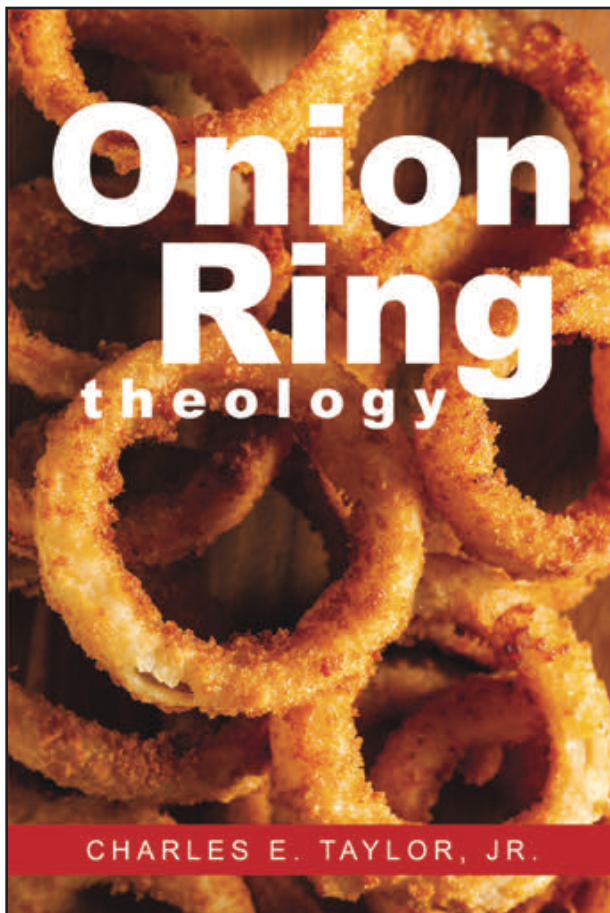
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