

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2017

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Temple Mount so
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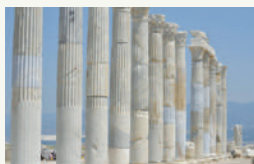


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See page 21 for more information.

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OUR TEAM

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

John D. Pierce
editor@nurturingfaith.net

CHIEF OPERATIONS OFFICER

Julie Steele
jsteele@nurturingfaith.net

MANAGING EDITOR

Jackie B. Riley
jriley@nurturingfaith.net

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR / CURRICULUM WRITER

Tony W. Cartledge
cartledge@nurturingfaith.net

ONLINE EDITOR / CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Bruce T. Gourley
bgourley@nurturingfaith.net

DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT

John F. Bridges
jbridges@nurturingfaith.net

PUBLISHER EMERITUS

Walker Knight

CHURCH RESOURCES EDITOR

David Cassady
sreditor@nurturingfaith.net

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Vickie Frayne
vickie@nurturingfaith.net

CUSTOMER SERVICE MANAGER

Jannie Lister
jlister@nurturingfaith.net

BOOK PUBLISHING MANAGER

Lex Horton
lex@nurturingfaith.net

SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER

Lydia Fields
socialmedia@nurturingfaith.net

EDITOR EMERITUS

Jack U. Harwell

* * *

OUR COLUMNISTS

The Lighter Side – Brett Younger

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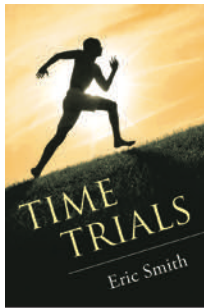
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Nurturing Faith Journal (ISSN 1072-7787) is published bimonthly by: Baptists Today, Inc., P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318 • Subscription rates: 1 year, \$24; 2 years, \$42; 1 year groups of 25 or more, \$18; 1 year groups of less than 25, \$24; 1 year Canada, \$42; 1 year foreign, \$100. Periodical postage paid at Macon, Ga. 31208 and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address corrections to: P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318 • (478) 301-5655 • © 2017 Nurturing Faith • All rights reserved.

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**MEDIA: A REVIEW OF
TIME TRIALS**

*Eric Smith runs, writes
for a good cause*

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Yellowstone's Mammoth Hot Springs at sunrise. Photo by John D. Pierce. See page 17 for two Nurturing Faith Experiences set for July 2018 that include exploring and staying in Yellowstone and neighboring places of beauty. Pick the small-group, customized experience for you!



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The ~~ABSENCE~~ of

How Christianity is being redefined apart from its main character

Jesus

BY BRUCE GOURLEY
AND JOHN D. PIERCE

For 30 minutes four evangelical leaders pontificated about the definition and characteristics of a real “biblical worldview.” They were clear about who has one and who does not.

The April podcast featured pollster George Barna, whose recent survey concluded that “Only 17 percent of Christians who consider their faith important and attend church regularly actually have a biblical worldview.”

FALSE HISTORY

Barna was hosted by David Barton, founder of WallBuilders, the organization behind the podcast. Barton is well known for writing false historical accounts of early American life to support his agenda of seeking government favoritism for dominant religious expressions rather than full religious liberty that Baptists once advocated and the nation’s founders enshrined.

Christian publisher Thomas Nelson pulled Barton’s book on Thomas Jefferson in 2012, noting “basic truths just were not there.” Other conservative media have edited or removed videos in which Barton’s claims have been deemed false.

In 2014 Barna and Barton co-wrote a book, published by Charisma House, to further their cause that is helping to redefine Christianity in America in narrow political and doctrinal terms.

Joining the podcast were Barton’s son, Tim Barton, and former Texas state legislator Rick Green.

UNEXCUSED ABSENCE

The four men had much to say about Barna’s findings and what it means for Christians to have a “biblical worldview.” Their primary concerns were opposition to abortion and same-sex relationships, while also blaming the poor for the condition they are in.

The half-hour podcast included little mention of Jesus. Unlike the faithful women who peered into his tomb where the stone had been rolled away, in this modern case, Jesus was basically overlooked.

Something else was more important in defining a true Christian with a biblical worldview than anything that has to do with Jesus and his call to discipleship.

Advancing a political agenda — rooted in the claim that only those who share agreement around a narrow set of beliefs are truly biblical — was the clear goal of this podcast. It is a consistent and exclusive political strategy of American fundamentalism.

TRUE BELIEVERS

According to the podcast participants, true biblical faithfulness — which Barna identifies with only 17 percent of active Christians — is found residing primarily in but one group of believers: “Socially Active Government Engaged Conservatives,” or “SAGE Cons” in abbreviated form.

Such faithfulness is not measured according to Jesus — who is diminished —

but according to one’s agreement with the narrow theological/political agenda that drives WallBuilders and other fundamentalist Christian operations.

Without Jesus as the lens through which scripture is interpreted and faithfulness is judged, a “biblical worldview” can be constructed to justify whatever political allegiance is desired.

Some of the so-called biblical claims are not even present in the Bible — such as the preferred and promoted western view of marriage (including the modern practice of wedding by choice) that ignores ancient understandings of matrimony expressed in varied biblical texts.

This approach is not new: ignoring certain verses that don’t support a preconceived notion while isolating (and interpreting at will) others in order to justify one’s perspective as “biblical.” Believers of all stripes have done this for a long, long time.

However, the use of “worldview” as a tool for redefining Christianity is rather new.

EARLY USE

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

This understanding is consistent with German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) use of *weltanschauung* (translated “worldview”) to refer to one’s

understanding of reality based on available scientific and cultural perspectives. Scholars picked up on that use of the word to refer to a “biblical worldview.”

“A ‘biblical worldview’ in that context was simply the understanding of the world (natural, social, cultural) that accompanied the faith testimonies that are found in the Bible,” explained Colin Harris, a retired Mercer University professor who teaches Bible study at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga.

Therefore, what one *perceived* rather than what one *believed* in a confessional sense defined one’s worldview, making worldviews descriptive rather than prescriptive.

EVOLVING USE

With the rise of the Religious Right in the 1980s, the terms “biblical worldview” and “Christian worldview” began to grow in popularity as ways of *prescribing* a narrow set of doctrinal and political beliefs to define “true Christians” — much in the way Barna’s latest research is shaped and used.

Voter guides, revised confessional statements and other instruments alleged biblical support for particular partisan positions that allowed fundamentalist leaders to dismiss those who might disagree as being opposed to the Bible or just flat not truly Christian.

As with the case of the WallBuilders podcast, Jesus is often downplayed or absent from these matters of determining biblical faithfulness.

It’s worth remembering that Jesus directed his strongest criticism, according to the Gospels, toward those who created litmus tests for judging the righteousness of others according to themselves and their rules of choice.

Jesus squared off with those “teachers of the law” and Pharisees who rejected his teachings of compassion, mercy, love and inclusion and rested their cases on selective readings of Hebrew scripture that Jesus frequently reinterpreted.

Often opening with, “You have heard it said ...,” Jesus would quote an Old Testa-

ment law and then reinterpret it beginning with, “But I tell you ...”

Jesus reinterpreted admonitions against murder to declare that anger is equally offensive (Matt. 5:21-22). Rather than punishing or hating one’s enemies, as Hebrew scripture often instructs and models, Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies (Matt. 5:43-48).

In these and many other instances Jesus reinterpreted scripture through the lens of compassion, mercy, love, and inclusion. He claimed to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17), and that he, not the scriptures at hand, was “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6).

In his gospel account, Matthew reported that those who flocked to hear Jesus “were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (7:28-29).

Yet modern uses of “Christian worldview” and “biblical worldview” (often interchangeable) employ pharisaic methods of constructing narrow and controlling ways to define faithfulness based on standards of righteousness found primarily in one’s mirror.

Rooted in these past experiences Jesus had with legalists, the recent shift in the use of “worldview” has gone from *describing* how someone views the world (scientifically and culturally) to *prescribing* the only narrow, politicized and acceptable ways to be considered “biblical” or even “Christian.”

This approach gives authoritative religious leaders and their favored politicians tools for making exclusive claims about the Christian faith based on criteria of their own choosing — while keeping Jesus on the sidelines.

MEASURING STICKS

It seems odd to be addressing the need to bring Jesus back into Christianity. One would think the very movement that includes his messianic title would be focused on him.

Many Christians have long affirmed Jesus as the fullest revelation of God and the means by which scripture is to be interpreted.

This confession (“The *criterion* by which the Bible is to be interpreted is *Jesus Christ*”) was included in the Southern Baptist faith statement from 1925 until its removal by fundamentalist leadership in 2000.

The primary call heard within many American congregations through the decades and even centuries has been for Jesus to be Savior and Lord — with conversion to be followed by Christian discipleship, defined as faithfully following Jesus in word and deed.

Shifting controversial social issues and doctrinal debates have brought divisions within congregations and fellowships for a long time. Yet, even so, the basic idea that Jesus plays the central role in defining Christian faithfulness was at least acknowledged, if not adhered to.

Today, however, Jesus is often missing in action. There are new politicized worldviews being used to measure biblical fidelity and confirm Christian identity other than seeing how one’s life is viewed through the lens of and in obedience to the one who said, “Follow me!” **NFJ**



Nurturing Faith is exploring new creative and collaborative ways to advance a Jesus worldview. To keep up with how this is taking shape — and to be a part of it — visit jesusworldview.org and/or contact Bruce Gourley, coordinator of the Jesus Worldview Initiative, at bgourley@nurturingfaith.net.

Worth Repeating

“About half of U.S. Protestants (52 percent) say both good deeds and faith in God are needed to get into heaven, a historically Catholic position. The other half (46 percent) say that faith alone is needed to attain salvation.”

—From Pew Research Center survey on opinions
500 years after the Protestant Reformation

“The culture in which we live and move and have our being has changed, but we are killing ourselves trying to maintain a dated congregational culture.”

—Presbyterian minister and blogger Jan Edmiston, on pastoral leadership (Columbia Theological Seminary)

“Christians are much more likely than non-Christians to view poverty as the result of individual failings, especially white evangelical Christians.”

—Julie Zauzmer of *The Washington Post*, on results from a survey by the newspaper and the Kaiser Family Foundation

“The Bible opens with a poem. It’s a beautiful piece of work, but it was never meant to be interpreted as I think some churches do.”

—Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who said his faith outlook broadened through a friendship with minister/author Rob Bell (*OnMilwaukee*)

“I find my faith today so much more compelling than my 20-year-old self, but my 20-year-old self would probably call me a heretic.”

—Pastor Daniel Willson of Williamsburg Baptist Church in Virginia, on broadening of his faith beyond his fundamentalist roots (*Virginia Gazette*)

“An exclusive focus on literal interpretation is a modern phenomenon, because that’s not the way ancient Christians read the Bible.”

—Bible translator Hugh Houghton, professor of New Testament textual scholarship at University of Birmingham (UK), on how the printing press “inspired a sense of exactness of the printed form of the Bible, which was alien to the first 1,500 years of Christianity” (*history.org*)

“Ultimately, the incivility of our society is a spiritual problem that must be addressed. People’s words are disquiet because their souls are disquiet.”

—Richard Kremer, pastor of Vineville Baptist Church in Macon, Ga., in his Aug. 27 sermon titled “The Necessity of Civility”

“The Nashville Statement is a 10-page document signed by yet another cabal of ‘Christian leaders’ during one of the most tumultuous summers in recent memory that unsurprisingly fails to mention anything constructive for people of faith and goodwill to do other than repudiate another group of people whom they have already repudiated ad nauseam.”

—Knoxville, Tenn., pastor and therapist Eric Minton (Red Letter Christians)

“White supremacy and its many permutations ... is antithetical to the Gospel and to Christianity. It is sin.”

—Elijah M. Brown, general secretary of the North American Baptist Fellowship

“White supremacy must not only be denounced; it must also be renounced through concrete acts.”

—From a *Christian Century* editor’s note

“Five of the states — Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee — with the most hate groups are in what’s often called ‘the Bible Belt.’ It must break God’s heart that the Bible Belt is the hate belt.”

—Author and native Tennessean Shane Claiborne (RNS)

“We in the church, and all who love the church, need to keep finding ways to show and tell those who say they have ‘no religion’ that faith — faith in the God who loves them still — can make that life-transforming difference for them and for the world.”

—Bishop of Liverpool, Paul Bayes, after a 2016 study showed more than half of Britons described themselves as having “no religion” (*Evening Standard*)



With gratitude

Sarah Frances Anders of Pineville, La., was a bright and caring Christian leader who for many years tracked the rise of Baptist women in ministry. The longtime sociology professor at Louisiana College and formative leader of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship died June 8 at age 90. Nurturing Faith is grateful for her remarkable life and for the estate gift she left to support the publishing ministry of Baptists Today, Inc.

Don't mess with my WIAB

By John D. Pierce

It is easy to confuse holding firm to one's faith with a reluctance or even refusal to open oneself to the possibility of needed change.

Yes, we know, God is unchanging. But none of us is God nor do we possess the mind and heart of God. Therefore, our ability to better grasp the truth of God and to grow in faith is greatly tied to our willingness and ability to reconsider fresh understandings of God's revealing truth even (or especially) if it conflicts with what we have long held as truth.

Too often the lack of insights, confession and redirection (marks of maturity) is tied to our inflexibility disguised as firm faith. We get saddled with restrictive, self-made fear of change.

Through the years, decades, and centuries faithful Christians have discovered that what once was considered biblical truth was actually not truth at all but a justification for attitudes and understandings that lessened fears and fit well with one's own comfortable ways of seeing the world and bringing about or preserving a preferred societal order.

From historical and scientific assumptions to moral codes for social behaviors, many "truths" have been replaced by new ones — either through a mature, deliberate spiritual process or, for latecomers, by the force of greater social change.

A lack of spiritual growth, often masked as firm faith, is tied to an attitude of "Don't mess with my WIAB" — "What I've

Always Believed."

Often rooted in falsely but deeply held conclusions, supported by "but the Bible says ...," these always-believed beliefs can restrict our growth. We hold on to them because of the comfort they provide as a religious security blanket.

Even when discovered to be wrong, it can be hard to let go of one's WIAB.

After a mind-opening lecture in an introductory New Testament interpretation class, several of us walked toward the student center discussing how these insights made more sense than what we'd learned growing up in church without the benefit of such scholarship — and how we had long misinterpreted a familiar biblical text.

One classmate, however, commented: "Well, that may be right but I like believing it better the other way." Holding too firmly to one's WIAB calls for placing comfort over truth.

The opposite danger is to totally toss aside one's foundational beliefs and faith commitments because of uncertainty. Openness to new possibilities of truth should not be equated with reckless abandonment.

Thoughtful, prayerful analysis and discernment — rooted in the understanding that we never fully comprehend and apply the fullness of divine truth — allows for new light without forfeiting all that has meaning in our lives.

The late John Eddins, who so ably taught theology classes in my seminary days, would say to us: "Hold on to what you have until you have something better to replace it."

That was divine wisdom nearly 40 years ago, and it is a needed word now. In fact, looking back at how our understanding of "truth" has changed through time should

(unless we are too arrogant to admit it) cause us to loosen our grips on our WIABs.

For example, biblically justified discrimination haunts our histories. Firmly held beliefs about scientific theories — based on biblical texts — have been proven wrong. Exclusive, nationalistic claims that suggest divine preference turned out to be sheer arrogance and used as an excuse for abuse.

Change is often the only route to truth.

Firm faith requires a confidence in God but a clear understanding that each of us still has something to learn about divine truth. Indeed God never changes. But our unwillingness to change should never be confused with godliness.

We all need the warning: "Watch your WIAB!" It can get in the way of growth. **NFJ**



MELISSA ROGERS TO RECEIVE 2018 JUDSON-RICE AWARD

Please mark Thursday, April 26, 2018, on your calendars to be in Winston-Salem, N.C., for Nurturing Faith's annual Judson-Rice Award Dinner. The award, created in 2000 to



recognize exceptional and trusted leadership, will be presented to attorney and religious liberty advocate Melissa Rogers. Details and registration will be forthcoming in this journal and online at nurturingfaith.net.

Not so fast!

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

One frustrating aspect of archaeology is that it takes time: No matter how large the team, you can't descend on a promising tel and uncover all of its secrets in one season — or even in 20.

Archaeology is a meticulous business that requires careful digging and constant documentation.

Often the fieldwork takes place for only a few weeks each summer. Sometimes we begin to uncover an interesting pot or installation near the end of a season, and it's tempting to dig it out quickly, but we have to be disciplined enough to cover it back up and wait until next year.

We also have to be tentative about interpreting what we find, but writers in search of an attention-grabbing headline often get ahead of themselves.

This summer, for example, a team from Israel's Kinneret Institute for Galilean Archaeology began uncovering a small part of a previously unexcavated site (called el-Araj) near the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, a few miles northeast of Capernaum.

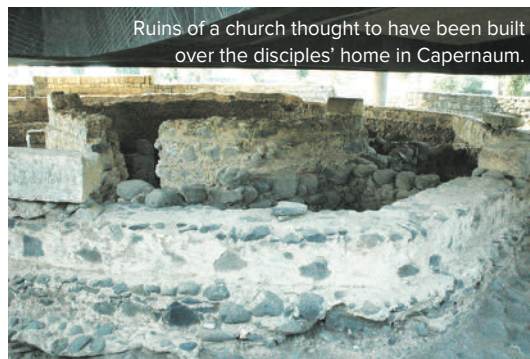
The team worked through remains from the Byzantine period, which included evidence of walls and some pieces of gilded glass that may have been used in a mosaic, suggesting the presence of a fifth-century church.

Two meters further down, team members discovered evidence of Roman occupation from the first to third centuries, C.E., including roof tiles, vents, and a mosaic floor typical of Roman bath houses — an indication that it was once an urban area.

Comparing this to sketchy (and not always reliable) historical records, the excavators proposed that they may have found the site of ancient Bethsaida, because

the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus wrote that Philip the Tetrarch, the son of Herod the Great, turned the Jewish fishing village of Bethsaida into a Roman city, or *polis*, in 30 C.E. Seeking to ingratiate himself to Emperor Tiberius, he renamed the place Julius in honor of Tiberius' mother.

Around 725 C.E., a Bavarian bishop named Willibald made a pilgrimage to Israel, and later wrote that he had visited Bethsaida, where a church had been built over the home of Peter and Andrew. Excavators wondered if the evidence of a fifth century church they discovered could be the same church Willibald described, and thus



further evidence that el-Araj is indeed the site of Bethsaida.

It didn't take long for the archaeologists' speculation to turn into overblown headlines:

"The Lost City of Jesus' Apostles Has Just Been Found, Archaeologists Say" (*Haarezt*, Aug. 8), "New Evidence of Lost City of Julius Unearthed Near Sea of Galilee" (*The Jerusalem Post*, Aug. 6), "Archaeologists May Have Found Apostle Peter's Hometown" (*Baptist Press*, Aug. 11), among others.

Not so fast. The site may indeed be the location of ancient Bethsaida, and its location fits better than the hilltop site at et-Tell, a mile and a half north of the Sea of Galilee, that has also been proposed as Bethsaida.

Likewise, though some Roman period ruins have been found at et-Tell (which was the fortified capital of Geshur a millennium before), they are not yet substantial enough to call it a *polis*.

Over the years, as archaeologists at el-Araj dig deeper and more widely, they may well find remnants of a first century fishing village, but for now it's still a matter of speculation.

And even if they do find compelling evidence that the site is what remains of Bethsaida/Julias, does that make it the home of Peter and Andrew? This is one of those places where the Bible offers a mixed message:

Mark says clearly that the two disciples had a home in Capernaum (Mark 1:21-22). Luke and Matthew follow Mark's lead (Luke 4:31-38, Matt. 8:5-14).

Visitors to Capernaum today can't miss a modern Catholic church on massive stilts, built over the remains of a Byzantine church, which was built over a Roman-era house that appears to have become a sacred site as early as the first century, possibly thought of as the home of Peter and Andrew.

It is the Gospel of John, written later than the other Gospels, that throws a wrench in the works: John 1:44 says that "Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter."

That provides the angle for some publications to juice their headlines by connecting the possible discovery of Bethsaida/Julias to Peter and Andrew, though the preponderance of biblical evidence has them living in Capernaum.

We have good reason to be excited about the new dig at el-Araj, which might well turn out to be the site of Bethsaida — but that's a far cry from claiming anyone has found Peter and Andrew's home. **NFJ**



RECOGNITION — Susan and Frank Broome, who are completing their fourth historic renovation in downtown Macon, Ga., after having to restart following a fire, received the Revitalization Award from Historic Macon Foundation.

Georgia couple helps the old become new

STORY AND PHOTO
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Downtown Macon, Ga., has seen many of its historic structures returned to life in recent years — and Frank and Susan Broome have certainly done their part. Their restoration of four older homes near the Mercer University campus brought recognition this year: the Revitalization Award from Historic Macon Foundation.

The Broomes moved into the downtown Huguenin Heights neighborhood in 2000 and lived in the basement of their first historic home while working evenings and weekends on the rooms above. Their move to Coleman Avenue put Susan near her job as a librarian at Mercer, a position she retired from in 2014 — giving her more time to scrape, sand and paint.

Frank, the first and only coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, will retire at yearend — a few months after he and Susan move into their fourth downtown renovation. Tenants for their

other homes tend to have ties to Mercer, putting school or work and fun (such as Tattnell Square Park) and food (Mercer Village) within easy walking distance.

It takes **vision** to see the potential in a dilapidated house, well beyond its glory years, even when available at a good deal.

It takes **patience** to remove multiple layers of paint from century-old doors, window trim and hardware — hour after hour — as well as an appreciation for the deep-grain beauty beneath.

It takes **time** — more of which will come when both Frank and Susan are retired. Frank said he doesn't fault others who enjoy golf or other pastimes. He'd just rather recreate a rosette or another piece of wood trim that fools the eye into believing it was original to the house.

It takes **commitment** to work with one's spouse on such projects — making choice after choice and dividing tasks not done together — not just on one historic house, but four.

It takes **perseverance** to watch flames leaping from the roof of your nearly

completed renovation and the water used to douse the fire destroying the beautiful wood floors — and then to start over. But that's what the Broomes did last year.

In one sense, such meticulous, hands-on renovation requires and offers delayed gratification — but there are some delights along the way, said the Broomes. They enjoy having family around — some of whom are also their neighbors.

The Broomes have worked with the same trusted contractor on all four projects. He does about 60 percent of the construction. He knows the parts Frank and Susan want to do themselves.

Tax credits are good incentives for historic preservation — but they are not enough to get a couple to purchase and renovate such properties. It takes vision, patience, time, commitment and perseverance — and an appreciation for seeing the old become new.

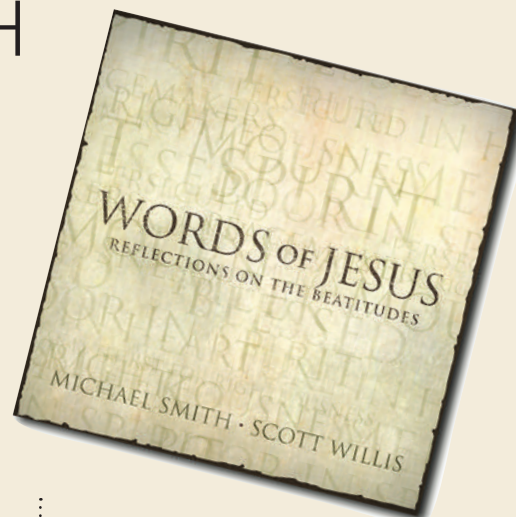
There is something quite biblical about that perspective — something spiritual about stripping away dingy, flaking layers of the past to bring new life. **NFJ**

New Audiobook

FROM NURTURING FAITH

WORDS OF JESUS: REFLECTIONS ON THE BEATITUDES

BY MICHAEL SMITH
AND SCOTT WILLIS



An audio devotional resource featuring commentary written and narrated by Michael Smith and music written by Scott Willis and Thomas Williamson and recorded by Scott Willis. This digital (downloadable) resource includes all audio tracks zipped into one file. Upon purchase, the file can be downloaded to your computer, where it will unpack to provide access to all 9 tracks.



Michael Smith, Ph.D., pastor of Central Baptist Church, Fountain City in Knoxville, Tenn., presents insightful, devotional commentary. He is an author and the former pastor of Second Baptist Church of Memphis and First Baptist Church of Murfreesboro, Tenn.



Scott Willis follows each devotional with an original theme-based song. He is a singer/songwriter and worship leader based in Murfreesboro, Tenn. He served as a Baptist campus minister in Georgia and Arkansas. His music is available at Worship150.com.



Download *WORDS OF JESUS: Reflections on the Beatitudes* for \$18 from nurturingfaith.net.

Included are these devotional tracks (mp3 files):

WORDS OF JESUS INTRODUCTION

SONG: "Words of Jesus"

THEOLOGY OF THE KNEES

SONG: "Poor in Spirit"

HOLY GRIEF

SONG: "Those Who Mourn"

DISARMED

SONG: "Blessed Be the Meek"

I'VE GOT A TASTE FOR

SONG: "They Will Be Filled"

PARDON PAPERS

SONG: "Mercy"

FOCUS

SONG: "Pure in Heart"

AMBASSADORS FOR PEACE

SONG: "Instrument of Your Peace"

PAIN THRESHOLD

SONGS: "Rejoice" / "Words of Jesus"
(Chant)

NYC TREE GIRLS

Christmas dread leads to 'Joy to the World'

BY RICK JORDAN

“I dread Christmas,” the youth minister confessed. “It is so busy, so exhausting. I get sick every December.”

In December 2011, needing a break from the routine, she grabbed some friends and went to New York to watch the lighting of the tree on Rockefeller Plaza. Al Roker led the countdown.

As the tree lit up, the crowd — all ages, races and accents — exploded into song: “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!”

Carol Ann Hoard, youth minister at First Baptist Church of Shelby, N.C., for the past 19 years, burst into tears.

“It was so beautiful — the tree, but also the singing, the celebration. I found Christmas joy in a concrete jungle that I couldn’t find in church.”

Carol Ann is known as a great leader and listener, so in February 2012, when a high school junior committed suicide, the school asked her to visit the students.

“I spent two days sitting on a bean bag, listening to students talk about this amazing guy, Tripp Dedmon, and how much they loved him and missed him.”

In October 2013, Carol Ann, the mother to two boys, met another parent, Tisha, after chaperoning a school orchestra trip together. It turned out that Carol Ann’s sister had been Tisha’s physical education teacher.

They discovered another thing in common: they both loved *The Today Show* and particularly the anchor, Matt Lauer.

When Carol Ann heard Tisha’s last name, Dedmon, she realized that this was Tripp’s mother.

“I have been praying for you,” Carol Ann said, and then told her about the student counseling and the kind words the



SPREADING JOY — North Carolinians Carol Ann Hoard (left) and Tisha Dedmon head to New York City on a mission of “spreading cheer to all who are near.”

students had shared about Tripp. The two women became fast friends.

In October 2015, Carol Ann’s father died and she knew it was going to be a particularly hard Christmas. She wondered, too, what it would be like for Tisha. It would have been Tripp’s 21st birthday.

Tisha confessed: “Christmas, which was once a joyful season for me, has become a season of memories and sadness.”

Remembering her inspiring visit to Rockefeller Plaza, Carol Ann called Tisha to say: “We’re going to New York to see the lighting of the tree — and we are going dressed as Christmas trees!”

Eager for a change of scenery, Tisha asked her family if they thought she should go. “Absolutely!” they said. “You gave birth to [Tripp]; you need to celebrate him.”

The women made outfits of felt

Christmas trees and lights, and hats — each with a star on top. A contact through *The Today Show* made sure they were on TV and got entrance to the ice rink for the tree lighting.

But the most fun came as they simply walked around town and rode the subway.

“Most people in New York are so serious — all work and no eye contact,” said Carol Ann. “But when they saw us, they had to smile. And everyone wanted to take a selfie with us.”

One woman posted her photo with the hashtag #nyctreegirls — and a new moniker was born.

Last year Carol Ann and Tisha went back to New York — this time with the hashtag on business cards along with a motto: “Spreading cheer to all who are near.”

The Today Show staff got into their cheerful spirit too. The women were offered a studio tour, received a video message from Matt Lauer, and had their makeup done by hosts Hoda Kobbt and Kathie Lee Gifford.

The NYC Tree Girls recorded all these events and more via Facebook Live feeds.

“When we got home, the fun didn’t stop,” said Tisha.

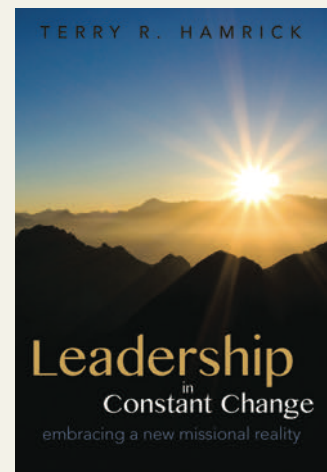
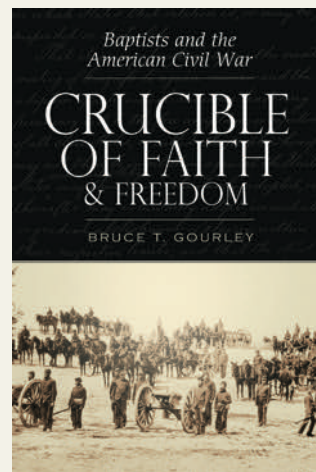
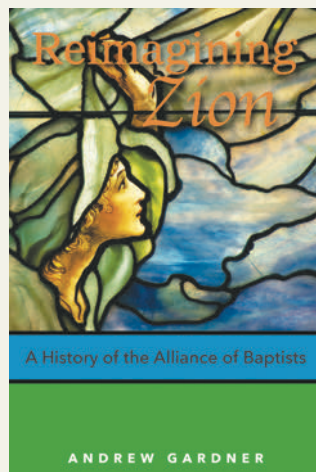
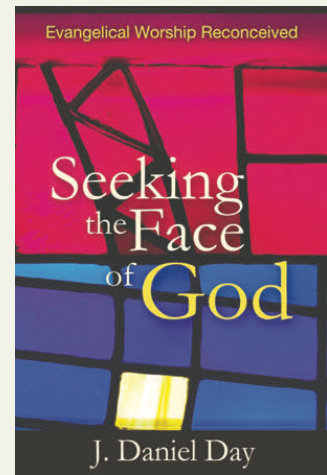
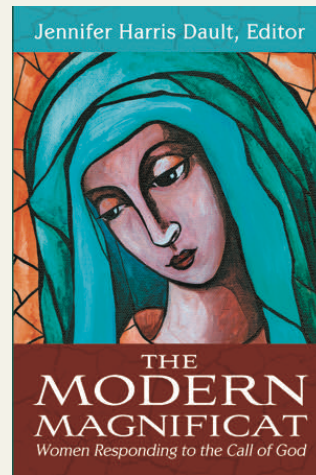
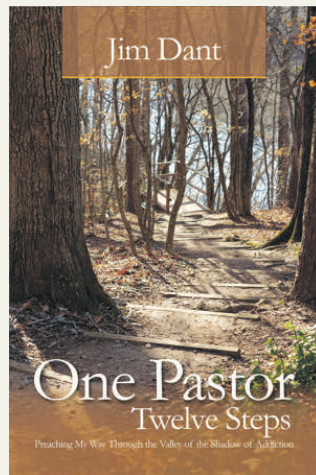
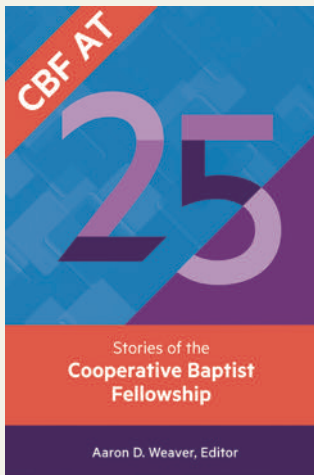
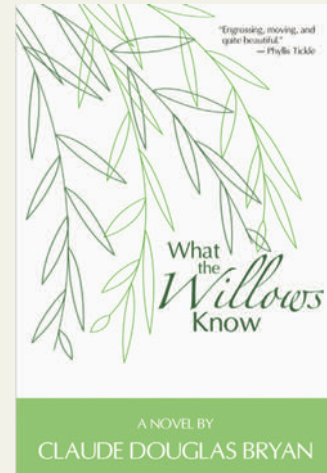
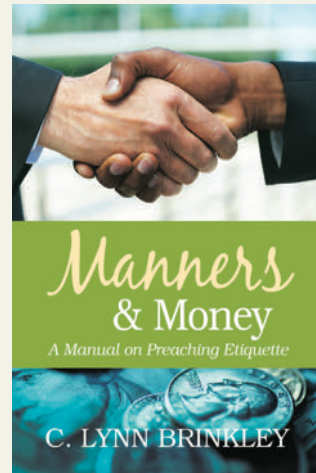
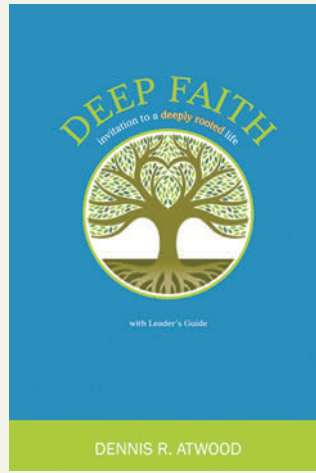
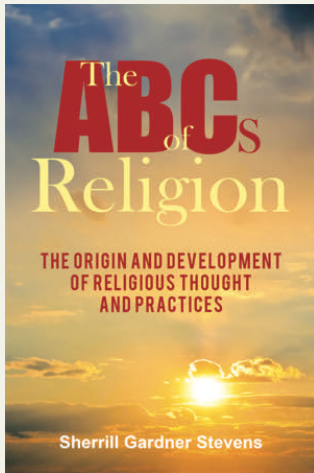
In costume, they visited schools and nursing homes. They rang the Salvation Army bell. They visited the homes of shut-ins.

“Christmas can be blue, in spite of the impression that it is always wonderful for everyone,” said Carol Ann.

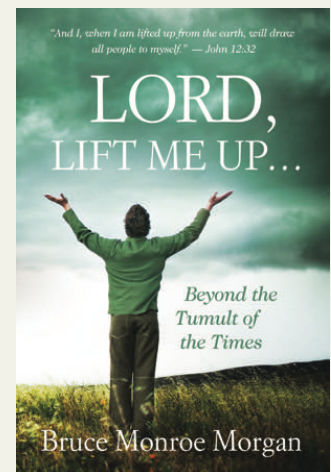
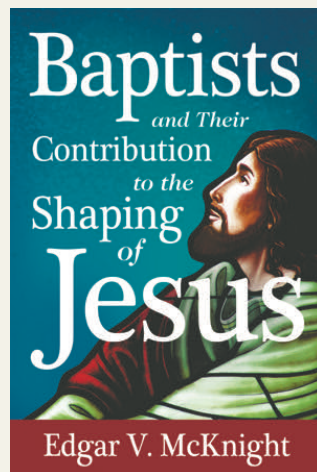
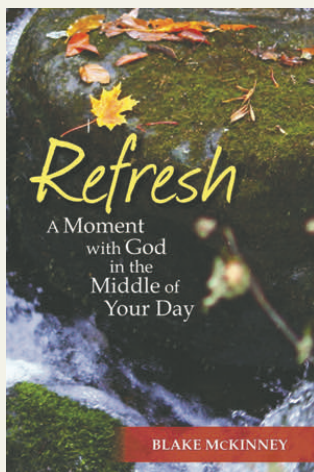
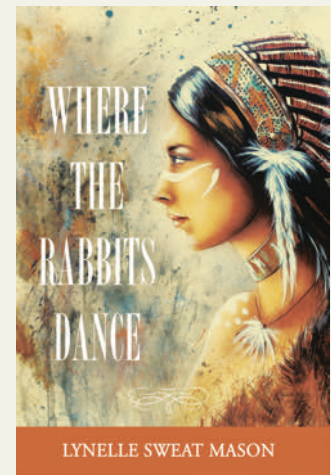
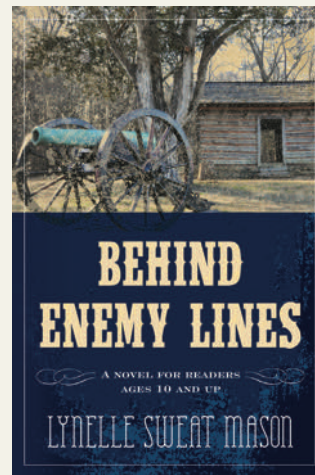
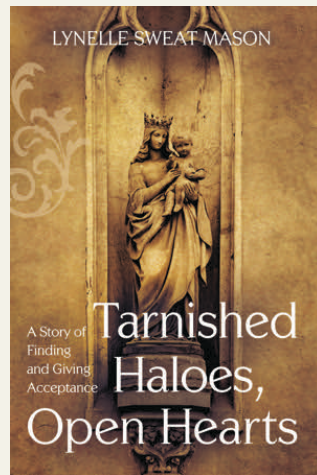
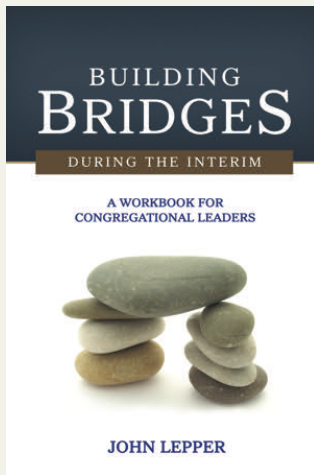
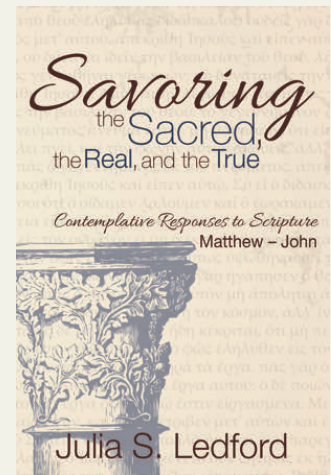
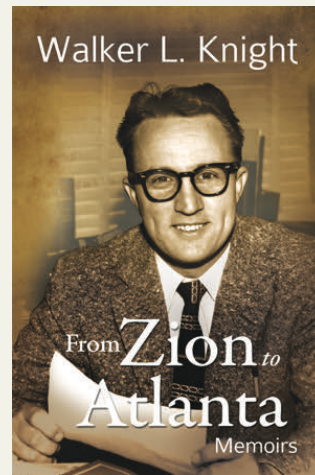
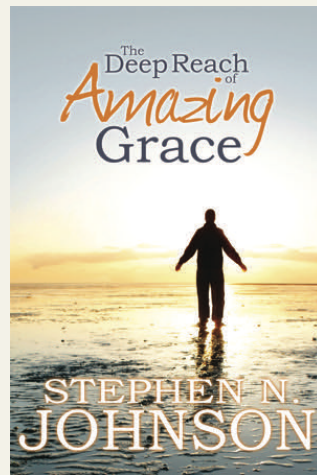
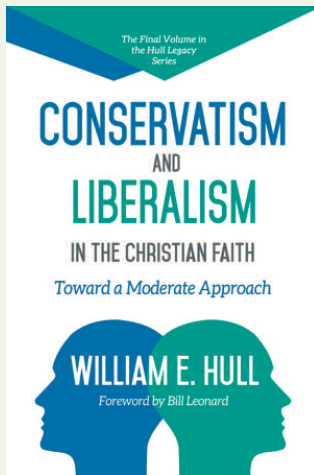
“We just want to bring hope and joy to others,” she added. “We hope the NYC Tree Girls can spread kindness and cheer for many years.” **NFJ**

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

Great books from



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10 Commandments for responding to your new pastor

By Larry Hovis

Having completed the “season of call” when pastoral transitions often take place, I offer my 10 Commandments for following and supporting your pastor.

1. Remember that your pastor works for God, not for you.

Yes, you voted to call her as your pastor. And yes, you pay her salary. But ultimately, her call comes from God, a call that came long before she met you and that will continue after God calls her to another place of service.

2. Hold your pastor accountable for spending time with God.

If he works first and foremost for God, he needs to be intentional in listening to God and growing in his relationship with God. If he’s always out and about, responding to every need and crisis and committee meeting that comes his way, he won’t have sufficient time for prayer, study and listening for the still, small voice.

3. Hold your pastor accountable for making her family a top priority.

Just as her call from God both precedes and will follow her call from you, so does her family. No one else in the whole world can be wife to her husband and mother to their children as she can. Let her put them first, and join her in loving and supporting them.

4. Don’t expect your pastor to perform the miracle of time travel.

The beginning of the 21st century is not as hospitable a place for historic, traditional churches as was the middle of the 20th century. Most people in these churches just want things to be the way they used to be, and they judge the pastor on whether he can do that. It’s not his job to re-create

the good old days, but to help your church discern and follow God’s leading to be its best, faithful self for today and tomorrow, not for yesterday.

5. Don’t ever utter the seven last words of the church: “We’ve never done it that way before.”

Banish that string of words from your vocabulary. Nothing constructive comes from its use.

6. Don’t come to your pastor and say: “Well you know, pastor, people are saying ...”

If someone has a problem with something your pastor has said or done (or perhaps misinterpreted what she said or did), ask the critical person to speak to her directly. Avoid sharing gossip and criticism from unidentified “people.” Encourage direct communication rather than playing those games — which aren’t healthy, and won’t help your pastor or the church.

7. Encourage your pastor to “play his aces.”

That’s the advice a wise person gave to me in my first ministry position. No pastor can do everything well. Every pastor has strengths for ministry and some weaknesses too. Enable your pastor to emphasize his strengths and complement his weaknesses through the gifts of others in the body of Christ.

8. Support your pastor’s ministry beyond your church — in the community and in the larger church.

Don’t consume all of her time with internal church issues. Yes, she needs to care for the souls in your flock, but God’s mission and

your church also need her to care for souls in the local community and the issues that impact them.

Also support her ministry in the larger fellowships of churches. The reason you have her today as your pastor is because a larger faith community nurtured, educated and called her, and continues to form her into the minister God wants her to be. Give back to that community by supporting her participation in and lending her leadership to the larger body of Christ.

9. Give your pastor a free pulpit.

Defend his right to preach hard things, even, and especially, when you don’t like what he says. Encourage him always to preach God’s truth as he understands it.

The pastor is not the activities director of a country club, but a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, following in the footsteps of Jeremiah and Amos, Deborah and Miriam, Peter and Paul, Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr.

Don’t try to censor him from sharing what he believes God has charged him to proclaim, and don’t let others do that either.

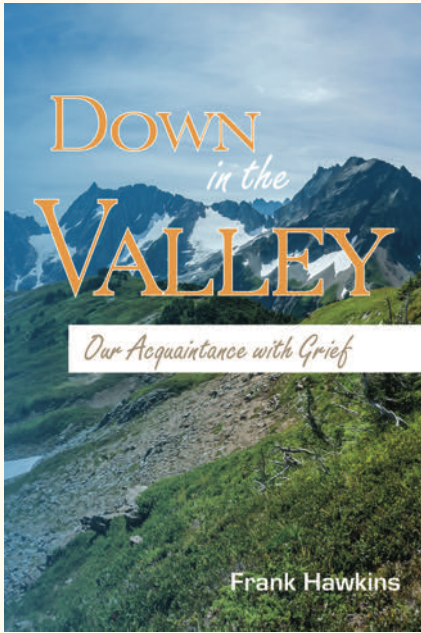
10. Pray that your pastor will be, not the minister your church needs, but the minister the world needs.

John 3:16 says, “God so loved the *world*...” There is no mention of the church.

Pray for your pastor to be the minister the world needs, and maybe, just maybe, you will be the church the world needs. And that would greatly please the God who gave his only Son for the world God so loves. **NFJ**

—Larry Hovis is executive coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina.

NEW FROM NURTURING FAITH



Grief:

- ... is a gift inherent to every person.
- ... is not a choice.
- ... manifests itself differently in different persons.
- ... should not come to stay.
- ... can be resolved.
- ... results from separation — from others and/or from God.
- ... and guilt are inseparable.
- ... and joy can co-exist in the same person.

Speaking from the warmth of a pastor's heart combined with deep insights from professional training, Frank Hawkins explores the depths and reality of grief. Weaving stories from the lives of his parishioners and his own life with the teachings of the Bible, he creates a compelling vision of what grief looks like and of what it does to us while ultimately providing pathways toward hope and growth.

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Advent and Prophecy

The oft-forgotten message of Christmas

By David Jordan

For many Christians, Advent is a time to anticipate the coming of Jesus as fulfillment of prophecy, a realization of God's plan for the people of God.

We must continue to affirm this deeply held and meaningful aspect of our faith without limiting our vision of Advent and Christmas solely to prophetic fulfillment.

In the early days of our biblical tradition, prophets were called to speak truth on God's behalf. Sometimes their words were heeded; at other times these spokespersons found themselves thrown in cisterns or jail, or worse.

But they were doing what God desired: to get the people realigned with what God envisioned. Specifically, they sought to expand society's sense of community and to broaden each person's compassion.

The prophet's job was not to foretell the future. Such was forbidden: "No one shall be found among you ... who practices divination or fortune telling..." (Deut. 18:9-12). Instead, the prophetic role was to speak truth to power — to tell kings and others what they did not want to hear.

Prophets called for an equitable society, where the poor and widows and orphans would be on equal footing with the rich and famous. Prophets pointed out wrongdoings and offered reminders of what needed to be repaired and restored in order to reconcile those wrongs.

Rather than predict the future, they attempted to change the future. They called on people to cease their selfishness, repent of their sinfulness, and reclaim the time-tested covenant relationship with Yahweh of justice and righteousness. They warned of what might result if unjust perspectives and actions did not change.

For about 600 years, from 1000 BCE

to 397 BCE biblical prophets came and went — calling for repentance, humility, kindness, caring, fairness and justice. Some think of Nathan in the time of David as the first such prophet, and Malachi in the late Persian period as the last.

An often forgotten message of Advent and Christmas is available to us. To get a sense of our biblical trajectory, we can look at words spoken by Mary and Jesus that proclaim the fulfillment of prophecy.

Mary's words came in response to the news from the angel Gabriel that she would bear a son, fulfilling what the prophets declared. Pulling extensively from the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and Amos, Mary raised a troubling series of images to those in places of privilege:

"He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty ..." (Luke 1:51-53).

From Mary's perspective, this was the fulfillment of prophecy: not just that Jesus would come, but what could occur as a result in such a time and place of social inequality and injustice.

In Luke 4, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus spoke clearly to the people he knew best at his home synagogue in Nazareth. His understanding of his role aligned with the prophets' proclamations of old. Therefore, he read from the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18-19).

In both passages an important perspective on prophecy should reverberate through the ages: Justice, truth, equality, righteousness and genuine compassion remain front and center for the people of God.

Speaking truth to power did not stop with Malachi — and prophecy was not just a matter of predicting Jesus' coming.

Jesus gave clear indicators of the prophetic hope coming to life and blossoming in the advent of those early disciples. And Jesus left them — and us — with clear commands: to live with compassion, to care for the least of these, to welcome the stranger, to love the enemy, and to do exactly what he did throughout his ministry.

His expectations remain; his calling continues. Living as his followers and living out this prophetic hope necessitates listening carefully, studying well, understanding fully and recognizing the ongoing revelation of God's concerns in our time.

Let us be vigilant this season. Prophets speaking truth to power offer an invaluable service of relevant faith in our time too. Often unwanted, consistently unheeded, these prophets remain necessary.

Will we listen? Will we heed? Answering these questions wisely, faithfully and quickly can make this season more than we ever imagined. **NFJ**

—David Jordan is teaching pastor at Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C.



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Reformation then and now

By John R. Franke

Five hundred years ago, on Oct. 31, 1517, a young monk named Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg and triggered the start of the European Reformation.

So significant was this occurrence and the events that followed, it is not hyperbole to suggest that this day forever altered the practice of religion and the course of history — even for those who rejected the principles of the Reformation. Hence the title of Martin Marty's brief book titled *October 31, 1517: Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World* (Paraclete, 2016).

For this reason Protestant churches all over the world are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the 16th-century European Reformation. But the notion of reformation is larger than simply commemorating the historical events from so many years ago that changed the world.

One of the main ideas of the historical Reformation is that the process is ongoing. One of the leading architects of the idea that the church is “always reforming” is the Reformed theologian John Calvin. This is reflective of his concern for the continual reformation of the faith and practice of the church in the context of ever-changing circumstances and situations.

For Calvin and other reformers, the faith and life of the church are never simply about continuing to believe what we have always believed and do what we have always done. Instead, faith and life involve

the ongoing assessment of our beliefs and practices in light of our understanding of the Word of God as it pertains to our particular situation.

The advance of knowledge, changing circumstances, and new experiences require the continual reformation of the church. From this perspective the work of reformation is not something that can ever be finished once and for all and set aside while we move on to other things.

It is an ongoing process that involves the church at every time and every place. The church is always reforming in its calling to participate in the mission of God as a provisional demonstration of God's will for the world.

One of the natural implications of ongoing reformation is that things change. Not only does the world around us change, but we also change. The ideas we believed and embraced 20 years ago are not necessarily the ones we hold to today.

In keeping with the changes we experience in ourselves and in the society around us, it is not surprising that the church changes too. That raises a natural question, however: Does anything remain constant in the midst of all this change that can anchor our thinking?

From the Christian perspective the answer to this question is the gospel of Jesus Christ and its announcement of the coming Kingdom of God.

What is the gospel? Simply stated, it is the announcement of God's love for the

world. In the Gospel of John it is out of love for the world that the Father sent Jesus the Son into the world:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

The church is then sent into the world after the pattern by which the Father sent the Son as a continuation of the mission of Jesus: “As the Father sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21).

God has called a people to work toward the establishment of a community in which everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid. It is this vision that provides guidance to us in the midst of ever-changing circumstances.

Reformation is the call to continual transformation both as individuals and as communities so that our faith and life are truly reflective of the ideals of the gospel that we say we are committed to following. Because we regularly fall short of these ideals in our lives, we not only confess our sins, but we also commit ourselves to the process of change for the sake of our calling in Christ to be his faithful people.

This is the Spirit of reformation that is behind the historical events of so long ago. It is this very same Spirit that continues to animate our lives today. **NFJ**

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

“Reformation is the call to continual transformation both as individuals and as communities so that our faith and life are truly reflective of the ideals of the gospel that we say we are committed to following.”

BEING CHURCH IN CHANGING TIMES

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

Taking church on the road

By Sarah Robb

On a sunny April day Mildred pulls into the church parking lot to accompany me to Julia's house for Church-at-Home. Through this ministry of Scott Boulevard Baptist Church, volunteers gather throughout the week in homes of those who can no longer attend Sunday worship.

They can't come to church, so we take church to them!

Mildred, a retiree, grandmother and spunky health-conscious learner, is one of our dedicated volunteers. Raised Catholic, she finds great meaning in sharing the table of the Lord with those from her church community who are no longer able to attend church.

Once timid and tentative, Mildred often apologized for not having been able to do more for the church members during the previous week. Now, after two years of service through Church-at-Home, Mildred has a fresh purpose in her life and a new framework from which to view her participation in the kingdom of God.

As she hops into my car to ride over to Julia's, I see a changed woman in Mildred. She understands that what she is doing with her time is important, and she will be a blessing to Julia and the other congregants who will gather for weekday worship.

Mildred's presence and participation are tangible reminders to Julia that though she is bound to her home, she is not forgotten. Her church family offers this holy reminder that

God has not forgotten her either.

As Mildred, Anita, Laura and I gather in Julia's living room, we are invited into a mindset of worship with a prelude of "How Great Thou Art" on the violin, followed by an opening prayer.

Then we join our voices in the hymn of praise: "What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning on the everlasting arms ..." Voices reverberate around the room, and I can hear Julia's sweet voice joining the chorus.

Though her memory fades with each passing day, the words of her most beloved hymns fall from her lips effortlessly, meaningfully.

We share a time of prayer that is closed by reciting the Lord's Prayer together. As we sing our hymn of faith, "For the Beauty of the Earth," we are reminded of the love of God over and around us, present as we worship together.

We listen as Anita reads from Jeremiah 31:31-34; and we open our hearts to the word of the Lord, the promise of a new covenant of restoration and forgiveness. We respond to the word of God by singing "Standing on the Promises."

At the close of our hymn of response, the bread and cup are blessed. As each congregant dips broken bread into the cup, we know that the Spirit of God is present with us.

We conclude our worship with the first verse and chorus of "The Solid Rock," and an ancient benediction that has provided

peace and hope throughout time:

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift his countenance upon you and give you peace.

We say our goodbyes — thankful for the legacy we are building together as a congregation. It is a legacy of presence with isolated, sometimes forgotten people who need a hand to hold, a song to sing, a hope to which to cling, a prayer, a cracker and a cup of juice.

We drive away from Julia's home in quiet introspection and prayerful thanksgiving for the bread and cup and the promises of God; for holy moments in ordinary time that become resounding hallelujahs deep within our souls.

Church-at-Home has become one of our congregation's most vibrant face-to-face ministries as we facilitate connections with God for our homebound (whom we call care partners) and our more-active members who share in the breaking of bread, sacred hymns and reading of Holy Scripture.

It is my honor to lead this ministry and to gladly share (when asked) with other congregations seeking to engage elder members in similar ways. Through God's beloved people — young, old and in-between — Christ's kingdom is coming on earth as it is in heaven, little by little. **NFJ**

—Sara Robb is associate pastor of ministry with aging at Scott Boulevard Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga. She is pursuing a master's degree in aging and dementia studies through Texas State University and blogs at saraerobb.com.



More fun than fitting in

By Brett Younger

Do you ever decide what you will wear by asking, “What will other people be wearing?”

Have you noticed how standing ovations usually start? Everybody is sitting and clapping politely. The opinion seems to be, “That was nice, but not worth standing up.” Then somebody stands — maybe she is heading for the exit — and 10 seconds later everyone is standing. It is difficult not to go along.

A reporter asked a 102-year-old man, “What do you like best about being 102?”

“No peer pressure.”

Those of us younger than 102 are not so lucky. We want to be liked. We wonder what people think of us. We want to fit in so badly that we act like the people we want to fit in with. Most of us are more cocker spaniel than bulldog.

The need for acceptance is overwhelming. The desire for approval is addictive. Not much is worse than being told that we do not belong.

Have you ever tried to comfort an eighth grader who did not make the tennis team? Or a college sophomore who has been turned down by a sorority? Have you tried to reassure yourself that you fit in with people with whom you do not fit in?

Rejection is so painful that we learn to do what we need to do to be accepted. We compromise. We conform. We do what is expected.

Jesus had a better idea. Most people long to be rich. Jesus said the poor are blessed. Most people want to be important. Jesus said the meek are blessed. Most people do what it takes to be liked. Jesus said the ones who are persecuted are blessed.

We do not have to care about the stupid things others care about. We do not have to worry about fitting in. People who follow



Christ get hurt like anyone else, but they love again. They speak courageously, even when they are afraid to say a word. They admit they are wrong, even when they are not forced to. They do not just plan; they do things. They act as if they believe what they say. Their desire to fit in has been overwhelmed by their desire to love.

God gives us the courage to resist our craving for approval. God teaches us that we do not have to agree with popular opinion. God helps us know and speak the mind that God has given us.

Christians should appreciate the T-shirt that says, “Make up your own mind.” Whatever else it means to be a follower of Christ it means that, with the help of God, we make up our own mind. We refuse to let our government or our employer or the media tell us what to think.

Christians do not care about some things:

- We do not need the newest toys.
- We do not buy things we do not need.
- We do not show off for people we do not know.
- We do not want the corner office because someone else wants the corner office.
- We do not impress strangers with the school we attended or the school our child attends.
- We are not afraid to look our age.
- We do not need a television that is bigger than we are.
- We do not let people know how important we are with the car we drive.
- We are not concerned with whether the music we love is cool.
- We do not care about how close our seats are to the stage.
- We do not worry about being ahead of everybody else or ahead of anybody else.

When we stop trying to do what will make us fit in, we can begin doing what God invites us to do. We care about some things more than others do. We care about people — our parents, our partner, our children, other people’s children, neighbors, friends, strangers, victims of abuse, victims of poverty, victims of racism, transgendered people, senior citizens, immigrants and refugees.

We care about being generous and big-hearted. We care more about wanting less than buying more. We care about peace, hope and joy. We care about social justice, health care and the environment. We care about worshipping, praying and giving.

We discover that God’s way is more fun than fitting in. **NFJ**

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



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

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Thanks, sponsors! These Bible studies for adults and youth are sponsored through generous gifts from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation. Thank you!

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 5, 2017

Micah 3:1-5

Being True

Preachers are called both to comfort and to challenge. Prophets could do both, but some clearly majored on challenge. You probably would not have enjoyed the prophet Micah's sermons unless you had been among the poor and non-descript peoples of the land, for Micah consistently critiqued the elite and spoke up for common folk. No doubt, people of wealth or power steered clear of the sharp-tongued prophet who made a career of skewering those who ignored God or twisted theology to enrich themselves at the expense of ordinary Israelites.

Micah, like Isaiah, lived and worked in and about Jerusalem during the latter part of the eighth century, BCE. He hailed from Moresheth, a village near the city of Gath, in an area of fair and fertile hills about 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem.

We can't say whether Micah was born poor, but he had a keen social conscience and was a champion of the peasantry. He was devoted to Yahweh, promoted ethical living, and forcefully condemned the injustice, greed, and decadence of the controlling aristocracy who lived in the cities.

Micah 3:12 –

Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Greedy leaders (vv. 1-4)

Our text for today is neither cheerful nor positive: it's all about judgment. Why, then, should we bother to study it? If we want to learn, sometimes the best lessons come from recognizing mistakes and their repercussions.

Micah's audience had made mistakes aplenty. In today's text, he addresses a variety of people who used their power to advance their own interests at the expense of others. The text consists of three oracles, each beginning with an imperative call to "listen" or to recognize that "Thus says Yahweh."

Micah first addressed the "heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel" (v. 1a). An earlier reference to "Jacob" and "the house of Israel" (1:5) addressed both the northern kingdom of Israel as "Jacob" and the southern kingdom of Judah as "the house of Israel." That prophecy preceded the destruction of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE. The prophesies of chapter 3 probably occurred later, when many exiles from Israel had fled to Judah, and the Assyrian kings Sargon II (711 BCE) and Sennacherib (701 BCE) had extended their reach into Judah. In that case, the parallel expression "heads of Judah and rulers of the house of Israel" could refer to the leaders of Judah alone, especially within its capital city

of Jerusalem.

But who were the "heads" and the "rulers" that Micah addressed? In a generic sense, he may have had in mind all government officials from the king on down, but it's likely that his primary targets were elders or persons from elite families who held royal appointments as judges in Jerusalem and other fortified cities in the kingdom (Deut. 16:18-20, 2 Chron. 19:4-10). Their job was to hear cases and render justice to all people in keeping with Israel's covenant law.

As Elizabeth Achtemeier has put it, the justice they were to administer was "intended to rescue the endangered, and help the hurt, and secure surcease for those suffering violence. Its aim was not only to punish the wrongdoer but to give aid to the innocent" (Minor Prophets I, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012], 318).


One would expect persons in such authoritative positions to understand the law and how to render just verdicts. Thus, Micah asks the obvious question: "Should you not know justice?" (v. 1b). The question is double-edged: "To know justice" could also mean "to experience judgment." Micah's question implied that those who fail to render justice could have a different type of justice rendered to them.

Micah had no doubt about the answer. Leaders/judges should know justice, but Judah's did not. He charged that they "hate the good and love the evil" (v. 2a), reprising a similar theme from Amos and Isaiah's preaching.

Micah used a shockingly graphic metaphor to describe the degeneracy of Israel's powerful elite. Instead of

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helping the poor who sought justice, they devoured them, ripping skin from flesh and flesh from bones, chopping them up “like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron” (vv. 2b-3). The image of cannibalism is horrific, but not uncommon as a metaphor for oppression in the Hebrew Bible. 

A day would come, Micah said, when those who took advantage of the poor would find themselves in need of help: “Then they will cry to the LORD,” Micah said, “but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have acted wickedly” (v. 4).

Is injustice still a problem? In response to the same crime, wealthy people who can afford skilled lawyers are much less likely to go to jail than poor people. African American and Hispanic men are imprisoned at disproportionately higher rates than whites.

A recent study showed that the richest one percent of Americans own 35 percent of the country’s wealth, and the top 20 percent own a whopping 85 percent, leaving only 15 percent of the wealth for the remaining 80 percent of the population. Meanwhile, powerful politicians and special interest groups push for more tax breaks for the wealthy. Is that just?

America does not live under a covenant with God, as did Israel. Yet, our laws are grounded in moral and ethical principles drawn from the Judeo-Christian heritage. Would Micah have something to say to our society? Are prophetic voices still needed in our time?

Phony prophets (vv. 5-8)

In the second oracle, Micah addresses others who claim to be prophets. The oracle begins, fittingly, with “Thus says Yahweh,” a typical messenger formula.

Other prophets had led God’s people astray, Micah said, selling favorable prophesies of peace to those who paid them, but predicting war to those “who put nothing into their mouths” (v. 5).

The biblical prophets we know best tended to be loners, but there were others who claimed the gift of prophecy. Some were affiliated with the temple and others with the royal court. It was not uncommon for individuals to approach prophets with questions about their personal futures. Micah charges that his contemporaries based their prophesies, not on a word from God, but on the basis of what they were paid.

One might expect Micah to speak of such people as false prophets, but he did not. He seems to assume that the others had experienced visions from God before: but no more. “It shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation,” he said (v. 6). Prophets who have no access to divine visions are no longer prophets, but disgraced and put to shame when God stops speaking to them (v. 7).


Micah, in contrast, insisted that “I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (v. 8).

True prophets are those who are in tune with the Spirit, who understand the character of God, and who recognize injustice in the land. They are willing to speak truth to power, caring not for their own gain, but advancing the ideals of God’s kingdom in which justice rules and oppression is a memory.

Do you know any prophets like that? Could one of them be you?

Complicit priests (vv. 9-12)

The concluding oracle of chapter 3 again indicts the nation’s chiefs and rulers “who abhor justice and pervert all

equity” (v. 9), running roughshod over the people while building up Jerusalem – and their positions in it – through bloodshed and wrongdoing (v. 10). 

Micah makes it clear that greed is a motivating factor, as he calls out rulers who “give justice for a bribe,” priests who “teach for a price,” and prophets who “give oracles for money” (v. 11a). Despite their unethical and ungodly behavior, however, they dare to “lean upon the LORD and say ‘Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us!’” (v. 11b).

This appears to have been a common attitude: many people apparently believed that Yahweh’s presence was so closely associated with the temple in Jerusalem that God would never allow Jerusalem to be defeated or the temple destroyed. While leaning away from God and toward their own selfish ambitions, Jerusalem’s leaders thought they could lean on God for protection, no matter how great the enemy.

Micah insisted that they were wrong, proclaiming “Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height” (v. 12). The prophet’s imagery is self-explanatory: the proud city was destined for destruction.

Micah thus became one of the first to predict the fall of Jerusalem, clearly blaming it on the sins of its powerful elites, both secular and religious. Later records indicate that Micah had some influence, at least on Hezekiah (see “The Hardest Question” for more).

Are we, like the leaders of Jerusalem, more concerned with income than ethics? Can faithful believers work for good through aiding the oppressed or supporting political candidates they believe will work for justice?

Are there any prophetic bones in your body? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 12, 2017

Amos 5:18-24

Being Just

Expectations: we all have them, and generally manage our lives in accordance with them. Some expectations are reasonable, while others are not. We expect that if we do our jobs well, we will be paid. We expect that if we are loyal to our friends, they will be loyal to us. Even though job security is subject to economic trends and friends may not always prove faithful, those are reasonable expectations.

Other expectations have a shakier grounding. Students, for example, may overestimate their academic performance. Some expect A's on every assignment and are often surprised when poorly researched and woefully written papers are returned with a much lower grade. Drivers who think they can safely exceed posted speed limits by eight or ten miles per hour don't expect to see blue lights in the rear-view mirror – until they do.

Today's text concerns a people who had certain expectations about what kept them in a right relationship with God and assured them of divine blessings. The prophet Amos believed they were dead wrong.

An unwelcome prophet


While prophets such as Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha played a role in Israel's story

Amos 5:24 –

*But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

prior to the eighth century, their stories are blended into narratives that focus on their relationships with kings or other individual characters. Amos was the first in a wave of prophets remembered for their preaching to the entire nation, and the first whose oracles were later compiled in written form and preserved as scripture.

Amos was said to have been from the small Judean town of Tekoa (1:1), about 11 miles south of Jerusalem, but his preaching took place primarily in the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos described himself as a shepherd and fig-tender who did not seek the prophetic office, but felt called into it (7:14-15).

Amos probably became active sometime near the end of Jeroboam II's reign, sometime between 760 and 750 BCE. The author of 2 Kings roundly criticized Jeroboam for maintaining sanctuaries outside of the temple in Jerusalem, but still acknowledged him as one of Israel's strongest and most durable kings (2 Kgs. 14:23-29). Under his rule, the northern kingdom of Israel recovered land that had been lost earlier and enjoyed its greatest power and widest influence. 

Long periods of peace also foster prosperity, which sounds positive – but such times may also lead to a growing disparity in wealth, giving opportunity for the most prosperous and powerful to take advantage of others to improve their own situation. Several of Amos'

oracles targeted wealthy people who oppressed the poor in violation of God's covenant demands (2:6-7, 5:11-12, 6:4-6).

The book of Amos is an anthology of short oracles and vision accounts delivered at Bethel (one of two major temples in Israel) and in Samaria (the capital city of Israel), probably within a relatively short time. His preaching attacked the ruling elite, from the priests to the king (7:10-17). As a result, it is likely that Amos was forced out of the country to save his skin (7:12).

Amos called for justice and predicted judgment on a sinful people who flaunted God's law and abused God's people. His prophetic challenge has inspired many to a greater social consciousness and a deeper understanding of what constitutes true faith as opposed to empty religion.

A misguided hope (vv. 18-20)

Amos 5 consists of a collection of brief oracles that may have come from different contexts. Their message is consistent, however: many who think things are hunky-dory with God are in for a big surprise.

Verse 18 begins with a surprising word: "Woe!" The NRSV's "Alas for you ..." fails to catch the depth of Amos' charge: a better translation is "Woe to you ..." The Hebrew word *hoy* was commonly used when lamenting for the dead: Amos saw the nation's destruction as so certain that he mourned for the people in advance.

The saddest aspect of the approaching disaster was that the people didn't see it coming. Recalling past times when Yahweh had fought for Israel,

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many in ancient Israel subscribed to a belief that a day was coming when God would appear in power to judge the world, vindicate Israel, and destroy all its enemies, leading to a golden age of peace and prosperity for God's chosen people.

Amos believed the people had it all wrong, crying "Woe to those who wish for the day of the LORD!" (v. 18a, NET). God's appearance would bring no bright future to them, but only darkness (v. 18b) that they could not escape. 📖

The people had narrowly evaded judgment before, but their luck was running out: it would be "as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake" (v. 19).

When God's judgment came, Amos insisted, it would fall first on Israelites who had turned their backs on Yahweh by ignoring God's covenant commands and separating religion from relationships. Those who anticipated a sunny future would find "darkness and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it" (v. 20).

A surprising charge (vv. 21-24)

How could the people have been so wrong? They appear to have been quite religious, observing annual festivals and offering sacrifices with regularity. Was that not enough to ensure God's favor? Speaking the received word of God in vv. 21-24, Amos assailed their shallow theology.

"I hate, I despise your festivals," God said through the prophet, "and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies" (v. 21). "Festivals" refers to the annual pilgrim feasts of Tabernacles/Booths, Passover/Unleavened bread, and Weeks. "Solemn assemblies" could

refer to more frequent rituals such as the new moon, which was celebrated with feast days each month, and possibly Sabbaths, as well.

Festivals and feast days were occasions of ritual sacrifices that were intended to please God by sending the pleasant aroma of cooking meat into the heavens. Amos insisted that their sacrifices were not having their intended purpose: "Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon" (v. 22). 📖

Israel's celebration also involved music, both vocal and instrumental. The ideal intent of such music was to offer praise and expressions of faith that would please God, but Israel's musical offerings and daily living were at such cross purposes that God would not hear it: "Take away from me the noise of your songs, I will not listen to the melody of your harps" (v. 23).

Notice the graphic ways in which Amos said God had rejected Israel's worship. The phrase translated "take no delight" literally means "I will not smell." The people might think of themselves as sending up a pleasing aroma to God, but God refused to breathe it in (v. 21). Likewise, God declined to accept or even look at the offerings brought to the sanctuary (v. 22), or to hear the music that accompanied them (v. 23). Figuratively, God's nose, eyes, and ears were closed to Israel's worship.

Why would God reject Israel's ceremonial worship so completely? Because it was hollow. It was a liturgical exercise without relational ethics. It was not ritual that God wanted, Amos said, but righteousness revealed through just living: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness

like an everflowing stream" (v. 24).

The rain in Palestine is seasonal, and the land is often cut by stream beds (called wadis) that can fill with water and flood during the rainy season, but become empty and parched during the dry months. Among God's people, justice and righteousness are not to be seasonal or periodic exercises, but as consistent as a life-giving river that runs throughout the year.

Justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedakah*) often appear together in scripture. 📖 The words are near synonyms in that both call for ethical behavior, but have a nuanced difference in that justice has to do with our behavior toward others, and righteousness speaks to our standing with God. One follows the other: the justice we show to others puts us in a right relationship with God.

The point is that how we relate to others directly affects how we relate to God. We cannot ignore, mistreat, or take advantage of fellow humans and still maintain a good relationship with God. What did Jesus say are the commandments of first importance? To love God, and to love others (Mark 12:28-31). Pious worship and callous behavior do not match: we show our love for God through the love we show to others.

Such a truth would seem self-evident, but its meaning continues to be lost on innumerable Christians who seem to believe that mouthing pious expressions and attending church every now and then is all it takes to keep them in good standing with God. It doesn't matter how large our offerings, how beautiful our music, or how inspiring our worship if they don't prompt us to go back into the world with a desire to love our neighbors and practice justice in our daily lives. 📖

Amen? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 19, 2017

Zephaniah 1:1-18, 2:1-3

Being Ready

Fans of the television series *Game of Thrones* are familiar with a recurring refrain: “Winter is coming.” The story takes place in an alternate world where both summers and winters can last for many years. With a long period of summer coming to an end, the wise recognize that winter is coming, bringing not only cold and ice but also hordes of death-dealing wights from the frozen north. While some (especially southerners) ignore the threat, others know the importance of preparing for the coming trials.

The prophet Zephaniah did not proclaim “Winter is coming,” but his predictions were even more chilling: he proclaimed “judgment is coming,” one that would sweep away every living creature from the earth and the sea. The apocalyptic visions are tempered in chapters 2 and 3 with words of hope that God would preserve a faithful remnant, but chapter 1 is all about distress, devastation, and darkness. 📖

Why?

A time for judgment (1:1-6)

Zephaniah preached “in the days of Josiah son of Amon of Judah” (1:1b). 📖 Josiah came to the throne around 641 BCE, when his father

Zephaniah 1:3 –

Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the LORD’S wrath.

Amon was assassinated by his own servants after a two-year reign (2 Kgs. 22:19-26). Biblical accounts describe Amon as a wicked king who continued the idolatrous practices of his father Manasseh, who had ruled for more than 50 years.

Josiah was only eight when his reign began, and would have needed the help of advisors. It is possible that Zephaniah had some personal influence on the young king, who grew up to lead a comprehensive religious reform: of all the kings of Israel and Judah, only Hezekiah and Josiah escape criticism from the author of 1-2 Kings.

Zephaniah’s name means “Yahweh has hidden,” but there was nothing secretive about his prophesies. He was convinced that Judah’s leaders had gone off the spiritual rails, and believed they would pay a price for their selfish and syncretistic ways.

The prophet’s oracles begin with a hyperbolic declaration that God was about to destroy every living creature on the earth. Zephaniah used language similar to that in Genesis 1, with God destroying all living creatures in the reverse order of their creation: humans, animals, birds, and fish (1:2-3).

The prophet’s opening salvo was intended to get the people’s attention through “shock and awe” before he offered a way to avoid extinction. Destruction remains prominent in the

remainder of Zephaniah’s prophesies, but also elements of hope that the people would change their ways.

While 1:2-3 speak of universal destruction, the following verses focus on Judah, a small nation caught in the middle of power struggles among its larger neighbors. Speaking for Yahweh, Zephaniah insisted “I will stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem,” wiping out all those who worshiped Baal, including some of the priests (1:4). 📖

The people’s syncretistic practices had extended beyond Baal worship, however. God also pledged to destroy “those who bow down on their roofs to the host of heaven” (astral deities associated with the sun, moon, and stars), as well as those who acknowledge multiple gods in their oaths (1:5). [See “The Hardest Question” for more.]

The result is that the people “have turned back from following the LORD,” and “have not sought the LORD or inquired of him” (1:6). In their times of need, the people had not sought God’s guidance through priestly or prophetic oracles, but had turned to other gods.

Zephaniah’s words should also prompt us to think about where we go for guidance, and in whom (or what) we trust for security.

A time for silence (1:7-9)

Zephaniah, like several other prophets, spoke of a coming “Day of the LORD” when God would intervene in history to judge the wicked and vindicate the righteous. 📖 Zephaniah introduced the concept with a call to quiet awe: “Be silent before the Lord GOD!” (1:7a). 📖

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The idea that God had prepared a sacrifice and “consecrated his guests” (1:7b) suggests that the prophecy was delivered during one of the annual festivals, when pilgrims gathered at the temple to offer fellowship offerings – sacrificial animals that were eaten mostly by the people but symbolically with God. The possibility of consecrated guests implies the existence of a faithful remnant for whom the “day of the LORD” would be good news.

But not for all. Zephaniah pronounced punishment for “officials and the king’s sons and all who dress themselves in foreign attire” (1:8), as well as those “who leap over the threshold” and those who practice “violence and fraud” (1:9).

Whether this refers mainly to foreign affectations in dress or the adoption of pagan practices, the problem is clearly that many people, including some members of the royal family, had become too familiar with foreign ways.

Neighboring peoples believed that evil spirits were associated with thresholds, and so people avoided stepping on the threshold lest they rouse the demons. Had some Judeans adopted the same superstition? The practice of “violence and fraud” needs no explanation, whether they occur “in their master’s house” or anywhere else.

Those who practiced such things might be prone to making excuses, but Zephaniah insisted that when the day of judgment came, they could only be silent.

A time for crying (1:10-18)

Not speaking would not prevent people from crying, however, and further judgments described in 1:10-18 would have provoked much weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Cries

and noise would come from the “Fish Gate,” the “Second Quarter,” the “hills,” and the “mortar,” indicating the extent of destruction in and around Jerusalem (1:10-11).^U

Zephaniah said Yahweh would “search Jerusalem with lamps” to seek out the self-sufficient folk who sit complacently, thinking of Yahweh as irrelevant, saying: “The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm.” They were like wine that thickens and goes bad if not separated from the sediment of dead yeast that drifts out during fermentation, he said. And, they were in for a rude surprise: they thought of God as a non-actor, but Yahweh would soon pay them a visit. The homes they had built and vineyards they had planted would soon become useless (1:12-13).

The following verses speak poetically of the coming judgment as a day of distress, anguish, ruin, and devastation; a day of darkness, gloom, clouds and thick darkness; “a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements” (1:10-16).

Zephaniah saw judgment coming in the form of an invasion from a foreign power, but vv. 17-18 speak of something even worse.^U Those who “have sinned against the LORD” would find their blood poured on the ground and their flesh becoming “like dung.” None of their riches could save them from the fire of God’s passion when the whole earth (or land) came to a terrible end (1:17-18).^U

The universal aspects of destruction in vv. 17-18 echo similar thoughts in vv. 2-3, bracketing the specific prophecies against Judah within a forbidding frame. The threat of a total apocalypse appears to be used as an attention-getting device, for Zephaniah had far more to say about a surviving remnant than about mass extermination: he did

not expect creation to become undone, but wanted his hearers to consider the possibility.

A time for turning (2:1-3)

The fearful threats of 1:2-18 set the stage for a call to repentance in 2:1-3, where Zephaniah calls on the “shameless nation” to come together before it is too late and to “Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his commands.”^U If the people would “seek righteousness, seek humility,” then *perhaps* they might “be hidden on the day of the LORD’s wrath.”

Most translations mask the Hebrew, but the larger section begins in 1:2 with God saying “Gathering, I will sweep away everything” Now, using two forms of a different verb, Zephaniah calls for the people to gather themselves and turn back to God. The implication is clear: “Gather yourselves and straighten up before God gathers you for destruction.”

Zephaniah’s description of the behavior that pleases God recalls themes from earlier prophets: they are to be humble before God, following God’s commands and living rightly. It is not enough to know or to affirm what God commands: we are to *do* God’s commands if we want to be right with God.

Contemporary Christians are not in the same covenant boat as the people of Judah, but we are also on the water. We, too, are called to humility before God and loving behavior that treats others justly, but we are also tempted to become compromising and complacent. It is easy to adopt the values of the world around us and come to believe that God is irrelevant to our lives, trusting in our wealth or our social position to bring us security.

Does Zephaniah have a word for us? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 26, 2017

Matthew 25:31-46

Being Surprised?

“Judgment” is not one of our favorite words. We may be good at judging others (though we rarely admit it), but don’t want anyone else judging us. One of the nicest things we might say about someone is that they are “not judgmental.”

But the Bible has much to say about judgment. In previous studies we have heard the Old Testament prophets Micah, Amos, and Zephaniah speak of judgment. Today we are reminded that Jesus also talked about it. While we prefer to think of Christ’s love and grace rather than of judgment, our mental picture of Jesus is incomplete if we do not include what he has taught us about personal responsibility.

Matthew 25 follows an apocalyptic passage in which Jesus speaks of an eschatological judgment not unlike the Old Testament concept of the “Day of the LORD” (Matthew 24). The chapter consists of three sections, each with a judgment theme. ↓

The third section speaks of a judgment to take place when Christ, as the glorified “Son of Man,” comes into his kingdom. Some scholars consider this to be a parable, like the parable of the 10 bridesmaids and the parable of the talents that precede it. Some read the text as direct discourse describing a

Matthew 25:40 –

And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

literal event. Others read it as a prophecy with parabolic elements.

Sheep and goats (vv. 31-33)

Jesus spoke of the “Son of Man” coming in glory, surrounded by angels, to sit on his throne. Jesus often used “Son of Man” as a self-ascription to suggest his solidarity with humankind, but here it takes on images of power and glory characteristic of earlier apocalyptic usage of the term (Dan. 7:13), for the Son of Man was coming to judge and to rule.

As “all the nations” gathered before him, Jesus said, he would distinguish between those who belonged with him, utilizing a metaphor of separating sheep and goats. The sight of a shepherd separating his flocks was common enough in Palestine. Sheep and goats commonly pastured together as a mixed flock, but they occasionally needed to be separated for shearing, milking, or shelter.

There is nothing inherently good about sheep or bad about goats. Both were highly prized in the pastoral economy. Goats tended to be more self-sufficient than sheep, which were more reliant on the shepherd. On the annual Day of Atonement, Hebrew priests symbolically transferred the sins of the people to a designated goat, which was then driven into the

wilderness – the original “scapegoat.” This may have contributed to goats having a more negative reputation than sheep. ↓

In Jesus’ metaphorical image, the “sheep” would be culled out and positioned at the king’s favored right hand, while the “goats” would be consigned to his left. In Semitic thought, the right hand was commonly favored. The king’s most trusted advisor would stand at his right hand, even as Jesus could be depicted at the right hand of God (Acts 2:33, 5:31, 7:55-56).

Being left-handed did not imply that someone was evil, but different, out of the ordinary. Ehud used left-handedness to his advantage in assassinating the king of Moab and rising to lead Israel as a judge (Judg. 3:15-25), while a cadre of 700 left-handed Benjaminites were known for their accuracy with a sling: “each one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss” (1 Chron. 12:2). While the narrator praised the warriors’ skill, the tribe of Benjamin was often presented in a negative light. ↓

Surprise No. 1 (vv. 34-40)

The important question here is not about sheep and goats or left and right, but about the criteria Jesus will use for judgment. Humans come in many shapes and shades, but none of our differences are as distinctive as that between sheep and goats. It cannot be ethnicity or gender that determines our place with Jesus: some other characteristic must come into play.

We must begin with a note of caution: a literal interpretation of this text alone — without reference to

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other revealed truths about the gospel — could lead to a works-righteousness theology in which one earns his or her way into heaven. Other scriptures make it clear that salvation is a gift of God, not an earned payment for good works (e.g., Eph. 2:8-9).

The difference in emphasis between the views provides needed balance. Salvation is offered freely, but the mark of those who have truly experienced that gift is a genuine and faithful life of service to God. The book of James puts special stress on this point: faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17-26).

Many people imagine that one day we will be given some sort of a doctrinal test to determine fitness for the kingdom, but salvation is not dependent on orthodoxy. A common folk belief asserts that everyone's good and evil works will be weighed in a cosmic scale, with those whose deeds tip the scale toward the good gaining a ticket to eternity. Of course, virtually all people who hold that view also believe their good deeds outweigh the bad.

Jesus, however, will not base his judgment on whether we can pass a doctrinal exam or demonstrate sufficient piety. Nor will he ask whether we have “walked the aisle” and experienced baptism. In the context of this discourse, the criteria for judgment lies elsewhere. Jesus said, “the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (v. 34).

Who are those who are chosen? Jesus identified the favored ones as those who had ministered to him when he was hungry or thirsty, homeless or naked, sick or in prison (vv. 35-36). The chosen “sheep” would be surprised, Jesus said, being unaware that they had done any of those things

for Jesus and wondering how they could get credit for ministering to him (vv. 37-38).

The king would respond, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (v. 40).

The identity of “the least of these” is a bigger question than one might expect. Readers commonly assume Jesus was talking about ministry to any who are poor, needy, or oppressed. Most recent scholars, however, believe the qualifying word *'adelphōn* (“my brothers,” but understood without gender) points to Jesus' followers. With that interpretation, the issue is not so much how people treat needy folk in general, but how they respond to the followers of Jesus sent on mission into the world – and thus to Jesus himself (See “The Hardest Question” online for more).

If this is the correct interpretation, it takes nothing away from the importance of caring for the poor and working for justice as central aspects of Jesus' teaching (Luke 4:18-19). It remains true that we cannot truly love God without also loving our neighbor, but the focus here puts the emphasis on one's response to the community of Christ.

Surprise No. 2 (vv. 41-46)

The remainder of our passage is the flip side of the previous verses. The “goats” shuffled off to the left side – reportedly to face “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” – will also be surprised (v. 41). They could feel certain that if they had seen Jesus facing afflictions of hunger, thirst, homelessness, nakedness, illness, or imprisonment, they would surely have reached out and provided for him, and asked when they could have ignored his need (vv. 42-44).

As before, Jesus said: “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (v. 45). If “the least of these” refers to Jesus' followers, these are rejected because they responded negatively to Christ's family. If we follow the more common view that “the least of these” could describe any poor or marginalized people, we are reminded that the way we treat others reflects our relationship with God. If our love for Jesus is genuine, it will manifest in love for others.

In reading this passage, we must be careful to focus on the main point without getting hung up on the contrast between eternal fellowship with Jesus for some and an eternal torment for others (vv. 34, 41, 46).

Matthew 24 and 25 follow a confrontation between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees, whom he considered to be hypocrites because they threatened others with the emerging idea of hell while failing to practice justice in their own lives.

When Jesus talked about hell, he was turning their own language against them, not necessarily endorsing the idea that God intends to torture the unfaithful throughout eternity – a concept that seems out of character for a God whose deep love for humanity was revealed in Jesus. Here it is likely that Jesus' words have been shaped by the early church, and certain that the idea has been reinforced by early interpreters.

We don't have to believe God will roast unbelievers in hell to appreciate the heart of Jesus' message in this text: the best way to be close to Jesus is to get close to “the least of these,” his family. This is an important reminder that church matters: Jesus' “sheep” are those who support Christ's family, the community of faith in which we live out our calling. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

New password for online teaching resources is: Study.

Dec. 3, 2017

Mark 13:24-37

Wakeful Faithful

It's 7:30 on a weekday and you've just managed to get home, change into some ratty sweat clothes, and get supper on the table. The den is a mess, the kitchen counter overflows with dirty dishes, and you wonder how six pairs of sneakers managed to get piled in front of the couch with all the kids' plates and sippy cups. "Later," you think.

Then the doorbell rings. The kids shout "I'll get it!" – and before you can get the fork out of your mouth to say "Wait!" an encyclopedia salesman is inside your house.

Do you look forward to the next eager entrepreneur, fund-raiser, or pollster knocking on your door? Most of the time, unexpected company is also unwelcome company. Still, there is the possibility of greeting a long-lost friend or a much-loved family member who came to surprise you, or maybe even someone from Publisher's Clearing House with a check for 10 million dollars. If that should happen, other concerns would be overwhelmed by the happiness of the moment.

The Bible often speaks of a day when the entire world will have an unexpected visitor – when Christ will return to the earth in power and glory. Those who love Jesus can look forward to it as a wonderful day.

Mark 13:37 –

*And what I say to you I say to all:
"Keep awake."*

Those who have lived in rebellion against God will find that their spiritual house is not in order, and it will be too late to clean it up.

An ancient hope

This idea that the Lord would one day come in glory to set things right reflects an ancient hope. The Old Testament describes how the people of Israel struggled to keep their covenant with God, broke their promises in the promised land, and mistreated each other. Israel's prophets and history writers believed the people suffered because of their shortcomings.

Those who experienced the greatest pain and heartache were often the poor and the pious. They longed for a day when the Lord would return to put evil people in their place and bring peace to the world.

They spoke of this coming time as the "Day of the Lord." The prophet Micah described a time when justice would abound and peace would flow like water (Mic. 4:1-5).^U Isaiah longed for a day when wild and domesticated animals would lie down together and children could play with snakes in safety when God came to inaugurate a day of peace (Isa. 11:6-9).^U

The prophets knew, however, that "the day of the LORD" would not be good news for everyone. Amos had words for those whose careless or wicked lifestyles would

engender a surprise, insisting that for them the day of the LORD would be a day of darkness and not light (Amos 5:18-20).^U

An unexpected advent

Still, the Hebrews held high hopes. Many anticipated the arrival of a Messiah ("anointed one") who would arise to deliver Israel from all enemies. Isaiah believed that a descendant of David would come forth to inaugurate a new age (Isa. 11:1-5),^U and when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple for his circumcision and naming ceremony, an aged prophet named Simeon took Jesus in his arms and declared that God's promise had arrived, "for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32).

During this season that the church calls "Advent," we celebrate that first coming of Christ into the world – but today's text insists that there will be another.

A second advent (vv. 24-31)

All three Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as predicting his death and resurrection, but also as declaring an apocalyptic vision of a world-changing return "with great power and glory" (vv. 24-26).

The Gospels speak of a day when Jesus will gather "the elect" – those who have accepted the invitation to experience grace and follow Christ – from every corner of earth and heaven (v. 27).


Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



As with the Old Testament “day of the LORD,” Christ’s return would be both good news and bad news. Those who follow Jesus know just enough of God’s presence to yearn for more. We appreciate peace enough to want universal peace. We have experienced enough love to seek the cessation of all hatred.

We live in a world in which people abuse each other, in which people hate and rob and rape and murder. We long for a day when diseases will die, when violence ceases like the calm after a storm, when justice rules, and no one is afraid. We can look forward to Christ’s return.

Those who have chosen to live without Christ will find less to celebrate.

Jesus used the illustration of a fig tree – so common in Israel that all his hearers would understand – to note that the tree’s emerging leaves and fruit are signs of summer’s approach, and that the signs of his return (vv. 3-23) would also be clear (vv. 28-30). 

The Gospel writers appear to have expected Jesus to return within their lifetimes, quoting Jesus as saying: “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (v. 31).

Obviously, Jesus did not return within the lifetimes of that generation. Does that mean Jesus was wrong? Apparently, the word “generation” must refer to something other than the lifetime of the disciples. Perhaps we could understand it as the “generation of the earth’s inhabitants,” the “generation of the nation of Israel,” or the “generation of the church.”

The most likely understanding is to realize that the work of Christ is all of one piece. His birth, life, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and ultimate

return are all part of the same great act of salvation. In the lifetime of the disciples, Jesus fulfilled every part of that act except the last one, and they believed that was so certain that they could speak of it as already having taken place.

In his grace, perhaps, Jesus delays, but he insisted that one day the waiting will be over. Christ will appear. Those who love Christ will rejoice that the age of righteousness and peace is dawning, but those who have rejected him will mourn, for their age will have ended.

A pointed warning (vv. 32-37)

The warning in vv. 32-37 may strike us as a little strange. Whereas the fig tree illustration in vv. 28-30 suggested the possibility of recognizing “signs of the times,” Jesus insisted that no one could know the time of his return, and that even *he* did not know: “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (v. 32).

Consequently, believers should always be alert, living as if each day might be the day of his return. Jesus added another illustration: It’s as if the owner of an estate went on a trip and left servants in charge, each with assigned tasks. Not knowing when the owner would return, those servants should work faithfully rather than lying about, lest the boss find them goofing off (vv. 34).

“Therefore keep watch,” Jesus said, “because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’” (v. 35).

The point is clear. Christ is Lord of the church and Lord of the earth, but

he has put the work he began into our hands: the work of loving others and doing justice and bringing others to a knowledge of God through our lives.

We don’t know when Jesus will return. Many people are fascinated by misguided efforts to analyze every word and number of Daniel and Revelation, working all kinds of tricks with the Jewish and Julian calendars in trying to determine when Jesus will come back, but no one knows, and no one can know. Occasionally, a so-called “prophet” will arise and convince naïve followers that they should sell their belongings and retreat to some special location to await Jesus’ return. They are inevitably wrong.

If we believe Jesus when he says “No one knows about that day or hour,” then we need not waste time on such fruitless efforts. When the master left his servants in charge, their job was not to calculate when he would return, but to look after his house and take care of things until that day when he came walking in the gate.

We note that Jesus did not say “If he comes suddenly, don’t let him find you sinning.” Or, “don’t let him find you drunk.” Or, “don’t let him find you with blood on your hands.”

He said, “don’t let him find you *asleep*.” Jesus knew that spiritual apathy lies at the root of all sinful actions.

For now, we’re in charge. It is *our job* to live justly and promote peace. It is *our job* to care for the earth. It is *our job* to be such examples of love and grace that we inspire others to follow Jesus so they can also be ready for his return.

When Jesus returns, we might think of him as an unexpected guest, but we should remember it is *his* house. Will it be in order? Will we wish he had stayed away, or rejoice to see him? Are we ready for company? **NFJ.**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 10, 2017

Psalm 85

Kissing Cousins

Brandon's parents had given him all the standard lectures about driving carefully and observing the speed limit when he first got his license. Like many parents, they continued to admonish him to drive safely, so when he was running late for a date and got a speeding ticket, he was afraid they'd never forgive him.

They were disappointed, but responded with surprising calm. Brandon used some Christmas money he had saved to pay the fine. Though his parents continued to preach safe driving, it felt good to be back in their good graces.

A few weeks later, however, Brandon was texting one of his buddies on the way to school and failed to notice that the minivan in front of him had slowed to a stop. He didn't hit it *that* hard, but it was hard enough to cause some damage and shake up the children inside.

Would his parents ever forgive him now, or had his luck run out?

Forgiveness granted (vv. 1-3)

Psalm 85 recounts a similar story, though on a larger level. It is an appropriate text for the season of Advent, as it reflects the same tension

Psalm 85:10 –

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

of “already” and “not yet” that we experience while pondering the birth of Jesus and the promise of salvation to the world.

The first three verses proclaim a happy hymn of praise, recalling God's past acts of forgiveness and restoration. “LORD, you were favorable to your land,” the psalmist sang: “you restored the fortunes of Jacob” (v. 1). This is probably not a reference to Israel's deliverance from Egypt, but to the Hebrews' return after the exile. They had lost their land to the Assyrians and Babylonians, but Cyrus the Persian had conquered Babylon and allowed the Hebrews to return.

Verse 2 offers further evidence that the psalmist was thinking of the return from exile. Israel's time in Egyptian captivity was not traditionally associated with sin or rebellion among the Hebrews, but the exile was: prophets such as Isaiah, Micah, Amos, and Jeremiah drew a straight line between a sinful people and a defeated nation.

The psalmist's expression of gratitude seems to presuppose that a time of punishment or exile had come to an end. Israel's restoration had begun with divine pardon: “You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin” (v. 2), leading God to turn away from anger and wrath (v. 3).

Unless we were born without a conscience, we all know how it feels to be weighed down by a heavy burden of guilt, knowing that we have done

wrong, have hurt someone, or have failed to live up to our calling. It's not a good feeling. Guilt can be poisonous if we wallow in it, but can be invaluable if it motivates us to seek forgiveness from God, from others, or even from ourselves.

Have you ever sought such forgiveness, and felt the amazing sense of relief that comes with the knowledge that your sins have been pardoned and set aside?

If you're like most people, it's likely that your sense of freedom did not last long, because we all have a propensity to venture back into the realms of wrongdoing. If so, you have a head start on understanding what the psalmist does next.

Forgiveness needed (vv. 4-7)

With the happy praise for forgiveness still in the air, the psalm takes a shocking turn to a fervent lamentation that God has *not* forgiven the people (vv. 4-7). The psalmist pleads for God to “Restore us, O God our deliverer!” (v. 4, NET: the word “again” in the NRSV is interpretive; not in the text).

“Will you be angry with us forever?” he asks (v. 5). “Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?” (v. 6)

The disjunctive shift from praise to lament is so sharp that the Revised Common Lectionary omits it from the liturgical reading as if it's inappropriate, but the interlacing of praise and lament is common in the psalms. Guilty people may praise God for past forgiveness to set the stage for a renewed plea that God will forgive them once again.

Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



The postexilic period offers a likely context for Psalm 85. Verses 1-3 may recall the heady days of Israel's return from captivity, when the prophets such as Isaiah of the Exile (Isaiah 40-55) declared that their time of punishment was over, that God had forgiven the sins that had brought them down. No doubt, many rejoiced at the news that they could return to Jerusalem.

When the Hebrews returned to Jerusalem, however, they still lived as subjects of the Persian Empire, occupying one small sub-province of the territory west of the Jordan. They found the beloved city in ruins and the neighbors unwelcoming. As the people scrambled to rebuild their homes and restore their farmlands, the enmity of surrounding peoples and an extended period of drought made life hard, and joy faded.

The prophet Haggai, who returned with the exiles, believed trouble had come because the people had not given priority to rebuilding the temple. "You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little," he proclaimed, "and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the LORD of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the soil produces, on human beings and animals, and on all their labors" (Hag. 1:9-11, see also Hag. 1:6 and 2:15-17).

The prophet Zechariah, active about the same time, likewise charged the people with having followed the evil ways of their ancestors, and called for them to repent if they hoped for better days (Zech. 1:1-6).

Perhaps it was in a setting like

this that Psalm 85 originated as a prayer for forgiveness and restoration as the people heeded the prophets and returned to the task of building the temple, pleading "Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation" (v. 7).

The word translated "steadfast love" is *hesed*, a word so rich that it defies an exact translation. It suggests ideas of persistent compassion, kindness, and mercy that grow from a deep love that won't give up. The psalmist knew that any hope for Israel's deliverance or salvation from its failures and its time of trial had to lie in the belief that God's *hesed* would not let them go.

Salvation coming (vv. 8-13)

While vv. 1-7 are addressed to God, in vv. 8-13 the psalmist speaks to his audience – worshipers, hearers, or later readers – concerning his beliefs about God. Perhaps the speaker was recognized as a temple prophet, for he claimed the ability to hear and proclaim a message from God: "Let me hear what God the LORD will speak," he said (v. 8a, NRSV), or perhaps "I will listen to what God the LORD says" (NET). Both are legitimate translations.

But what is it God will speak? "For he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful." The word translated "peace" is *shalom*. Like *hesed*, the concept of *shalom* cannot be summed up in one word. It conveys the primary idea of wholeness or well-being that produces an inner peace that goes far beyond the absence of conflict. *Shalom* is the outgrowth of God's salvation or deliverance, which the psalmist believed would be soon coming (v. 9).

In v. 10 we find one of scripture's most charming images: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteous-

ness and peace will kiss each other." Here the psalmist imagines four of God's divine attributes as living agents who unite to bring salvation to the land through renewed prosperity. In personified form, "faithfulness will spring up from the ground and righteousness will look down from the sky" (or "heavens," v. 11), a reminder that fertile soil and appropriate rains are both gifts of God, for "The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase" (v. 12).

The psalmist believed that divine forgiveness and earthly fertility were intimately connected: when God's rich attributes of loving faithfulness and righteous peace were unleashed, both land and people would respond with fruitful growth reflecting God's presence among God's people. That, in the psalmist's mind, was of prime importance. When facing famine, the people naturally longed for abundant rain and prolific harvests, but the psalmist understood that their greatest need was for God to be with them: "Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps" (v. 13).

Americans are less closely connected to the land than our ancient counterparts: less than two percent of families in America are actively involved in farming. Even so, we can appreciate the powerful metaphors connecting God's faithful love with redeeming grace that brings peace and wholeness to God's people, even as God's righteous acts call forth right living on our part, as well.

During this Advent season we celebrate the fulfillment of a hope that goes far beyond the psalmist's wildest dreams. God in Christ came to live among us and bring *shalom*, the fullest expression of salvation. Every Advent reminds us that he lives with us still. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 17, 2017

Psalm 126

Tearful Farmers

As children, many of us learned to sing “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart.” As adults, we enjoy hearing children of the church sing the same song, but perhaps wistfully, because many of us – individuals and churches included – may wonder where the joy went in our lives and in our worship.

A church without joy is a church without life, a church with no good news to proclaim. We want our worship to have a sense of dignity, but we need not sacrifice joy in the name of formality. If there is no joy in our faith, perhaps we should be asking ourselves why.

If we can agree that joy is important to the Christian life, it’s worth taking time to contemplate some basic truths about joy. The third Sunday of Advent is often devoted to the theme of joy, a day to gladly sing “Joy to the World!” Psalm 126 was written long before Jesus’ birth on earth, but it offers a prime text for pondering the source and meaning of joy in the life of the believer.

Joy surprises (vv. 1-3)

When the British skeptic-turned-believer C. S. Lewis wrote his autobiography, he called it *Surprised*

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Psalm 126:5 –

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.”

by Joy. A central theme of the book is that joy is not automatic. It is not something we can buy at the store. It is not something we can find on the street, or in a bar. Instead, he said, joy finds us. Sometimes, when we least expect it, we may be surprised by joy.

Sometimes we may be inspired by the beauty of nature – vibrant shades of green in springtime, sparkling palettes of color in the fall, a rainbow emerging from a gray and cloudy sky. There are times when joy may emerge from an otherwise bleak and boring day: we may hear the words of a song, or the laughter of children at play, and a flicker of joy may warm the soul.

That kind of surprising joy is an amazing gift of God, and those whose hearts are open to receive God’s gift of joy will find it, even where they don’t expect it. Even so, when joy comes, we must welcome it to receive it. The Catholic mystic Henri Nouwen famously said “Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.”

Our text for today probably comes from a setting in which the Psalmist chose to celebrate Israel’s miraculous (and undeserved) return from Babylon as a dream come true. Listen:

“When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, ‘The LORD has done great things for them.’ The LORD has done

great things for us, and we rejoiced” (vv. 1-3).^U

For the exiles in Babylon who longed to return to Jerusalem, the journey home may have seemed too good to be true. We can imagine a level of giddy rejoicing as thousands of Jews packed their belongings and set out for what they imagined to be a great homecoming in the beautiful city of Jerusalem.^U They imagined that other nations would likewise recognize what great things God had done for them.

But things don’t always turn out as expected.

Joy and pain can coexist (vv. 4-6)

After weeks of walking the long road through the Fertile Crescent, a few thousand people accompanied by camels and donkeys to carry provisions and possessions, the returning exiles found Jerusalem in ruins, an overgrown city of broken buildings and squatters’ shacks. They came with authority to establish a new sub-province called “Yehud” amid other small Persian districts, but neighboring peoples resented them and tried to undermine their efforts. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah relate stories of both diplomatic connivances and direct threats that imperiled the Jews as they sought to rebuild the city.

As the people worked to rebuild their homes and re-establish their fields, the land experienced a time of drought. Food supplies ran short, and tempers followed. Misery abounded, and yet a poet among them turned to God with hopeful joy despite the sorrow.

The psalmist prayed: “Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves” (vv. 4-6).

Two images drawn from nature illustrate the psalmist’s hope. “The watercourses in the Negeb” refers to seasonal wadis in southern Israel that were typically dry, but filled with life-giving water during the rainy season. 🇺🇸

The second metaphor, “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy,” points to a connection between joy, hope, and patience. Clearing fields, plowing, and sowing is difficult work, but accompanied by hope for a successful harvest and patience in waiting for it. Hardship and sorrow may have their day, but do not mean that God has forgotten us. Another psalmist believed that “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5). And, we recall Jesus saying “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt. 5:4).

Psalms 126 reminds us that joy is not the same thing as happiness. Joy, happiness, and pleasure may overlap, but they are not the same. As Lewis noted, what they have in common is that, once you taste any of them, you want more.

What we think of as happiness and pleasure are almost entirely dependent on circumstances. Happiness may depend on having things or doing things or having the sense of being in control. The experience of pleasure implies a lack of pain and the presence of something that generates good feelings. We can intentionally seek pleasure and find it in good food or good company or a good massage.

We can pursue happiness and find it in buying things and building wealth and taking long or frequent vacations. We can find happiness and pleasure — the problem is that we cannot keep them or find lasting joy in them.

The U. S. Constitution guarantees us the right to the pursuit of happiness — but the gospel message invites us to accept the *gift* of a joy that is internal and eternal, ultimately satisfying and unfazed by circumstances. People who have joy can experience happiness and pleasure while keeping them in perspective. Those who have no internal joy may devote their lives to pursuing happiness, but are never satisfied — they become like a ship that has wind in its sails, but no rudder to guide it home.

One of the great mysteries of the faith is that joy can exist, even at the heart of pain. Unlike happiness or pleasure, joy endures through physical trials, through financial problems, through heartache and loss. Joy endures, even in death.

Joy and sorrow exist in an almost mystical relationship. The poet Kahlil Gibran held that joy is sorrow unmasked, and that our laughter and tears rise from the same wellspring. 🇺🇸 In a similar vein, C. S. Lewis wrote that joy and pain were like two sides of the same coin — the pain we feel in times of loss would not exist if not for the joy we knew before the loss. 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

Joy is from God

The poet behind Psalm 85 understood that the ultimate source of joy is the presence of God. We may have trouble getting our heads around that thought, because our socio-cultural-economic world teaches us to look for joy just about anywhere but in God.

We grow up thinking that joy comes when our team wins, when we get the big promotion, when every-

one is healthy, when we have lots of vacation time and a place at the beach, when everybody loves us and no one treats us badly.

At some point, we must realize that we’ve been sold an empty bill of goods. Many Christians, no less than anyone else, have bought the gospel of consumerism and me-ism and prosperity-ism. When things don’t go their way, there’s no joy to keep them focused. When trouble arises at work, there’s no joy to maintain an even keel. When problems crop up at home, there’s no joy to see them through. When sickness invades the body, there’s no joy to give strength.

The scriptures insist that ultimate joy, lasting joy, the kind of joy that holds us up through every trial of life, is found in the One who has already endured all that life could throw at him, and emerged victorious. The only true source of joy is found in the only true God.

Another psalmist testified: “You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (16:11).

Jesus taught his disciples that God is the source of both love and joy: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. *I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete*” (John 15:9-11).

If we want to know peace and contentment, to be an effective witness to others, to be the best parent or friend we can be — the place to begin is here, in opening our hearts to God’s love, in celebrating what it means to say “*I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart — down in my heart to stay!*” 🇺🇸

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 24, 2017

Psalm 89

Keeping Promises

Psalm 89 has many verses, and most of them are joyful, but a large part of the psalm is one of the saddest songs to be found in the Bible. Why choose a text like that for such a joyful time as Christmas?

The short answer is that the first 37 verses celebrate God's choice of David as Israel's king, and recall God's promise to keep one of David's descendants on the throne forever (2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17). We often think of Jesus' birth as the ultimate fulfillment of this promise – but there is more to this psalm than happy thoughts. 📖

A song of steadfast love (vv. 1-18)

A superscription credits the psalm to "Ethan the Ezrahite," a contemporary of David, but it may have been written much later. The first two verses set the initial tone of praise as the poet repetitively promises to *sing* of God's steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*'emunah*) forever, because he believes that both have been *established* forever (vv. 1-2). 📖

Given that the song is also a prayer, the celebration of God's eternal love and faithfulness may be intended as a reminder to God as much as a declaration to the worshipers. Stating his belief

Psalm 89:3-4 –

You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: 'I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.'"

that God's faithful love is everlasting is a way of challenging God to show it.

For this psalmist, the primary evidence for God's beneficence is God's promise to David that "I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations" (v. 4). This is a near-quote from the promise found in 2 Samuel 7:16: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever."

God could fulfill such promises, the psalmist believed, because God rules in the heavens, supreme among all heavenly beings that make up the divine council, "great and awesome above all that are around him," surrounded by faithfulness (vv. 5-8). 📖 📖

The poet's praise moves from heaven to earth in vv. 9-12, beginning with an affirmation that God's rule extends to the chaotic sea, the prime symbol of disorder in the ancient world. Rahab was imagined as a sea monster and author of chaos that God defeated before creating the world. 📖

God rules not only the sea, the psalmist insists, but all of heaven and earth, from the north to the south, so that even Tabor and Hermon (two of the most prominent mountains in Israel) "joyously praise your name" (vv. 11-12). God rules with a mighty arm, the poet says, but always with righteousness and justice, steadfast

love and faithfulness (vv. 13-17).

The last verse of this section shifts back to the psalmist's interest in the king with a declaration that "our shield belongs to the LORD, our king to the Holy One of Israel" (v. 18). Here "shield" is a euphemism for the king as Israel's protector. The familiar "Star of David" symbol looks back to this: its Hebrew name is not the "star of David," but the *mogen Dawid*: the "shield of David."

Christian readers often think of "the Holy One of Israel" as Christ, the ultimate "king of kings."

A promise remembered (vv. 19-37)

Having returned to the subject of the king, the psalmist rhapsodizes on his belief that God had made binding promises to David. When David had offered to build a house for Yahweh to dwell in, he was told that Yahweh would build a house for him: not a physical palace, but a dynastic "house." 📖 According to 2 Samuel 7, God promised to establish David's descendants upon the throne of Israel for all time — while making it very clear that sin would lead to punishment. David's descendants had no guarantee of peace and stability without regard for their behavior.

But, as the poet celebrates God's promise, he expands upon it, elevating David to near-divinity. He speaks of David as Yahweh's "*firstborn, the highest of the kings of all the earth*" (v. 27). More than once, he recalls the promise that God's covenant with David would last *forever*.

In vv. 31-32, the psalmist remembers the proviso that rebellion would

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be punished, but quickly glosses over it with a reminder that God would never break the covenant promise (vv. 33-34). He then claims in poetic exaggeration that God had promised to make David's throne "*as the sun before me, it shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful*" (vv. 35-37).

Such flowery promises are not found in the narrative, but the psalmist took ideas from popular tradition and fashioned them into a claim that God had promised not only that David's descendants would rule forever, but be shining stars who would carry Israel along in their train.

The psalmist was not alone in believing that God's promise to David had made Jerusalem permanently secure. When the people were threatened by the Assyrians in the eighth century, and more than a century later by the Babylonians, the prophets called upon them to change their ways or face judgment – but many scoffed at the idea that God would ever allow Jerusalem to be defeated (Mic. 3:9-12, Jer. 7:1-15). They assumed that God's "forever" promise to David gave the city invulnerability against all enemies.

But the city was not impregnable. It did fall, and it fell hard when the Babylonians tore it apart and burned the temple in 587 B.C.E.

A promise forgotten? (vv. 38-52)

It's likely that the man who wrote this psalm in Ethan the Ezrahite's name was one of those persons who had thought Jerusalem and its king could never fall, because when Judah was defeated, he responded with bitter disappointment. Verse 38 marks a major shift from praise to lament as the psalmist accuses the Lord of failing to be true:

"But now you have spurned and rejected him; you are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust. You have broken through all his walls; you have laid his strongholds in ruins. All who pass by plunder him; he has become the scorn of his neighbors. You have exalted the right hand of his foes; you have made all his enemies rejoice. Moreover, you have turned back the edge of his sword, and you have not supported him in battle. You have removed the scepter from his hand, and hurled his throne to the ground. You have cut short the days of his youth; you have covered him with shame" (vv. 38-45). The following verses [vv. 46-51] continue the theme, like a country song about someone who feels betrayed. 📖

It's not that difficult for people to become whiners when they think God has let them down. Our complaining takes different forms. Some of us go straight to God with loud complaints. Others express their disappointment by glossing over it, calling on sentimental ideas for why the tragedy must have been a good thing because they believe "everything happens for a reason." 📖 📖

Many people, however, respond to disappointment by simply giving up on God. Whether they admit it or not, when hard times came and God did not meet their expectations of protection, they wondered what was the point of continuing to worship or serve God.

This is a problem, but the problem is not with God. The problem is with misplaced expectations that God is somehow obligated to protect us from harm and to make us prosperous. The problem is with our expectations. The psalmist had it in his head that God had promised to keep David's son and David's city and David's country on

top of the world, no matter what.

He was wrong, even if his song is in scripture. We learn from his mistakes. He had quoted God's proviso that sinful behavior would lead to troublesome consequences (vv. 30-32) — and the scriptures are very careful to say that is why Jerusalem ultimately fell — but then he largely ignored the warning.

What the psalmist could not see from his limited perspective was that God was not through with Israel. Because Israel and Judah's kings and people persisted in turning away from God's covenant, other scriptures insist that God was only fulfilling his promise that David's descendants would be punished with the rods of men — those men just happened to be Babylonians.

The author of Psalm 89 had no way of knowing that God's promise ultimately would transcend the concept of a physical king in Jerusalem. He had no way of knowing how Jesus Christ (a descendant of David) would become all that David and his descendants were not, or that he would reign forever on an eternal throne within a whole new concept of Jerusalem. So, let's be patient with Ethan the Ezrahite. No matter how he tried, he couldn't see the big picture, much of which had not been painted yet.

This is where we re-enter the story. As we celebrate Christmas, we can look back and see the part of the picture that includes the coming of Christ as the true and eternal son of David. We can see how God's promise did in fact prove to be true, even though the psalmist thought he had been forsaken. While the psalmist could only whine about the loss of David's dynasty in Jerusalem, we can celebrate the birth of a new dynasty led by a "son of David," a dynasty that will truly last forever. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*


Dec. 31, 2017

Psalm 148

Praise Squared

Have you ever walked out into a beautiful rain-fresh morning, or looked out over a stunning mountain vista, or watched a puppy at play, and felt moved with gratitude that we live in such an amazing world?

Our daily outlook is often tinged with busyness related to work or home, or with frustration over some aspect of life, or with sorrow that has left us feeling vaguely disappointed. Moments of pure praise are likely rare – but for those moments, Psalm 148 is a perfect text.

As we have seen in previous psalm texts during this month, Israel's praise was commonly mixed with lament, because that's the way life is. No one stays on top all the time. Occasionally, though, a poet was moved to declare unadulterated thanksgiving to God, pure praise such as that echoed in hymns such as Charles Wesley's "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." The chorus ends with the redeemed standing before God, "lost in wonder, love, and praise." 


A hallelujah hymn

Psalm 148 is one of five "Hallel" or "hallelujah psalms" that conclude the book (Psalms 146–150): all of them focus purely on praise, beginning

Psalm 148:1 –

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!

and ending with the words "hallelujah." The term is a combination of two Hebrew words: *hallelu* is a plural imperative form of the verbal root *hll*, meaning "Praise!" and the object "yah" is an abbreviation of the divine name *Yahweh* – so "hallelujah" literally means "Praise the Lord!"

The composite expression came to be used, not only as exhortation to energetic praise, but also as an exclamation of praise itself. As such, the early translation known as the Septuagint often simply transliterated the Hebrew phrase into Greek letters as *allelouia*. We continue that practice today. Whether we exclaim "hallelujah!" in praise or sing "alleluia" in a more formal hymn, we are proclaiming "Praise the LORD," where "LORD" stands for *Yahweh*, the special covenant name God revealed to Israel (Exod. 3:15). 

The church father Augustine took note of this. He wrote that when people say "Praise the Lord," they are doing precisely what they are telling others to do (*Expositions on the Psalms 121–150* [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004], 6:477).

While the classic form *hallelu-jah* appears only at the beginning and the end, the verb *hallelu* appears 10 more times, encouraging us to "praise the LORD" (spelled differently), to "praise the name of the LORD," or simply to "praise him!" This gives a sense of continuity to the psalm, leaving no doubt about its central theme.

Heavenly praise (vv. 1-6)

Psalm 148 has a distinctive structure. While the overriding concern is that all creation should praise God, the first six verses call on all aspects of the heavens to pay tribute to God, while vv. 7-14 issue the same challenge to every attribute and inhabitant of the earth. Can we find ourselves in this psalm?

The first verse utilizes the verb for "praise" no less than three times: "Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!" The psalmist then begins an inventory of heavenly inhabitants that owe praise to God, beginning with "all his angels ... all his host" (v. 2).

Anyone who claims to understand either the number or hierarchies of heavenly beings overestimates his or her abilities. The Hebrew word translated as "angels" is *mal'ahim*, which means "messengers" (the prophet Malachi's name means "my messenger").

The word for "hosts" is sometimes used in the sense of heavenly armies in the expression "LORD of hosts" (1 Sam. 17:45), sometimes as heavenly attendants (Ps. 103:20-21), and sometimes as a reference to stars that accompanied the sun and moon (Deut. 17:3, 5) and were associated with pagan deities. Israel was forbidden to worship these, but sometimes did, leading to judgment (2 Kgs. 23:4-5, Jer. 19:13, Zeph. 1:5). In v. 2 of our text, the word clearly refers to heavenly beings thought to attend God in various ways, as the heavenly bodies come next.

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“Praise him, sun and moon; praise him all you shining stars!” (v. 3). The author of the creation story in Genesis 1 refused to use the words “sun” and “moon” because neighboring nations worshiped the heavenly bodies as gods, with similar names (“sun” is *shemesh* in Hebrew, *shamash* in Babylonian/Assyrian). Here the writer names the “sun, moon, and shining stars,” but in a category that is clearly a step down from “God’s heaven” to the visible “heavens” above the earth, where they inhabit the sky. They are God’s creation, not gods in themselves. 📖

The Hebrews’ pre-scientific view of the universe held that a cosmic ocean existed above the “firmament” that defined the limits of the heavens above the earth, and that windows opened to allow rains to fall (Gen. 7:11, 8:2; Mal. 3:10). This is probably behind the expression “waters above the heavens” (v. 4). 📖 Atmospheric clouds appear in the next section.

Calls to praise often conclude with a reason for praise. Why should heavenly beings and bodies “praise the name of the LORD”? Because “he commanded and they were created. He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed” (vv. 5-6). Through their very existence and fulfillment of their divinely ordained function, the heavenly hosts and cosmic luminaries reflect praise to their creator. 📖

My wife owns a beautiful “lazy Susan” turntable that her grandfather handcrafted with an inlaid checkerboard/chessboard on the top. The checkered squares are made from sycamore and mahogany wood, while the border is from red oak. The quality of the craftsmanship reflects the honor due to the crafter. In a similar way, the majesty of the universe speaks to the power of its creator and the glory that is due.

Earthly praise (vv. 7-14)

With v. 7, the psalmist turns from the heavens to the earth, along with its oceans and atmosphere. He begins with the sea: “Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps.” Here “sea monsters” may call to mind whales or other large sea creatures that had been seen or imagined by sailors, while the depths of the sea are likewise personified as capable of voicing praise. 📖

The atmosphere takes the stage in v. 8, where the psalmist calls for praise from “fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!” The imagery suggests all kinds of powerful storms. “Fire” in this context calls to mind lightning, which often accompanies hail-producing storms. NRSV’s “frost” would be better rendered as “clouds” (as in NIV11, NET, and HCSB): the word more commonly describes thick smoke, which clouds resemble. Israel’s Canaanite neighbors depicted Baal as the storm god, but the psalmist believed Yahweh alone reigned over all the earth, from ocean depths to highest heaven. 📖

In vv. 9-10, the psalmist shifts to the earth’s surface with an intentional movement from geological features (“mountains and hills”) to prized vegetation (“fruit trees and cedars”), then to animal life (“wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds”). The list does not distinguish between “clean” and “unclean” animals: every creature that lives and moves is a part of God’s good creation and owes praise to the Lord.

We are not surprised that humans make up the final category called to praise God (vv. 11-12). Once again we see a purposeful progression, this time from royalty (“kings of the earth and

all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth”) to common folk (“young men and women alike, old and young together”).

How can cosmic bodies, ocean depths, land formations, standing trees, and living creatures join human beings in giving praise to God? Even unconscious entities give praise to exalt God’s glory “above earth and heaven” precisely by existing and fulfilling the function God designed for them (v. 13).

On one hand, then, the psalm pictures humans as one part of the larger web of creation. We, like stars, clouds, trees, and animals, give praise to God by being and doing what we have been called to be and do. That is an important lesson, but there is more.

Why should people praise God? The final verse turns to Israel as God’s covenant people, especially blessed by God and thus even more obliged to offer abject praise: “He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!”

“Horn” in this instance is probably a metaphor for a special position of dignity or privilege. The psalmist believed Israel had been chosen as God’s special people, to live in a covenant relationship that would serve as a shining example and draw other peoples to God. The mark of Israel’s honor was seen in their praise to God.

Christians are not Israelites – but we also claim to live in a special relationship with God, a new covenant made available to all through the salvific work of Christ. We also are called to live in such a way that our attitudes and behaviors reflect the goodness of God and attract others to have faith. There is no better way – or greater reason – to praise the Lord.

Hallelujah? **NFJ**

RECOGNITION & REMEMBRANCE

Jonathan Barlow is pastor of First Baptist Church of Dalton, Ga., coming from the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Royston, Ga.

Meghan Alexander Beddingfield was ordained to ministry by Memorial Baptist Church in Buies Creek, N. C. A former Peace Corps volunteer in South Africa, she is a Princeton Theological Seminary graduate pursuing a doctorate in religion and culture at Southern Methodist University.

Kasey Jones is associate coordinator of strategic operations and outreach for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. A former CBF moderator, she comes from the pastorate of National Memorial Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

Brandon Malloy Patterson is pastor of Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga.

Suzii Paynter, executive coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, received the T.B. Maston Foundation Award in October.

Kristen Pope is minister of faith development at First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga. She is a third-year student at Mercer's McAfee School of Theology who has served as a ministry associate at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga.

Drayton and Mary Etta Sanders received the Louie D. Newton Award for Service to Mercer University. They are lay leaders in the First Baptist Church of Dalton, Ga., and engaged in and supportive of causes including Nurturing Faith.

Matt Sapp is pastor of Central Baptist Church in Newnan, Ga., coming from Heritage Fellowship Church in Canton, Ga.

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Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation

1. Publication title: *Nurturing Faith Journal*
2. Publication number: 1072-7787
3. Filing date: Oct. 1, 2017
4. Issue frequency: bimonthly
5. No. of issues published annually: 6
6. Annual subscription price: \$24 U.S.; \$42 Canadian; \$100 foreign
7. Complete mailing address of known office of publication:
P.O. Box 6318
Macon, GA 31208-6318
Contact person: Jackie Riley
Telephone: 478-301-5655
8. Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business office of publisher:
988-1/2 Bond St.
Macon, GA 31201
9. Full names and complete mailing address of publisher, editor and managing editor:
Publisher: Baptists Today, Inc.
P.O. Box 6318
Macon, GA 31208-6318
Editor: John D. Pierce
Baptists Today
P.O. Box 6318
Macon, GA 31208-6318

Managing Editor: Jackie B. Riley
Baptists Today
P.O. Box 6318
Macon, GA 31208-6318

10. Owner: Baptists Today, Inc. (nonprofit)
P.O. Box 6318
Macon, GA 31208-6318
Jack Glasgow (chairman)
P.O. Box 6318
Macon, GA 31208-6318
David Turner (vice chair)
P.O. Box 6318
Macon, GA 31208-6318
Julie Steele, (corporate secretary)
P.O. Box 6318
Macon, GA 31208-6318

11. Known bondholders, mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities:
None

12. Tax status: The purpose, function and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months

13. Publication title: *Nurturing Faith Journal*

14. Issue date for circulation data below:
September / October 2017

15. Extent and nature of circulation

National and limited foreign
Total number of copies: *11,555 **9750
Paid and/or requested circulation
Paid/requested outside-county mail subscriptions stated on Form 3541: *10,538 **9455
Paid in-county subscriptions stated on Form 3541: *___**___
Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales and other non-USPS paid distribution: *___**___
Other classes mailed through the USPS: *___**___
Total paid and/or requested circulation: *10,538 **9455
Free distribution by mail
Outside-county as stated on Form 3541: *___**___
In-county as stated on Form 3541: *___**___
Other classes mailed through the USPS: *___**___
Total free distribution: *601 **145
Total distribution: *11,139 **9,600
Copies not distributed: *416 **150
Total: *11,555 **9,750
Percent paid and/or requested circulation: *95% **99%

16. Publication statement of ownership: Publication required. Will be printed in the November / December 2017 issue of this publication.

*Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months

**No. copies of single issues published nearest to filing date



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Inspired Creativity

Benjamin Harrison (1889–1893)

By Bruce Gourley

Seven-year-old Benjamin Harrison missed his first opportunity to attend a presidential inauguration. Thirty-one days after his March 1841 election, U.S. President William Henry Harrison, Benjamin's grandfather, tragically died while in office.

Born Aug. 20, 1833 in Ohio, Benjamin was named after his immigrant ancestor of the same name who had arrived in early Jamestown, Va., in 1630. In a storied family of generations of distinguished men, William Henry Harrison, despite his untimely death, had been the most prominent.

Raised in a farming family of only modest means, Benjamin spent his childhood hunting and fishing, while attending school in a log cabin. A two-year enrollment at the agricultural Farmers' College near Cincinnati came next, then a transfer to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Presbyterian faith and theology heavily influenced both non-sectarian schools. Harrison joined a local Presbyterian church, the faith of his family, while attending Miami. Under the tutelage of Northern Presbyterian professors the young scholar embraced religiously-fueled antislavery sentiments. Developing superb oratorical skills, he briefly contemplated a career in the ministry "to the ordained of God to evangelize the whole world."

Opting instead for the legal profession, following graduation Harrison studied law in Cincinnati, settled into a disciplined life revolving around work befitting his Calvinistic religious faith, and married his college sweetheart, Caroline Scott, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister.

Admission to the bar and a move to



Indianapolis to practice law came next. The couple joined and became regular attendees at the city's First Presbyterian Church. There the future president taught a Sunday school class, ushered, and eventually became an elder. Soon, the Harrison family enlarged to include two children.

The up-and-coming lawyer joined the anti-slavery Republican Party shortly after its formation in 1856. Four years later, Indians elected him as reporter for the Indiana Supreme Court. Service in the Union Army during the Civil War followed. First serving as a military recruiter, Harrison eventually received a commission as a colonel in the 70th Indiana.

Late in the war Harrison and his regiment joined William T. Sherman's Atlanta Campaign of 1864. He commanded a brigade during eight battles, including the Battle of Atlanta. Bestowed by Congress with the title of brevet brigadier general in February 1865, following Union victory over the Confederate States, Harrison mustered out of military service.

Renowned in Indianapolis for his wartime service and legal work on behalf of the federal government, Harrison sought higher political office, narrowly losing election as governor in 1876.

Success followed, however, in election to and service in the U.S. Senate from 1881 to 1887. During his senatorial service Harrison took progressive and courageous stances in support of federal aid for the education of children of freedmen, and against the anti-immigrant Chinese Expulsion Act of 1882. In both instances his efforts proved futile.

Nonetheless, Harrison's service in the Senate led to his nomination as the 1888 Republican presidential candidate. Signifying the nature of politics at the time, both parties engaged in vote buying and electoral fraud, although there is little if any evidence that the candidates engaged in the underhanded activities.

In a close election Harrison lost the popular vote to incumbent Democrat President Grover Cleveland, but garnered an Electoral College victory by a margin of 233-168, carrying most of the northern states.

In his inaugural address of March 1889 Harrison, in similar fashion to many of his predecessors, invoked the "favor and help" of an inclusive "Almighty God — that He will give to me wisdom, strength, and fidelity, and to our people a spirit of fraternity and a love of righteousness and peace."

His Thanksgiving Proclamation of the same year spoke of an American God of "Divine Providence" who had blessed the nation with "enduring peace," "freedom from pestilence and famine" and "abundant harvests."

This is the 23rd 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.

Thoroughly positive in tone, President Harrison's religiously-infused language while in office reflected a confluence of his personal Christian faith, as well as national and international peace and prosperity that American Protestantism attributed to Christianity.

Addressing the Methodist Ecumenical Conference in Washington, D.C. in 1891, Harrison expressed warmth to Christians of other persuasions. Voicing intimate religious language largely foreign to previous presidents, he enthused: "Who does not greatly rejoice that the controversial clash of the churches is less than it once was; that we hear more of the Master and His teachings of love and duty than of hair-splitting theological differences?"

During the same speech the president turned to the language of religious nationalism, referring to America as a "Christian power." He rejoiced in "a unity of the Church and of humanity" and declared "by this great Christian sentiment, characterized not only by a high sense of justice, but by a spirit of love and forbearance, mastering the civil institutions and governments of the world, that we shall approach universal peace."

Apart from celebrating nationalist American Protestantism, President Harrison only on rare occasions mixed religion and politics in any formal sense. Religious historian William Ringenberg, however, concludes that the president when "deciding important matters of state ... listened to the advice of others, but ultimately believed he should act upon what he understood to be God's will."

Whether from his understanding of God's will or reflective of his views of the limits of religious freedom granted by the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment, Harrison followed recent presidents in prosecuting the illegal activities of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or Mormons.

During his term the LDS Church, following decades of resistance to federal anti-polygamy laws, formally renounced the practice. Harrison in turn offered a full pardon to all who "abstained [from polygamy] and on the condition that they continue to do so." Even so, he refused to

grant statehood to Utah, believing that more time needed to pass in order to allow the further uprooting of polygamy.

Championing the Religious Establishment clause of the First Amendment, Harrison as president set in motion a chain of events in opposition to the controversial, two-decades-long practice of federal financial support of Roman Catholic Indian schools. With the president's approval, Indian Commissioner Thomas J. Morgan, a Baptist and strict advocate of church-state separation, asked Congress to phase out government support of the religious schools. Some Catholic leaders accused Harrison of bigotry. The practice of federal aid to Catholic Indian schools eventually ceased in 1900.

From his religious convictions, too, Harrison opposed organized gambling. At the same time, he was criticized from some religious quarters, including the Episcopal Bishop of New York, for tolerating corruption within his administration.

All told, Harrison's presidential accomplishments were modest at best. His more notable successes included pensions for disabled Civil War veterans, tariff reforms, landmark anti-monopoly legislation (the Sherman Antitrust Act), the creation of national forests, modernization of the U.S. Navy, and admittance into the Union of the western states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Washington and Idaho.

On the other hand, President Harrison failed to enact legislation prohibiting white southerners from violating the voting rights of African Americans. The Civil War veteran nonetheless made clear in an 1889 address his support of African American Civil Rights:

"The colored people did not intrude themselves upon us; they were brought here in chains and held in communities where they are now chiefly bound by a cruel slave code ... when and under what conditions is the black man to have a free ballot? When is he in fact to have those full civil rights which have so long been his in law? When is that quality of influence which our form of government was intended to secure to the electors to be restored?"

In addition to lingering racism, new technologies also vexed Harrison. Although the first president to have his voice recorded, he recoiled from the installation of electricity in the White House. Fearing electrocution, the Harrisons refused to touch the light switches and often slept at night with the lights on.

In a rematch with Grover Cleveland in the 1892 presidential election, Harrison faced daunting headwinds. His record as president was nominal. A growing financial downturn soured the national mood. Many Catholic voters remained angry over his opposition to federal funding for the denomination's Indian schools. And his wife fell seriously ill during the campaign season.

Rather than publicly campaigning, Harrison chose to stay home and care for Caroline. Less than two weeks before the election, she tragically passed away from tuberculosis.

Easily defeated by Cleveland, Harrison returned to civilian life. He remarried, fathered a child, wrote a book (*This Country of Ours*) elaborating upon America's political system, returned to the practice of law, remained politically engaged, spoke frequently throughout America, and became a significant voice on international issues of law.

On the religious front Harrison served as the honorary chairman of and official Presbyterian Church U.S.A. delegate to the international Ecumenical Missionary Conference held in New York's Carnegie Hall in 1900. With more than 150 mission boards represented, the conference instilled the word "ecumenical" into Protestant consciousness.

At the conference and in other instances during his waning years Harrison pointed to Christ and the Gospels as the cure for the modern world's socio-economic problems, and to America as God's chosen nation to sow righteousness around the globe.

Benjamin Harrison — United States president, faithful Presbyterian, ecumenist, and Christian nationalist — died from pneumonia while at home in Indianapolis on March 13, 1901. He is remembered as one of few presidents evidencing heartfelt and personal religious faith. **NFJ**



In the IMAGE of God

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Recovering Baptist identity in a world of racial and ethnic hostilities

Editor's note: Upon closing the William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society in 2012, leaders voted to carry out its mission in the pages of Nurturing Faith Journal. This article by historian Bruce Gourley is part of that ongoing, occasional series.

In public rhetoric, surging movements and widespread rallies, racial and ethnic hatred is back in the open, and with a vengeance. Spurred on by the White House, stoked by far-right fake news and often empowered by evangelicals, white supremacy has regained a dark fervency not seen in America since the 1960s.

The nation's historical institutions have thus far proven unable to overcome this current crisis that threatens our nation's democratic foundations. Greed commands the loyalty of too many politicians, prophetic preaching is largely absent from pulpits, and the public square is distracted and divided.

Nonetheless, history has long provided insights and lessons for combating the evils of white supremacy.

BAPTIST BEARINGS

One such story is the daring, courageous and cutting-edge inclusiveness of early, traditional Baptist thought and practice. Scandalous in evangelical circles and long forgotten in wider American culture, early Baptists' remarkable contributions to the shaping of an inclusive and tolerant nation offer timeless contours of an effective road map for defeating the forces of darkness.

Some 400 years ago from the depths of persecution and in the bowels of danger, Baptists were birthed with the heretical conviction that all humans are entitled to equal freedom of conscience.

Early Baptists based their freedom beliefs on a radical interpretation of the Bible: the common origin and oneness of humanity as the creation of God.

The Genesis account of humanity created "in the image of God" positioned humans as visible, earthly representatives of the one, transcendent and invisible entity that the ancient Hebrew people called Yahweh. Within the human conscience, the soul, God dwelled.

Not all persons lived godly lives, of course, and personal beliefs found expression in a variety of religions and no faith at all. But for early Baptists, the human conscience was inviolable, God its only master. Therefore every person — Christian, Muslim, Jew, pagan, heretic, all — deserved equal freedom of conscience.

Early Baptists recognized in part a remarkable truth that had thus far in history eluded most of humanity: human equality.

EQUALLY HUMAN

Today, science offers insight that the scribes of Genesis could only approach through poetic and figurative language, and that

Baptists of the 17th and 18th centuries believed but could not quantify.

Thanks to advances in understanding human DNA, however, we now know that all humans at the molecular level are more than 99 percent identical. We, all of us, are a common humanity. We are equally human.

Yet even as early immigrant Baptists of the New World embraced the concept of human equality prior to the Enlightenment and modern science, colonial America expanded inequality into the realm of skin color.

Historians have long referred to racism as America's original sin.

Led by profit-seeking men who declared that God had chosen them to create a New Jerusalem in the wilderness, the earliest colonial settlements in what is now the United States of America often used violent means to subdue and steal lands and riches from native peoples who were dismissed as barbarians.

New World settlers enshrined their discriminatory, racist and violent deity in religiously-infused military doctrine, theocratic colonial charters, Old Testament-based legal systems, white-dominated social customs and cultural practices, and legalistic church practices.

In the name of an exclusive God a wholesale slaughter of native peoples intensified in the second half of the 17th century, alongside the proliferation of colonial laws dehumanizing African Americans to the status of slaves and codifying freedom as the domain of whites only.

White Americans' enslavement of black persons lasted until the 1865 defeat of the slave-owning southern states in the American Civil War, while the slaughter of native peoples continued several more decades. Both atrocities were widely supported by Bible-proclaiming, white evangelicals who insisted they were not racists, but instead were merely doing God's work of subduing inferior races.

To this day, the violent God of the original white settlers is portrayed as the American God. The 2008 election of the nation's first African-American president, rather than helping to overcome our collective history of violent racial conflict,

fostered the resentment of white supremacists and white evangelicals — often one and the same — who are now determined to make America unequal again in the name of their exclusive God.

RESISTING EVIL

Early Baptists often resisted racial discrimination and hatred. Roger Williams, founder of the First Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island — the nation's first Baptist church — and founder of the Rhode Island colony, treated native peoples as equals and spent most of his life advocating on behalf of area tribes.

John Clarke — a medical doctor, Baptist minister, co-founder of Newport, Rhode Island, and author of the colony's 1663 charter establishing freedom of conscience and religion for all — donated land and created in Newport a "Common Burying Ground" for the burial of white and black alike.

Often persecuted for their heretical religious and freedom beliefs and opposition to Christian colonial theocracies and laws, few Baptists in the 17th and 18th centuries owned slaves.

The Baptist principle of congregational autonomy allowed black Baptists in the North and South to freely form their own congregations by the early 18th century. Black congregations, often led by free black persons, bore witness to human equality at a time when racism defined American life.

Some courageous white Baptists in the northern colonies helped lead successful campaigns for the eventual sectional eradication of slavery in the early 19th century. Even in the slave-centric South until the turn of the 19th century, many white Baptist pastors and evangelists openly preached against slavery and for the intrinsic equality of black and white persons as images of God.

Virginia Baptists in 1789 passed a resolution stating: "Resolved, That slavery is a violent deprivation of the rights of nature, and inconsistent with a republican government, and therefore, recommend to our brethren to make use of every legal measure to extirpate this horrible evil from the land; and to pray to Almighty God that our honorable legislature may have it in

their power to proclaim that great jubilee, consistent with the principles of good policy."

In the same year Baptist churches in Baltimore and Philadelphia called for the abolition of slavery, recommending that churches form abolitionist societies. Abolitionist voices in the North, both black and white, grew rapidly from the 1820s onward as many Baptists became involved in the abolitionist movement.

Numerous black congregations participated in the Underground Railroad, including Second Baptist of Detroit, Michigan Street Baptist in Buffalo, Union Baptist and Zion Baptist in Cincinnati, and Second Baptist and Anti-Slavery Baptist of Columbus, Ohio.

A number of white congregations of the North also joined the Underground Railroad, including Sand Lake Baptist Church in Albany, N.Y., whose pastor Abel Brown was among dozens of white Baptist ministers who participated in the Underground Railroad.

EMANCIPATION

In the South, however, anti-slavery voices largely faded away by the 1830s as white Baptists advanced socially, culturally and economically in the slave-based states. Slave labor financed and constructed many First Baptist church buildings, paid the salaries of pastors, and provided funding for missionary endeavors.

Simultaneously, southern states passed ever-harsher laws designed to control slaves. Some laws prohibited independent black worship services and forced slaves and free blacks to attend white churches, wherein white preachers routinely reminded blacks that the Bible ordained their enslavement. Few white Baptists dared to speak openly against the South's "peculiar institution."

Of the relatively small number of black Baptist congregations that existed in the antebellum South, from their freedom convictions a number participated in the Underground Railroad, including: First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Ga.; Montgomery Street Baptist Church in the Georgetown area of Washington, D.C.; and Alfred Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va.

Southern white insistence upon maintaining and expanding in perpetuity the enslavement of black persons led to the greatest military conflict on the nation's soil, the American Civil War.

During the war over slavery U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, long opposed to slavery as immoral and repugnant, embraced the nation's founding Declaration of Independence statement of "all men are created equal." On Jan. 1, 1863 he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, legally freeing black persons in southern slave states then controlled by U.S. Army forces.

Black Baptists and seemingly most white Baptists in the North praised the Emancipation Proclamation. In black communities Lincoln became known as America's Moses, the one chosen of God to lead the captives out of slavery.

Many black Baptists of the South, upon escaping from slavery, fought for the Union. Among those was Robert Smalls, a Baptist deacon from Beaufort, S.C., who daringly hijacked a Union naval vessel and, along with other slaves, sailed to freedom in 1862. Smalls became famous in the North, raising support for the abolition of slavery and serving in the Union Navy.

DEFIANCE

America's victory over the Confederacy in the Civil War led to the abolishment of slavery. The 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the U.S. Constitution granted legal equality and voting rights for black persons. Green Clay Smith, a white U.S. congressman and Baptist minister from Kentucky, played a key role in the enactment of the 13th amendment forbidding slavery.

Following the war northern soldiers, preachers, teachers, missionaries and philanthropists — including many Baptists — expended money, time and labor in the South to provide education, job training and land for freedmen. Against the wishes of white southerners during Reconstruction, northern overlords ensured that southern blacks won election to local, state and national political offices. During this time Robert Smalls served as a U.S. senator from South Carolina.

White southerners fought back,

however. Upon the region's defeat in the Civil War, defiant southerners determined that former slaves and their descendants would never achieve success in life. Landowners forced hapless freedmen into sharecropping, a form of servitude similar to that of slavery, that perpetuated generational poverty. The Ku Klux Klan, a post-war avowedly white Christian terrorist organization, reinforced the brutal suppression of black Americans.

White Southern defiance prevailed, bringing an end to northern efforts of securing racial equality in the South. Forced segregation, economic suppression, legal and judicial discrimination, widespread brutality and murder, and systematic terrorism of black southerners created an apartheid South. These tools of racism and hatred were employed by a white "Christian" South against black Americans for some 100 years after the Civil War.

Racism also existed in the North before and after the Civil War, albeit on a far lesser scale and with much less violence.

CIVIL RIGHTS

For many generations amid the enslavement of and post-war terrorism against black Americans, most white Baptists of the South abandoned the historical faith convictions of human equality, unwilling to concede that all persons were equal images of God.

From this wilderness black Baptists emerged in the 1950s and 1960s to provide leadership in the march toward civil rights long denied. Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, Albert Paul Brinson, Fannie Lou Hamer, Kelly Miller Smith Sr., and many others fought the battles for racial equality in civic life.

At a 2015 Baptist History and Heritage Society conference in Nashville on Baptists and civil rights, Kelly Miller Smith Jr., pastor of the First Baptist Church Capitol Hill in Nashville and the son of Nashville's leading civil rights advocate during the mid-century movement, explained why black Baptists led the way in the civil rights movement:

"Among the things that helped [advance] most of the issues during the time of the civil rights movement, whether it was the sixties or before, was to be able to under-

stand and to see and to hear a free voice, free to share what needs to be said. The effectiveness of a protest movement is the freeness of the voice to articulate the issues. That is one of the beauties of being Baptist. We were not constrained by any political alliances. We were all free and independent congregations."

A few white Baptists, too, seized their denomination's freedom mantle and dared to advocate for racial equality: Clarence Jordan and the interracial Koinonia Farm in Americus, Ga; Foy Valentine, a Southern Baptist ethicist who insisted that racism denied the Lordship of Christ; and some white Baptists who risked their lives to march with King and other civil rights leaders.

Most white Baptists of the South, however, resisted integration. Some wore white hoods and terrorized black families through cross burnings, beatings and bombings. Many refused to allow black persons into their church sanctuaries and neighborhoods, opposed public school integration and established white-only private schools.

The legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws and opposition to the civil rights movement is yet visible in America. We remain a nation too often divided by race, rather than a nation united around our shared, 99 percent sameness. In terms of educational and employment opportunities, economic benefits, housing, justice issues and so much more, a systemic and often vast bias against black persons advantages white Americans.

THE COST

Speaking up against white supremacy is costly, as a pastor from Winston-Salem, N.C., learned when he voiced his convictions following the August 2017 white supremacist rally and terrorism in Charlottesville, Va., that played out on national television.

Condemning America's slave past, he declared of the present day: "As a pastor, it is my moral duty to speak out against racism, America's original sin. Today, I call on all of us with privilege and power to answer God's call to confront racism and white supremacy head-on. We can find inspiration in the Black Lives Matter movement, the women

who marched in the Women's March in January, and, especially, Heather Heyer, who died [killed by a white supremacist in Charlottesville] fighting for her beliefs."

For daring to speak out, the Rev. Robert Lee IV, the great-great-great-nephew of Confederate Army General Robert E. Lee, was forced out of his church.

Like Lee, early Baptists spoke truth to power, and were persecuted by others for their beliefs. A persecuted and powerless minority, early Baptists understood and embodied God's call for human freedom and equality for all persons.

Upon obtaining power and majoritarian status, however, privileged white Baptists often forgot what it had been like to be a despised minority. Today, African American and other minority Baptists are more likely to embody the Baptist faith heritage of freedom and equality. Increasingly, they are finding allies among traditional white Baptists eager to reclaim their faith's early convictions and identity.

The New Baptist Covenant, a partnership of black and white Baptist groups spearheaded by former President Jimmy

Carter, is a step in the right direction of listening, responding and working together at a local level. So, too, are partnerships between black and white Baptists that oppose predatory lending practices that victimize impoverished communities. Partnerships between black congregations and Cooperative Baptist-related theological institutions are also bridging racial divides.

In addition, many Baptist congregations are speaking up on behalf of Muslim and immigrant communities that are victims of discrimination and animosity, often from white fundamentalist Christians and their political allies.


Although the racial and ethnic chasm in America is vast, the faithful witness of early Baptists remains, offering hope that one day all of humanity will be welcomed by people of faith as being created in the image of God. **NFJ**

—Bruce Gourley is the author of several books including *Crucible of Faith & Freedom: Baptists and the American Civil War* (*Nurturing Faith*, 2015), *Diverging Loyalties: Baptists in Middle Georgia During the Civil War* (*Mercer University Press*, 2011) and *A Capsule History of Baptists* (*Fields Publishing*, 2010).

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Why is Temple Mount so disputed?

BY LAUREN MARKOE
AND KIMBERLY WINSTON

Religion News Service

Jerusalem's Temple Mount is the holiest site in the world for Jews and the third holiest for Muslims — a place where millions of people have prayed for millennia. Yet, often, it is a launching pad for deadly attacks and counterattacks.

For example, violence unfolded in July, when three Arab residents of Israel fatally shot two Israeli police officers guarding the Al-Aqsa Mosque. In response, Israel erected metal detectors and cameras at entrances to the mosque. More deaths followed as three Israelis were stabbed to death in the West Bank, four Palestinians were killed in East Jerusalem, and a Jordanian worker stabbed an Israeli Embassy worker.

After more than a week of violence — and a flurry of diplomatic closed-door meetings — Israel announced it would remove the metal detectors. But those are just a recent symbol of the broader struggle over ownership and control of the sacred site.

It is easy to find the tense situation and issues behind the disputes to be confusing. So here are some explanations that might help in response:

Of what does the Temple Mount consist?

The Temple Mount consists of three main sacred sites — the Al-Aqsa Mosque; the Dome of the Rock, sacred to Muslims for its ties to the life of the Prophet Muhammad; and the site of the Second Jewish Temple.

The site is sacred to Christians, too, as Jesus is believed to have walked there. Its most visible feature is the golden-roofed Dome of the Rock, visible from much of the city.

You mean there's no temple at the Temple Mount?

That's right. There is a remnant of a retaining wall that helped support the Jewish temple. What is known as the Western Wall buttressed the Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans in the year 70.



There are no remains of the First Temple, built by Solomon, the king of ancient Israel and Judea, and destroyed in the sixth century B.C. by the Babylonians.

Why was the First Temple built?

King David wanted to build a permanent resting place for the ark containing the Ten Commandments, a task that fell to his son, Solomon.

In ancient times, the Jewish high priest would enter the temple once a year on Yom Kippur to pray to God on Israel's behalf. Orthodox Jews still pray three times a day for its restoration.

Rabbi Tzvi Graetz, executive director of the World Council of Conservative/Masorti Synagogues, said that when it was destroyed, "it wasn't just a building that was destroyed, an entire nation went into exile."

Is the Temple Mount holy to Muslims in the same way?

Not exactly. According to the Quran, the top of this mount was the holy landing place in about 620 for the Prophet Muhammad.

After his "Night Journey" on a winged beast to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, Muhammad prayed, and the angel Gabriel offered him water, wine or milk. The prophet chose milk, and Gabriel told him that meant his followers would follow the true path, Islam.

It is also the place from which Muslims believe that Muhammad ascended to heaven.

Can't Muslims pray at the top and Jews pray at the bottom without bothering each other?

On peaceful days, that's what happens. Muslims pray at the two mosques at the "top" of the Temple Mount — which they call the Noble Sanctuary — and can look over the edge to see Jews praying at the Western Wall below.

But both Israelis and Palestinians have intentionally upset the peace at the Temple Mount, knowing that any disturbance there is likely to send violent shock waves far beyond.

In 2000, Ariel Sharon, then the leader of Israel's opposition party, took a delegation to the top of the Temple Mount, inciting rioting from Muslims and sparking the Second Intifada, which resulted in the deaths of more than 4,000 Israelis and Palestinians.

In 2014, a Palestinian shot Rabbi Yehuda Glick near the Temple Mount. Glick wanted Jews to pray freely at the top of the Temple Mount, which Israel does not allow, for fear of inciting violence.

Since his assailant was killed by Israeli security forces, Palestinians have mounted several attacks on Israelis. Israeli police have killed rioters and terror suspects.

So who is actually in charge of the Temple Mount?

Jordan pays the salaries of the employees of an Islamic waqf, or trust, that oversees the Noble Sanctuary. But Israel, which has soldiers stationed around the Temple Mount, effectively controls access to it. After the attempted assassination of Glick, for example, Israel closed the Temple Mount to men under 50.

What's this I hear about a Third Temple?

In Judaism, there is a belief that a new temple should be built on the ruins of the First and Second temples. But most Jews consider it an unrealistic and dangerous goal given that it would entail the destruction of the Noble Sanctuary.

As Graetz puts it: "Some extremists have the terrible fantasy of blowing up the mosque and building a temple. That's not the kind of temple I would ever want to visit." **NFJ**

Time Trials

Eric Smith runs, writes for a good cause

A reivew by John D. Pierce

GREENWOOD, S.C. — Eric Smith has finished the Boston Marathon five times, including the 2013 event disrupted by a deadly bombing. He brings his love of running, creative writing skills and deep commitment to the redemption of abused children together in the novel, *Time Trials* (WestBow Press, 2016).

The book is available for \$15 directly from the author's web site, weswriter.com. Smith, a member of First Baptist Church of Greenwood, S.C., responded to these questions about the book:

NFJ: Where did the idea for the book originate?

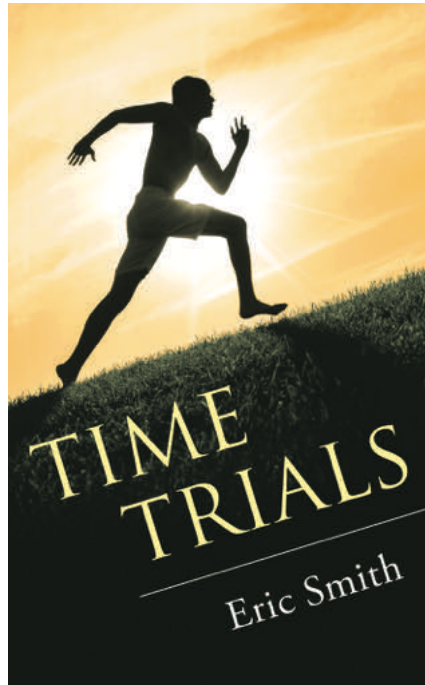
ES: The idea for my book originated after being present at the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. I originally wanted to help raise money for the victims and bring attention to this great marathon.

The deadline for donations to the One Fund passed before I could get published, so I turned to my second purpose, which was raising awareness of the Bowers-Rodgers Home in Greenwood. I was on the original board of directors and am still involved with the home.

NFJ: What do you hope this story will accomplish?

ES: I wanted this to be an inspirational Christian story of redemption and second chances. We all make mistakes, and I want people to understand it is never too late to surrender to God's grace. God is willing to give unlimited chances at redemption.

I also wanted to give a guide to new believers of some basic Christian beliefs: God loves us unconditionally; God can work our mistakes for good; and God has a good plan for each of us.



NFJ: What do people, especially church leaders, need to better understand about abuse?

ES: We need to understand that we are all damaged vessels. We are surrounded by people with varying degrees of brokenness in need of healing and understanding. God's grace offers that if we are willing to accept it. I hope this book can be an inspirational guide to healing and faith.

NFJ: What life lessons and spiritual disciplines have you found in running?

ES: Some of the things I have learned from distance running are perseverance, dedication and trust. These apply to our Christian walk also. We must focus on Jesus Christ and not be deterred.

We must be dedicated in our Christian training through prayer, Bible study, church

attendance, missions, etc. In running we must trust that our training program will allow us to reach our goal. Christians have to strive to trust God fully and to understand that faith in God will allow us to do God's will.

NFJ: What from the Boston Marathon, in particular, has shaped your life and work?

ES: The Boston Marathon is the pinnacle of marathon running. On a personal level, it is an honor to be able to participate and the fans are so supportive.

More importantly, it is amazing to see what God has started through my book. It is touching lives and has given me the opportunity to speak to groups about God's grace and redemption. Several other programs have grown out of it too.

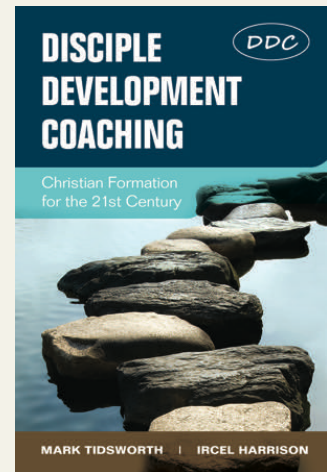
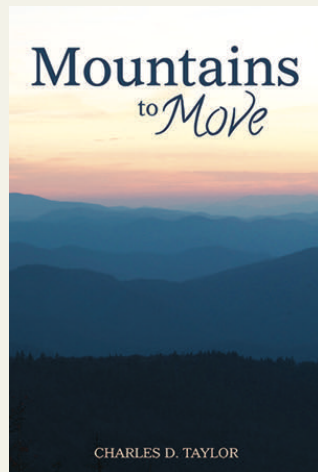
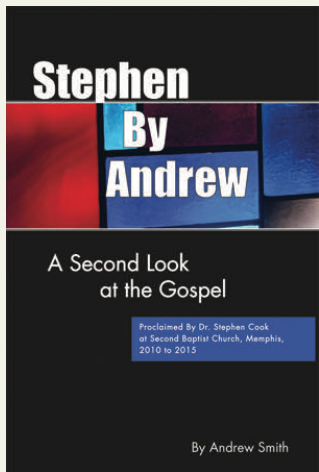
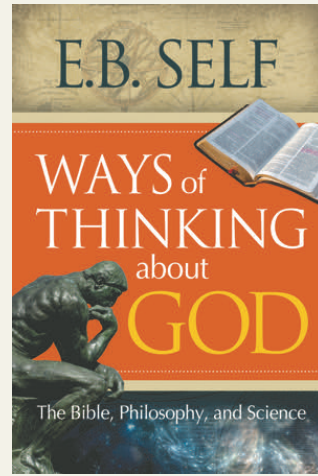
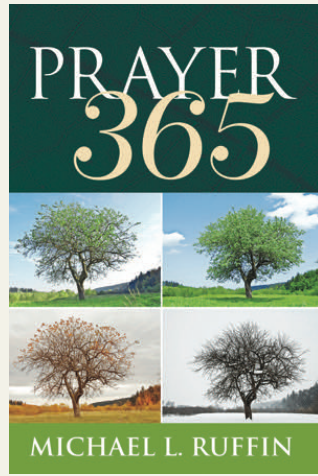
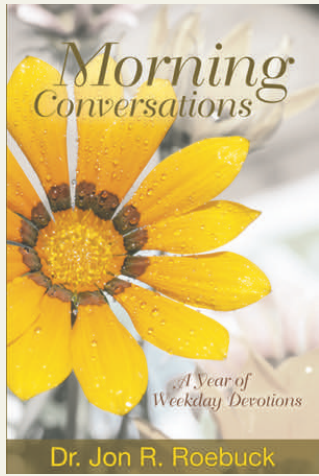
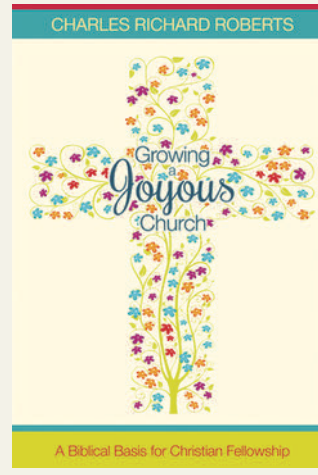
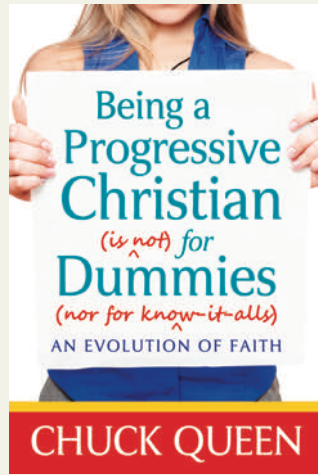
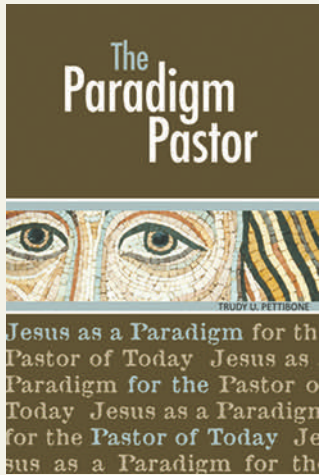


I have started a Run for God group in Greenwood, and I am raising funds to start a youth running club at the Bowers-Rodgers Home and the Connie Maxwell Orphanage. That is why I am desperately trying to reach a wider audience with my book.

NFJ: What do you find so captivating about Romans 8, which is the focus of the book's last chapter?

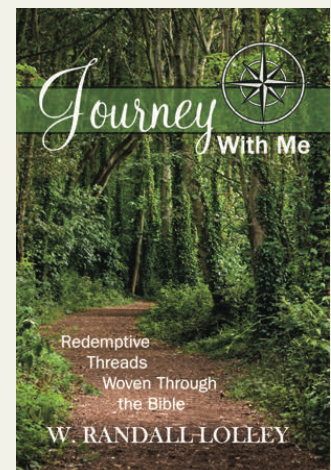
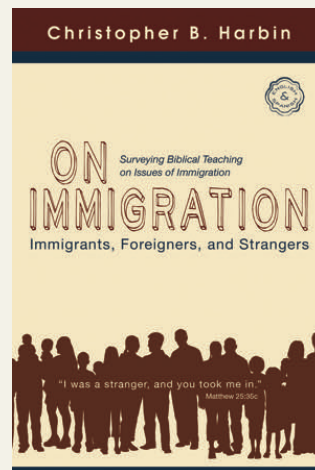
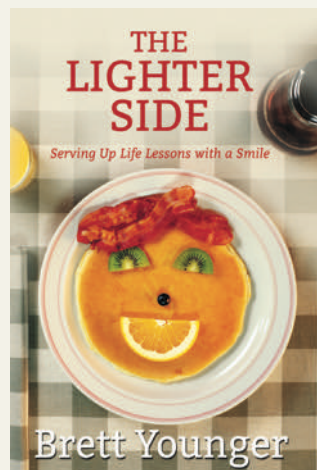
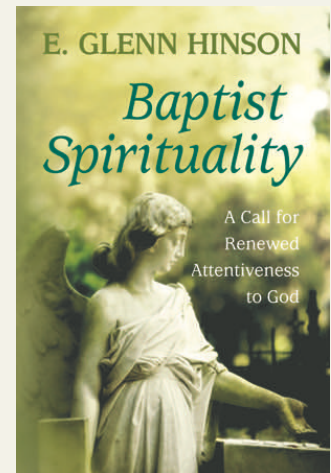
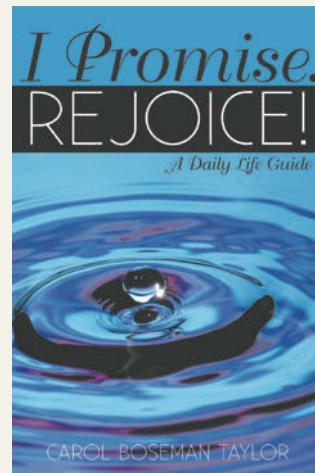
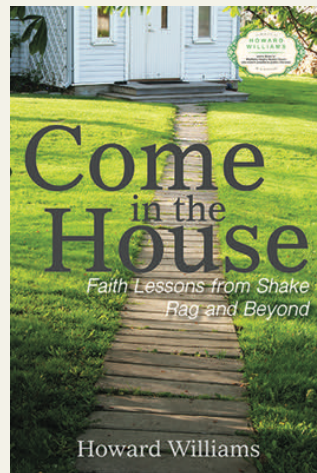
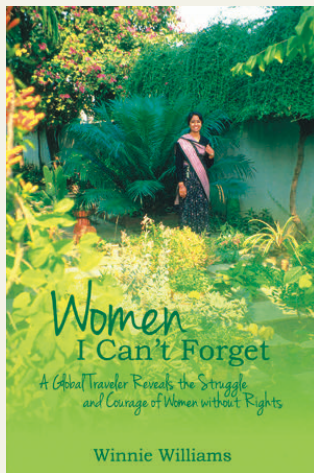
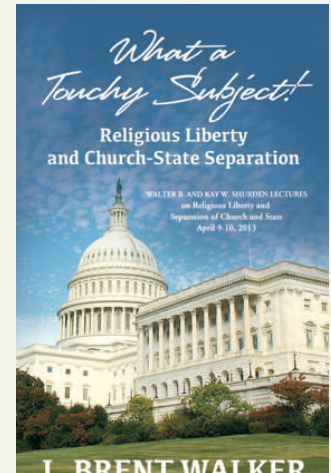
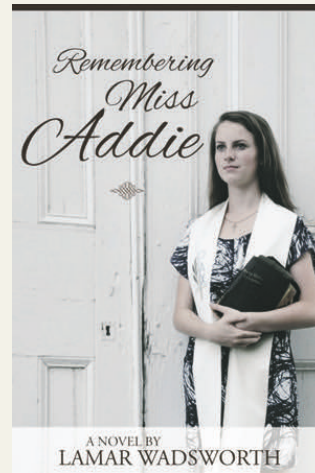
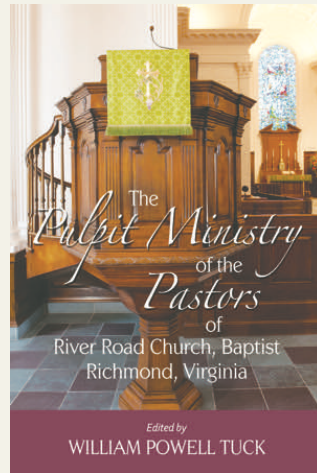
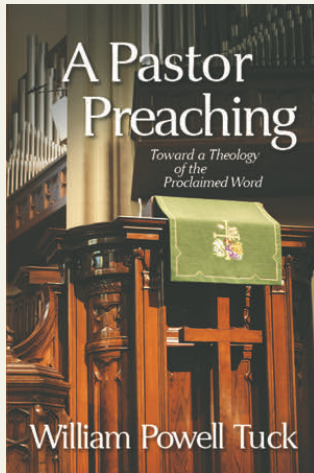
ES: I love Romans 8. It is a guide to new believers of God's constant presence, grace and love. To me personally, it is my anchor that reminds me of how much God loves me and is in control. I am assured that God is working all things out for my good, and to grow me in Christ-likeness. **NFJ**

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Nashville Statement won't change anything — relationships will

BY JONATHAN MERRITT

Religion News Service

There is a way for conservative Christians to make a strong, winsome case for traditional views of sexuality and gender. Unfortunately, the Nashville Statement isn't it.

In August, a group of prominent evangelicals released a “Christian manifesto,” which argued that LGBT people who embrace their sexual or gender identity are living in sin. The statement was coordinated by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, and many respectable people, including my father, signed it.

I assume most did so because of their convictions, however misguided, rather than hatred.

When the statement was released, a broad coalition of progressive Christians responded with disbelief, anger and mourning by turns. But dissenters can take a deep breath and put their sackcloth back in mothballs.

A closer look at this statement reveals a number of fatal flaws, which are likely to render it impotent. And the history of similar efforts indicates the Nashville Statement will almost certainly fail to shape broader conversations on the issues it addresses.

A casual reader of the Nashville Statement can quickly spot its problems, regardless of theological convictions. But here are the three most consequential:

Terrible timing

Set aside the content itself for a moment, and consider when this coalition decided to release its statement. An unprecedented hurricane was ripping through Texas, leaving countless people homeless and many others dead.

Choosing to release this statement then, rather than waiting even a few days, is not just misguided, but inexplicably callous.

When it comes to messaging efforts, the *when* is just as important as the *what*. Or to frame it with a phrase my dad often spoke to me when I was a child, “The right words spoken at the wrong time are the wrong words.”

Absence of repentance

Let's look at the content itself. The Nashville Statement fails as soon as it starts, not because of its assertions but because of its omissions. The statement fails to acknowledge, much less apologize for, Christians' sinful mistreatment of the LGBT community.

A quick review of the history of this sect of American Christians reveals a pattern of aggressive and harmful behavior against LGBT people. Growing up, I heard preachers aplenty talk about gays and lesbians like animals.

They were spoken of as filthy, disgusting abominations that made God's blood boil. I am not the exception. To wit:

- Televangelist Jimmy Swaggart once said, “If a gay man ever hit on me, I'd kill him and tell God he died.”
- Founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network Pat Robertson declared that for him, “[Homosexuality] is sodomy. It is repugnant.”
- Ten Commandments crusader and Alabama Judge Roy Moore called homosexuality an “abhorrent, immoral, detestable crime against nature” that should be punishable by law.



- In the 1990s, leaders such as Jerry Falwell led an effort to block funding for AIDS relief and research. Countless gays and lesbians — that is, men and women who are made in the image of God — have perished as a result.
- Thabiti Anyabwile, a pastor and blogger at The Gospel Coalition, wrote an article asserting that Christians need to recover their “gag reflex” when speaking about gays and lesbians. This article remains on the popular conservative website even today.

Acknowledging these failures would have softened the edges of an otherwise blunt statement, and in the process, would have ceded no theological ground. That the drafters of this statement did not realize the need to address their own history, or realized it and yet simply chose to ignore it, is grounds for questioning whether they are as smart and culturally savvy as they think they are.

Christian theology generally asserts that repentance is the key that unlocks the door of conversion. The Nashville Statement attempts to convert the culture while refusing to repent of its own failures on these very issues.

Marginalization tactics

An earmark of fundamentalism is marginalization. It is how the movement remains pure. Whenever someone disagrees or dissents, even if they themselves are not implicated in the “sin,” the person must be cut off and cast out.

Article X of the Nashville Statement repeats this error by rejecting that Christians can “agree to disagree” on these matters. Instead, the document asserts that “it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism and that such an

That the drafters of this statement did not realize the need to address their own history, or realized it and yet simply chose to ignore it, is grounds for questioning whether they are as smart and culturally savvy as they think they are

approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness.”

In other words, if you hold to every doctrine in every Christian creed since Jesus’ resurrection but you disagree with the signers on this issue, you are no longer a faithful Christian.

The problem with these kinds of heavy-handed tactics is that they often backfire. And a case in point is the LGBT debate itself.

Three decades ago, gays and lesbians merely wanted some sort of civil recognition of their unions. They wanted the ability to visit their loved ones in the hospital and leave their inheritances to their partners. Conservative Christians rejected even modest compromises at the time.

But then the balance of power shifted. Now conservative Christians are in the minority. They are crying “uncle” in similar fashion, asking to be left alone so they can live their lives (and refuse to bake cakes for whomever they like).

LGBT people and advocates aren’t having it. They are returning the favor, refusing to compromise with the ones who oppressed them for decades.

Solomon said that if a man rolls a rock, it will be rolled back onto him and if a man digs a pit, he will fall into it. Or to paraphrase the words of Jesus, “Those who live by marginalization tactics will die by them also.”

Conservative Christians are quickly becoming the minority on these matters. For better or worse, *they* will soon be the ones who are considered unfaithful and sinful.

These three flaws, and many others, will likely shipwreck the Nashville State-

ment. But there is one other glaring reason that progressives should slow their roll: Signing statements almost never lead to lasting cultural change.

I think of the 1978 “Chicago Statement,” which made a case for the inerrancy of the Bible. This became a rallying cry for many who were already committed to the doctrine, but I’ve never met someone who was convinced to change their mind as a result of reading it.

In fact, some of the most popular and influential books on the Bible in recent years have argued against this doctrine. If the Chicago Statement shaped culture, you can’t tell it.

Or one might consider the 1997 “Colorado Springs Guidelines,” which made a case for keeping gender-inclusive language out of Bible translations. Despite the support of influential leaders such as James Dobson, you’ll be hard-pressed to find a person outside of evangelical academia who has even heard of this statement.

Subsequent conservative translations that claimed to follow the Colorado Springs Guidelines would have presumably done so with or without the statement. Meanwhile, several popular Bible translations have violated the principles of these guidelines in their translation decisions.

Or for a more recent example, consider the “Manhattan Declaration” from 2009. This statement made a case for conservative positions on marriage, abortion and religious liberty. Like the Nashville Statement, it was met with much fanfare and criticism at the time.

Organizers of the Manhattan Declaration even hired a full-time spokesperson,

Eric Teetsel, to promote its message. In no time, the fledgling organization was broke and Teetsel was sent packing. Its effect on the American society and public policy was nil.

Conservative Christians seem to love issuing statements, all of which share two common characteristics: They oddly bear the name of the city in which they were drafted or released, and they all fail to shape the broader culture.

When it comes to issues of sexuality and gender, a statement like this is unlikely to move the needle with those who aren’t already in agreement. It is all head and no heart. It speaks to your mind but fails to look you in the eyes. It is intellectual, but not pastoral.

It dialogues *about* people, rather than *with* them. It acknowledges the theology of these issues but never the humanity. It is all words and no word-made-flesh.

So progressives who hope for change should take a deep breath and stay the course. Keep comforting your friends. Keep making space for those whom others refuse to welcome. Keep loving your neighbors, and don’t forget that these signers are your neighbors, too.

Like so many before it, this statement won’t change anything. But if you keep leading with love, you can change everything. Proclamations don’t shape history; people do. **NFJ**

—Jonathan Merritt, a senior columnist with Religion News Service and a contributing writer for *The Atlantic*, is author of *A Faith of Our Own: Following Jesus Beyond the Culture Wars* (FaithWords, 2012).

Light shines in the darkness

BY GINGER HUGHES

As evening fell, my husband sat with our two-year-old in the middle of his bedroom floor, reading books before bedtime. A small lamp offered a soft glow in the otherwise dark room.

Closing the last book, they stood up, and my husband walked over to the dresser and turned off the lamp. Darkness cloaked the room except for the smallest sliver of light peeking under the bedroom door from a light left on just down the hall.

“Daddy, I can’t see you! Where are you?” our little boy asked anxiously.

My husband’s eyes adjusted quickly and though it was dark, he could see our little one’s silhouette still standing there, perfectly still, in the middle of the floor. Our son’s eyes had not adjusted as quickly, and he couldn’t see his daddy.

The sudden shift from light to dark left him feeling insecure and afraid.

My husband said, “I’m right here, son.” Our youngest again said, “But, Daddy, I can’t see you.”

My husband walked straight over to him, picked him up and reassuringly said, “That’s OK, buddy, because Daddy can see you, and I’m right here with you.”

Even as adults, the darkness can seem

overwhelming, can’t it? When troubles come, it’s easy to become wrought with fear and uncertainty. This darkness can feel like the sheer absence of all joy, all peace and all hope.

It can feel like quicksand, sucking us down into a void where we feel powerless to join in the living. Our Enemy would have us believe this is true: that the light is extinguished and gone for good; that despair, fear and darkness reign — that ultimately, our hope is gone.

John 1:5 assures us, however, that “The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Even in our little boy’s room, there was a sliver of light, though momentarily he couldn’t see it because he was distracted by his fear. Even more, his father was standing right there beside him; he simply couldn’t see him while looking through the eyes of anxiety.

The same understanding is true for God. When darkness descends upon us, we often become so afraid that our fear and despair seem larger than the Almighty.

But just as my son’s father was still standing beside him, so it is with our Heavenly Father.

Even when darkness seems to surround us, God is still present. In our most difficult moments when the shadows envelop us, we can hold the hand of the giver of all light.

So whatever we’re facing today, whether brokenness within our family, an unexpected diagnosis, the loss of a loved one, financial hardships or any other circumstance that has caused our eyes to be diverted from the Light, we can trust that God is still with us.

Just as my husband spoke into the night comforting our child, our Heavenly Father comforts us in our darkness, whispering:

“You are not alone, for I will never leave you nor forsake you. Though it has become like night around you, it is not dark to me. My light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. Do not fear. Do not be afraid” (Isa. 41:10, Deut. 31:6, Ps. 139:12, John 1:5). *NFJ*

—Ginger Hughes now blogs at *nurturingfaith.net*, thanks to a sponsoring gift from First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga. She is a mother, minister’s wife and accountant living in Lenoir, N.C.



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Fire and that which follows

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

In much of the western U.S., warnings are everywhere—from flashing roadside signs to Smokey the Bear working overtime.

Fire danger has been high according to every indicator—and smoke from existing wildfires in forested lands travels hundreds of miles based on the winds.

Those who manage such devastating wildfires face the challenges of risking lives to protect others in some situations while at other times allowing fires to run their intended courses.

Human carelessness in a moment's time along with long-term causes related to global warming creates serious threats. Signs in and around national parks and other forested areas plead for responsible actions:

“Don't drive cars onto grass.”

“Check loose trailer chains to avoid creating sparks.”

“Smoke inside car or home, and extinguish cigarettes appropriately.”

“Build campfires only in designated areas.”

Danger and destruction from such human-caused, fast-moving fires have lasting effects and deserve every effort to prevent them from occurring. However, not all wildfires are enemies of the land.

Forest fires, often caused by lightning, are a part of the natural process of wilderness renewal. Essential to ecosystems, they thin and refine forests and meadows—though initially blackened settings are unattractive and seem absent of life.

During two Nurturing Faith Experiences this summer, participants witnessed some of the ways wildfires impact nature and society in both negative and positive ways.

Helicopters dipped water from Flathead Lake just west of Glacier National Park and doused a fire near a populated area. While on a boat tour of Lake McDonald in the park we watched with amazement as a wildfire broke out on a nearby mountain.

Our 92-year-old interpretive ranger announced that the lesson before our eyes was better than anything he might tell us about forest fires. The spread of fires in the park in the weeks that followed caused

much alarm.

Our time in the park presented a lesson in contrasts. It was remarkable to see a mountain ablaze and then to walk where earlier fires have produced new life.

The cones of lodgepole pines, we learned, require intense fire for reproduction. Fresh stands of young trees rise in bright greenness below their charred ancestors kissed by intense flames a few years ago.

Natural thinning clears what would become excessive fuel for a more-destructive fire in the future. And the fire-produced nutrients and space provide for the growth of colorful wildflowers and other plants.

It takes time, but restoration comes in lovely ways. The lessons here for our own lives are obvious as well.

We hold responsibility for our careless acts that are often destructive. These are inexcusable.

On the other hand, the natural course of life brings its share of fiery forces that char our lives and leave us fearing what might be left.

Yet we all have underbrush to be cleared so better things might grow. **NFJ**

Diversity calls for dialogue, understanding

By Jason Loscuito

There are several poignant questions in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. A lawyer asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded with a question of his own, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

The lawyer answered Jesus’ question correctly by citing Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

However, after Jesus told the lawyer that he had answered correctly, the lawyer asked perhaps the most important question: “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus answered his question by telling a story that places a Samaritan, a religious other, as the exemplar to be imitated. This question, “Who is my neighbor?” is as relevant today as it was then.

When our family moved to Spartanburg, S.C., I did not anticipate much religious diversity there beyond the traditional Christian denominations prevalent in the South. However, I soon realized that this mid-size southern city is home to an array of thriving religious communities.

There is a Jewish community with roots back to 1912. There is a Laotian Buddhist community and a Vietnamese Buddhist community that both have temples. There is a Hindu temple in the middle of a peach orchard. The Islamic Center is home to Muslims from Pakistan, Iraq, Nigeria and the United States. Christian churches line the downtown streets and rural county roads.

From the outside it looks like our city is a place of religious tolerance, and I would agree. However, the question of “and who is my neighbor?” calls us to reflect on the difference between religious tolerance and religious pluralism.

Harvard scholar Diana Eck makes

a distinction between religious tolerance and religious pluralism that I have found is helpful:

First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the *energetic engagement with diversity*. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them.

Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies.

Second, pluralism is not only tolerance, but also the *active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews and ardent secularists to know anything about the other.

Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence.

In our world today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.

Third, pluralism is not relativism, but the *encounter of commitments*. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind; it means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation but in relationship to one another.

Fourth, pluralism is *based on dialogue*. The language of pluralism is that of encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism.

Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both

common understandings and real differences. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the “table” will agree with one another. Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table — with one’s commitments.

Pluralism calls on us to actively engage in dialogue with and to partner with those from different religious and secular traditions while still holding onto our own religious commitments. In my work with college students I teach them about the importance of having an appreciative knowledge of religious and secular traditions other than their own.

I try to help students understand that when we have the correct information about a religious tradition different from ours, then we are less likely to believe the propaganda that is often spread.

I encourage students to identify the values their religion shares with other religions. Many of them are surprised to learn that the majority of the world’s religions share similar values such as hospitality, care for the environment, alleviating poverty, offering service and forgiveness.

Together we study the history of interfaith cooperation and learn how people from different religions have worked together to end social injustice. Baptist minister Martin Luther King Jr., Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and secular humanist Bayard Rustin all worked together in fighting for civil rights.

Finally, I ask students to write out their own theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation that challenges them to engage with their sacred stories and scriptures and to think critically about their understanding of God and our relationships to each other as God’s creation. **NFJ**



—Jason Loscuito is college chaplain at Converse College in Spartanburg, S.C.

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Epiphany: Big Questions

Jan. 7
Ephesians 3:1-12
The Mystery of the Ages

Jan. 14
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
What Is Best for Me?

Jan. 21
1 Corinthians 7:25-40
A Question of Matrimony

Jan. 28
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Are You Going to Eat That?

Feb. 4
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Any Volunteers?

Feb. 11
2 Corinthians 4:1-6
Have You Seen the Light?

Lent: Keeping Faith

Feb. 18
Genesis 9:8-17
A Global Promise

Feb. 25
Genesis 17:1-16
A Covenant Family

March 4
Exodus 20:1-17
A Covenant Nation

March 11
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Covenant Breaking

March 18
Psalm 51
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March 25

Psalm 40:1-10
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June 17
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August 5
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August 12
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November 18
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All in the Name of Jesus

‘Christian America’ dwindling

Study shows diversity, losses among groups including white evangelicals

BY KIMBERLY WINSTON

Religion News Service

The future of religion in America is young, non-Christian and in Technicolor.

Almost every Christian denomination in the U.S. shows signs of growing diversity as white Christians, once the majority in most mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations, give way to younger members, who tend to be of different races, according to a study released in September by the Public Religion Research Institute.

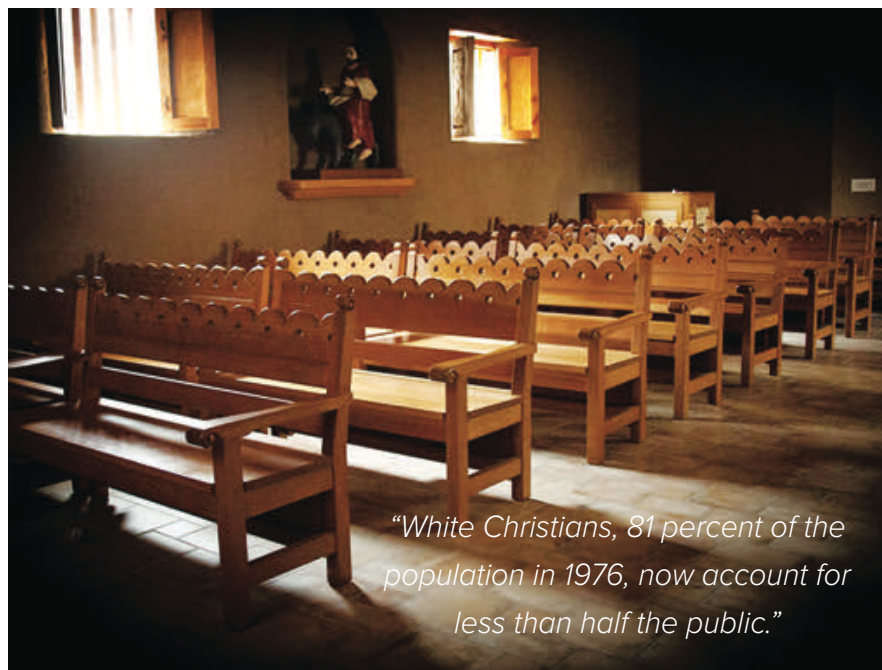
And American evangelicals — once seemingly immune to the decline experienced by their Catholic and mainline Protestant neighbors — are losing numbers and losing them quickly.

Americans are also continuing to move away from organized religion altogether, as atheists, agnostics and those who say they do not identify with any particular religion — the group known as the “nones” — hold steady at about one-quarter (24 percent) of the population.

The study, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” contacted 101,000 Americans in 50 states, and has an overall margin of error of plus or minus 0.4 percentage points. And while the survey spotlights transformations afoot in many religious groups, it also shows a seismic shift for a long-standing American religious powerhouse: white evangelicals.

“This report provides solid evidence of a new, second wave of white Christian decline that is occurring among white evangelical Protestants just over the last decade in the U.S.,” said Robert P. Jones, PRRI’s CEO and author of *The End of White Christian America*.

“Prior to 2008, white evangelical Protestants seemed to be exempt from the



“White Christians, 81 percent of the population in 1976, now account for less than half the public.”

Window light shines on the empty pews of a church in Kansas City, Mo. Photo by Sally Morrow

waves of demographic change and disaffiliation that were eroding the membership bases of white mainline Protestants and white Catholics,” he said. “We now see that these waves simply crested later for white evangelical Protestants.”

“It is no longer the case among young people that being religious is necessarily a positive attribute.”

Among the survey’s findings:

- White Christians, 81 percent of the population in 1976, now account for less than half the public — 43 percent of Americans identify as white Christians, and 30 percent as white Protestants.
- 92 percent of Lutherans are white, more than in any other denomination.
- White Christians are aging. About 1 in 10 white Catholics, evangelicals and mainline

Protestants are under 30, compared with one-third of all Hindus and Buddhists.

- Muslims and Mormons are the youngest faith groups in the U.S., with 42 percent of all Muslims under 30, and nearly a quarter of all Mormons.

Daniel Cox, PRRI’s director of research, said senior citizens generally have cohorts who look a lot like them — “nominally white Protestant, and that has been normal throughout their lives.” But the under-30 crowd tends to rub elbows with a more diverse group — including the religiously unaffiliated and people of different races and religions.

“The young are much less likely to believe this is a ‘Christian nation’ or to give preference to Christian identity,” he said. “Young people and seniors are basically inhabiting different religious worlds.”

And while the decline of white mainline Protestants and Catholics has been documented in earlier surveys, the new PRRI survey shows a similar and relatively

recent decline among evangelicals — from 23 percent to 17 percent of the public from 2006 to 2016.

“There is no one explanation, but you can’t answer why without looking at the rise of Christian conservatives,” Cox said.

Christian activism for many has come to mean conservative activism, working against gay marriage, abortion access and the legalization of marijuana — and young people may be turned off by such positions, Cox said.

“It is no longer the case among young people that being religious is necessarily a positive attribute.”

The survey also shows that religious folks are realigning, both geographically and politically:

- The Catholic Church is headed south. A majority of Catholics now live in the American South (29 percent) or West (25 percent). That’s a reverse from four decades ago, when 7 in 10 Catholics lived in the Northeast or the Midwest.
- White Christians are a minority in the Democratic Party. Fewer than 1 in 3 Democrats are white Christians, down from almost half 10 years ago. And Democrats under 30 are increasingly less religious — only 14 percent identify as white Christian, while 40 percent are nones.
- While white evangelical Protestants are losing adherents, they remain the dominant religious force among Republicans — more than one-third (35 percent) of Republicans are white evangelicals, a stable proportion for the last 10 years.

The PRRI survey is broad in scope but also reveals much about the slender slices of American religiosity:

- The religious profile of Asian or Pacific-Islander Americans is unusual compared with other racial or ethnic groups, with roughly equal numbers spread across the Christian, non-Christian and no-religion categories.
- Though atheists and agnostics account for about one-fourth of all the religiously unaffiliated, 16 percent of the unaffiliated

identify as “a religious person.”

- Almost half (46 percent) of LGBT Americans are religiously unaffiliated — about twice as many as the general population (24 percent).

Rabbi Denise Eger, founding rabbi of the Kol Ami synagogue in West Hollywood and an LGBT activist, said the high numbers of unaffiliated LGBT persons should surprise no one.

She blames fundamentalism, especially in Christianity, Islam and, to a lesser extent, Judaism.

“The truth is that all of religion becomes tainted, even though there are many denominations that welcome them, that it becomes ‘why bother?’” she said of many LGBT people’s encounters with religion.

The study also found:

- Mississippi is the most homogeneous state in terms of religion (60 percent are Baptist) while New York is the most religiously diverse.
- There are now 20 states in which the religiously unaffiliated outnumber adherents of any other single religious group.

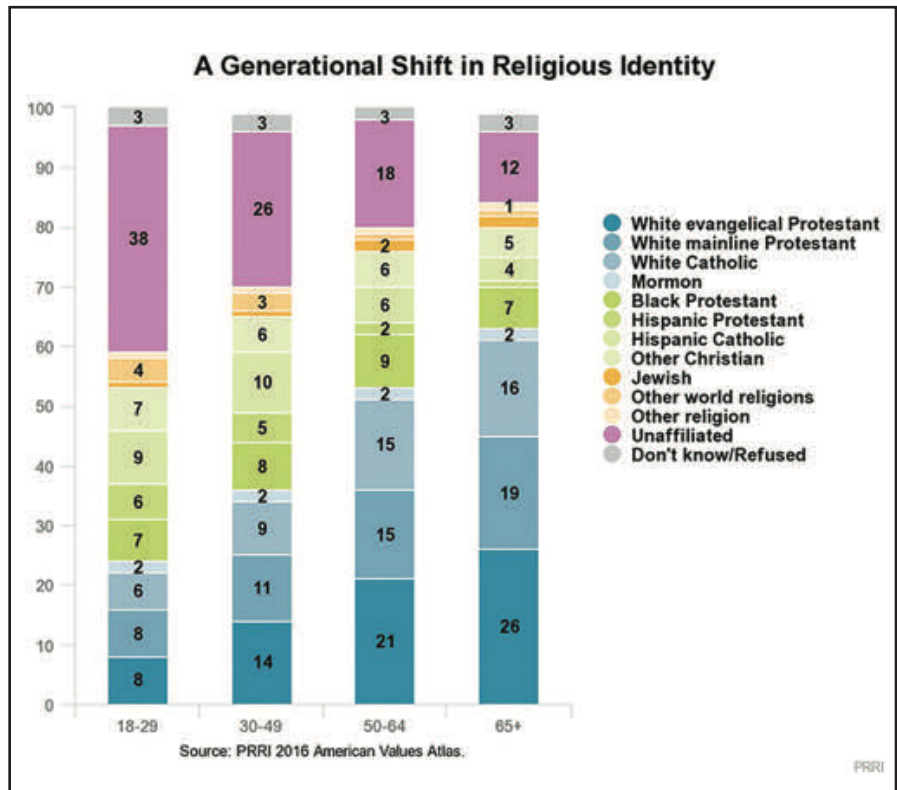
“There are now 20 states in which the religiously unaffiliated outnumber adherents of any other single religious group.”

Most of those states sit on or near a coast; they include Vermont (41 percent unaffiliated), Oregon (36 percent), Washington (35 percent) and Hawaii (34 percent).

The rise in the religiously unaffiliated means people must now ask old questions in new ways, said Jennifer W. Davidson, an associate professor of theology and worship at the American Baptist Seminary of the West.

“We need to begin asking people, ‘How do you make meaning in your life? What sustains you when you suffer? How do you cultivate a sense of wonder?’” she said.

“It is fully possible to answer these questions from a secular perspective, and if we ask them, we might be able to see abundantly fruitful connections among people who are religiously affiliated, religiously unaffiliated, secular, agnostic and atheist.” **NFJ**



Questions Christians ask scientists

How do science and faith fit together for you? And do you have a favorite metaphor or image you can share that might shed light on the relationship between them?

Yes, I do, and I would like to start with another image: that of God as Father. Jesus used this image all the time, perhaps most memorably in the parable of the prodigal son.

God is represented as the father of two sons. The younger one asks for his full inheritance, and the father gives it to him. The boy leaves home, squanders his inheritance on fleeting and shallow pleasures, and ends up with nothing.

He eventually comes to his senses and returns to his father, who, instead of punishing him or turning his back in silence, welcomes him home with a joyful embrace and a huge party.

This story of a father's love for his son is a powerful image of God's love for each of us. You and I are loved by God exactly as the prodigal was loved by his father.

Not everyone agrees, however, and some look to science to make their point. Here is what atheist blogger P.Z. Myers has to say about the heavenly father:

"You don't have a heavenly father at all. You're a mediocre product of a wasteful and entirely impersonal process. We've done the paternity tests. We are apes and the descendants of apes, who were the descendants of rat-like primates, who were the children of reptiles, who were the spawn of amphibians, who were the terrestrial progeny of fish, who came from worms, who were assembled from single-celled microorganisms, who were the products of chemistry. Your daddy was a film of chemical slime on a Hadean rock, and he didn't care about you—he was only obeying the laws of thermodynamics."

This paragraph is built around a skeleton of scientific facts. One of these facts is that we have evolved through a progression of ever-more-complex life forms. Another is that we are built out of chemical elements.

We are mostly hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen and oxygen, just like llamas and rotifers and single-celled microorganisms and all

Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to editor@nurturingfaith.net.



BY PAUL WALLACE

other life. You'll not find me debating these scientific facts.

Onto this skeleton of facts, Myers adds some non-scientific flesh. That is, he makes stuff up. For example, nature does not speak to us of its obedience to laws (this is our metaphor), and it certainly does not call anything "wasteful," "impersonal" or "mediocre."

You will not find such value judgments in any scientific paper. This is all added by Myers, and it amounts to a bit of flesh surrounding the skeleton of shared scientific facts.

But what flesh there is, seems unhealthy. If Myers' account of fatherhood sounds cold, it's not only because he adds so little to the facts, but also because most of what he adds is unhealthy. The flesh is not only minimal; it's a bit rotten and beginning to stink: "You are a mediocre product."

Myers is not a typical atheist. He is much more extreme in his rhetoric and theatrics than most unbelievers, and more prone to overstatements.

My point is not that he is wrong, but that his statement is fully consistent with science, but as a whole is not forced on him

by the facts of nature. The extra, made-up stuff — the "flesh" — is his own invention.

To see this, consider the following re-write of Myers' statement. It is also fully consistent with our skeleton of scientific facts but adds different flesh to it:

"You have a heavenly father. You're an amazing product of his ongoing creation project. We've discovered a lot about that project, which has been going on for billions of years. We are human beings, the descendants of apes, who were drawn from earlier, smaller primates. Our lineage also includes reptiles and amphibians and fish and worms and even single-celled organisms. Like a flower that grows from the dirt yet is not itself dirt, we have been gradually assembled out of chaotic and disorganized elements. You were formed from the dust of the ground, given the breath of life, and carry the image of a loving and creative father who is crazy about you."

Who is right? You may vote for either one, but be clear about this: Science will not help you distinguish between them. Both statements are faithful to the scientific facts. It is not possible to devise any scientific experiment capable of showing that either scenario is false. I added more non-scientific

stuff than Myers did, yes, but that's OK. Adding stuff is normal. It's what we all do.

Human beings always go beyond the facts, which do not speak for themselves. And science is a skeleton, which needs flesh to give it life.

Another way of saying this is: Human beings always interpret science. We make sense of it by placing it within a larger context, inside a larger story. In my metaphor, that story is flesh on bones. That story gives life to the facts. It animates them. It puts them in motion.

Science, by its very nature, is as incapable as a skeleton of standing on its own.

In the above example, Myers' larger context — his story, his flesh on the skeleton of science — seems to be a strident and rather bitter atheism. Mine is Christianity, and of all human enterprises, religion is best suited to the interpretation of science. This is because religion is, by its very nature, comprehensive.

You see this everywhere. For a simple example, I once had a pastor who liked to talk in his sermons about "what this means

on Tuesday." His point was that God's claim on a Christian is about her whole life, and not just about what she does and says and thinks at church on Sunday.

This is seen in scripture too, where all-inclusiveness goes way beyond how we behave on Tuesday. The Bible is not content to simply tell the story of Jesus and throw in some theological commentary. It begins its history not with the birth of Jesus but with the creation of the universe. It concludes not at the ascension but at the end of time.

Scripture proposes a model of the cosmos and discusses the origins of animals and fish and plants. It describes the relationships between creation and God and humanity. It accounts for everything from the desert grass to the distant constellations. According to scripture, these things and everything else in the cosmos are expressions of God's creativity. They are part of the story. The Bible construes the whole cosmos with no remainder.

This is not to claim that all of the Bible's history is factual or that its model of the cosmos is scientifically accurate or that

its accounts of the end times are literal. It is simply to say that scripture takes a cosmic view. It is not content with pieces of the world but embraces all things.

Like the Bible, Christianity is audacious in its scope. Yes, faith is about what you do on Sunday. It is also about how you live on Tuesday and every other day of the week. It is about how we are to live, period.

It is about peace and justice. It is about holiness and worship, the law and the prophets, righteousness and salvation, sin and the forgiveness of sin, about coming clean and loving those who persecute you. But it is also about where we come from, what the universe is, and where it is going.

This makes Christianity perfectly fitted for the interpretation of scientific facts. At its best, faith is healthy and robust flesh on the skeleton of science, one that is perfectly suited to contain it and interpret it and make sense of it.

And, surrounded by this interpretive flesh, the skeleton of facts is able not only to stand, but also to live and grow and thrive. **NFJ**

"Paul Wallace is an astrophysicist who writes with magic..."

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BY JOHN F. BRIDGES

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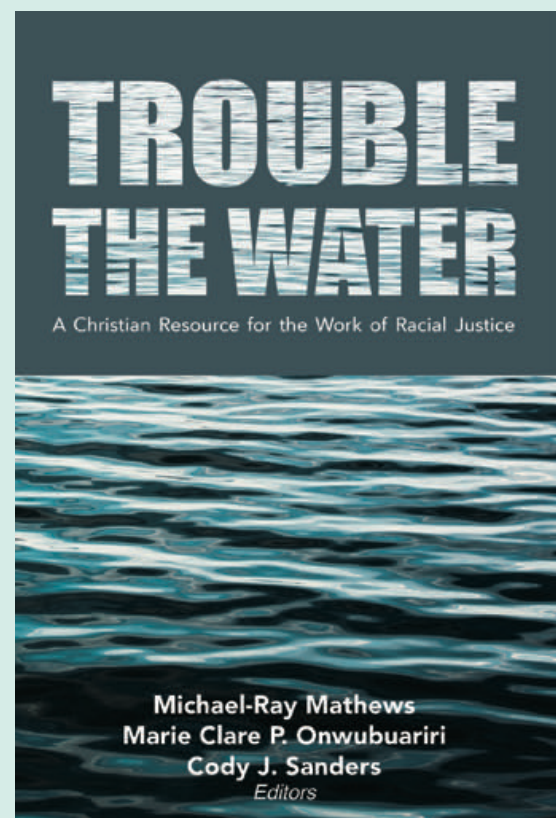
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