

JULY-AUGUST 2018

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RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS

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(1913–1921)
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Cover photo by John D. Pierce of a coffee stand on the island of Kauai, Hawaii. Pour yourself a cup and read the story on page 12 about the blend of beloved coffee and religious beliefs.

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Worth Repeating

“People who try to turn the Bible into a legalistic rule-book reveal that they haven’t yet trusted that they are completely justified by God’s grace.”

Morton Guyton, United Methodist campus minister in New Orleans (Patheos)

“If any ministry is biblical, it is prison ministry.”

Travis Collins, pastor of First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala.
(EthicsDaily)

“Rather than bemoaning the fact that there are a lot of older folks in the church, take advantage of them...They long to make connections and to make a difference.”

Mike Queen of the Center for Healthy Churches

“A common move is to find religious passages which will create added weight for an argument you really developed for other purposes.”

Robert Fuller, author of *Religion and Wine*, on Tennessee lawmakers on both sides of a debate over Sunday alcohol sales quoting scriptures
(*The Tennessean*)

“My generation had a chance to change this nation and make it right, and we flat whiffed and I’m ashamed... We could have not just legislated civil rights stuff, which happened; we could have changed the whole thought process, and we didn’t do it. Especially the Christian church, white Christian America, including myself, we blew it. And now we’ve got to try to get it right.”

Former NFL player and college coach Bill Curry (*The Undefeated*)

“All are free to persuade others to their truth, but no one ... may use the engine of government to promote one religion over another.”

Charles Haynes, founding director of the Religious Freedom Center of the Newseum Institute, when presenting the Baptist Joint Committee’s 2018 Shurden Lectures at Mercer University (*Report from the Capital*)

“Many [American Christians] are disturbed by the identification of their faith with a certain kind of white-grievance populism, which cuts them off from the best of their history, from their nonwhite neighbors, from the next generation and from predominantly nonwhite global evangelicalism.”

Michael Gerson, former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, and now a syndicated columnist (*Washington Post*)

“Facing this part of our history is going to heal us from our blindness. I see it as a pilgrimage for white Christians.”

Hannah McMahan, executive director of the New Baptist Covenant, upon attending the opening of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala., that includes a Lynching Memorial
(Baptist News Global)

“People come to church to face this question about themselves and their loved ones: Is love as strong as death? And their continuing to show up is their answer: Yes, stronger.”

Author Samuel Wells, vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London
(*Christian Century*)

“I’ve had to learn to say two things that seem to contradict one another: first, that the people who raised me and taught me to love Jesus gave me an incredible gift, and second, that those same people also passed on to me the habits and assumptions of slaveholder religion.”

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, author of *Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion* (2018, InterVarsity Press)
(RNS)

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Stumbling over rocks and other obstacles to faith

By John D. Pierce

In my youth, whenever persons of influence wanted to add a restriction to our already restrictive code of personal ethics, and no clear biblical prohibition was at hand, they would turn to Romans 14. The emphasis was on “stumblingblock” in verse 13 — followed by Paul’s words about not eating meat.

It was presented in this way: “The Bible may not forbid [fill in the blank], but it could be a stumblingblock that keeps others from Jesus.”

The perception others had of us seemed as important as our own spirituality. Christian living, therefore, had a strong element of not offending anyone socially or religiously — even though the one we called Lord was so offensive he was killed.

Years later, a campus ministry colleague put that verse in better perspective: “There’s a difference in causing a brother to stumble and pissing off the pious.”

During my upbringing, however, handy-dandy Romans 14 served more as a roadblock between Baptist kids and social temptation than reducing our risks of damaging the spiritual wellbeing of others.

Lately, though, I’ve been giving more thought to stumblingblocks. What are the obstacles to faith? What causes some to resist or reject the Christian faith that others hold so dear?

A few possibilities have arisen. It seems best to divide them between natural and human-made obstacles — but not in a literal sense. (Of course, insisting solely on a literal understanding of truth is often an obstacle to faith itself.)

By these distinctions I mean there are reasons for doubting or dismissing beliefs

based on factors not of our own making. Then there are others we create.

Anyone who ponders the existence and ways of God (which is theology whether one is aware of it or not) wrestles with what theologians have long called the Problem of Evil.

Attempts at easy answers fail to explain how a loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God would permit such human tragedies that could be avoided with a little intervention. Even the best efforts of the best minds give hints but can’t fully satisfy this ongoing, demanding question that often is the biggest obstacle to faith.

A non-practicing Jewish friend explained to me once about the large number of family members including his grandparents who were killed during the Holocaust. His mother, captured as a little girl, suffered deeply but escaped execution. He couldn’t align the inactivity of the divine in such devastation with the stories of faith he had been taught. I understood his limited faith and lack of practice.

Likewise, those Christians who lose a child or suffer continually from illness or abuse often find it hard to reconcile the idea of a loving, even incarnate, God who seems to have grown silent and inactive. Such experiences are natural barriers to belief.

Other thoughtful persons are troubled by irreconcilable differences in the biblical revelation or in the very notion of a God portrayed as so lovable yet so wrathful. Exclusive claims of God’s favor can be troubling as the world grows smaller, and engagement with persons of other faith traditions or none at all often reveals them

to be unlike familiar stereotypes.

So there are challenges to faith that are not of our own making. Engaging those questions in honest, intellectual and experiential ways is an important step of faith.

Too often, however, we erect obstacles — intentionally or not — by adding requirements that Jesus omitted.

In this journal and through Nurturing Faith Experiences, we give attention to the relationship between faith and science. It is hard to think of a bigger stumblingblock to faith for bright young people than being told through religious instruction they must embrace faulty scientific theories easily contradicted in their basic science courses.

Old rocks become stumbling blocks.

One can hardly imagine the scope of lost faith due to the identification of God — and the Christian faith particularly — with the politics of fear and exclusion being advanced in our nation. Why would someone be drawn to Jesus when the agenda of those bearing his name has no semblance to what he said and did?

The church sends mixed messages when claiming that “Jesus is the way, the truth and the life,” and that “the truth will set you free,” and then reducing the whole concept of truth to that which advances me and my favored causes — regardless of fact.

Hypocrisy is indeed the greatest obstacle of our own creation. And we are all guilty, such as when I claim to follow Jesus but keep too much for myself or claim to love my neighbors but ignore their needs.

In hindsight, some of the so-called stumblingblocks of my youth seem laughable now. They were simply social trends that had nothing to do with Christian discipleship.

However, there are enough real faith challenges to be wrestled with — without creating faulty ones of our own. **NFJ**



Still celebrating

Ragan Courtney on the long artistic trail of life

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

SANTA FE, N.M. — “I wanted to be Roy Rogers,” said playwright and poet Ragan Courtney, sitting comfortably in the Santa Fe home he and his wife, singer Cynthia Clawson, moved into earlier this year.

Over cups of coffee he told of growing up thoroughly Southern Baptist in Ruston, La. — shaped by being a Sunbeam and a Royal Ambassador, a kind of baptized Boy Scout. That led to attending a Baptist college and then starting at a Baptist seminary, both in Louisiana.

“I was going to be a missionary,” he said. But he couldn’t shake the childhood feeling from attending those western movies on Saturdays.

“I think God is calling me to be an actor,” he said with some caution to his father. The pleasing response he received was, “as long as you’re in school.”

So the boy from Louisiana with dreams of riding Trigger into the sunset headed off to New York City. The Wild West would have to wait, but not the pursuit of acting.

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

After one semester of seminary, Ragan enrolled in The Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theater in New York City. Like many aspiring actors, he worked various jobs while pursuing his dream.

“I knew I was in the right field,” said Ragan of the long-ago move.

His break came when he and a cousin, C.C. Courtney, wrote and starred in a



“It always touches me,” playwright Ragan Courtney says of the responses he continues to receive from those spiritually impacted by the words he wrote for the 1972 musical *Celebrate Life!*

musical titled, *Earl of Ruston*. After a successful tour of the South, the show opened on Broadway in the Billy Rose Theater.

Reviews were mixed, recalled Ragan. But the death knell was sounded by a ballet critic for *The New York Times* — whose review expressed no appreciation for the country-music-filled production.

“The show closed (in just one week), and I was devastated,” said Ragan.

REDIRECTION

Shattered dreams often lead to shattered lives. Ragan found himself at a troubling time.

“I went to Antigua to get my head together,” he said. “I would walk up and down the beach, but was very depressed.”

A dark idea penetrated his mind as he looked into the depths of the Caribbean Sea: “I’ll just swim out here and Mother Earth will envelop me.”

He entered the water and was up to his waist in rotting fruit and other refuse

discarded by a cruise ship. It seemed an appropriate way to end one’s life.

“I am garbage in the middle of garbage,” he recalls thinking.

After decades of reflecting on that episode, Ragan still affirms that God saved him in that moment. But he adds, “It could have been that Ragan was trying to save Ragan too.”

His mind delved into childhood memories and a song he learned in church: “Jesus Loves Me.”

“YES, Jesus loves me!” he sang. “And I sobbed and sobbed.”

In that moment he realized that his life was not garbage but gift.

“Nobody was there but me and God, and I knew I was going to throw away something God loved and wanted back,” he said. “And everything changed.”

It had been a dark, cloudy and windy day, Ragan recalled. “But with God as my witness, the clouds parted and the sun was setting.”

'BORN AGAIN'

The familiar Baptist idea of being “born again” is exactly how Ragan felt at that moment. He had been given a new start to his life — and a new focus. “That was my salvation experience,” he said.

“At that moment I started to write, and in everything I’ve written I’ve tried to show my love for God.”

The first words to flow from his heart and pen after coming out of the water as a new creature were:

He’s the wind I soar on;
He’s the grass I run through;
He’s the one I turn to
when I have to laugh or cry.

He’s the light of my world;
He’s my priceless pearl;
He’s my answer to why,
He’s my friend even after I die.

He’s the sun I sing in;
He’s the sea I swim in;
He’s the mountain I climb to
when I want to reach a new high.

Jesus my Lord...
You shall know the truth
and love is the proof,
and the truth will make you free.

This poetic profession of faith would be set to music by the late composer Buryl Red in the popular 1972 musical *Celebrate Life!*

CONNECTIONS

Earlier in New York, Ragan had passed Manhattan Baptist Church and noticed that Buryl Red was leading the music. He visited one Sunday and, after the service, told Buryl how much he appreciated the worship music.

In turn, Buryl told Ragan the Baptist Sunday School Board had commissioned him to write a musical and asked if he wanted to be a part of it. “I agreed to do it.”

“Buryl played Christian youth musicals for me,” said Ragan. “He introduced me to that genre.”

After his spiritual reclamation, Ragan

poured himself into this work.

“I used Greek theater as the vehicle for *Celebrate Life!*” said Ragan. “It’s a different format than most youth musicals, which are all show biz now.”

The just-released musical was well received, so Buryl and Ragan traveled widely to promote it — including a stop for “music week” at Ridgecrest Baptist Conference Center in western North Carolina.

Buryl had enlisted singer Cynthia Clawson to record the song, “I Quietly Turned To You.” Ragan was so moved by the recording that he once played it for a man who was dying.

He was also moved when the singer with flowing red hair and a magical voice showed up at the Ridgecrest music conference in 1972: “I was stunned!”

“We started talking and I helped take her suitcase to her room,” said Ragan. “We met again the next day and I proposed. She laughed! But in less than a year we were married — after just 10 dates.”

Their personal and professional collaboration produced both a family and more artistic projects than one can count — including the musical *Bright New Wings*.

Through the years Ragan has taught, directed, written and performed in a variety of settings including the long-running annual “A Christmas Spectacular” at First Baptist Church of Houston.

More recently, he and Cynthia served for 11 years as co-pastors of a congregation in Austin, Texas, “and loved doing it.” They ended the pastorate to return to Houston so Cynthia could care for her ailing father. Now they’ve settled into Santa Fe where her sister lives.



REFLECTIONS

When asked if there is a single description for someone who is a playwright, director, poet and more, Ragan responded: “I would call myself, after years of struggle, an artist.”

The role of an artist is to tell the truth, he said, in whatever form of expression.

Our conversation flowed and turned like a river as we discussed the benefits and liabilities of being raised Baptist in the South and trying to make sense of it all today. We talked Jesus, fundamentalism, commercialized Christianity, and the twists and turns of life.

We forgot to eat the cinnamon rolls Ragan had prepared that neither of us needed. That omission just made more room for the enchiladas we’d enjoy for lunch when our hours-long chat continued.

Cynthia had returned to Texas for some concerts. Their new home was pretty much put together except for a few remaining boxes to be unpacked.

Ragan said he still receives letters and social media testimonies about how *Celebrate Life!* impacted someone’s life. The musical experienced a resurrection in 2012 when graying former youth reunited in churches to sing the familiar and inspiring words from 40 years ago.

“There’s been a huge response,” said Ragan of the musical’s lasting impact. “And it always touches me.”

At times Ragan and Cynthia find resistance to their open-minded, grace-first approach to faith — such as some concert cancellations after Cynthia sang at a Dallas church known to be gay-friendly. But Ragan said they don’t fret over such things.

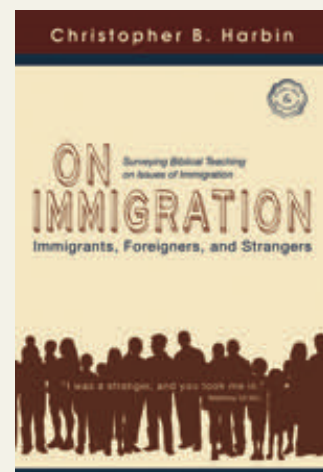
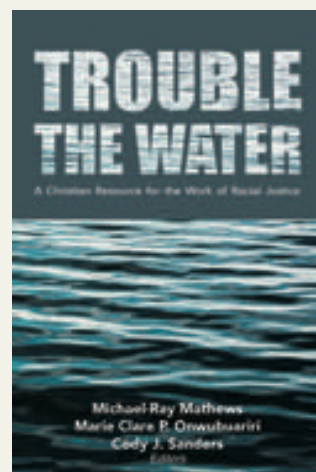
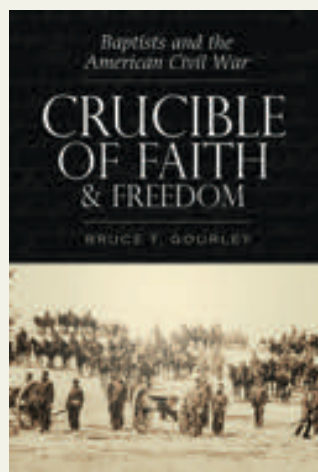
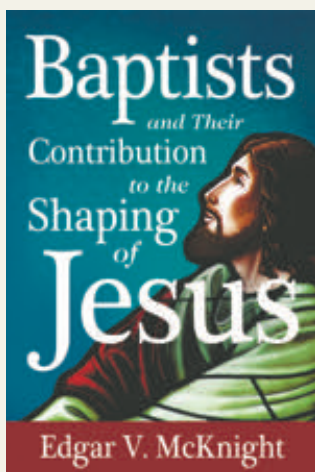
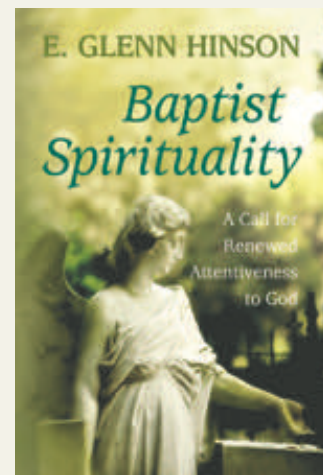
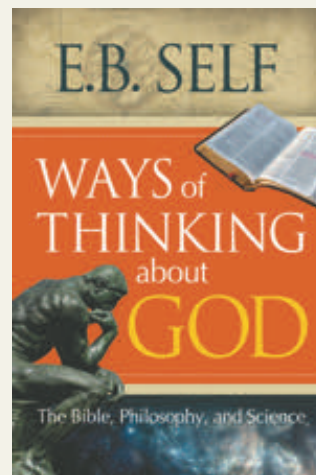
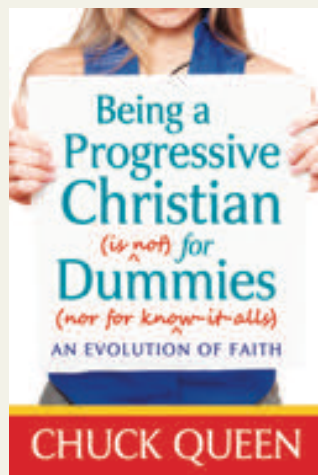
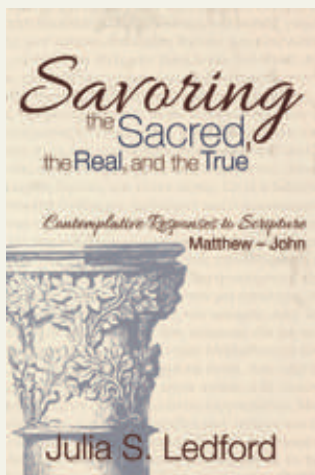
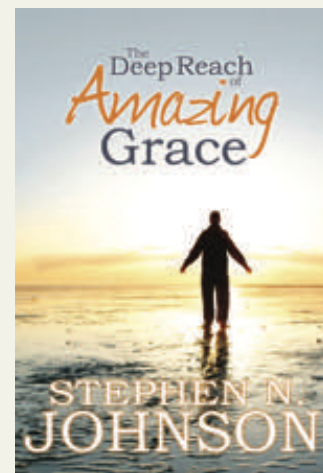
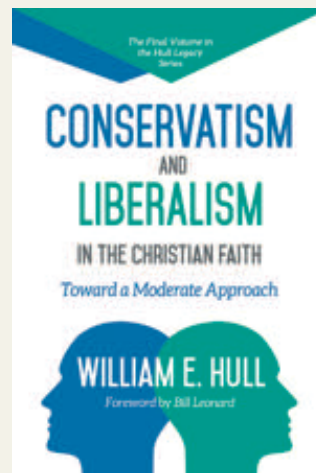
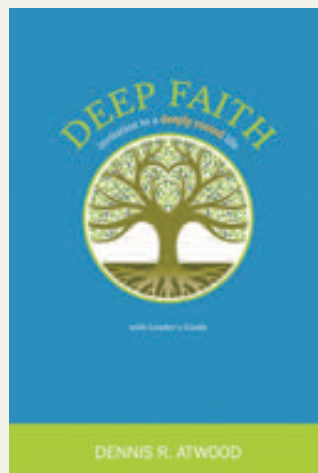
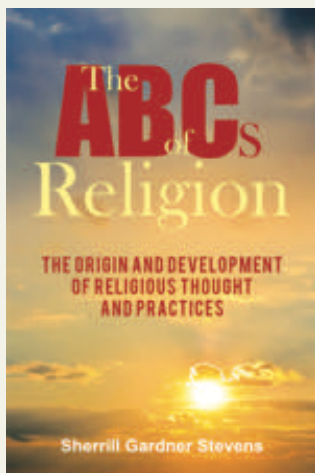
They prefer a faith bigger and better than “just lots of doctrine and dogma,” he said. And in their lives they continue to find much to celebrate.

Sometimes reality is better than dreams. Ragan didn’t become the next Roy Rogers, but has traveled some interesting and often happy trails. And he’s not finished at age 76, he said, quickly noting that his wife is much younger.

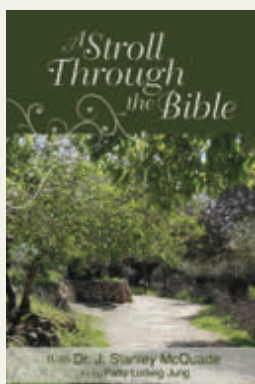
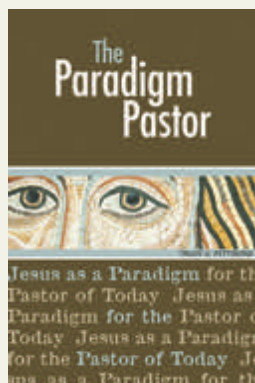
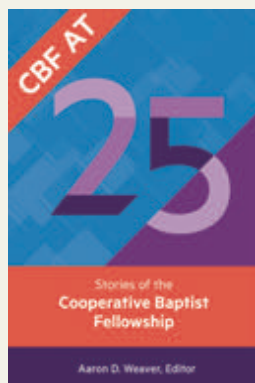
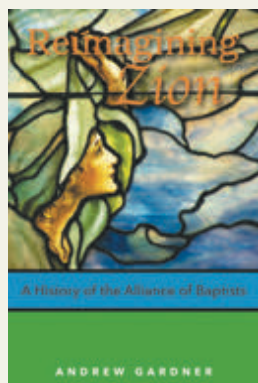
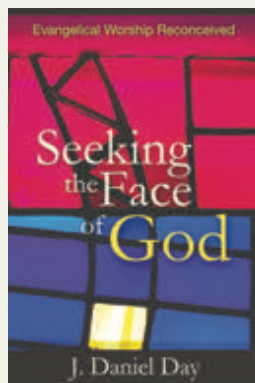
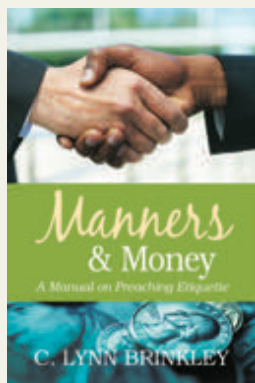
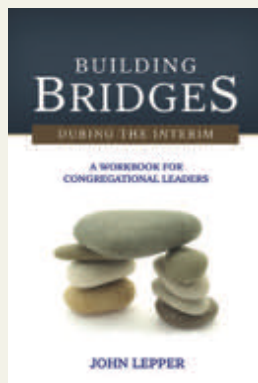
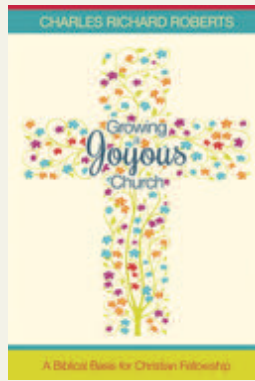
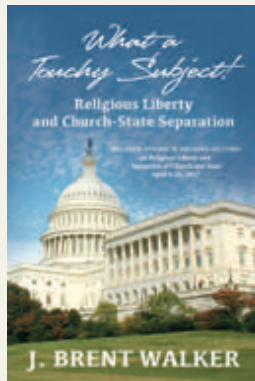
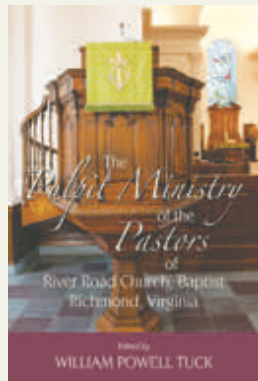
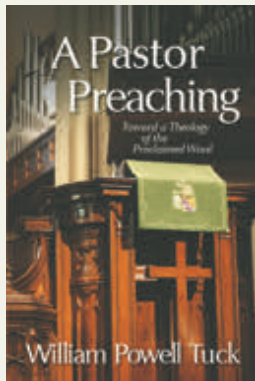
“There is no finish,” he said. “I want to keep exploring the mind of God into eternity.” **NFJ**

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Expansive world, *expanding faith*



SURF SANCTUARY – Participants in the Nurturing Faith Experience to the Big Island of Hawaii for a week of faith-science exploration share Sunday worship at Laupahoehoe Beach. Photo by an unnamed fisherman.

Nature nurtures belief in a bigger God says scientist/columnist Paul Wallace

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

WAIMEA, Hawaii — The skies didn't cooperate as well as we hoped for the Nurturing Faith Experience to the Big Island of Hawaii in March, but the group shared remarkable explorations of nature and expanded understandings of the divine creator.

"There has always been a deep connection between the natural world and my faith in God," said Paul Wallace, an astrophysicist who writes the column, "Questions Christians ask scientists," for this journal.

Wallace discussed his personal journey of faith and science with the group, along with giving insights into the field of astronomy. Participants discussed with the author

issues raised in his columns and in his 2016 book, *Stars Beneath Us: Finding God in the Evolving Cosmos* (Fortress Press).

PURSUIITS

As a student at Young Harris College in the mountains of north Georgia, Wallace, an Atlanta native, would take long walks to examine the darkened skies and decided to become a science professor. He fulfilled that goal by earning a doctorate in nuclear physics at Duke University and doing post-doctoral work internationally in astronomy.

His scientific pursuits led him away from his Baptist-rooted faith until his wife-to-be Elizabeth wooed him back with love rather than debate.

"I was the person all the Baptist



students tried to save," he said with a smile. "I loved it; I could argue with them all day."

Then he met Elizabeth, who was a Christian, but "different," he said. "We hit it off, effortlessly."

"I didn't come back to faith in God through science," he said. "What brought me back to the church was my wife; it was love."

NEW CALLING

Another turning point came in 2004 when, as a 36-year-old tenured professor at Berry College in northwest Georgia, Paul began feeling “restless,” sensing a call to do something else, “to hit the reset button.”

That calling, he said, was to do exactly what he was doing with the Nurturing Faith Experience group in Hawaii and through his writings: to explore issues at the intersection of faith and science.

So he resigned his professorship and enrolled at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology where he completed a Master of Divinity degree, seeking both theology education and the background to write effectively about faith and science.

“I walked into seminary thinking I was a New Testament guy, but walked out an Old Testament guy,” he told the group, noting his growing fascination with Job — the subject of two chapters in his book.

Many Christians read Job and settle on the idea of retribution — that one gets what one deserves, said Wallace. That conclusion, however, glosses over the 36 chapters in which Job seeks an explanation for what happened to him.

“God asks Job, ‘Have you thought about the stars, the seas, the creatures?’” Then God takes Job on a “cosmic journey,” Paul noted. “And that vision satisfies him.” He added that, for Job, this “encounter with the natural was not just a head game; ... It was about Job’s life.”

YOUNG EARTH

Bill Allen, a retired city planning engineer and a member of First Baptist Church of Chattanooga, Tenn., asked Paul about the influence of young-earth creationists on modern Christianity.

“I don’t try to convince them of anything,” Paul responded. “I treat it as a pastoral effort — at least at first.”

The idea of the earth being merely some 6,000 years old “is crazy on a couple of points,” he said, with the first being the argument that natural elements were made to look old.

If so, said Wallace, “you have to believe that God is a deceiver, trying to trick us.”

This presents a theological, rather than scientific problem he added.

Wallace, now a professor at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga., said there are 20 to 30 independent lines of scientific evidence pointing to the earth being billions of years old.

He expressed concern that young-earth defenders such as Ken Ham of Answers in Genesis, the force behind the Kentucky-based Creation Museum and Ark Encounter, and Southern Baptist theologian Albert Mohler are causing bright young minds to choose between faith and growing scientific evidence.

“The damage it does to the Christian witness is pretty large,” said Paul. “It ignores what has been for me a primary path to God: science.”

Rather than alter one’s thinking, he added, “science tends to amplify whatever you bring into it.”

CREATION

Kyle Kelly, a retired school social worker from Shreveport, La., said the most moving part of the book to him was how Wallace talked in a positive way about God as creator — addressing *creatio ex nihilo*, or “creation out of nothing.”

Paul said that concept is more theological tradition than biblical evidence, which is mixed. The biblical emphasis, he added, is more on “creation from chaos” than from nothing.

A more important observation, he suggested, is to take note of the ways God continues to create out of chaos.

“It happens every moment,” he said.

“God is intimately involved in every act of creation, not just long ago.”

The arbitrary ways suffering is experienced has shaped his understanding of God, he confessed. While he considers God to be personal, Paul added that he no longer thinks (as he did as a child) that God is “a large, invisible version of my father.”

Understanding the vastness of creation as well as the intimate involvement of God puts our personal lives into perspective, he said. “I’m part of all of this, but not the beginning and the end.”

The resulting humility of that perspective is often needed, he added. Wallace recalled a time in his life when he was self-absorbed and a friend said: “Paul, if you took all the people in the world and lined them up, you’d be one of them.”

MIRACLES

When asked about the conflict between miracles and science, Paul noted that science “tells us what usually happens, not what always happens.”

“I don’t have a problem with miracles from a scientific point of view,” he said. “If you have eyes to see, you’ll see miracles all the time... and I believe on Easter Sunday that something good happened.”

Wallace, who has a new book coming aimed at helping younger persons reconcile science and faith, noted that Jesus’ miracles had a point to them rather than being arbitrary tricks.

“As a Christian, I believe there is something special about Jesus,” he said, “and that whatever revelation comes will align with Jesus.” **NFJ**



The group discusses Paul Wallace’s book, *Stars Beneath Us*, with the author.



COFFEE COUNTY — Bruce Gourley of Bozeman, Mont., points to a coffee-themed directional sign at Kauai Coffee in Hawaii that includes the rural county 4,678 miles away where he grew up in South Georgia. Photo by John D. Pierce.

Common Grounds

History of coffee brews up a blend of beans and beliefs

BY BRUCE GOURLEY
AND JOHN D. PIERCE

KONA, Hawaii — During our professional and personal travels we typically begin each day with an early-morning pursuit of a good cup (or more) of coffee — even if a little effort is required. Coffee shop searches appear often in our Google histories.

Last year, on an 11-mile hike into a remote ranger cabin in Yellowstone National Park, a little more planning was needed. So, a plastic pour-over brewing cone dangled from a backpack while a bag of freshly-ground coffee beans provided a pleasant aroma.

Our philosophy is simply: Life is too short to drink bad coffee — or none at all.

KONA

So, when on the Big Island of Hawaii for a Nurturing Faith Experience in March, it made sense to thoroughly examine and

experience the highly reputable Kona Coffee. And, with a bent toward history, we took the opportunity to learn more about the roots of this beloved morning companion.

In addition to visits to well-reviewed coffee shops (including return engagements with our preferred medium roast macadamia vanilla peaberry variety at one stop in Kona), we took an educational approach.

First, we included a group visit to the Kona Coffee Living History Farm — operated by the Kona Historical Society — on a lovely slope leading to the scenic coast.

The Kona Coffee industry dates back more than a century and a half, with multiple ethnic groups contributing to its growing success. Particularly, Japanese ingenuity shaped the coffee farming process and the land there, as well as the culture.

The tour included a 1926 processing mill and rooftop drying platform, along with the Uchida Farmhouse, occupied by the same family from 1925–1994.

KAUAI

After leaving the Big Island for a hiking trip to Waimea Canyon on Kauai, we came upon a more modern but equally educational coffee farming operation. The Kauai

Coffee estate transitioned from a sugar farming operation in 1987.

During a self-guided walking tour we learned that “Once a year, one tree gives one pound of coffee”; that harvesters with fiberglass rods “tickle the cherries” off the trees; that there’s no such thing as decaf coffee trees (it’s a process done better with water than chemicals); and that coffee should

“never, ever” be stored in a refrigerator or freezer (but in the pantry).

More importantly, we were allowed



to sample dozens of varieties and blends produced by the Kauai Coffee Company. Rich volcanic soil, warm sun and gentle winds are credited with the goodness in each cup.

Coffee varies in flavors as widely as the individual tastes of those who drink it — and discriminating drinkers sometimes gain a reputation for being coffee snobs. But, again, why settle for bad coffee?

ORIGINS

“No one knows exactly how or when coffee was discovered, though there are many legends about its origin,” according to the National Coffee Association.

Likewise, scholars — historians, theologians, anthropologists, psychologists and others — are uncertain about the origins of religion.

The starting point for the story of coffee is modern-day Ethiopia, the same geographical area in which, based on fossil evidence, early humans are believed to have existed about 200,000 years ago.

A common legend recounting how humans discovered the effects of the coffee bean takes the form of a goat herder named Kaldi, who observed that sometimes his four-legged charges stayed awake at night even in the absence of predators. Eventually, Kaldi associated this behavior with the consumption of berries from a certain tree.

Puzzled, Kaldi related his observations to the abbot of a nearby monastery — who in turn concocted a drink with the berries and discovered that the mixture helped him stay awake and more focused during lengthy prayer routines.

The monk shared his discovery with his companions, who quickly embraced the perks of coffee.

CULTIVATION

From there the buzz spread to the Arabian Peninsula and the third branch of monotheism, Islam, in the form of the cultivation and trade of the magic bean. By the 16th century, coffee farms existed in Persia, Egypt, Syria and Turkey.

Throughout the region public coffee houses emerged as places of social gather-

ings in the form of conversation, music, performances and games.

From the Islamic East through the popularity of the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage of many thousands of Muslims to the holy city of Mecca, news of the dark drink traveled back to Christendom.

Europeans at the turn of the 17th century viewed the mysterious concoction with suspicion. Some Christians referred to it as the “bitter invention of Satan.”

Local clergy in Venice condemned the drink. Persuaded to try coffee for himself, Pope Clement VIII found it pleasantly stimulating. His blessing paved the way for European acceptance of the beverage.

Throughout large cities in England, Austria, France, Germany and Holland, coffee houses sprang up as public hot spots of conversation and cheer. London boasted more than 300 coffee houses by the mid-17th century.

Soon coffee vied with beer and wine as a breakfast beverage, generating increased awareness and productivity among workers.

FERTILE GROUND

Coffee arrived in the New World in the mid-17th century. Nonetheless, tea remained the hot drink of choice among colonists. Not until the revolt against British taxes and the Boston Tea Party, a defiant dumping of over-taxed and monopolistic British tea into Boston Harbor in 1773, did coffee gain the upper hand.

By this point, many traveling caffeine addicts and opportunists alike sought ever more fertile ground for the popular crop. Among other travelers, missionaries introduced coffee beans far afield. Tropical rain forests and mountainous regions proved most adept for successful coffee plantations.

Samuel Ruggles, an American missionary to the Hawaiian Islands in the early 19th century, introduced a variety of coffee beans to the Big Island. From Ruggles’ efforts emerged Kona Coffee, the world-famous brand grown exclusively along the slopes of the Big Island’s Hualalai and Mauna Loa volcanoes.

Today some 70 countries produce coffee, led by Brazil, Vietnam, Colombia, Indonesia and Ethiopia. Coffee shops now number in the millions worldwide and are the fastest growing restaurant category.

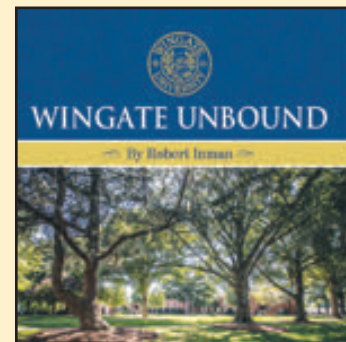
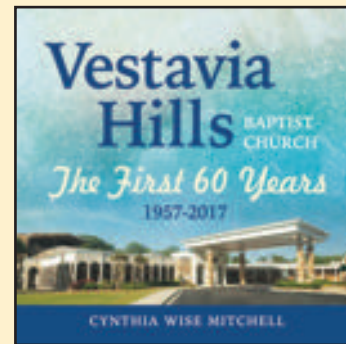
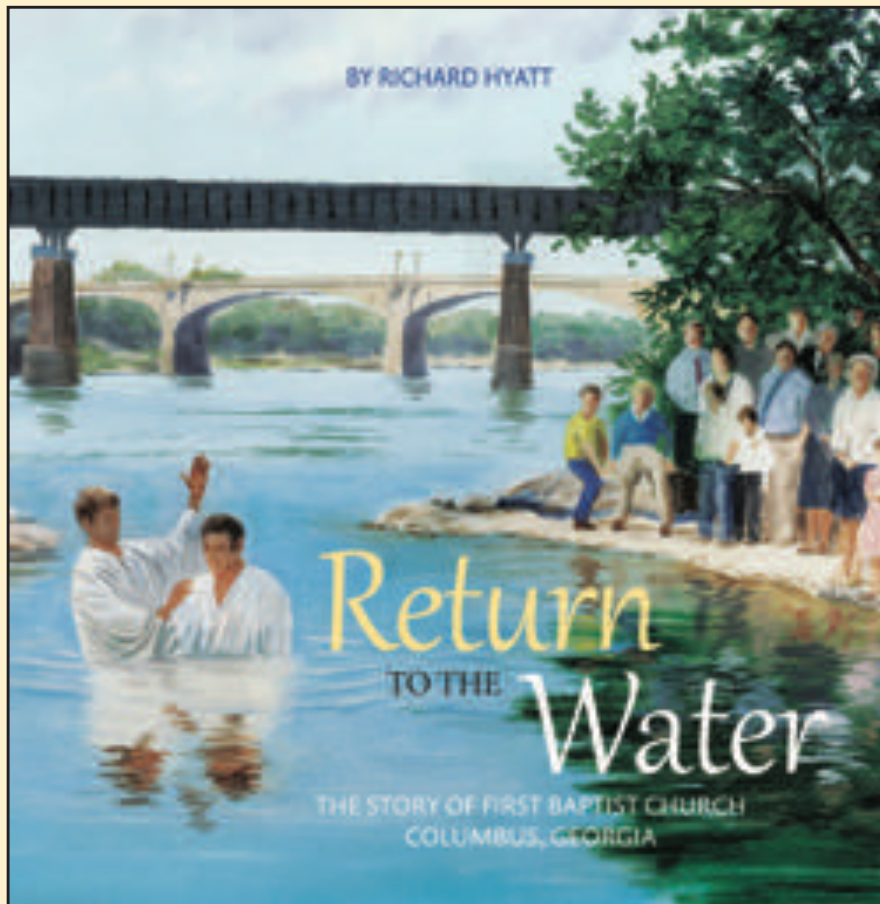
Coffee consumption, meanwhile, is common among many of the world’s cultures, socio-economic strata, and religious adherents. The third most popular drink in the world, behind plain water and tea, the once-strange dark beverage is most popular in the United States, where 83 percent of adults, according to a recent survey, imbibe almost 600,000,000 cups daily.

In all likelihood, each and every day coffee fuels discussions about the origins and evolution of religion. And many of the faithful and others continue to seek economic justice for those whose labor provides the beans that jump-start our days. **NFJ**



ROOFTOP ROASTING — Coffee beans, along with macadamia nuts in the background, dry in the sun at Kona Coffee Living History Farm. A rolling roof covers them during rain. Photo by John D. Pierce.

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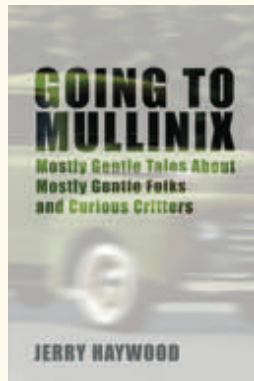
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—Jimmy Elder, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Columbus, Ga.

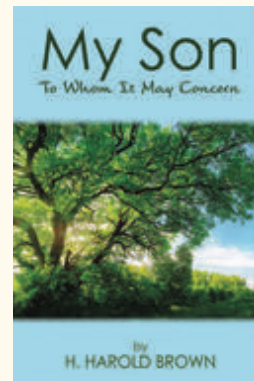
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BEING CHURCH IN CHANGING TIMES

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

Reflections on a pastoral care failure

By Lee Canipe

Let me begin by getting to the hardest part — at least as far as my pride is concerned: Some time ago, when a family in one of the churches I served went through a gut-wrenching ordeal, I failed miserably to give the kind of pastoral care they needed.

“Spectacularly” may better capture the essence of my failure. I blew it — and the family let me know it. Eventually, their hurt and anger drove them to find another church.

I am certain that I’ve failed like this on numerous occasions, but this particular failure especially haunts me.

I have hashed and rehashed the circumstances, trying to identify the crucial forks in the road where different decisions might have led to happier outcomes. I’ve wrestled with the feelings of guilt, defensiveness and inadequacy that mark the distance between what I did and what I should have done.

Through the combined wisdom of hindsight and prayer, I have come to believe that my failure was primarily the result of my own ignorance and misunderstanding. I failed to grasp the gravity of the situation and to ask the right questions at the right time.

I settled for what I thought the situation required. I didn’t deliberately fail this family. In fact, I believed I was doing the right thing. But sometimes our reasons can be right and yet we still end up getting it wrong.

When it happens to ministers, not only do people get hurt but their faith in

the church as a source of compassion and care — and, even, their faith in God — gets poisoned. Most of us in ministry are familiar with the refrain: “If that’s how you treat those in need, then count me out! The Jesus you claim to follow never would’ve let me down like that!”

And maybe that’s the point: Jesus wouldn’t have, but sometimes we do. For all our aspirational talk about being the presence of Christ in times of crisis, the truth is that only the Holy Spirit can bring peace to a hurting heart in the midst of great suffering. At our best we offer ourselves as imperfect vessels — clay jars carrying the precious treasure of God’s love and mercy.

It’s tough to have Jesus as our performance standard, but it’s part of the job we willingly and knowingly accept. When God calls us to serve others in Jesus’ name we have some sense of what we’re getting into.

Good training, mentors and experiences — such as clinical pastoral education — help us figure out the holy work of pastoral care. Supposedly it’s enough, but not always.

When I offered to meet with a member of this family to seek forgiveness and to talk about how I could have served them better, the response was curt: “That’s why you went to school. I shouldn’t have to tell you how to do your job. You’ve got the degrees; figure it out.”

Yet, in many ways the church is the only place on earth where pastors — at least, pastors like me — learn how to do their jobs

in relationships with real people who are struggling with real challenges. Tragically, when we get it wrong the consequences can be devastating, long lasting and far reaching for the people who end up getting the short end of our shepherd’s crook.

Although it feels awfully self-centered to call this ever-present potential for failure a burden, that’s exactly what it is — and I’m grateful that I don’t carry this burden alone.

Jesus generously offers me rest, which I’m beginning to believe means that he doesn’t take my burden or failure away so much as he adds strength to mine as we carry it together.

I’m hopeful enough to believe that on those occasions when I fail, Jesus is still at work, doing what I did not do.

Ghosts of past failures never completely go away, and I am enough of a realist to know there will probably be more ghosts in my future. When I am haunted by memories of angry words, pained faces and cold stares, I pray for the parishioners who feel let down. I pray that somewhere in their souls they can believe my failure was not Jesus’ failure — and that Jesus loves them and continues to be with them even now. And, I pray that they will not give up on the church as a source of love and mercy.

Finally, I offer a prayer of gratitude, thankful that I have company in this wonderful, mysterious, humbling labor of love we call ministry. Burdens come — and we do the best we can and hope it’s enough. Jesus, though, does the heavy lifting and, in faith, we trust that his grace is sufficient for us all, shepherd and sheep alike. Because, Lord knows, we need it. **NFJ**

—Lee Canipe is pastor of Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C.



Remembering James Cone, 'powerful testifier and storyteller'

BY HENRY L. CARRIGAN JR.

On April 28, my birthday, I awoke to well wishes from friends and family. But the day wasn't very old when someone posted on Facebook about the death of James Cone. Like others touched by his life and writings, I spent a few moments crying over the loss.

Later, I re-read passages from some of his books. His death touched me deeply. Not only was he a friend, but his writings also reached me at a time when I was struggling to reconcile my time in seminary with my own theological vision.

I first met James Cone in the early 1990s when I was teaching religion at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio. The college chaplain and I were putting together a conference on racism and sexism, and I suggested we invite Cone. Jim had just published *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* — but I'd been teaching his earlier books, primarily *God of the Oppressed*, in my classes.

I contacted Cone's office at Union Theological Seminary. He was gracious but cautious, asking plenty of questions about the topics and settings in which he would speak. Here I was talking to the theologian whose writings I'd been immersed in since the mid-1970s, so when he agreed to come, I was thrilled.

While I don't recall all of his words at the conference, he enlivened the audience, challenged us, roused us out of our religious complacency, and enraged the college president, who pulled me aside angrily and said, "How dare he come to my college and call me a racist?"

Of course, Jim had not even mentioned the word "racism," but he had expressed his vision of Christianity as Black Power and had issued his prophetic words calling for a conversion experience where individuals



make a commitment to the struggle of the poor for freedom.

I got to know Jim better as we talked about theology, but even more about music and family, over meals and while driving to the airport. He was warm and encouraging. I was working on my dissertation at the time, while holding down a couple of jobs — and he asked searching questions.

He was a powerful testifier and storyteller. We kept in touch sporadically over the years, and I saw him when he returned to Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary — where I am an adjunct — to speak at an alumni gathering.

Yet I knew Jim before I met him through reading his works. I grew up in South Carolina and Georgia, in a family that was never shy about its racism. I cried when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, but my father was unsympathetic to me and seemed to be glad King was dead.

By the time I got to seminary I had already been involved in the Civil Rights Movement in small activist ways, and I was very ready to find voices within my faith that spoke to racial injustice. I found Jim Cone very quickly, thanks to Alan Neely, who taught the class in liberation theology my first semester.

While I read *A Black Theology of Liberation* and *Black Theology and Black Power*, the book that meant the most to me and revealed Jim most clearly was his little "testimony," *My Soul Looks Back*.

In that book Jim told the story of growing up in Bearden, Ark., and learning about oppression as a child. His vision of black liberation theology grew out of those experiences, and the closing words of his introduction captured for me the bankruptcy of my own Christian experience and the promise of a new way of thinking theologically:

"I firmly believe the gospel is available to all — including white people. But the availability of the gospel is exclusively dependent upon a *conversion* experience, wherein one makes an unqualified commitment to the struggle of the poor for freedom. This *metanoia* is available for all, though not accepted by all."

Yet, when I heard of Jim's death, I picked up *The Spirituals and the Blues* again, having just written a column about this book and my own book on gospel music, and turned to the final words. They seemed fitting for the day:

"In sum, when blues people are 'standin' here looking one thousand miles away,' they are looking for a home that is earthly *and* eschatological. Home would always be more than a plot of land, more than a lover, family, and friends — though it would include these. Home would be the unrestricted affirmation of self and the will to protect self from those who would destroy self. It would be self-reliance and self-respect. In short, home could only be freedom, and the will to create a new world for the people I love."

Welcome home, Jim. [NFJ](#)

—Henry L. Carrigan Jr. writes about music, literature and religion for a variety of publications including *No Depression: The Quarterly Journal of Roots Music*, *Christian Century*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *BookPage*. He teaches at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary and Lake Forest College.

The Church as a sign of the Kingdom

By John R. Franke

The church is sent into the world by Jesus (John 20:21) to bear God's image as a sign of the Kingdom of God, a visible community that bears in its own life the presence of God's coming reign. This notion is connected with the idea that humans are created in the image of God.

However, it is important to remember that this assertion is both an ontological status and a vocational calling, a destiny toward which humans are moving. Being in the image of God is not simply a status or condition but is rather a movement with a goal: that of bearing God's image in the world.

To understand this image, it is helpful to set it against the background of the Hebrew Bible from which it came. The kings of the ancient Near East often left images of themselves in cities or territories where they could not be present in person.

Just as earthly kings erected images of themselves to indicate their dominion over territory where they were not physically present, so humans are placed on earth in God's image as God's sovereign emblem or image to represent God's reign on earth.

Viewing the image of God as connected to our divinely-given calling to represent God means that all persons are made in God's image and that all are called to share in the human vocation of reflecting the loving care of God to creation.

In the face of human rebellion against this vocational calling, Jesus is sent to bear this image as the clear representation of the character of God in the world (2 Cor. 4:4-6, Col. 1:15) and to call forth a community to follow him in bearing this image in the world. Those who follow this path are united to Christ and share in his role as the image of God.

Indeed, the entire biblical panorama may be read as presenting the purpose of

God as that of bringing into being a people who reflect the divine character and thus fulfill the vocational calling to be the image of God.

As the church, following the pattern of Jesus, proclaims the gospel of the kingdom and God's love for all people and calls on those who hear this good news to repent of and become disciples of Jesus, a new way of life in the world is envisioned and established, leading to the formation of a new community — a welcoming and inclusive community that lives the love of God for the world and transcends the divisions that are so often used to exclude people from the blessing and peace of God's kingdom.

In the New Testament this transcendence of division that is a sign of the Kingdom of God is particularly focused on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles.

In the letter to the Ephesians (2:14-19) we read that the gospel of Jesus has broken down the wall of hostility that has divided the peoples of the earth — Jew and Gentile — and that one new humanity has emerged in place of two, bringing peace to the world.

The two groups are reconciled, participating in the life of the Spirit in such a way that they are no longer strangers and aliens but instead members together in the family of God. This reconciliation leads to the end of the division and hostility between the people of the world that destroys life and peace.

It is a sign of God's reign. Hence the church is called to embody this most basic sign of God's Kingdom, a life of peace and unity in the midst of difference "with all

humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul summarizes the significance of the gospel for the divisions that divide and destroy the peace and harmony God intends for creation: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:28).

This succinct summary can be extended to all other social bifurcations that humans can dream up that divide people from each other and imply, directly or indirectly, that some don't belong and can't participate in the new humanity made possible through Jesus Christ. As the church pursues and embodies this inclusive vision of new community in the way of Jesus, it bears the image of God as a sign of God's kingdom. **NFJ**



—John R. Franke is theologian in residence at Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis and general coordinator of the Gospel and Our Culture Network. He is also helping shape the Jesus Worldview Initiative for Nurturing Faith.

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The Sunday challenge

BY GINGER HUGHES

In just a couple of hours my house will most likely look as though something exploded.

How do I know? Because it happens almost every week.

Tiny shoes will be dumped out of the basket and onto the floor of the closet in an attempt to find matches.

Clothes will be strewn in the bedroom as I try to help the kids get dressed — only to realize they've grown two inches, and the clothes I'd laid out suddenly don't fit any longer.

The bathroom counter will be littered with hair bows and brushes as we try to tame tresses.

Bowls of half-eaten cereal will be left on display as we forget them in our mad dash to get ready.

And to top it all off, my ears will be ringing from all of the opinions my kiddos have slung my way: "This shirt is too itchy, Mama!" "These pants are too scratchy!" "My hair looks silly like this, Mama!"

Yes, Sunday mornings are hectic. They're chaotic. They require "work" to get everyone ready and to church on time (or thereabouts!).

And sometimes, after a long week, it's natural to just want to stay home. It's natural to want to forgo the challenges of getting ready to go one more place and adding one more thing to the already overbooked schedule.

But if we choose to stay home, we miss out on so many things — and so do our children.

We miss out on the experience of

collective worship: the act of joining our voices together with fellow believers to sing songs of praise; the bowing of heads, knowing that God promises "Where two or three are gathered in my name there I am in their midst"; the listening to scripture being read and allowing it space in our hearts.

And our children miss these things too, even if they are very young.

They miss singing "Jesus Loves Me" and learning that Jesus does indeed love them. They miss simple prayers and learning the stories that will become the foundation of their faith.

Our children know what we value by watching us. They know what we think is important by observing where we spend our money and our time.

Do my children know that faith is important to me?

I hope so.

I want my children to hear me pray. I want them to see me read scripture. I want them to see me live out Jesus' command to love our neighbor. And I want them to see me put forth the effort to go to worship.

I want them to know that faith is the foundation of my life, so I will do the "work" to get us there.

Please join me this week. I'll save you a seat. **NFJ**

—Ginger Hughes is the wife of a pastor, a mother of two and an accountant. She is a Georgia native currently living in the foothills of North Carolina. Her blogging for *Nurturing Faith* is sponsored by a gift from First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga. Additional writings may be found at nomamasperfect.com.



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Yikes! Yelp

By Brett Younger

Perhaps I am being defensive, but I do not believe that our church's three reviews on Yelp are a fair indicator of who we are as a congregation.

Mike O. writes, "There were all these signs about puttin cell phones away and such. When I entered, I could have sworn I'd seen the inside of this church from the movie *Selma*. Turns out, MLK did give a speech here, but I'm unclear if the movie was actually filmed in this location. When I came inside, there was some sort of meeting going on. Didn't want to disturb it, but it looked like a special place. Obviously it is a special place, full of abolitionist and civil rights history. Most definitely check this space out on a Sunday morning."



Mike, you should know that I haven't seen any signs about "puttin cell phones away and such." Perhaps they took the signs down because they weren't clear what "and such" means. *Selma* wasn't filmed here (I'm guessing much of it was filmed around Selma), but you're right about Martin Luther King Jr. We have lots of meetings, but you're welcome to interrupt. It is such a special place that you should come on a Sunday morning before you write your next review.

Pamela M. writes, "Went here today for a wedding and it was just perfect. There are lovely gardens, and the space that the couple used was perfect for their group of 10."

Pam, thank you for the kind words. The gardens are lovely. They are not the first thing I would mention about our congregation, but we will take it.

Alison P. writes, "I'm not suggesting

you walk in, but do walk by this place for your daily dose of U.S. history. Check out the grassy knoll with the statute of this church's first pastor, Henry Ward Beecher. Of course, Beecher was a staunch abolitionist. And, did you know that this site was a stop on the Underground Railroad?!!!"

Alison, I'm suggesting that you do walk in?!! We like our grassy knoll and statue, but you really need to come inside to experience our church.

I should not complain. Yelp can be mean-spirited. These are two reviews of a particular Seattle congregation:

Alexandra B. writes: "This is an amazing church that I would highly recommend to anyone. It's all about Jesus, all the time."

Jeff S. writes: "This church is a hate-factory which preys on naive, misguided, deluded, abused, lonely, and confused youth."

Alexandra and Jeff don't sit together in worship.

Some churchgoers vent their frustrations on Yelp. Nina V. writes: "When I listen to the minister speak he has a very dark/negative side. He is always asking for money. At times he can be very rude: he will go right

up to people when he is entering the church [and] if someone is not singing he tells them to get the prayer book out and sing. Someone should give him some professional coaching on his behavior especially. Sorry to put this on yelp."

This review has a very dark/negative side. Nina may not be truly sorry.

Some reviews say more about the writer

than the church. This is L.T.'s review of a church in Brooklyn: "The old ladies here gossip a lot, and I would know because my family is very involved with this church."

Is L.T.'s review gossip?

I have heard people lament that their church buildings are becoming theaters, but I had never considered the sadness Pearl H. feels: "I was not yet a teen when I saw my beloved movie theatre converted into an organization with a name as terrible and horrifically uncreative as The Rock Church."

Let's hope Pearl was able to find another movie theater.

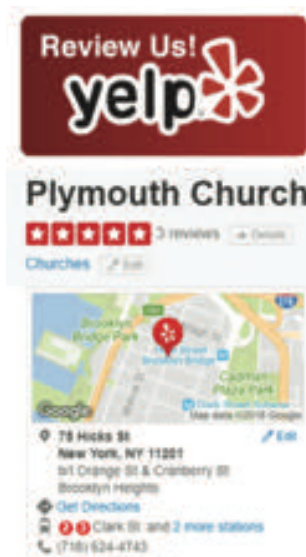
Maybe Yelp is not the place for serious theological discussion.

The problem with church reviews is that they reduce church to a product, when church is not a service, but a family given to God. We do not review our families on Yelp for good reasons.

People who only look at our church's Yelp reviews will not know that our church is fascinating and our congregation amazing. Is it kosher for the minister to write a review?

"The seats are too hard and the preacher is not as clever as he thinks, but this

congregation is living out its calling. We worship joyfully. We listen to the story of Jesus. We care for the hurting. We work for justice. We love one another. We share what we have been given. Five stars." 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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- > Simply click the “Teachers” button in the orange bar at the very top of the home-page. This will take you to where you enter the July password (**insight**) or the August password (**think**) and access the Teaching Resources. You will find the current password on page 21 (this page) in each issue of the journal for use by subscribers only.



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Scripture citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

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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*

July 1, 2018

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Motivating Generosity

What themes do you most enjoy in Bible studies or sermons? Most of us enjoy thinking about love, or peace. We may enjoy lessons or sermons that contain practical advice for the stress of everyday life. Salvation and hope for the future are popular topics.

Now turn the question around and think about what you *least* like to hear or study about. The topic of money is bound to be high on the list. Do you consider a sermon on finances to be too personal? Too much pressure? Too much practical and not enough spiritual?

Ah, but there is something deeply spiritual at stake here, because when we talk about our money, we are getting close to our deepest heart. It was Jesus himself who said “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21), and just three verses later, he went on to say that we cannot serve both God and money (Matt. 6:24).

Today’s lectionary text is the New Testament’s most extensive discussion about stewardship, and we can tell that even Paul was not comfortable with it. He didn’t like preaching on this subject any more than his modern counterparts. Ordinarily, Paul was very straightforward, but here he danced around the issue and treated it as delicately as he could.

2 Corinthians 8:9 –

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

In approaching the subject with the Corinthians, Paul used every homiletical strategy at his disposal. He held up the Macedonians as an example of generous givers. He flattered his readers to encourage them to greater growth. He challenged them to test and prove their love through serious stewardship. And, he reminded them of promises they had made.

Let’s take a closer look at how he did it.

Check this example (vv. 1-5)

The specific thing Paul had in mind was a special offering for the poor in Jerusalem. There had been a spate of bad weather and meager crops in Palestine, and the poorest people around Jerusalem were seriously suffering. Given the “all things in common” philosophy practiced by at least some in the Jerusalem church, even well-heeled people may have exhausted their resources in sharing with others (Acts 2:44-47).


Paul had mentioned the offering in an earlier letter, when he wrote of instructions he had given the Galatians, urging them to set aside a weekly offering for the poor in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1-2).

Paul was enthusiastic about the opportunity for predominantly Gentile

Christians in Asia to assist believers in Jerusalem, most of whom were Jewish. He had been particularly impressed by the response of the churches in Macedonia, “for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” (v. 2). Paul held them up as an example in hopes that the Corinthian Christians would respond in the same way, giving “according to their means, and even beyond their means” (v. 3).

Paul insisted that the Macedonians had surprised him by “begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints” (v. 4), giving themselves “first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us” (v. 5).

How many of us have ever pleaded for the privilege of donating to a worthy cause? Many of us are ready to respond when asked to contribute to a cause we believe in, but few beg for the honor. We might be surprised to learn that those who are most willing to give are, like the Galatians, often those who are least able.

Generalizations are hard to make, but a variety of recent studies show that both poor and rich people tend to give a higher percentage of their income to charitable causes than people whose incomes are in the middle. While the rich can easily afford it, the poor know what it feels like to be in need, so they are often more willing to help. 

As a rule, the biggest secret we keep in our society has to do with how much money we make. Whether in industry or education, it’s unusual for people who work together to know how their salary stacks up against their co-workers. That’s changing some, in

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part because women tend to be paid less than men for equal work, and we can't work toward wage equality if we don't know what wages are. 🇺🇸

Most churches have members in a broad spectrum of income brackets, and some people in every group give generously, and some give little or nothing. Paul would call on all of us to be generous in Christian stewardship – and consider it a privilege.

Excel in everything (vv. 6-7)

Paul moved from the example of the Macedonians to an argument based on flattery and encouragement to greater maturity. He had seen how the Corinthians had excelled in other areas of their Christian growth and development, and he had sent Titus to urge them to grow in generosity, as well (v. 6).

“Now as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you — so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking” (v. 7).

Faith, speech, enthusiasm, and love: those are wonderful attributes to have. Paul had seen evidence of growth in these areas, but he wanted to see them grow in giving, too: a literal translation could be “see that you also excel in this thing of grace.”

Translations such as the NRSV often blunt the charm of Paul's terminology by paraphrasing it to something like “excel also in this generous undertaking.” Paul emphasized that unselfish giving is an attribute of grace.

Through the grace of God we can receive life abundant and eternal. Through the grace of God we can receive love undeserved and beyond all measure. Through the grace of God most of us who read this journal have material blessings far beyond the reach of most of the world's population.

Why were we born in America

instead of Yemen? In a land of opportunity instead of one torn by bloody civil war? In a land of spacious skies and fruited plains, instead of a land marked by barren fields and starving children?

We can't explain it; we can only acknowledge that we did not do anything to deserve it. We are recipients of the inexplicable and undeserved grace of God. If our eyes are open to the grace that has been given us, our gratitude for that ongoing grace should lead us to be generous in sharing that grace with others. 🇺🇸

Paul wrote to people who were growing in their faith, in their knowledge, in their earnest love for others. He did not want them to miss the joy of growing in the grace of giving.

Demonstrate your love (vv. 8-9)

Paul drove his plea home with a comparison and a point-blank appeal. He knew better than to “command” generosity, but had no problem appealing to their sense of pride: “I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others,” he said (v. 8).

The primary “other,” in Paul's mind, was Christ. “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (v. 9).

“*I am testing the genuineness of your love.*” In essence, Paul was challenging his readers to prove the reality of their faith – to demonstrate their love for Christ by generously supporting the work of God.

He was giving them, as it were, the acid test. Perhaps you remember litmus paper from high school science lab. You dip a strip into a liquid or press it against something moist and watch what happens. If it turns blue, the solution is more alkaline. If it turns pink or red, the solution is acidic.

Paul was putting the litmus paper to the Corinthian Christians' faith, testing them against Christ. Those who have truly experienced the grace of God should be willing to demonstrate grace of their own, he believed. When people who claim to love Christ refuse to share their blessings with others, they fail the test.

We are all familiar with the challenge to “put your money where your mouth is.” Paul is exhorting us to put our money where our faith is – if we truly have faith.

Remember your promises (vv. 10-15)

Paul's final attempt at urging generosity from his readers came in the form of a reminder that they had already made commitments to God, and they would be well advised to keep them. They had given before, and should be eager to give again, finishing the work they had already begun (vv. 10-11).

The amount of their gift was not as important as their willingness to give it: some have more to share and some less, but all can have the same spirit of generosity.

Paul was building on the idea sometimes expressed by the phrase “today for you, tomorrow for me.” In the present, the Corinthians were doing well, while the people in Jerusalem were suffering. Later, the tables might turn and the Corinthians could be the ones needing help from Jerusalem (vv. 13-15).

Keeping our commitments to God is an important aspect of spiritual growth. We give, not only to help others or to accomplish a needed project, but as an expression of who we are, and as a means of growing in our personal and spiritual lives. 🇺🇸

We give, because giving is not truly so much a matter of the pocket-book, but a matter of the heart **NFJ**.

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 8, 2018

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Heavenly Secrets and Earthly Thorns

Do you have any acquaintances who are habitual braggarts? Only the hugest egomaniacs go around squawking about how talented or smart they are, because most people understand that no one likes or respects a big-headed boaster. So, some folks brag more indirectly: they may rhapsodize about their ski vacation at Jackson Hole, or prattle about the technical wizardry in their new car, or boast about their child's academic or athletic accomplishments.

Most of us are uncomfortable with the idea of bragging about ourselves, but there are times when a bit of boasting is appropriate. When we fill out a job application or go for an interview, for example, the whole point is to stress our qualifications, our accomplishments, and our fitness for the position.

And sometimes, perhaps, we may find ourselves in a similar situation to that of the Apostle Paul: if someone else seeks to demean or disqualify us by boasting of their superior credentials, a bit of bragging may be necessary to defend our right to lead or to be involved.

2 Corinthians 12:9 –

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

An amazing vision (vv. 1-6)

This is where Paul finds himself in the latter part of 2 Corinthians, a section that many scholars believe was originally a separate letter, perhaps the “severe letter” that Paul mentioned in 2 Cor. 2:3-9 and 7:12. 🇺🇸🇺🇸

Paul was exasperated because he had founded the church in Corinth and considered himself to be the congregation's spiritual father, but other evangelists had come behind him, preaching a different gospel and besmirching Paul's reputation, portraying themselves as superior to him. Whether they taught a Judaized faith that demanded circumcision or a gnostic-like system that promised secret knowledge, they promoted it as an advance over Paul's understanding of the gospel.

Paul found it necessary to defend himself in order to defend the gospel he preached, though he felt foolish doing so. Today's text is part of what scholars sometimes refer to as Paul's “fool's speech” (11:1-12:13), because he urged his readers to listen, even if they thought he was being foolish (11:16). He didn't like playing his opponents' game of one-upmanship but found it necessary. In the speech he exposed their foolishness by similar

behavior, then concluded: “I have been a fool! You forced me to it. Indeed, you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing” (12:11).

Evidently, some church leaders — who Paul referred to as “super-apostles” — had portrayed themselves as superior to the church founder, possibly on the basis of visions or revelations they claimed to have received from God. Paul's term “super-apostles” was clearly sarcastic: earlier he described the same people as “false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (11:13).

Paul could not let his opponents remain unanswered, and so felt compelled to take up the gauntlet: “It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord” (v. 1).

Still, Paul seemed hesitant to boast directly of his own visions, so he began by acting as if he were talking about someone else: “I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows” (v. 2).

As Paul went on, it became clear that he had to be talking about himself, but he was so averse to boasting that he tried couching it in the third person, such as Jesus talking about what the “son of man” must accomplish.

“Fourteen years ago” would refer to the early days of Paul's encounter with Jesus, presumably during the time he claimed to have spent in Arabia (Gal. 1:17) before spending time with the apostles in Jerusalem. Paul claimed to have received his gospel directly from

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Jesus, and not from the other apostles (Gal. 1:11-12).

And what did Paul experience? He had once been caught up to the third heaven, he said, unaware of whether it was in body or in spirit alone (vv. 2-3).^U Some Jewish writings contemporary with Paul imagined seven levels of heaven, while others believed there were three, with the third heaven — also known as Paradise — being the highest.

Paul said nothing of what he saw and little of what he heard, only that they were “things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (v. 4). Perhaps Paul’s opponents had claimed that their teachings were the result of specific revelations or visions they claimed to have received, relating in detail what they had seen and heard.

By describing his visit to the third heaven as being too high and too sacred to be shared with mortals, Paul implied that his testimony was more legitimate than that of those who exulted in their own reported visions.

Still claiming that he was not crowing, Paul said if he had wished to brag, he would boast only of his weaknesses — and that anything he said would not be foolishness but truth (vv. 5-6). This comment appears to be a thinly veiled charge that his opponents were less than truthful when they boasted of their experiences.

A painful affliction (vv. 7-8)

Despite the “exceptional character of the revelations” he had received, Paul said he would not call on them to make himself look more impressive.^U In fact, recognizing the danger of developing an over-inflated opinion of himself, Paul said he had been given “a thorn in the flesh” to keep him humble: “a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated” (v. 7).

This verse raises many questions.

Paul wrote as if he believed his “thorn” was God’s doing, a divine means of keeping his ego in check. On the other hand, he described it as “a messenger of Satan to torment me.” Would Paul have thought that God assigned Satan to afflict him? It’s not common to think of God and the character of Satan, as understood in Paul’s day, as cooperating. It’s likely that Paul was speaking metaphorically, considering anything that hampered his gospel efforts to be “satanic” interference.

Commentators have long speculated on how we should understand Paul’s “thorn.” Was it a physical affliction? Some have postulated poor eyesight, severe headaches, a painful back that left him stooped, or even epilepsy. Was it a psychological malady? Commentators in the Middle Ages speculated that Paul battled sexual temptation, while others have proposed a struggle with depression. Was he plagued by guilt for having persecuted the church, or feeling humiliation from others’ criticism?

We can only guess, because Paul does not offer details of his “thorn,” though he speaks as if it were an obvious physical affliction, a “weakness” that others could recognize.^U While the affliction was painful and unwelcome to Paul, he saw it as a sign from God, as visible proof of his apostleship.

An invaluable lesson (vv. 9-10)

Though he found something positive in it, Paul’s handicap was so painful that he asked God to take it away: “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me” (v. 8). But, Paul’s prayer did not have the effect he initially hoped for, as is often the case with our own prayers. There is no guarantee that God’s ways are our ways.^U

Ultimately, Paul came to believe

that God had given him something better than an easing of his afflictions by teaching him an invaluable lesson for life. “My grace is sufficient for you,” God had told him, “for power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9a).^U

With this deeply significant statement, Paul undercut the criticism of his opponents: his outward weakness was a sign of his internal experience of communion with God, given to keep his ego in hand.

Paul did not mean by this that we should view every trial as an affliction from God and portray ourselves as poor suffering servants. It doesn’t mean we should not seek to be healed of our illnesses. But when we find ourselves in a hard place, whether physical, spiritual, or emotional, we can know that Christ is with us in the midst of it. As Jesus took suffering beyond our imagining and transformed it into our salvation, so God works with us in our weakness, shaping it into unexpected strength.

So, Paul concluded, he could boast “all the more gladly” of his weaknesses, “so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (v. 9b). Paul could boast, indeed, in all kinds of trouble: “I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (v. 10, compare to a longer list of troubles in 11:23-29).

Have you ever felt that life was like a roller coaster? Imagine Paul’s experience: he had known the ecstasy of heavenly transport and the joy of evangelistic success, but also the misery of physical affliction and public humiliation. Paul’s amazing conclusion is that the greatest source of strength was his own weakness, because it forced him to rely on Christ rather than himself.

Here is a lesson we all would do well to learn. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 15, 2018

Amos 7:7-15

Walking the Line

Today's text takes us back into the eighth century, BCE, a time when the populous northern tribes existed as the kingdom of Israel, while the kings of Judah ruled the more sparsely populated south.

Let's face it: some people find prophets boring, so let's add a bit of imagination and picture the two lead characters as cowboy-like wordslingers.

Showdown at the (Not) OK Corral

Amaziah stood silhouetted in the sunset, waiting for Amos to arrive. As chief priest at the Bethel First Israelite Temple, Amaziah was the king's number one man in town. Life was good, and he wanted it to stay that way. He was the head lawman, and this Amos was an outlaw, as far as he could tell.

Amos had come up from the south and ridden into town taking potshots at everything he didn't like about how things were going in Israel. He preached against the elaborate worship services Amaziah led before the golden calf in the Bethel temple. Amos criticized the amount of wine they were drinking there, and he pitched a fit because Amaziah had incorporated the Canaanite practice of cultic prostitution,

Amos 7:8 –

And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by."

claiming he was trying to be culturally relevant.

Those critiques alone would be bad enough, but Amos had crossed the line when he started lambasting the king of Israel himself. He had publicly announced that Jeroboam II was doomed to die. Did that qualify Amos as a terrorist threat? He was clearly a menace and had to be stopped.

So it was that Amaziah had reported Amos' activities to the king, and now he was waiting with extradition papers in hand, ready to send the unwelcome prophet back to his own country. High noon had come and gone, but Amos had not shown up. Still, Amaziah waited.

The spurs on his sandals rubbed painfully on his heels, but still he waited. The big holster filled with scrolls weighed heavily on his right hip, but still he waited. The sun bore down upon him, but he just adjusted his big black Stetson, dusted off his badge, and waited some more.

Amaziah watched as a dust devil swirled up west of town, and out of the haze old Amos came striding into town with his tall white hat haloed by the orange sun. He seemed to be unarmed, but Amaziah knew he was deadly just the same. As Amos approached, Amaziah shifted his weight from one foot to the other but stood his ground

outside the temple doors. Amos stopped no more than 10 paces away.

The two combatants stared each other down, each waiting for the other to make a move. Without warning, the outlaw prophet whipped up a long bony finger, pointed it straight at Amaziah, and fired off three quick shots:

One: "Amaziah! I didn't ask for it, but the Lord showed me a plague of locusts coming to eat every bit of grass in Israel," Amos said. "But I said 'Surely not!' I pleaded for mercy on your behalf, and God held back" (vv. 1-3).

Amos prayed for Israel? That didn't sound right to Amaziah, but he had little time to ponder it, for Amos' finger was still smoking.

Two: "That's not all I saw, Amaziah! The Lord showed me a hail of fire that fell from the heavens and dried up the oceans and turned Israel into a cinder, but I prayed again for the Lord to forgive, and he held back" (vv. 4-6).

Amaziah felt a bit of relief. Amos had shot twice, and it appeared that he had missed both times. But the crusty prophet wasn't done.

Three: Quick as a flash, Amos reached into his robe and pulled out a small weight tied to a string. He held the string high and watched the plummet swing to vertical.

"Now one more thing, Amaziah! I saw the Lord himself standing beside a wall, holding a plumb line to it, and he said 'Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel, and they don't measure up! This wall can never be made straight: I'm not holding back anymore, but *all the temples and sanctuaries in Israel will be razed to the ground, and I will rise against*

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King Jeroboam with the sword!” (vv. 7-9).^U

Amaziah felt the fierce salvo rattling against his bones, but he shook it off and drew his own weapon – a scroll with the king’s command written on it. He pointed the scroll at Amos, let it unroll in the breeze, and shouted with the most authoritative voice he could muster:

“I have reported you to the king, and he wants you gone. Now get out of town, you old seer! Flee this land and go back home to Judah where people will pay you for your drivel. If you plan to prophesy again, don’t do it around here!” (vv. 10-13).

But Amos dodged the bullet. “Oh, you’re mistaken, Amaziah – I never claimed to be a prophet. I don’t get paid for being religious, like you. I work for a living. I raise sheep and I look after fig trees. That’s what I really like to do. I didn’t ask for this job of dropping word-bombs on you Israelites, but the Lord called me from the farm down in Judah, and said ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel!’” (vv. 14-15).

Pointing that long, deadly finger again, Amos cried out “You tell me not to preach,” Amaziah, “you tell me to get out of town – and I will. But know this, you holy hypocrite: your day is coming. Your entire family will be lost to you, and your land will be given to strangers, and you will die in an unclean foreign land, and Israel will go with you. *You just remember that!*” (vv. 16-17).

With that final shot, Amos turned on his heels and walked out of town, back into the setting sun until he reached the road to Judah, where he turned south and marched himself right out of Amaziah’s life. But Amaziah was shaking where he stood. Amos’ parting volley was still ricocheting inside his head. Those who were standing by may have thought Amaziah had won the day, because

Amos was leaving, but Amaziah knew the truth. Amos had left the scene, but Amaziah had lost the duel.

Truth and consequences

Amos was among the earliest of the “writing” prophets.^U His short career was unusual in that he was a southerner but preached in the north.^U Israel’s first king didn’t want people going south to worship in Jerusalem, Judah’s capital city, so he had established sanctuaries in the central city of Bethel, and at Dan, in the far north. Notoriously, he outfitted each of the temples with a golden calf. Though the images were probably intended to symbolize Yahweh’s presence in lieu of the Ark of the Covenant, they violated the commandment against images.

Southern critics claimed that the northern priests diverged even further from the expected norm by introducing elements of pagan worship. In both countries, social justice fell victim to a highly stratified economy in which the rich and powerful took advantage of their poorer countrymen, choosing selfish goals over a just and equitable society.

Prophets such as Amos and Hosea became convinced that the nation was doomed, citing visions in which God had shown them a coming destruction. Their prophesies were not fulfilled immediately, but as the nation of Assyria became ascendant in the east, its kings had their eyes set on empire-building – and within a generation or so, the Assyrians would prove to be the instruments of judgment.^U

Amos declared the message he felt compelled to preach, and in time Israel faced the consequences.

Lay power

In reading this text, we can’t help but note that Amos was not a professional religionist, but a layperson. He spoke

of tending sheep and cultivating fig trees. He was a man of the land – but also one willing to hear and respond to God’s call.

Being a layperson, Amos could have felt freer to say things the religious establishment did not want to admit or to say. It also gave added weight to his words because anyone could see there was nothing in it for him. He didn’t get paid for prophesying – in fact, he took a lot of grief for doing what he felt God leading him to do. Nobody in their right mind would do that unless they really did believe that God was leading them. All of those things gave extra power to what Amos had to say.^U

Being a witness is not something we do periodically or with a gospel tract. We do it with the consistency of our lives, and others take note of the lives we live.

I like to collect Coca-Cola cans from other countries. The brand name may be written in flowing Hebrew or Arabic or Thai letters, but the colors are the same and the can remains clearly identifiable.

As we live from day to day, it is not the sermons we preach or other words we say that make a difference, but the lives we live. People know what a Christian ought to look like and act like. If we say Coke but look like Sprite, people can tell the difference. The best preaching we do is not with our words, but with our lives.

Laypeople can also have a greater influence in part because they don’t get paid for visiting the sick, calling on prospective members, listening attentively to a hurting friend, or taking supper to a shut-in. When laypeople do those things out of love and true commitment to God, they have greater influence precisely because their Christian living is not what they do for a living. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 22, 2018

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Bad Shepherds and Good

Occasionally we hear the news that some respected figure has a seamier side that has come to light. A mayor is charged with accepting kickbacks in return for steering city contracts toward a particular company. A senator is accused of pursuing an extramarital affair. A male doctor is found to have been taking indecent liberties with young female patients. It happens all too often, and it's always heartbreaking.

It can happen with religious leaders, too. Most of us can name preachers, both famous televangelists and local pastors whose ministry was tarnished or ended when it came to light that they had betrayed their spouse, or misused church funds, or abused one of the youth. Such news is always disturbing – but it's not a new problem. People in positions of authority – whether political or economic or religious – have always been tempted to misuse their power.

A perceptive prophet

Such was the case in the small country of Judah, in the waning years before the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar crushed Jerusalem and began uprooting the powerful and wealthy and

Jeremiah 23:5 –

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

influential and particularly skilled people from the homes, marching them to Babylon and a life in exile.

Jeremiah lived during a time of much upheaval. The northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by the Assyrians more than a century before, and Judah had grown weaker. Jeremiah dated the beginning of his prophecy to the 13th year of King Josiah (Jer. 25:3), who showed more promise than his predecessors, spearheading religious reforms that included renovating the temple in Jerusalem and tearing down other places of worship. After Josiah ordered renovations to the temple, the priest Hilkiah brought to him a book of the law – probably an early version of Deuteronomy – that had reportedly been found during the cleanup.

Unfortunately, Josiah died young in an ill-advised battle, and the kings who ruled after him during the next two decades were disappointments. Jeremiah watched as the country fell under the domination of first Egypt, and then Babylon, ultimately falling to Nebuchadnezzar and being carried into exile. Jeremiah escaped to Egypt but remained in touch with the exiles through letters.

In a time when other religious leaders were failing, Jeremiah steadfastly remained true to Yahweh and

denounced all religious deviations. Often, he interpreted Judah's political troubles and impending wars as punishment for the nation's sin in turning away from Yahweh; yet, he also offered glimpses of hope for the future.

A change in leadership (vv. 1-4)

Today's text finds Jeremiah offering words of both strong critique and ultimate hope. He began by lambasting both priests and prophets who served themselves or the temple rather than God. Jeremiah charged them with leading other people astray: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD" (v. 1).

In other places he accused both priests and prophets of trusting the temple more than God. While the Babylonians were threatening and Jeremiah was desperately calling the nation to repent and trust God for deliverance, priests and prophets associated with the temple were complacent, insisting that Yahweh would not allow the temple to fall into enemy hands.

Thus, Jeremiah once stood at the gate of the temple and declared: "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD'" (Jer. 7:3-4).

It wasn't the presence of the temple that could save Jerusalem, but only a change in the attitudes and actions of the people. God does not dwell in a building, but among a people who have receptive and contrite hearts.

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But the problem was even worse than faulty theology. Just a few verses past our core text, Jeremiah declared that the actions of the prophets and priests made him reel with revulsion. The prophets of Samaria had “prophe-sied by Baal and led my people astray,” he said, while the prophets of Jerusalem were even more shocking: “they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hand of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness ...” (vv. 13-14).

Because the “shepherds” had not properly “attended to” the people, Jeremiah declared that God would attend to them for their evil doings (v. 2). The word translated as “attend,” like the English word, can have both positive and negative connotations. We can attend to one another in a positive and loving manner – but no child wants to hear a parent or teacher say “I will attend to you later!”

Now, Yahweh had promised to “attend to” the ungodly priests and prophets with punishment. Further on, Jeremiah declared that Yahweh would drive them into dark and slippery paths where they would fall into disaster (v. 12), “for from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has spread throughout the land” (v. 15).

But Jeremiah was not without hope. He declared that God would not forget those faithful ones who remained: “Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD” (vv. 3-4).


This prophecy probably derives from sometime between 597 and 587 BCE, for it presumes that many Judeans were already in exile. King

Jehoiachin had surrendered Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BCE. He and many others were taken captive and the temple was looted, but the city was left intact. Nebuchadnezzar put Jehoiachin’s uncle Mattaniah in charge as a new king, changing his name to Zedekiah (2 Kgs. 24:10-18).

Ten years later, however, Zedekiah refused to pay the annual tribute, and the Babylonians returned. This time they burned the city, destroyed the temple, and carried many more citizens into exile.

A righteous branch (vv. 5-6)

Jeremiah’s hopes for the faithful “remnant” extended to a vision of a new and righteous king from among David’s descendants. “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (v. 5).

Jeremiah portrayed the remnants of Israel and Judah as a tree that had been chopped down. But, he saw a future day when a new shoot would arise from the stump of David’s heritage, and a new king would emerge who would rule wisely and justly. 

The new king would not only be just, but also act as a deliverer: “In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness’” (v. 6).

Although Jeremiah preached long after the northern kingdom of Israel had been overwhelmed by the Assyrians, he believed that a remnant of both Israel and Judah remained, and still had hope for a good future.

His reference to the king being called “the LORD is our righteousness” was probably a swipe at the present king, whom Nebuchadnezzar

had renamed as Zedekiah. The Hebrew word for “righteousness” is *zedeq*, and Zedekiah’s name (*zidqiyahu* in Hebrew) meant “My righteousness is Yahweh.” But Zedekiah had not lived up to his name. Only the future king could truly be called *Yahweh zidqenu*, “the LORD is our righteousness.”

So what do we make of this prophecy? Jeremiah and his hearers, no doubt, anticipated a day when God would bring the remnant faithful home from exile, where they would live securely under the rule of a faithful king. The people did indeed return to Jerusalem, beginning in 538 BCE, but only as a province of Persia, with appointed Persian governors. This remained the case for more than three centuries, until they gained a brief period of independence under the Hasmoneans (about 140–37 BCE), but there was no evidence of a truly “righteous ruler.”

Thus, the hope of a coming “shoot” from the stump of David morphed into the hope for a coming Messiah, still held by Jews when Jesus emerged in the first century. As Christians looking at this text through the lens of the New Testament, we interpret Jeremiah’s salvation oracle as having been fulfilled in Christ.

The Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus is almost certainly not what Jeremiah had in mind, but from our perspective, even better. As Christians, we do not live as a religion-centered nation with our identity dependent upon political independence and a central temple, but as a global community of believers committed to the same God and the same ideals of right living based on love and respect for all persons.

As we do so, there is a sense in which we all are called to be good shepherds, encouraging others to lives of faithfulness and right living, that they do not go astray. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 29, 2018

John 6:1-21

He Did What?

Today's text is the first of *five* lessons from John 6. Why, you may wonder, did the committee behind the lectionary choose this sequence? In the first place, John 6 is quite long: 71 verses, to be exact. In the second place, it is packed with memorable stories about Jesus' growing popularity, his remarkable demonstrations of power, and his mind-boggling teachings. The chapter is so dense, in fact, that today's text contains two of those stories. 🇺🇸

A hungry people (vv. 1-9)

The first story must have been especially popular, for it is the only one of Jesus' "mighty works," other than the resurrection, that is recorded in all four gospels (Matt. 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-14). There are some differences in the stories, but also many similarities.

The story's appearance in all four gospels tells us how significant the early church considered the memory of this event to be. Broken bread and fish not only fed thousands of people but also provided important lessons for those who follow Jesus. Before chapter 6 is done, Jesus will confound his listeners by describing himself as the

John 6:14 –

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

bread of life (v. 35).

The story comes at a time when Jesus' ministry was just beginning, when he was best known as a wonder-worker and healer. Large crowds followed him, hoping to witness a miracle or to be healed (v. 2). When Jesus climbed up the side of a low mountain and sat down with his disciples, it's not surprising that multitudes followed them (v. 3).

John's brief mention of the approaching Passover (v. 4) seems to have nothing to do with the story but may have been intended as a pointer to Jesus' later remarks that speak of his body and blood in ways that foreshadow the Last Supper. Since the miraculous meal follows directly, some commentators see the feeding of the five thousand as a type of Passover meal marking a new kind of deliverance.

While the other gospels spell out Jesus' compassion for the multitudes, the Fourth Gospel is more concerned with a test of the disciples' faith – or creativity. In the obvious absence of markets, Jesus asked where they could obtain bread for the people (vv. 5-6). Phillip calculated that it would take a half year's wages to buy food for the crowd, even if it had been available (v. 7).

Andrew knew of a boy who'd brought five small loaves and two fish, which suggests that they may

have already canvassed the crowd for resources and found them sorely lacking (vv. 8-9). 🇺🇸 The people were so intent on being healed or watching others that they had not come prepared – but they were about to see a wonder they could not have imagined.

An amazing meal (vv. 10-14)

The author of John's gospel ascribes no great ceremony to what happened next. Jesus simply had the disciples go among the people and tell them to sit down (v. 10). 🇺🇸 Then, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted" (v. 11).

The mechanics of the miracle did not interest the author as they do us. Did Jesus go among the people, handing out food? Did they line up and come by? Did he pile the quickly multiplying bread and fish into baskets for the disciples to distribute?

We don't know, and it doesn't matter. The point is that the people had a need, and Jesus was able to supply it. Perhaps we are to recall how the Israelites were said to have wandered in the wilderness, complaining to Moses that they had no food, when God supplied bread-like manna from heaven and more quail than they could eat (Num. 11:31-32).

The story, as in the other gospels, adds a note that Jesus had the disciples gather up the leftovers after the people had eaten their fill, and they filled 12 baskets with uneaten food (vv. 12-13).

The point of the story then becomes clear: Jesus' mighty works were a convincing demonstration that

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he was no ordinary teacher or run-of-the-mill medic: “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world’” (v. 14).

By “prophet,” they spoke of more than a preacher: the anticipated prophet was also the long-awaited Messiah. For hundreds of years, the Jews had been oppressed by other peoples, but retained the prophet-fueled hope that one day God would turn history around by sending an anointed deliverer who would lead the Jews to defeat their enemies and then rule over a new and glorious kingdom.

Try to put yourself in their situation. If you encountered a young prophet who could heal the sick and feed 5,000 people without breaking a sweat, wouldn’t you believe he was the coming king, and fall in line to follow him?

A fast getaway (vv. 15-21)

The problem is that Jesus *was* indeed the intended Messiah, but he had no intention of leading a bloody rebellion against Rome and setting up a new Jewish kingdom in the land of Israel. He had indeed come to inaugurate what the gospels call the “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven,” but not in the expected way. God’s reign would be in the minds and hearts of women and men and children who learned to follow Jesus – not into a war of conquest, but into lives of love and compassion that reflect his ethic of love and justice.


The crowd around Jesus evidently did not yet understand this or want to accept it. Like athletes who rush to lift a game-winning hero to their shoulders, people in the crowd must have pressed forward hoping to pick Jesus up and carry him in a great procession to gather further support, crown him

as king, and begin the revolution.

This was not Jesus’ agenda, however, so when he saw that the crowd wanted to “take him by force to make him king,” he somehow managed to get away and go further up the mountain by himself (v. 15).

Verse 16 brings a surprising shift to the narrative. The reader must assume, perhaps, that Jesus had instructed the disciples to take their boat to Capernaum without him; otherwise they surely would have waited. The distance was only a few miles. Perhaps Jesus sought solitude and gave the impression that he would walk alone and meet them there (vv. 16-17).

The Sea of Galilee is 700 feet below sea level. It can frequently become quite rough when swirling winds affected by the surrounding mountains create impressive waves. The winds had apparently made it too dangerous to use a sail, so the disciples had rowed along the shore for several miles when they looked up to see Jesus walking out to meet them (vv. 18-19).

Seeing Jesus calmly striding across the stormy waves terrified the disciples, and we can understand why. There’s no account of Peter trying to join Jesus, as in a similar story in Matthew (Matt. 14:22-33): Jesus simply told the disciples not to fear, and didn’t even bother to get into the boat, for “immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going” (vv. 20-21). 

Whether we are to imagine that Jesus miraculously transported them the rest of the way, or to understand that they were already nearing the shore when Jesus came to them, is unclear. The point of the story, however, is obvious: the gospel writer wants to portray Jesus as wise and powerful beyond the abilities of any ordinary human. Jesus was indeed the

one who would be sent from God – but he defied all expectations.

Both of these stories glorify Jesus while also pointing to the inabilities of the disciples. In doing so, they challenge the contemporary disciples in at least two ways. First, how would Jesus have us respond to the many needs – including hunger – that surround us? Some readers have offered a naturalistic explanation for the miracle by suggesting that most people in the crowd had brought food with them, but kept it hidden: only the one boy was willing to reveal his stash. When Jesus prayed and began distributing the boy’s food, according to this view, it led other people to bring out and share their own resources.

While this view downplays the miraculous element that was clearly intended by the writer, it is a reminder that when Jesus calls us to care for the poor and oppressed, the resources we need may already be at hand – if we are willing to share them. In these materialistic days, getting people to share generously from their own resources may seem miraculous in itself.

The second story in our text focuses on the disciples’ inability to recognize Jesus when he approached them. They thought he was still on land, and never expected to see him coming to meet them on the stormy sea.

We, too, have a tendency to think of Jesus as distant, sitting idly on a heavenly throne, uninvolved in our daily lives. But texts such as this remind us that Jesus is here among us, challenging us to minister to “the least of these” and empowering us to do what needs to be done. If we would see Jesus, the spiritual disciplines of prayer and contemplation – along with scripture – might help us to discern his presence in the most surprising of places. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

New password for online teaching resources is: think.

Aug. 5, 2018

John 6:22-35

Straight Talk

Once served a church in the mountains of North Carolina where one of the older men always greeted me the same way. His standard salutation was not “How are you?” or “How’s it going?” or any of the more common pleasantries we use. Instead, he always said “Gettin’ enough to eat?” The gentleman had grown up poor and lived through the depression, when finding food enough to survive could be a day’s work. For him, as long as you were getting enough to eat, anything else was gravy.

Most of us have never thought about life in that way. Although we know that serious hunger exists in some parts of the world, food is so available to us that we’re more concerned with how to eat less than with how to get more. 🇺🇸🇺🇸

The people who study eating disorders – whether the issue involves overeating or under-eating – understand that we have a tendency to use food as a means of comforting ourselves or subconsciously dealing with parts of our lives that are out of our control. We may eat to console ourselves after a hard day, or even to please somebody else. We may eat to feed hungers that have nothing to do with our stomachs: loneliness, disappointment, pain.

John 6:27 –

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.

There are many reasons why we may choose to eat too much or too little, but ultimately, all of us *have* to eat in order to survive. Our bodies need fuel in order to operate, and if we don’t provide the fuel, the bodies will stop working.

That truth applies to our spiritual lives as well as to our physical lives. If we want to overcome our deep internal emptiness and enjoy spiritual health, we have to feed our souls – and with something more than “soul food” like fried chicken, collards, and cornbread.

Somewhere along the way, we need to find some *real* soul food. Maybe that’s why we like to recall Jesus’ description of himself as the bread of life.

Hungry people (vv. 22-24)

That brings us to our text for today. It’s a narrative account of a conversation between Jesus and some of his would-be followers. It follows John’s account of how Jesus fed five thousand men and even more women and children by means of a miracle that began with only five little loaves of bread and two pickled fish.

After the meal, Jesus and his disciples disappeared, and it was too dark to go looking for them. The next morning, some members of the crowd walked

down to the Sea of Galilee and saw skid marks on the shore. They surmised that Jesus and the twelve had left by boat and guessed that their most likely destination was the fishing village of Capernaum, on the northwest coast of the sea, known to be home base for several of the disciples.

John says there happened to be some other boats present that had come across from the city of Tiberias, on the western side of the sea, and many in the crowds persuaded the sailors to ferry them over to Capernaum in search of Jesus. In time, they found him there, apparently teaching in the synagogue (vv. 24, 59). 🇺🇸

Misguided questions (vv. 25-31)

The people’s first question was probably a roundabout way of expressing curiosity about how Jesus had gotten away from them the evening before. They asked, “When did you come here?” Jesus saw through the vacuity of the question and recognized that many had come to see another miracle, or to seek a free lunch (v. 26).

Jesus challenged them to focus on their souls instead of their stomachs, to seek the kind of spiritual food that lasts. Jesus had fed the multitude once because he had compassion on them, but he wasn’t interested in becoming a traveling cafeteria manager. He recognized their many needs: not only hunger, but also loneliness and insecurity. They needed more than a satisfied stomach. Jesus wanted to fill their souls with a more meaningful life (v. 27), and he knew that the only place they could find *that* kind of soul food was in him.

Additional information at
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So, Jesus said “Work for the food that lasts,” and we can imagine the people saying “Okay, and how do we do that? What must we do to work the works of God?” (v. 28). And Jesus said “*Believe in me*. This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (v. 29).

You’d think the crowd might have been happy to hear those words, but they were apparently obtuse, obstreperous, obstinate people – in other words, people like us – and even though they had just experienced an incredible miracle by eating loaves and fish that Jesus had multiplied, they responded by asking for another miracle.

“What sign are you going to give us then,” they asked, “so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?” (v. 30).

What sign? If Jesus wanted them to believe, they apparently wanted Jesus to convince them that he was worthy of their belief. Could he give them bread from heaven, as Moses did in the wilderness? Someone offered a mangled proof-text from Psalm 78:24: “As it is written,” they said, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”^U The wandering Israelites had eaten manna for years, but Jesus had only fed the crowd once. “Moses gave us bread from heaven,” they claimed. “What are you going to give us?”

The people were so hung up on the material side of things that they couldn’t see the spiritual significance. It reminds me of a cartoon I saw in which a teacher was standing before his Sunday School class, which was evidently studying the story about the gift of manna. In the cartoon, the teacher looked a little frustrated as he answered a question from the class: “No, Mary Beth, the Bible doesn’t say how many calories there were in a serving of manna.”

Everlasting bread (vv. 32-35)

Jesus responded with two statements. The first was a simple reminder that it wasn’t Moses who had provided bread from heaven, but God. They needed to get that straight from the get-go. It was God who had provided manna in the wilderness, and it was God who would give them the true bread, “that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (vv. 32-33).

Did the people still not get it? Were they still looking for a permanent meal ticket? “Sir,” they said, “give us this bread always” (v. 34). But Jesus was not talking about biscuits, pitas, tortillas, matzah, bread sticks, white bread, brown bread, corn bread, gluten-free bread, or homemade yeast bread.

“*I am the bread of life*,” Jesus said. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (v. 35). This is the first of seven “I am” statements that the Fourth Gospel attributed to Jesus.^U

“*I am the bread of life*,” Jesus said. But did the people get it? It appears that many in the crowd were standing there with their hands out rather than with their hearts open. They understood bread made from flour and water. The notion of bread made from flesh and blood made no sense to them.

In essence, Jesus said “You want bread? You want life? Here I am!” But he lost them. There may have been a few who caught the vision and followed Jesus for Jesus’ sake, but there were many others who were more interested in a free lunch than a fulfilled life. And they left hungry.

The story leads us to ask, of course, if our own spiritual quest is still leaving us hungry, or if we have found the true source of life that lasts. The congregation that came to Jesus in this story went to a lot of trouble to find him and sit at his feet, even as we go to some

trouble to get up and clean up and drive up on Sunday morning to be a part of worship in our local churches.

That congregation came hungry – they came looking for something. And, so do we. The question is: What are we looking for? What kind of hunger are we seeking to fill when we come to church?

Many people come to church looking for friends, people who know their names and miss them when they’re gone. Church is a great place to make friends, if we’re willing to put forth the effort to be a friend ourselves. But if we come to church in search of someone to join our car pool and fail to discover what a friend we have in Jesus, we are missing out on the main reason for being here.

Many people come to church looking for someone to teach their children about God, and that is certainly a worthy goal. But, if we come looking for a Sunday School teacher and fail to hear the words of the ultimate Teacher, we’ve missed the point.

Many of us do come to church wanting to be spiritually fed. We sense a certain emptiness within, and we have learned that worship with our sisters and brothers helps to put us in touch with the One who is the bread of life that comes down from heaven.

Those who are spiritually mature know that when we come to be fed, we must come with our hearts open rather than with our hands out. We come knowing that the presence of Christ is most real and our life with Christ is most meaningful when we are serving rather than being served. We come knowing that as we feed others with our friendship and our teaching gifts, with our administrative abilities and our faithful tithes, we are also being fed with the bread of life that endures forever, and yet is eternally fresh. That’s *real* soul food. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 12, 2018

John 6:35-51


Living Bread

Do you love an argument? If not, you probably know someone who seems to take great delight in the give and take of disagreeing over everything from politics to family matters. Some people can do that without also being disagreeable. Some cannot.

On some subjects, people tend to take a party line. When the subject of economics or taxes or immigration or social justice comes up, we can pretty well guess by someone's position which party they supported in the last election.

Theological arguments are also common, even within the same faith. Progressives and fundamentalists rarely see eye to eye on doctrinal matters, nor do Catholics and Protestants, or supporters of free will versus predestination.

Most people tend to keep their beliefs to themselves, but there are always those who feel compelled to confront others who hold divergent beliefs.

We meet some of those people in today's text. 

Skeptics (vv. 35-40)

Today's study must begin with an awareness of the larger context, which clearly includes several factions. Aside

John 6:42 –

They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

from Jesus and his closest followers, the crowds who sought Jesus out included curious onlookers, supportive fans, and hostile opponents.

Jesus did not just pronounce "I am the bread of life" (v. 35) out of the blue. John 6 begins with the Fourth Gospel's version of the familiar "Feeding of the 5,000" (vv. 1-14). John gives the story a particular twist by portraying Jesus as having to escape an attempt by some zealots in the crowd to take him by force and make him king (v. 15). Somehow Jesus retreated up the mountain to obtain time alone.

This is followed by John's version of Jesus walking on the water, late in the evening and during a storm (vv. 16-21). Though his unexpected appearance frightened the disciples, Jesus comforted them as they brought the boat safely to shore.

The next day, some from the crowd who had been fed the day before found Jesus in Capernaum, hoping to see additional signs and wonders (vv. 22-26). When Jesus called on them to "believe in the one whom he (God) has sent," they asked for more signs, recalling how their ancestors had been given manna in the wilderness in Moses' day. Jesus reminded them that God had provided the "bread from heaven," not Moses, adding "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven

and gives life to the world" (vv. 27-33).

When the people asked that Jesus give them a lifetime supply of such bread (v. 34), Jesus surprised them with words we may find familiar and comforting, but which would have been shocking to those who first heard them: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (v. 35).

Perhaps only then did the people realize that Jesus was not talking about physical bread, but spiritual sustenance, and they found the concept hard to grasp or accept. "You have seen me and yet do not believe," Jesus said (v. 36).

The following few verses have the ring of the later author's attempt to explain the concept by having Jesus elaborate further. The text has an odd feeling, as it portrays Jesus speaking of people, but using an odd combination of neuter pronouns and masculine participles: "Everything that the father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away" (v. 37). Other translations translate the first pronoun in more personal terms such as "All" (KJV, ESV), "All those" (NIV 11), and "Everyone" (NET, HCSB).

Perhaps the writer's intent was to include humanity within the larger sphere of Christ's mission to transform the entire world. In any case, the conversation shifts from Jesus to the Father and those the Father "has given" Jesus, whom he gladly receives and would "never drive away" (v. 37).

Jesus is portrayed as doing the Father's will, which is to receive those whom God has given and to raise them up on the last day (vv. 38-39).

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While these verses seem to suggest that the giving and receiving is all God's doing, v. 40 is a reminder that human will is also involved: God's desire is that "all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life" (v. 40). Salvation and life are not limited to a select group that God chooses to give Jesus but is for all who believe.

Antagonists (vv. 41-46)

Jesus' discussion of himself as the "bread of life" may have puzzled many of his hearers, but a group of Jews who were hostile to Jesus were not confused at all: they were furious. Who was this young whippersnapper who dared to claim "I am the bread that came down from heaven?" (v. 41).

"Is not this the son of Joseph?" they said, "whose father and mother we know? How can he now say 'I have come down from heaven?'" (v. 42).

One could read "whose father and mother we know" as a reference to Joseph, establishing his pedigree, but it's more likely that the critics spoke of Jesus, whose parents they presumably knew to be Joseph and Mary. The belief that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary – with no help from Joseph – was dogma by the time the Fourth Gospel was written, and readers would notice that the opponents' identification of Jesus as Joseph's son was irrelevant. They just didn't know.

Jesus' response did not address their misunderstanding of his heritage, for he continued to speak confidently as having been sent by the Father, with the ability to "raise up" all who were "drawn by the Father" (vv. 43-44).

Jesus did not elaborate on what he meant by being "drawn by the father." While Calvinist-leaning interpreters may assume that God "draws" only those "predestined" to be saved, it's more likely that the reference is to those

who hear and respond to the Father's spiritual appeal, which is to all.

This is made clear in the next verse, which begins with a very loose quotation of Isa. 54:13 – "All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the prosperity of your children." The gospel quotation comes out as "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God'" (v. 45a).

In this context, "they" refers to those who have been drawn into relationship through hearing and responding to God's teaching. Lest anyone take this wrongly and assume Jesus was suggesting that believers could circle up around Yahweh's throne for private lessons, he added that no person had seen the Father except "the one who is from God; he has seen the Father" (v. 46). Only Jesus had seen the Father, but any who sought God's way and listened for God's guidance could be taught through God's spiritual promptings.

Believers (vv. 47-51)

This thought brought Jesus back to his earlier comments about eternal life and spiritual sustenance, ideas that the author has him repeating multiple times in the chapter. Verses 47-48 add special emphasis to the claim, beginning with "Very truly, I tell you" (NRSV), rendered memorably in the KJV as "Verily, verily I say unto you." These are attempts to render a Hebrew expression spelled with Greek characters: "Amēn, amēn ..." In Hebrew, "amen" is derived from a verb that means to be firm or sure.

And what did Jesus affirm with such certainty? "Whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life" (v. 47).

As a general metaphor, such a statement would raise few eyebrows, but Jesus' further explanation may have

offended more people than those who already felt some hostility toward him.

"Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness," Jesus said, "and they died" – a reference to the stories of Israel wandering across the Sinai peninsula after being delivered from Egypt, and how God had provided a nightly rain of bread-like manna when they ran out of food (v. 48).

Despite the divinely-provided food, the ancestors ultimately died, as all people do (v. 49). But in a shocking statement about his own mission, Jesus said "This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die" (v. 50).

In case anyone missed the self-reference, Jesus added "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (v. 51).

Modern readers do not feel the shock value of these words, because we have the benefit of the entire New Testament and 2,000 years of church history between us and them. When we read these graphic claims, we are aware that Jesus was talking about eternal life beyond the grave, not a magic preventative for physical death. And, we have converted the idea of "eating" the flesh of Jesus to an enacted metaphor when we take the bread during the "Lord's supper."

The people in the crowd who first heard Jesus say these things had no such background. For defenders of the faith who were already hostile to Jesus, they sounded like heresy, or worse.

In next week's lesson, we'll read about their visceral reaction. In the meantime, it's appropriate to consider our own response. Have we trusted in Jesus as the bread of life, sent from God? Has it made a difference in the way we live? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*


Aug. 19, 2018

John 6:51-58

Offensive Language

Try to imagine a Stone Age hunter-gatherer who has taken his flint spear into the hills in search of a mountain goat but comes to realize that he is being hunted by a sabre-tooth tiger. Watch as he hides, trembling, behind a large boulder. Suddenly inspired, he tosses his loincloth to the side, attracting the tiger to his scent. When the big cat pauses to sniff at the worn leather, the naked hunter emerges to drive his spear deep into its chest, shouting in gleeful triumph.

Later, around the campfire, he shares teeth or claws with the elders and meat with the rest but reserves the heart for himself. Chewing the tough flesh, he thinks to himself that the strength of the sabre-tooth now dwells in him.

Imagine again, if you're not too squeamish, a head-hunter from Borneo, as recently as two centuries ago. After a battle, he slurps the blood of a rival warrior and pictures the power of the vanquished now coursing through his veins. 

Not a comfortable thought, right? Right.

So, try to imagine how some of the people surrounding Jesus would have reacted when he said plainly "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh

John 6:53 –

So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (v. 53).

That might have been too much for us, too.

A long lead-in ...

Today's text is just eight very repetitive verses long, and the first of these (v. 51) was also the last verse in our previous study: the lectionary overlaps them so we can't miss the connection. The subject at hand, however, had been a long time coming.

John 6 begins with the Fourth Gospel's version of the "Feeding of the 5,000" (vv. 1-14). When some rabid followers were so impressed that they sought to railroad him into sparking a rebellion by declaring himself king, he slipped away from the crowds, meeting the disciples on the water as they rowed toward Capernaum (vv. 15-21).

The next day, a mixed crowd of fans, opponents, and a large share of curiosity seekers gathered around Jesus again. Some appeared disappointed that he was more interested in teaching than in feeding them again: Jesus called their bluff, accusing them of looking for him "because you ate your fill of the loaves" (v. 26).

Jesus then began a discourse, speaking of himself as the "bread of life" that far surpassed the manna their ancestors ate in the wilderness. Their ancestors died, Jesus said, but they had the opportunity to "work for the food

that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (v. 27).

So far, so good. Nothing too mind-boggling. But then Jesus began to get graphic. "I am the bread that came down from heaven," he said (v. 41), "so that one may eat of it and not die" (v. 50).

Some may have begun to get uncomfortable, wondering where he was leading, and then Jesus spelled it out: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (v. 51).

Gulp! What?

Jesus' troublesome talk (vv. 52-58)

The crowd surrounding Jesus would have been overwhelmingly Jewish, and some were more willing to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt than others. They "disputed among themselves" over the almost unthinkable question: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (v. 52). Don't you think we'd be asking the same question?

You might think Jesus would back away a bit, or explain carefully that he was being metaphorical, but he plowed ahead, speaking in even more graphic terms: "Very truly, I tell you," Jesus said, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink."

Can you imagine? But that was not all: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in

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them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever” (vv. 53-58).

What?

Jesus’ talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood was not only shocking and offensive: it represented a blatant violation of Jewish law. Jews were not allowed to consume the blood of animals, much less people. Had Jesus never heard of Leviticus? 📖

According to Lev. 17:10-14, blood was the source of life, and belonged to God alone. The only thing humans were allowed to do with blood – other than bury it – was to sprinkle it on the altar during sacrificial offerings for the purposes of atonement. Anyone who violated the prohibition would be “cut off” from Israel. Neither vampires nor rare steak eaters were allowed! 📖

Opponents in the crowd had to wonder. Did Jesus not realize that his teaching was not only offensive, but also heretical? Did he expect his followers to become cannibals, feeding from the flesh and blood of their master? How long could that last, anyway?

No one who heard Jesus teach that day went home comfortable, and they were probably no longer hungry, either. If we try to read the story on its own terms, not colored by nearly two millennia of church tradition, it can still leave us a bit queasy. Is this kind of thing what we come to church for?

We may even be a little put out with Jesus. Why did he have to be so controversial? Why couldn’t he pick a nicer metaphor? And it *was* a metaphor, wasn’t it?

We sure hope it was a metaphor.

But Jesus really got our attention, didn’t he? And that was certainly

part of his strategy. When Jesus made outrageous statements like this, you can almost hear him saying “Made you *think!*”

Jesus wanted the crowds around him to *think*, not just look for miracles. Consider again how Jesus has moved through this chapter. He began by feeding thousands of people through the miraculous multiplication of a few fish and flat barley cakes. When the hangers-on came to him the next day with food on their minds, Jesus declared that *he* was the bread of life, “the true bread that comes down from God in heaven.”

That statement wasn’t so shocking. We can handle talking about Jesus as the bread of life, so long as it remains in the abstract.

But then Jesus added blood to the metaphor, possibly because he *did* know Leviticus, where blood was used only in the course of sacrifices for atonement, and he would soon be shedding his blood in the process of atoning for the sin of others.

Jesus’ scandalous words simply took the metaphor to its natural conclusion. If Jesus is the bread and blood of life, then one who wants life must seek Jesus. Food has no effect until we eat it and it becomes a part of us. Thus, coming to Jesus does no good unless we find a way to bring Jesus into our lives, and the natural metaphor Jesus used was *eating and drinking*. Still sounds edgy, doesn’t it?

I think Jesus stuck with this troublesome metaphor because he wanted his hearers to understand that God did not just come to us through some intangible essence, but through the physical reality of Jesus himself. God is not just an eternal principle, but an active participant in our lives. And it is only through participating in Christ’s life that we can find the abundant and eternal life that he came

to give us. We participate through trusting Jesus and accepting his grace.

Our remarkable opportunity

Digging into this troubling text helps us to appreciate why Jesus chose to have his followers remember him through the observance we now call “the Lord’s Supper,” or “Holy Communion.” What did Jesus say as he distributed bread and wine to his friends? “This is my body that is given for you ... this is my blood that is shed for you ... do this in remembrance of me.” Then we *eat* it and *drink* it.

With the institution of the Lord’s Supper, Jesus provides the interpretive key to understanding his earlier discussion that seemed to border on cannibalism. Jesus never intended for his disciples to take a bite out of his arm, but he was totally serious about their need to receive his living reality into their lives.

The material substance of bread and wine remind us of the present reality of Jesus Christ. It is not necessary for us to get involved in endless theological debates about transubstantiation or consubstantiation, trying to imagine if the bread and wine truly become the body and blood of Christ, and if so, when. 📖 The issue is not about eating, but about believing, about trusting.

These tangible symbols, broken and crushed, bring to us in a present way the incarnate reality of Jesus Christ, who truly came to live among us, who taught us the way of life, who died for our sins and rose again to God’s glory.

They bring us into the presence of Jesus, who said “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink” (v. 55).

Isn’t that where we want to be? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 26, 2018

John 6:56-69

When It's Hard to Believe

All of us know what it's like to be in school and tackle a new subject. Did you find some harder than others? Most of us do. When I was in high school, I took every math course offered. I loved Algebra and Geometry. I could do Trigonometry with my eyes closed, and I thought Physics was fine. I carried a slide rule in the long leg pocket of my overalls, and I could use it. I won the senior math prize at my small high school, but I had never heard of a "function" until I got to college and was enrolled in "Pre-Calculus." I got through it with a lot of head scratching and some help from a friend, but when I took full-blown Calculus the next quarter, the landscape changed.

I went to class faithfully and studied hard and followed the professor through derivatives without too much trouble. But then, he introduced "imaginary numbers." I have quite an imagination, but I could not get my head around imaginary numbers. I got lost that day, and never caught up. I wondered if the part of my brain that could comprehend imaginary numbers must have been damaged when I was playing high school football, back when we were not prohibited from,

John 6:69 –

We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.

but *taught* to go in head first. I have a twice-broken nose to prove it. In any case, I wound up with a 79 average and made the first and only "C" of my academic career.

I had gone to college with the intent of becoming a pharmacist. But in an advanced chemistry course on quantitative and qualitative analysis, the professor started writing calculus equations on the board, and I concluded that pharmacy wasn't my calling after all. Calculus was a hard teaching for me, and I couldn't bring myself to pursue it.

A hard teaching (vv. 56-66)

Our text for today has to do with another hard teaching, and a lot of people who refused to follow where it led. It is the same hard teaching from John 6 that our lessons have been concerned with for the past two weeks. Jesus was speaking in the synagogue at Capernaum, according to v. 59. He was addressing a crowd that included his closest disciples, along with a mixed bag of followers, hecklers, and curiosity seekers. Jesus had fed many of them with a miraculous meal of bread and fish. Later, he segued from bread in the belly to the bread of life, utilizing an increasingly edge vocabulary that culminated in a most shocking claim:

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in

them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever" (vv. 56-58).

That's when many in the crowd said "*This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?*" (v. 61a). The word they used for "difficult" is *sklēros*, the root of our word "sclerosis," which refers to a diseased organ or tissue that becomes hardened in some way. The same word could be used for hard wood, for hard knocks, for a hard person, or for something hard to understand. "Who can accept it" translates a phrase that literally means "who is able to hear it?"

The idea of eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood sounded scandalous, for obvious reasons. How could anyone accept such a hard teaching? When Jesus heard them murmuring, he asked "Does this offend you?" (v. 61b), literally, "Does this scandalize you?" The Greek word *skandalizomai* (look familiar?) meant "to cause to fall," or "to give offense." Jesus was asking, "Does this teaching trip you up?"

You would expect Jesus to offer some comforting explanation that would reassure them that everything would be fine if they would just hang with him, but he did not: he pushed even harder. "If *that* trips you up," he said, "*what would happen if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?*" (v. 62). In other words, what if you saw me take off and fly back to heaven, just shoot right up to the place I came from? Can

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you imagine *that* number?

As they stared in slack-jawed amazement, Jesus switched angles and came at the issue from a different perspective. Many of those who heard Jesus were struggling because they could not comprehend anything beyond the physical. Finally, Jesus explained that he was talking about spiritual things, not physical. “*It is the spirit that gives life;*” Jesus said, “*the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe*” (vv. 63-64a).

Even when he explained it, it was still a hard teaching, and not everyone could accept it or believe it.

John tells us Jesus knew that not everyone would believe him. Not everyone could accept his teaching. The number of people willing to crawl that far out on the limb was pretty slim.

When Jesus added “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father” (v. 65), he was not teaching that one has to be especially gifted by God in order to understand. What he meant was that only those who opened their hearts to the drawing power of God’s Spirit could begin to understand what he meant.

Perhaps those who said “this is a hard teaching, who is able to understand it?” were trying to comprehend Jesus with their brains, rather than opening their hearts to God’s Spirit.

That is not to say we shouldn’t use our brains when thinking about God. One of the greatest problems with the church is that too many Christians never think about their faith at all. There are some things that the human mind simply cannot comprehend, but where our intellectual faculties let us down, our spiritual faculties take over.

The truth is, we can’t study hard enough to “get” God – but when our

hearts are receptive, *God gets us.* Some things are not communicated by words, but by the Spirit. Regrettably, the sad truth is that many who heard Jesus that day could not get their minds around what he was saying and were unwilling to open their hearts to embrace it. One of the most doleful texts in the Bible is this: “*Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him*” (v. 66).

A fateful question (vv. 67-69)

As he watched the erstwhile followers turning slowly about and drifting away, Jesus looked to the twelve who followed him everywhere, and pointedly asked them “*Do you also wish to go away?*” (v. 67). In other words, “Are you ready to pack it in, too? Are my teachings too hard for you, my demands too great?”

Simon Peter gave the answer that continues to inspire followers today: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (vv. 68-69).

Do you see what is different about Peter and those people who had turned their dusty sandals away from Jesus? Peter had managed to put hearing and mind and heart together. He acknowledged that *Jesus had the words of life.* The caretakers of their Hebrew traditions had the words of the law, but only Jesus had the words of life.

The words of Jesus inspired Peter and taught him to think in new ways. But there was more to Peter’s confession than an acceptance of Jesus’ words. Speaking for the others, he went on to say “*we have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.*”

Because of what they had heard, had seen, had experienced, Peter

could say “we have come to believe.” Because they were open to the inner working of the Spirit of God, he could say “we have come to know” that you are the Holy One of God.

“Believing” and “knowing” are tricky words for Christians, because they can mean different things.

“Believing” Jesus does not just mean we accept the reality of his existence and his claims: it means that we trust him enough to give him our lives.

“Knowing” that Jesus is in fact the Holy One of God, the Messiah sent for our salvation, is not something that we know in the same way we know that $2+2=4$. It is something we know in the same way we *know* what falling in love is like: we know it because it happened to us.

To say “I know that Jesus is the Savior” sounds like a piece of rational knowledge that one can prove, but we can’t. We can more appropriately say “I know Jesus as Savior” because we have accepted him to be *our* Savior, and we know what happened in our spirits.

If we truly believe the words of life, it is not because we give intellectual consent that they are true, but because we choose to bet the rest of our lives that they are true. If we can claim to know Jesus, it is not because we memorized a lot of Bible verses, but because he has touched our open hearts and forgiven us and blessed us with his abiding presence.

Like those ancient hearers around Jesus in Capernaum, we may also face times when we are tempted to turn back and no longer follow. There is a sense in which we must decide this every day: Will we join the many who found Jesus too hard to swallow and turn away, or will we stand with Peter and say “To whom will we go? *You have the words of life!*” **NFJ**

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RECOGNITION & REMEMBRANCE

Ka'thy Gore Chappell is the first executive director of Baptist Women in Ministry of North Carolina, effective July 1, coming from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina where she served as coordinator of leadership development.

Priscilla Eppinger was inducted into the Martin Luther King Jr. College of Ministers and Laity at Morehouse College in Atlanta. She is executive director of the American Baptist Historical Society.

Bob Fox is coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Kentucky, coming from the pastorate of Faith Baptist Church in Georgetown, Ky.

Rob Fox is president of CBF Church Benefits, succeeding Gary Skeen upon his retirement. Fox has served as vice president for advancement at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond and, earlier, as field coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia.

Leigh Halverson is minister of family life and education at Vineville Baptist Church in Macon, Ga. Earlier she served as children's minister at First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala.

Scarlette Jasper received the Addie Davis Award for Outstanding Leadership in Pastoral Ministry from Baptist Women in Ministry. She is a student at Baptist Seminary of Kentucky and director of Olive Branch Ministries.

Kelly Moreland Jones received the Ircel Harrison Theological Scholarship from the Tennessee Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. She is a member of Nashville's First Baptist Church and a student at Central Seminary's site in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

LeDayne McLeese Polaski has announced plans to leave her leadership role with Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America next year. She began her service in 1998 and became executive director in 2015.

Kristen Pope received the Addie Davis Award for Excellence in Preaching from Baptist Women in Ministry. She is a student at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology and minister of faith development at First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga.

James R. Smith has retired as president of CBF Foundation, a position he held for nearly eight years.

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—Danny M. West, professor of preaching and pastoral studies, Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity

Generation to generation generosity

BY JOHN F. BRIDGES

Director of Development

From Genesis to Revelation the biblical message is one of God’s people being called to live in the present — but also to positively impact the next generation.

From Deuteronomy’s Mosaic proclamation to God’s people on how to live the ancient covenant in a land that Moses would not enter to Jesus blessing his followers with the Great Commission, we are reminded of our responsibility to provide the message and means for a generation that will enter a spiritual landscape we will not see.

Like Moses, many if not most of us will not enter the Promised Land of the movement in which *Nurturing Faith* will continue to live out. Therefore, a crucial task in our hands is not only to provide the resources for ministry today, but also to thoughtfully, intentionally and generously provide resources for a future time in a “land we may not see.”

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—Tommy James, pastor, First Baptist Church, Burnsville, N.C.



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—Mary Jayne Allen, Christian educator, Chattanooga, Tenn.

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Gun violence deserves better response from faith communities

BY J. MATTHEW BLACKWELL, M.D.

Having never considered myself a political person, I generally favor innocuous topics such as music, college football or baseball trivia. Typically, my introverted nature causes me to avoid controversy at the risk of offending someone or casting myself in an unwanted spotlight.

However, I feel compelled to speak out although my message poses the risk of alienating those of differing opinion and perhaps damaging some longstanding relationships. I certainly hope that will not be the case, and pray for understanding by those who disagree with my position.

Nevertheless, I cannot keep silent any longer on this particular issue. Too much is at stake.

I am a physician who serves as the director for an internal medicine residency training program at a large academic medical center. My role provides me the incredible opportunity to interact daily with young physicians as our facility trains the next generation of healthcare professionals.

Outside this work, I recently started a book discussion group at church for a small group of resident physicians. On Wednesday evenings we have discussed the book, *When Breath Becomes Air*, by Dr. Paul Kalanithi.

These sessions have afforded rich discussions on how our individual faith intersects with our work as physicians, which have deepened my connection with my residents and reaffirmed my motivation to work in healthcare.

One medical resident (I'll call him



“James” for the sake of anonymity) has been a faithful participant in these sessions. During our first meeting James shared how he was inspired to pursue a career in medicine by his uncle, a physician in the Midwest.

Then, recently, James’ uncle was shot and killed in a senseless tragedy in a hospital parking lot as he was walking to his car. Later, the gunman turned the weapon on himself. The motive of the murder-suicide is not known, and I am not sure it really matters at this point.

Like everyone, I have been deeply affected by the wave of gun violence in our nation. The recent mass shootings have left me heartbroken and searching for answers and meaning amid such apparent evil. This wave of national tragedy has been coupled with a record number of homicides this past year within my own beloved city, Charlotte.

Like some, I have been bewildered at and deeply concerned with the lack of social and political response to these unspeakable tragedies and toward any reasonable gun control legislation.

I am frustrated and outraged that commonsense legislation seemingly is

blocked by one special-interest organization and a highly vocal minority that apparently wields incredible power over our nation’s political machine and clouds the judgment of our society’s leaders.

Yet, the status quo is clearly not working. By enacting some reasonable societal and legislative changes, what do we have to lose?

As I listened to James sob uncontrollably in my office the afternoon of his uncle’s murder, I promised myself I would no longer remain silent and that now is a time for action.

Speaking as a physician, our nation’s level of gun violence is a public health crisis. Statistics are clear: More guns equal more deaths from guns, and the U.S. leads the world in this horrible, gut-wrenching statistic.

Numerous highly respected medical organizations, including the American College of Physicians and the American Academy of Pediatrics, have issued consensus statements calling for commonsense gun control legislation including mandatory background checks; registration of all firearms; and bans on all assault weapons, high capacity magazines and armor-piercing bullets.

Let me be clear: I do not think there is anything unspiritual about owning a gun or knowing how to properly use one, but I do not see how anyone could be opposed to these regulations regardless of political affiliation. I have heard the counter-arguments, but truth-be-told they make little sense to me. I support the concept of personal freedom, but these rights must be protected with a level of discernment and common sense.

As a physician, I am troubled by the fact that some people will defend the right of anyone to own a gun but will not support the right of everyone (including gun violence victims) to have appropriate access to healthcare. Instead, rational gun control

legislation must be aligned with improved access to affordable healthcare, including mental health care, along with increased awareness, understanding, and support for those living with mental illness.

When we experience an unexpected death in the hospital we examine closely all the factors that may have contributed to the fatal outcome, with the goal of improving the systems of care delivery and reducing the risk of a similar outcome affecting an individual patient in the future.

Although healthcare remains far from perfect, there is a consistent effort to improve continually — with the goal of making care safer for everyone. Indeed, this same process of improvement with the goal of advancing safety exists in nearly every industry from nuclear power to NASCAR.

Sadly, however, in the face of an overwhelming increase in gun violence

in our nation, there has been zero legislative response and/or societal willingness to change. Unsurprisingly, the destructive trend in deaths from gun violence continues as a result.

This adamant opposition to reflect, learn and enact well-reasoned change in response to tragedy is frightening, irresponsible and appallingly shameful.

As a Christian, I feel a moral imperative to speak out against gun violence and submit a call for action within our faith community. As I read and interpret scripture, I feel strongly that the lack of action toward gun violence is not consistent with the nature of Jesus Christ.

Ecclesiastes 9:18 tells us, “Wisdom is better than weapons of war.” There is no question that now is a time for thoughts and prayers. Prayer is powerful and nothing will be accomplished without it. Now is also the

time, however, for action.

Our nation is grieving, and thoughts and prayers without action come across as empty, insincere and meaningless. We risk being the priest and Levite walking past when the world needs a Samaritan.

Moreover, the lack of outcry and unified action from within our faith community damages our testimony to a confused and grieving world that is so desperate for the love, grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

As a Christian physician, I am convinced that now is a time for wisdom. Now is a time for healing. Now is a time for prayer. Now is a time to be a Samaritan.

Now is a time for action. And for me, that action begins here. **NFJ**

—J. Matthew Blackwell, M.D., is a member of Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C.

“Rational gun control legislation must be aligned with improved access to affordable healthcare, including mental health care, along with increased awareness, understanding, and support for those living with mental illness.”

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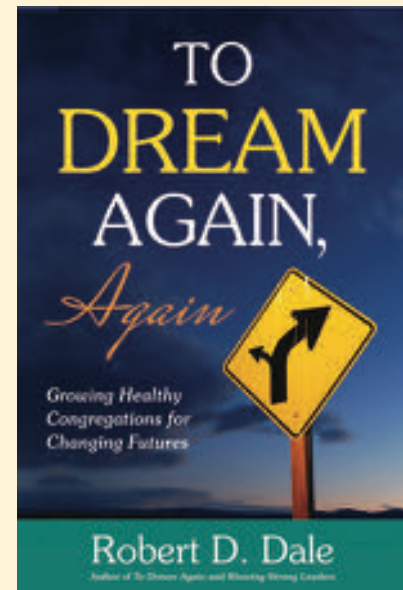
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Finding connections

Is the God of the Bible the God of the universe?

BY E. B. SELF

I believe that the God of the Bible is the God of the universe. But what connections are there between biblical beliefs about God and scientific understanding of the universe?

Summarizing what the Bible has to say about God is extremely challenging. After reading through the Bible several times over the years, I decided that many biblical statements about God could be organized into three simple categories: defining qualities, descriptive titles and divine actions.

These categories certainly do not cover everything the Bible says about God, but they do provide a helpful guide to many important teachings. I attempted to explore these categories in my book *Ways of Thinking about God: The Bible, Philosophy and Science* (2013, Nurturing Faith).

My approach did not involve trying to decide on the special views of individual authors, nor attempting to determine the comparative importance of different parts of the Bible. I simply concentrated on trying to understand basic beliefs in specific statements.

DEFINING QUALITIES

When thinking about defining qualities of God, the Bible has verses that refer to God as one, good, holy, spirit, perfect, light and love. These qualities express some of our



most important convictions about God.

Is there a connection with scientific information about the universe? The closest connection I can find between the biblical qualities of God and scientific views of the universe is concern with power. From the biblical point of view, I am thinking primarily of references to God as holy and spirit.

Biblical writers were limited in technical knowledge but did conceive of God as mysterious power. Biblical references to God as holy carry a meaning of moral excellence, as in the case of Isaiah in the temple when he considered himself a man of unclean lips in God's presence. But biblical references concerning holiness also present God as awesome power, as shown in stories of the Ark of the Covenant.

Biblical statements about God as spirit also have meanings of power. The Hebrew and Greek words for spirit refer also to wind and breath. These familiar realities of human life are invisible but with significant powers.

When scientists wish to speak about power in the universe, they usually refer to matters such as gravity, magnetism, temperature, chemical activity and the behavior of subatomic particles. The language is different, but the concern with power in the universe is evident. The power is there. How should it be interpreted?

Those with biblical faith believe the ultimate source of all power in the universe is personal and divine. Scientists regard power in the universe as impersonal and neutral. They restrict themselves to what is empirically provable. All agree on the existence of power in the universe. That thought is the connection. The difference is over the proper interpretation of that power.

DESCRIPTIVE TITLES

Another way of thinking about the God of the Bible is to consider the various titles assigned to God by the writers. These titles include creator, judge, redeemer, shepherd, king, husband and father. Since most of these titles involve relationships between people (or people and animals), the titles have no scientific meaning beyond our planet. But the biblical title of creator for God has implications for the entire universe.

This connection between the general category of biblical titles for God and scientific information about the universe emphasizes God as creator. Biblical writers and scientists are all concerned about the beginning of the universe. The biblical writers speak of God as creator while scientists refer to the Big Bang.

According to Genesis 1, God created

the heavens and the earth. Although the earth was originally without form, God separated the waters with a dome or firmament and had the dry land appear. God made the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night. God also made the stars. God made fish, birds and animals and directly created human beings.

According to Genesis 2, in the day God created the heavens and the earth, made Adam from the earth, established a garden in Eden, created animals and then produced Eve from one of Adam's ribs.

A difficulty for the Bible is that Genesis 1 and 2 have varying creation accounts. There are six days of creation in Genesis 1 but only one day of creation in Genesis 2. Animals come before humans in Genesis 1 but after Adam in Genesis 2. Male and female are created together in Genesis 1, but Adam precedes Eve in Genesis 2. The two accounts cannot both be literally true because they are not consistent.

Another difficulty, at least for some Bible interpreters, is the scientific view that neither creation account in Genesis is literally true. Some biblical interpreters believe not only that God created the world but did so less than 10,000 years ago. They base their conclusion on such biblical details as the reigns of kings and genealogies. Modern scientists have a different view of the origin of the universe.

Today's scientists think that the universe began almost 13.8 billion years ago with a Big Bang. There was an explosion of very small and extremely dense material. Stars and planets developed over extremely long periods of time. Life began on our planet with beings of one cell and then developed into a variety of forms. Humans, the scientific account continues, appeared comparatively recently in the history of the universe.

As we deal with difficulties, we do not need to restrict ourselves to a strictly literal interpretation of the Bible. We may accept the scientific view of the Big Bang and the development of the universe.

The first two chapters of Genesis still suggest a significant possibility. Although details of the creation stories in the Bible are not considered scientifically accurate, there

is an expression of faith in a power behind our world. Might the biblical writers be correct in their basic conviction?

Religious believers may think that, if the Big Bang is true, it was the God of the universe who accomplished it. There is no conflict with science because science does not go beyond the Big Bang. Scientists do not speculate on what, if anything, came before the Big Bang because they have no way of observing what may have preceded. They simply do not know.

When we turn to the development of humans, there are more considerations. Scientists do discount the literal accuracy of the account in Genesis 2 that humans first appeared as fully-grown adults. But exactly how did life first begin? Scientific views are tentative and sketchy and not completely convincing. Religious believers may well think that divine power was involved.

In addition to needing a satisfactory explanation for the origin of life, we would like an explanation for consciousness and intelligence. Science does not have an adequate answer and is not likely to have one from a completely materialistic viewpoint. It is hard to believe that a certain combination of atoms, which are basically composed of electrical charges, could somehow develop the ability to think.

Biblical writers and scientists are interested in the beginning of everything. That concern is a strong connection. Biblical writers do believe more was involved than what scientists wish to acknowledge.

DIVINE ACTIONS

A further way of thinking about the God of the Bible is to look at the divine actions mentioned by the biblical writers. The Old Testament writers refer to God's creating, commanding, punishing, saving, making covenants and calling. The New Testament authors mention God's incarnating, raising Jesus from the dead, sending the Holy Spirit, revealing, reconciling and working for good.

We have already covered God's creating activity under the title of creator. One of the most astounding of additional biblical claims is that of God's incarnating activity. Let us consider this special activity.

The claim of incarnation may seem absurd. If God is real and is spirit, how could God be transformed into a material body? Scientists are not quick to believe in spirit in the first place. For spirit to be present in a material body is another step much too far. How could there be any connection here between biblical beliefs and scientific information?

The connection I see at this point is a willingness, at least at times, to accept what is hard to explain. Biblical writers do this, but so do scientists.

Consider a simple example that involves scientific concepts. Water vapor is invisible. Yet it can condense into a liquid, which is capable of being frozen solid as ice. Scientists may say that we accept such transformations because we can see and feel the water and the ice. But we do not see the water vapor. And what exactly is the explanation for how these transformations occur? We may accept them, but a full understanding escapes most of us, probably including scientists.

The claim of incarnation is not much more amazing for many. The claim is not fully understood but is widely accepted. Religious believers do still have a concern. How could God become incarnate while remaining God of the universe? The traditional explanation is that God the Son became incarnate while God the Father did not. The belief is that God the Father continued as God of the universe.

Scientists may think that things they do not understand are easier to accept than much of what religious believers do not fully understand but accept. It is still true that both biblical writers and those concerned about scientific information sometimes accept what is not fully understood.

It is not always easy to find connections between biblical ideas about God and scientific information concerning the universe. But there may be more connections than we sometimes think. I would like to see many people, after comprehensive studies of the Bible, explore possible connections. **NFJ**

—E.B. (Ben) Self of Hopkinsville, Ky.,
is a retired professor and pastor with
degrees from Baylor, Yale and
Vanderbilt universities.

What does it mean to believe in God?

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

“It’s good that you believe that God is one. Ha! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble with fear.”

Rather than using the more-commonly translated “Good!” or “Good for you!” the Common English Bible (CEB) renders as the middle line in James 2:19 the well-communicated English term, “Ha!”

That verse came to mind when reading results from a recent Pew Research Center survey about Americans’ belief in God.

Pew concluded that “nine-in-10 Americans believe in a higher power, but only a slim majority believe in God as described in the Bible.”

Of course, those of us with a theological bent would note quickly that God is described in a variety of ways in the Bible.

NUMBERS

Based on a sampling of more than 4,700 American adults, Pew found that one-third claim to not believe in the “God of the Bible” but in some other higher power or spiritual force in the universe.

A slight majority (56 percent) of Americans say they believe in God “as described in the Bible.” And one-in-10 holds no belief in any higher power or spiritual force.

Almost half (48 percent) of surveyed Americans say the divine determines what happens in their lives all or most of the time. And another 18 percent say this happens “just some of the time.”

But nearly eight-in-10 believe God (in some form) protects them, and just slightly fewer think they are divinely rewarded. And six-in-10 expect to be judged for their lives.

NONE/DONE

This study clarifies a common misconception that those who identify as religiously unaffiliated — often called “nones” and sometimes “dones” (because they are “done” with organized religion) — are nonbelievers.

Not so. In fact, according to the survey, 72 percent — nearly three-quarters — of religiously unaffiliated persons believe in a higher power of some kind. And, I’m guessing here, that a good number believe in God as revealed in Jesus Christ, but don’t find that belief reflected well institutionally.

GOD OF THE BIBLE

Surveyors left it up to the surveyed to interpret what is meant by “God as described in the Bible.” Pew explained:

“The survey questions that mention the Bible do not specify any particular verses or translations, leaving that up to each respondent’s understanding. But it is clear from questions elsewhere in the survey that Americans who say they believe in God ‘as described in the Bible’ generally envision an all-powerful, all-knowing, loving deity who determines most or all of what happens in their lives. By contrast, people who say they believe in a ‘higher power or spiritual force’ — but not in God as described in the Bible — are much less likely to believe in a deity who is omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent and active in human affairs.”

GOD OF AMERICA

One has to wonder how much the concept of God — and, therefore, whether one affirms belief — is shaped by the way God is represented in American Christianity and culture.

When most self-identified evangelicals ignore the moral standards they’ve long trumpeted in favor of political influence while displaying disregard for (and even fear of) marginalized minorities, then the “God of the Bible” morphs into the image of a

nationalistic god of American culture.

Such a misrepresentation of God as a self-serving, discriminating deity is unattractive and worthy of rejection. Hence one of my common refrains: “I don’t believe in the god that people who don’t believe in god don’t believe in.”

FUNNY OR NOT

Actually, belief in God is no big deal. At least James, a most practical voice within the Bible, thought so when with a chuckle he wrote: “Good for you! You believe in God. HA! So do the demons, and they tremble.”

Surveys showing the degree to which Americans claim belief in a divine presence are interesting. But those of us committed to both protecting religious liberty for all and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ have a higher purpose than setting a national goal for belief in a deity of some form.

Sadly, American Christianity is quite guilty of advancing — intentionally or unintentionally — concepts of a civil religion attuned to an Americanized god or portraying the “God of the Bible” in ways that don’t align with the fullest revelation of God in holy text: Jesus Christ.

Belief in the divine or even a profession of faith in Jesus Christ requires more than a simple affirmation on a survey — or even a muttered prayer.

So, my greater interests are in how Christians are presenting and representing the “God of the Bible” in American culture and how much of that projected image aligns with the life and teachings of Jesus — who called us to more than mere belief, but to self-denial, love of enemies, and the embrace of those who suffer.

The question on our survey is singular and simpler: Do you love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself?

According to Jesus, that is the greatest question — because it answers our faithfulness to the greatest commandment. **NFJ**

Counting what counts with Nelson Morgan

STORY AND PHOTO
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

ROSWELL, N.M. — This New Mexico town may be best known for a 1947 UFO incident that flooded the area with conspiracy theories rather than green aliens. However, my drive here through wide-open plains was to visit a remarkable man whose support and encouragement I'd long appreciated — but someone I'd never met.

Morgan Nelson lives on the outskirts of Roswell in a home he first occupied in 1928. "We've been farming the same land here since 1895," he said of the family-owned acres that now produce corn used to feed dairy cattle.

A savvy user of communication technology, Mr. Nelson has computer set-ups in both his den and his home office in an adjacent adobe building.

"I'm 98 years and five months old," he said shortly after my arrival one April morning. "I'm counting the months now."

In his hands were copies of recent articles from *Nurturing Faith Journal* — particularly those about the emerging Jesus Worldview Initiative. We discussed the remarkable absence of the life and teachings of Jesus within much of American evangelicalism.

"Jesus is what it's all about," he said, expressing surprise that so many Christians seem driven by an opposing political agenda.

At my urging, he shared some of his own reflections — including those based on the need for advancing a Jesus worldview that "rejects authoritarian concepts of God; values people above doctrines; expresses love of others and rejects fear of others; does not legislate religious morality; advocates widespread human rights and equality; heals the sick and provides for the poor; strives for economic justice; seeks peace; embraces truth and is not selfish."

People are "hungry for a viable alter-

native to religious-right fundamentalism," he affirmed. To that end, Mr. Nelson sends *Nurturing Faith Journal* gift subscriptions to friends with whom he has ongoing conversations.

He and one friend, a non-believer, have continuing conversations about the validity of the Christian faith. Mr. Nelson said he emphasizes Jesus who emphasized love — expressed so clearly and concisely in the greatest commandments calling for unbridled love of God and inclusive love of neighbor.

"Jesus didn't equivocate on those," he said. "If you read his parables, most of them are basically about love. That's what Jesus taught. He changed the world from hate and revenge to love."



An overarching question has emerged for Mr. Nelson, to which he is giving much thought and urged our exploration as well: "What if Jesus never existed? What would the world be like today?" It is a question that has stayed with me long after my departing drive through more of New Mexico's wide-open spaces.

A mechanical engineer, he has long applied his critical thinking and insights to other areas of interest — often to the benefit of his community. He has played a major role in preserving and harnessing the much-needed water of the artesian basin that irrigates the area's productive farmland.

From 1941–1946 he served in the Air Force, including stops in Egypt and Palestine. "I was at Armageddon, seven miles out of Nazareth, servicing bombers for five months." He took advantage of exploring the lands of the Bible as much as possible.

Returning to Roswell after World War II, he was elected to the state legislature. During his 12-year tenure Mr. Morgan led efforts to create the community college system across New Mexico. From 1951–1967 he served in the Air Force Reserves, retiring with the rank of colonel.

Engineering, education, irrigation and history are but some of his many interests. He describes himself as a seeker — and is, most significantly, a seeker of ultimate truth. So he does more than peruse books and journals. He engages these topics with others who share his inquisitive approach — and "writes a lot of things just for myself."

Leaving Roswell with some of those insightful writings added to the gratification of my first visit to the grand plains of New Mexico and having the privilege of getting to know this good man beyond the many years of exchanging letters.

Ever the thoughtful believer, Mr. Nelson described religion as the human effort to answer the unknown.

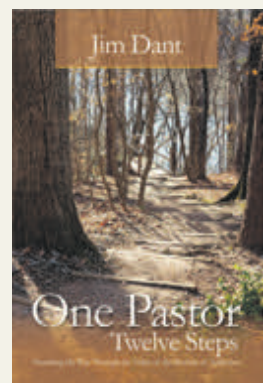
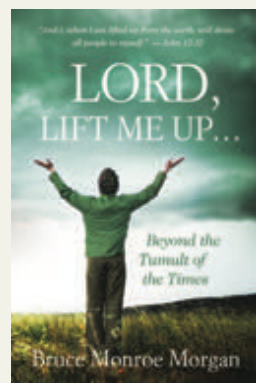
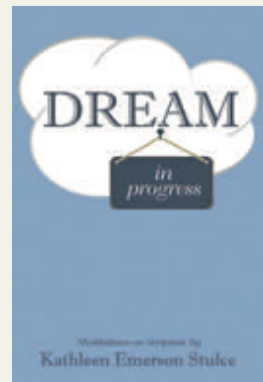
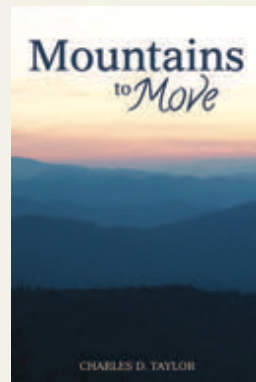
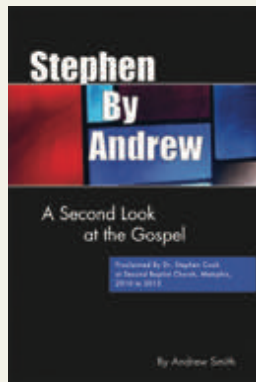
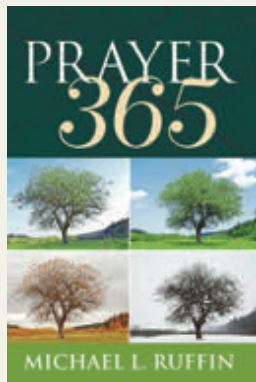
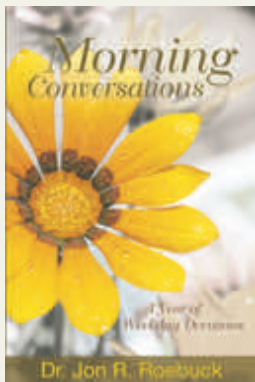
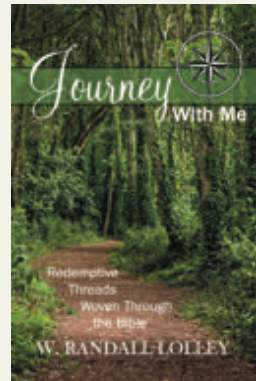
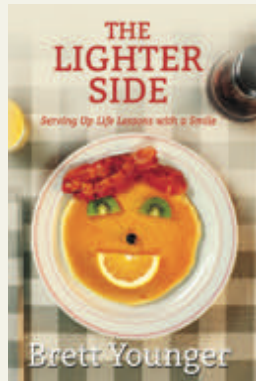
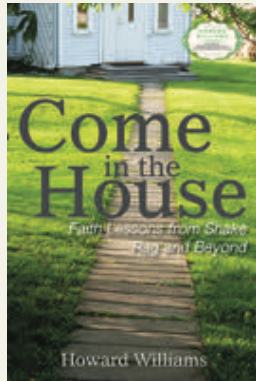
"The Bible has sufficient answers," he noted, adding that, however, too often the wonderful allegories and other vessels of truth get hammered into absolutes. "But they are not!"

He spoke of the abuses of religion that come from literalism and legalism, seeking to control people rather than relieving control. "[Control] is just a human characteristic that gets confused with Christ," he added.

Coming full circle, he affirmed that after 98-plus years he has found nothing more deserving of his attention and allegiance than God revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ — who called his followers to love God and others. **NFJ**

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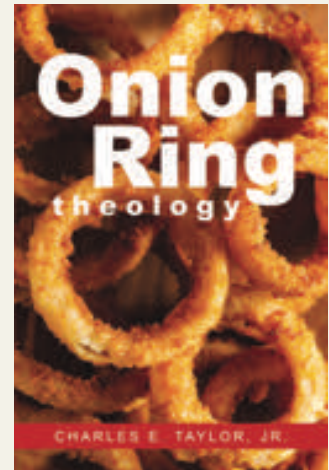
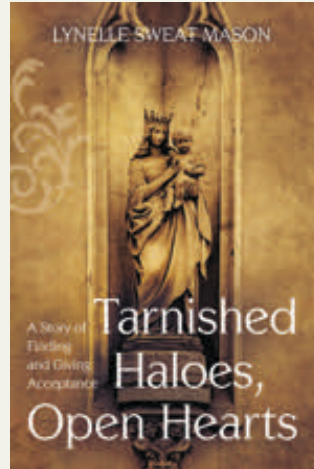
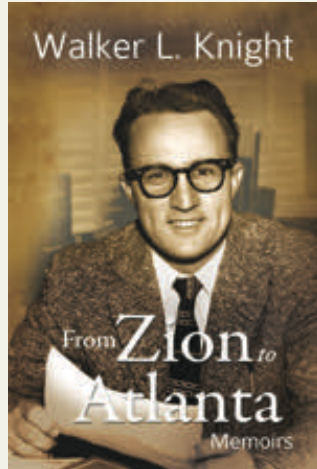
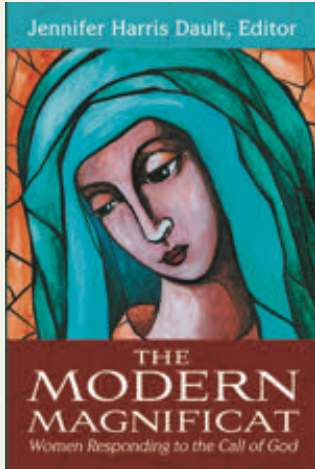


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Is this Isaiah's autograph or the seal of another?

By Tony W. Cartledge

Has a lump of clay bearing the prophet Isaiah's personal seal been discovered in Jerusalem?

Maybe; maybe not.

Archaeologist Eilat Mazar, in a *Biblical Archaeology Review* tribute article to retiring editor Hershel Shanks, recently described a clay bulla found in the "City of David" excavations, suggesting that it might reflect the personal seal of Isaiah the prophet.

Some publications have touted the discovery as "proof" of the biblical Isaiah: the *Daily Wire* shouted "Fantastic Find in Israel: Proof of the Prophet Isaiah's Existence."

Most articles simply raised the question, as did the original in *BAR*: "Is this the prophet Isaiah's signature?" Others, such as one by epigrapher Christopher Rollston, were more skeptical: "The Putative Bulla of Isaiah the Prophet: Not So Fast."

So, what's the story? Has the prophet Isaiah's personal seal been found? There's no question that the bulla in question — a lump of clay once used to seal a folded parchment document — bears the mark of a real Isaiah, but whether he was the prophet Isaiah remains an open question.

The bulla is broken, so that some letters are missing. The top line contains the letters we would transliterate as "L-y's'yb[w]." The initial L (lamed) is a preposition used on seals to mean "belonging to."

The remainder of the line would be pronounced "yishayahu," the full Hebrew spelling of the name Isaiah. Note that the final *vav* (u) is broken off, but it's the only



Photo by Ouria Tadmor (biblicalarchaeology.org)

reasonable letter that would go there.

The question comes with the next line, which bears three letters before the broken part, and those letters are *nyy*, which looks suspiciously like the first part of the full spelling of the word for "prophet," which is *nyv*, with an *alef* at the end: *navy*'.

The seal is dated to somewhere between 850–750 BCE, however, when the word was typically spelled without the *yod*, which later came to serve as a long vowel marker. Comparable texts from a century or more later spell the word *nb*'.

So, even though there is room for an *alef* to have been broken off after the *nyy*, it would be unusual for the word to be spelled that way in the eighth century, when Isaiah of Jerusalem was active. The same three letters, *nyy*, could be a patronymic, meaning "the Nobite" (someone from Nob), or "son of Nobai."

The seal was found in a pile of rubble outside of an eighth century building dubbed the "royal bakery," where another seal belonging to someone with the patronymic *nyy* was found, so there's a good

chance there was an Isaiah son of Nobai who may have sold supplies or done other business with the bakery.

A further problem is that there's no "the" (the letter *hē*) before the word *nyy*, as we would expect to find before a title. Archaeologist Eilat Mazar believes there is room in the broken part for the letter to have appeared on the top line, but others question whether there was enough space for both the missing *vav* and a *hē*. While the *hē* is almost universal before a title, the word for "son of" (*ben*) is sometimes omitted.

A question not asked is this: If Isaiah did have a seal — and he probably did — would he have had the *hutzpah* to identify himself as "Isaiah the prophet"?

Most seals bear the name of a person and the name of his or her father — as did a notable bulla from the seal of King Hezekiah, which was found just 10 feet away, on the same level. It reads "belonging to Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, King of Judah." Isaiah's personal seal would more likely read "Isaiah, son of Amoz" (Isa. 1:1).

Yet another thought is this: the bulla was found in 2009, the same year the seal of Hezekiah was found. If Mazar really thought the broken Isaiah seal belonged to the prophet, why wait nine years to publish it?

It would be lovely to think this bulla came from a seal personally used by the prophet Isaiah, but the evidence weighs against it. We don't need Isaiah's seal in order to believe he really existed, however.

Whether or not he was the one doing business near the bakery, it's fun enough just to imagine him eating a hunk of bread on the street outside. **NFJ**

If Mazar really thought the broken Isaiah seal belonged to the prophet, why wait nine years to publish it?

Former inmate becomes minister of healing

BY RICK JORDAN

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — “I know what it’s like to be an outcast,” Charlyne Boyette told her ministry ordination council at First Baptist Church of Asheville.

She identifies herself as a person in long-term recovery, a representative of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, an ambassador of reconciliation, a messenger of hope, and a minister of healing.

Charlyne uses her lived experiences for ministry to people who are caught in generational cycles of abuse, poverty, addiction and incarceration.

By day, Charlyne works for Universal Mental Health, managing programs of peer support and psycho-social rehabilitation for persons in recovery from mental health challenges. By night, she works at Katharos Sanctuary as a licensed clinical addictions specialist providing support for persons in medication-assisted treatment from opioid addiction.

Charlyne also ministers inside the Swannanoa Correctional Center for Women and is leading the development of prison ministries for Asheville’s First Baptist Church.

“I grew up in a family in which the disease of alcoholism was passed down through both parents,” she explained. “After having an abortion at age 16, I quit high school and ran away from home. I did whatever I had to do to get the food, shelter and drugs I needed — including to prostitute my body and steal from others.”

She was sent to the Florida State Penitentiary for Women at age 18, where she earned her GED. Ten years later, Charlyne was booked into jail again.

“My family had taken my 2-year-old daughter from me,” she said. “I had no reason to live, no hope that I could get out of complete despair.”

She continued to describe this painful and seemingly hopeless stage in her life.

“I had been violently raped, beaten with shovels publicly, poisoned and left for dead,



Carol Dalton (left) with Charlyne Boyette

robbed repeatedly, dirty, homeless, malnourished, used by men for their pleasure, involved in a near-fatal car accident, filled with shame, paralyzed with fear, suicidal, untrustworthy, and unable to form a complete sentence or hold a conversation.”

Then, she found Jesus.

“I cried out: ‘God if you are real, then help me now! I give up. I’ve hurt every person that I ever tried to love, and I feel that the most loving thing I can do right now is take my own life so I cannot hurt anyone anymore.’”

Soon thereafter, a man being released from prison asked a correctional officer if he could give his Bible to Charlyne. It was a Contemporary English Version titled, *Free on the Inside*.

“It was through the loneliness of incarceration that I encountered Christ,” she recalled. “I received the marvelous gift of salvation so I could do the good things God had planned for me long ago.”

Charlyne graduated from Campbell University, both undergraduate and divinity school, and was in the inaugural class of Elon Law School. She considers Justice Willis Whichard and professor Michael Cogdill to be her spiritual mentors.

“They believed the best in me, loved

me, and supported me through my degrees,” she said. “Dr. Cogdill shaped my identity as a Christ-centered, Bible-based, ministry-focused human being.”

Just before taking the bar exam, however, Charlyne received a DUI.

“The appearance of success, lack of attention to my faith, denial of addiction, unresolved trauma, and anger toward God took me back to prison,” she shared. “God used that ‘forced sabbatical’ to clarify my calling.”

Carol Dalton, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship-endorsed chaplain for the Ministry of Hope that supports chaplains at the Swannanoa Correctional Center for Women, became Charlyne’s soul-friend when she was incarcerated there.

At her recent ministry ordination council, Charlyne said to Carol: “Thank you for believing in me.” And Carol responded: “I believe in the resurrection within you.”

“Thank you for loving me when I felt so unlovable,” said Charlyne, who now considers the “unlovable” to be her flock.

Her ministry goal is “to see a life transformed, to show the broken and shamed a new way of living with a happy and productive life.” Her sermon in a sentence is, “God’s grace is greater than all our sin.”

At Charlyne’s recent ordination to the gospel ministry, Amy Stertz, minister with children and families, said: “This church needs your voice. You challenge us to face things we want to avoid.”

Pastor Mack Dennis added, “You have been acting as a minister of reconciliation, and we are sending you out to continue that ministry with our blessing.”

Charlyne sees her life and ministry in simple terms of love.

“As I am learning to trust God, I choose to give my life to love,” she said. “I want to share that love with others so they may be released from the shame, trauma and addiction that imprison them.” **NFJ**

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

Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921)

By Bruce Gourley

Divisions and distrust hovered over American politics in the summer of 1912.

From the left, progressives — represented by the Democratic and Progressive (Bull Moose) parties, the latter led by former Republican President Theodore Roosevelt — focused on using the expansive levers of government to extend rights, protections and assistance for ordinary Americans.

Political policies included business and banking regulations, labor rights, food safety laws, conservation efforts benefiting the public good, and the election of senators by popular vote through ratification of the 17th Amendment.

From the right, an increasingly conservative Republican party called for protective tariffs, pro-business policies and a smaller government footprint. Reflecting the rise of nativism across party lines, the official 1912 Republican platform also railed against “the constantly growing evil of induced or undesirable immigration.”

At the same time, American women marched into the nation’s political consciousness as never before. Amid a tide of women’s suffrage victories at the state level and mounting pressure for national suffrage, the *New York Herald* on August 12 succinctly captured the gender revolution taking place: “With a suddenness and force that have left observers gasping, women have injected themselves into the national campaign this year in a manner never before dreamed of in American politics.”

Roosevelt’s Progressive Party alone embraced the suffrage movement. The Republican Party established local committees of women in states with women’s



suffrage to assist party candidates, but remained opposed to national suffrage. Democratic leaders refused to recognize local women’s groups or suffrage.

Although newly-anointed Democratic presidential nominee Thomas Woodrow Wilson publicly embraced women’s ascendance into “the field of politics” as “indispensable,” in private and reflecting conservative Christian sentiment he opposed suffrage and insisted that “a woman’s place was in the home.” Opposition to human equality had thus far characterized Woodrow Wilson’s life and career.

His paternal grandparents, Irish immigrants, initially settled in Ohio in the early 19th century. There his father, Joseph Ruggles Wilson, published an anti-slavery

newsletter. Joseph’s views, however, changed upon moving to the South.

Becoming a Presbyterian minister, he owned slaves, defended black slavery, helped establish the slavery-embracing Southern Presbyterian Church in the United States, and served as a chaplain for the Confederate Army, as pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Augusta, Ga., and later as a professor at several theological institutions in the South.

Born in 1856 in Staunton, Va., and growing up in Augusta, Ga., young Woodrow was raised in a staunchly pro-slavery environment. After the South lost the war over slavery, he witnessed the fervent and violent resistance of southern states to federal rights granted to newly-freed African Americans.

Echoing the Lost Cause mythology that emerged after the war and would become a fixture in the white South for many generations, Wilson in young adulthood ignored slavery as the cause of the war and maintained that southern leaders of the Confederacy had exhibited “purity of purpose” and “righteousness” in their “doctrine of states’ rights.”

Overcoming an early lack of formal education, Wilson briefly attended the University of Virginia School of Law and in 1883 graduated from Johns Hopkins University with a Ph.D. in political science. He remains the only president to earn a doctor of philosophy degree.

In short order Wilson married Ellen Louise Axson, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, began teaching at the university level, and wrote the first of several academic political books. The couple also commenced to raising a family.

This is the 28th 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 Jesus Worldview Initiative.

His teaching career led Wilson to Princeton University in 1890 as professor of jurisprudence and political economy. Prospering in this capacity, in 1902 he was selected as Princeton's new president.

Soon voicing political aspirations as a Democrat, Wilson on a pro-labor platform won election as governor of New Jersey in 1910. His victory came in the wake of recent Republican president Theodore Roosevelt's two progressive-centric terms in the White House.

As governor, Wilson enacted numerous reforms, including election law policies, public health care access, advances in workers' rights, and utilities and factory regulations.

In his second year as New Jersey governor, Wilson, renowned nationally and sensing his popularity among white southerners, decided to run for the presidency. Positioning himself as a progressive man of the people in the fashion of Roosevelt, yet non-committal on issues of race, Wilson emerged victorious in the three-way party race paralleling the advancing women's suffrage movement.

Arriving in the nation's capital the day before his inaugural address, president-elect Wilson encountered the complexities and contradictions of the progressive era embodied in his own life and that of the nation. Stunned at the absence of crowds to greet his arrival, he wondered, "Where are all the people?"

The crowds were to be found at a nearby suffrage parade. Thousands of spectators watched as some 8,000 women marched from the nation's Capitol to the U.S. Treasury in what is considered by some historians to be America's first peaceful civil rights demonstration.

The parade, composed primarily of white women who did not consider black women worthy of inclusion, was designed to send notice to Washington's power brokers that suffragists would press their demands upon the new administration. For the next four years suffragists would hold hundreds of demonstrations in front of the White House, to which Wilson would sometimes politely acknowledge but adamantly refuse to take action.

On the day following the initial women's march and before a crowd of his own, President Wilson in his inaugural address reaffirmed his public commitments to labor rights, banking reform and business regulation. He made no mention of women's suffrage.

Among the many celebrating in the nation's capital on inaugural day were white southerners, overjoyed in the presence of the first southern president elected since Zachary Taylor in 1848. Enthusiastic renditions of pro-slavery "Dixie" filled the air. Rebel yells could be heard.

The voices of white supremacists quickly proved more persuasive than those of women suffragists. Soon the new administration reversed post-Civil War policies of racial inclusion in the nation's capital by segregating the federal civil service, cafeteria and restroom facilities, and some federal offices.

When a contingent of prominent African Americans protested the resegregation of the capital, President Wilson dismissively responded that "segregation is not a humiliation but a benefit, and ought to be so regarded by you gentlemen."

Wilson's personal racist heritage arrived in the White House in the form of a film by cinematographer D.W. Griffith based on the pro-Ku Klux Klan novel *The Clansman*, written by Thomas Dixon, a supporter, friend and former university classmate of Wilson.

Celebrated by whites throughout the South, the film *Birth of a Nation* merited a private viewing in the White House. The movie's subtitles included a quote from Woodrow Wilson's writings regarding the eradication of slavery at the conclusion of the Civil War: "The [southern] white men were roused by mere instinct of self-preservation ... until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country."

Of the film Wilson declared, "It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so true."

Aside from racist policies mirroring public white sentiment, Wilson as president initially focused on the progressive

agenda outlined in his inaugural address. The establishment of a national income tax in 1913 represented one of his most lasting early accomplishments.

Nonetheless, events far from America soon diverted the president's attention. Looming over Wilson's presidency from 1914 onward, the war in Europe, known as the Great War and later World War I, elicited his utmost concern.

Determined to keep America from becoming entangled in the war, Wilson for two years used diplomacy in an effort to remain neutral while seeking to resolve the expanding warfare between Germany on the one hand, and Britain and France on the other. America's major religious denominations, including Southern Baptists, supported the president's calls for peace.

Against a backdrop of national racial tensions, a major railroad strike, ascendant nativism, rising public concerns about the war in Europe, and the ever-growing women's suffragist movement, Wilson in the summer of 1916 campaigned for a second presidential term. His recent second marriage to Edith Bolling Galt, following the death of his first wife, Ellen, afforded newfound personal strength during the closely-contested election season.

Labor cheered Wilson's successful resolution of the railroad strike via passage of the first federal law regulating the hours of workers in the private sector. Named the Adamson Act, the law legally established an eight-hour workday and mandated overtime pay for railroad employees.

Tacking to select political winds, Wilson in 1916 campaigned on a promise to stay out of the war in Europe, while further expanding his progressive labor, business and social policies. He managed only a narrow victory in November.

One month later President Wilson vetoed an anti-immigrant bill passed in bipartisan fashion by Congress. Two months thereafter Congress overrode the veto and enacted the 1917 Immigration Act barring illiterate immigrants over the age of 16.

Then the war came to America.

Following Germany's sinking of several ships with Americans aboard, Wilson

abruptly put aside his calls for neutrality. On April 6, 1917 Congress declared war on Germany. By August some one million American troops were on the ground in Europe.

At the same time, women activists for months demonstrated daily in the nation's capital. During the summer of 1917 public anti-war sentiment increasingly accompanied their demands for suffrage. Some were arrested and jailed. Hunger strikes ensued.

Aware of the hunger strikes, fearful of even more negative publicity tarnishing his administration during the critical days of the greatest war the world had yet witnessed, and influenced by New York's successful November 1917 vote enacting state suffrage, Wilson gave in to the demands of suffragists the following year and threw his support to a constitutional amendment granting women the right to vote nationwide.

Even as he bowed to women's demands, the president fiercely prosecuted America's war effort against Germany. Religious denominations, once calling for peace, now supported war. Espionage and Sedition Acts targeted recent immigrants and others who opposed the war. Unions that supported the war effort received favorable treatment from the government.

With overwhelming power, Britain, France, Italy and the U.S. forced Germany to surrender. Turning from war back to peace, Wilson played a leading role in the negotiations that followed, including his successful proposal for a League of Nations designed to prevent another great war. Sixty-three nations eventually joined the League, but the U.S., led by an isolationist Republican Congress, abstained. For his heroic efforts Wilson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The intense post-war negotiations, however, proved too much for Wilson's health. In October 1919 he suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed.

Meanwhile, on the home front the president in 1919 vetoed the religiously-driven National Prohibition Act, only to have his veto overturned by Congress, leading in January 1920 to the ratification of the 18th Amendment, a nationwide ban on alcohol.

In August of the same year, however, Wilson achieved a victory he had earlier resisted: the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution, granting national women's suffrage.

Exhausted but triumphant, Wilson departed the White House in 1921 with a mixed but largely positive legacy of advancing progressive domestic policies and leading the way to world peace. He maintained a national presence until his death on Feb. 3, 1924.

Upon his death some wrote of President Wilson's devout religious faith in glowing terms that may have tended to exaggeration. Nonetheless, Wilson, a lifelong Presbyterian, frequently attended



church services and often read the Bible.

On the other hand, as president of Princeton University he moved the institution in a more secular direction. He banished mandatory Bible and theology courses, eliminated confessional mandates for faculty, limited spiritual formation to chapel messages and the campus YMCA, and refocused the school on service to nation rather than church.

His Princeton reformations represented a liberal spirituality that paid little heed to formal doctrines. Nonetheless, his progressive religious convictions at times spilled over into the larger, more conservative Christian nationalist climate evidenced in much of Protestant public life.

In a 1911 address titled "The Bible and Progress" in celebration of the 300th anniversary of the King James Bible, Wilson while governor of New Jersey neatly packaged

religion and nation into a seamless entity:

"Let no man suppose that progress can be divorced from religion, or that there is any other platform for the ministers of reform than the platform written in the utterances of our Lord and Savior," he declared. "America was born as a Christian nation. America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture."

Whether a reference to the early colonies or the founding of the nation, Wilson's declaration was historically problematic. The earliest colonies were theocracies in which freedom of conscience and religion were harshly prohibited, while America's founders expressly rejected theocracy and instead established the U.S. as a secular nation grounded upon church-state separation and freedom of conscience.

As with his embrace of the false narrative of the white South's Lost Cause, Wilson — a political scholar and amateur historian, author of a five-volume history of America — idealized a mythological past that in the early 20th century buttressed a rising white Christian nationalist tide.

Four years later in 1915, and from the White House, President Wilson wrote in a letter, "My life would not be worth living if it were not for the driving power of religion, for faith, pure and simple."

He also stated, "Never for a moment have I had one doubt about my religious beliefs." On the other hand, he realized that his understanding was limited and decried human understanding "as the standard of the universe."

His words encapsulated the complexities of religion and nation in the second decade of the 20th century: Dominant white, male Protestants, frequently suppressing women and people of color, often succeeded in steering America according to their own narrow and authoritarian religious views in opposition to the nation's secular founding and devoid of the higher standards of human dignity and equality.

Unbeknownst to President Wilson, the ideological battle between privileged white Christianity and secular, increasingly diverse America would last well into the next century. **NFJ**



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Timely conversation

Melissa Rogers talks about working in and out of government to advance religious liberty

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — Religious liberty advocate Melissa Roger received the 18th annual Judson-Rice Award from Nurturing Faith Publishing. She is a nonresident senior fellow in governance studies with the Brookings Institution and a member of Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va.

Previously she served as director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest University, and with the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life. A former general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, she served as executive director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships and as a special assistant to President Obama.

In a tribute, church historian Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University's School of Divinity described Melissa as "a superb representative of the best of Baptist progressivism, spiritual integrity and freedom of conscience."

The April 26 award dinner at Wake Forest University featured an interview with Melissa by *Nurturing Faith Journal* editor John Pierce. The following conversation was adapted from that interview.

NFJ: Many evangelical leaders today define America as "a Christian nation." But they rely on revisionist history and vague historical references to the "Almighty" or "God" that aren't specifically Christian. How might we help our friends to understand the difference between advocating for this civil religion and being free and faithful witnesses for Jesus Christ?

Melissa: Of course, I'd have to say at the top it's never a good idea to merge church and state. So, how do we get that idea across to people?

One of the things that I've gone back to recently is President George Washington's letter to the Touro Synagogue. Some leaders of the Touro Synagogue wrote to President Washington, as he was preparing to go to Newport, R.I., about the importance of the Constitution to this group of Jewish Americans.

The president wrote back about the importance of everybody having equal rights to religious liberty, including Jewish Americans. He talked about how we don't want tolerance by some of others, but full freedom and liberty of conscience for all.

As a kind of closing wish to that congregation, he wrote: "May the children of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants — while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid."

Also, in this very famous letter he wrote that government "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

So that's a good thing to hand somebody. It's a nice, short letter. It packs in a lot of good material, and it's our first president — a framer — and it talks about the foundation of these rights in a way that's really helpful.

Of course, throwing in some John Leland, a Baptist, is never a bad idea. One of the quotes from Leland is: "The fondness of magistrates to foster Christianity has done it more harm than all the persecutions ever did."

That's a good place to start with people who may not have the background that we do. We can say: "Think about how the establishment of religion not only harms everyone's rights of conscience but undermines the faith that is embraced by government by making it a creature of the state."

One other piece for people to think

about is the aspect of worldwide protection of religious freedom. In the United States, when we're talking about protecting religious minorities, we're often talking about protecting people who are not Christian. But protecting religious minorities abroad may often include Christians.

When we are protecting the equal rights of religious minorities here at home, we are strengthening our hand to say to leaders of other countries where Christians are in the minority: "We are protecting religious minorities in this country. And we ask you in turn to protect the rights of religious minorities in your country."

Those are a few starting points that might be helpful.

NFJ: "Religious liberty" is gaining a pejorative meaning now and it's intentional — due to the efforts of fundamentalist Christians and politicians of their likings. The term is being redefined as the right to discriminate. How big of a problem is this, and what can we do about it?

Melissa: I think the problem of religious liberty having a negative connotation is a very serious one. And it's a complicated issue, and there are lots of reasons for that. But I think the one that you mentioned — or one that is implicit in your question — is a particular kind of context that we're confronting today.

That is, for example, the protection of people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, protecting them from discrimination, which is a very good and important thing that we are doing right now. Then we have the question raised by some about religious exemptions from those protections, and that becomes a very difficult debate sometimes.

I think we all agree that churches are going to be able to marry whomever they



PRESENTATION — Cynthia Holmes (left), an attorney from St. Louis, presents the 2018 Judson-Rice Award to religious liberty advocate Melissa Rogers on behalf of the Nurturing Faith/Baptists Today Board of Directors during an April 26 dinner event at Wake Forest University. Photo by Tony W. Cartledge.

marry, and that’s always going to be true. Religious organizations are going to be able, under the law, to decide, based on religion, who works for them, especially their ministers.

But there are other contexts where this becomes a real battle. Sometimes there’s a sense in which there is not an honoring of rights on all sides. So we’ve got to protect [not only] the right to religious liberty, but other human rights too.

We’ve got to protect people from discrimination. We’ve got to look at equality for all people — liberty and equality. How do we balance those things? That all depends somewhat on the context we’re operating in.

So I think it’s very important for us to

be defending other people’s rights and not to be running over them in the name of religious liberty; for us as Baptists and other people of faith to be defending all people from having their civil rights undermined and saying, “Your rights are important to me. I may not be exactly like you, but I want to defend your human rights.” We need to be looking for that balance.

It is also important to remind people that these stark religious liberty threats — like rank discrimination against Jewish people, Muslims and Sikhs — need to be faced by all of us. A spike in hate crimes keeps going up, including threats of violence against these people, as well as sometimes violence.

So, what are we doing about those folks in our midst who are our fellow Americans?

How are we protecting them? Let’s rally around causes like that where I think we all ought to be able to get shoulder-to-shoulder.

NFJ: Well, we’re curious about what it’s like to work in the White House. What are some of the highlights from your time there? And what surprised you about your experience?

Melissa: Of course, the place I have to start is with the president and the first lady. The highlight was getting to know them. If you haven’t had the chance to meet them, they are brilliant, kind, good and warm people.

I never would’ve thought that I would be able to have this relationship of working with the president and, to some extent, the first lady, as well as Vice President Biden

and Dr. Jill Biden who are also just wonderful, caring, good people.

The other thing is getting to work with the president on these issues of religious freedom and religion in public life. He's such a deeply thoughtful person about these issues, among many others. I enjoyed having conversations with him about these issues.

I particularly enjoyed working on speeches with President Obama and the speech-writing team. The speech-writing team would joke that they were just a poor man's Barak Obama. He was the real speechwriter, especially when he would be making a speech at a religious gathering.

I'd work with the speechwriters on drafting something, and then submitting it to him. Then it would come back a million times improved. Then we'd get to see him deliver his speeches to people and see them being so affected.

In a stretch of about a week and a half in 2016, we had an event at a Jewish gathering and then went to a mosque in Baltimore. President Obama gave a speech at the Jewish gathering and then gave a speech at the mosque in Baltimore, and then, the day after, made his speech at the National Prayer Breakfast.

I saw him take stories he had heard from people he'd met at these other two events and weave them into the masterful address he gave at the 2016 National Prayer Breakfast. Things like that I'll just never forget. I feel so grateful that I was able to be a part of that.

There are other things like working to treat and contain the spread of the Ebola virus in West Africa that broke out in 2014. It was a very scary time for all of us facing this dreaded disease, and wondering if would we be able to stop it and what would we do with the people who came down with the disease, as some Americans did.

From the start both the president and Chief of Staff Denis McDonough recognized that it was critical to have top-flight doctors involved, military, other government officials, and cooperation between our government and governments in West Africa. Also, they recognized right from the beginning that faith-based and humanitar-

ian groups were going to be key to solving this problem. So we had those groups into the White House immediately, talked about what we were going to be able to do to attack these problems together and were able to work together in this really neat way.

One of the memorable parts was when Dr. Kent Brantly got Ebola while treating patients in West Africa. He was airlifted to the U.S. to be treated, and made a full recovery. One day I got an email from his team asking if the president would like to meet with him. I knew immediately the president was going to want to meet with Kent Brantly.

He and his wife, Amber, came to the White House and met with the president in the Oval Office, shook his hand, sat down on the couch, and talked about their experiences. Pete Souza, the White House photographer, was there.

In the paper the next day were those pictures of President Obama shaking the hand of an Ebola survivor and showing that nobody needs to be afraid of relating to Ebola survivors. And, indeed, religious groups played a huge role in dealing with the stigma that could've been attached to Ebola survivors.

As well, I have to mention the visit of Pope Francis to the United States in 2015. I could go on about that for a long time. But I'll just say that the president told us before the visit that he didn't want it just to be a photo opportunity. He wanted the visit to have lasting value.

He tasked two of us — myself and someone from the National Security Council — to put together a policy agenda that would reflect some of the values the pope and the president shared. Over a period of months, and working with the Vatican, we established an agenda to boost the number of refugees that we took into the country by a really substantial number, to strengthen our ability to promote religious freedom around the world, and to build partnerships to combat climate change.

We unveiled those policies when Pope Francis came to visit. So, that was a really special memory too. I could go on a long time, but those are a few.

NFJ: You spent many years working for nonprofits, then all of a sudden you're working within government. Was that a very different experience? What did you learn from that perspective?

Melissa: It really was a big shift. I had the benefit of understanding the policy and the law, and a lot of players — the religious leaders and community, partnerships leaders. That was a big help. I knew it would be a steep mountain to climb, but I didn't know the half of it. And that's a good thing.

I remember somebody telling me, "It'll take you months to figure out how to get things done in government because it's just so different." The processes are, by design, fairly slow moving and arduous and consultative. You move deliberately and as transparently as possible. That's hard.

So, it took me a long time to figure out: How do I drive this tank from A to B and keep everybody onboard and not run over anybody on the way there? It was really tough.

And, of course, all the ethical rules that come along are there for very good reasons but they're not always second nature. So, we were briefed constantly on the ethics rules. President Obama famously did not have scandals, and they told us, "You will not be the person to break the record." So, we took that seriously.

One of the things I knew, but was surprised by the extent of it, was the extent to which religion-related issues crop up across government on a regular basis. I worked with many colleagues in the Domestic Policy Council at the White House. That was the unit where I was operating.

We were a little unusual in that we had contact with the Domestic Policy Council and the National Security Council because religion flows across boundaries. In our shop we were working with Health and Human Services, Veterans Affairs, Education, USAID, the State Department — because each of those groups has religion-related issues.

If it's Veterans Affairs, it's often about chaplains that work for the Veterans Affairs Administration — or about people at veterans' hospitals and how they can be

ministered to from a religious point of view.

With Health and Human Services, we're talking about religious objections to certain kinds of health treatments — or about religious hospitals or schools with the Department of Education. Or with USAID, concerning development assistance for a building abroad that might also be used for religious worship. How do establishment clause issues apply there?

With EPA, it might be about its partnerships with faith-based organizations to combat climate change. How should those be structured? Or with the State Department concerning ISIS: Is it committing genocide against particular religious communities, and what are the standards and how can we improve them?

We really felt like we were running across the federal government on a regular basis and dealing with this huge number of important, complex issues and trying to make sure that we did justice by them. We can't always say we solved these issues, but we addressed them in ways that were consistent with both the spirit and the letter of the First Amendment because that was always the charge.

That wasn't easy, and it wasn't something that we could do just by working with one sector of the government. We had to be marching around to many different departments.

NFJ: Now that you've been on the inside, please give us some advice. How can churches and other religious organizations engage with government effectively?

Melissa: Well, just a few basic things I would say. You guys are way up the curve. But I would definitely encourage others who may not have thought about it as much to not wait for an invitation to engage with government. You may not get one. And I think every religious community ought to be engaged in government in some way, even if it's just to know each other.

So, whether it's the mayor, city council, your state legislator, your member of Congress, or even the president and his staff at the White House, begin by making an introduction so they know who you are and

you know who they are. Offer assistance where you can be helpful, and create opportunities to work together if it's something that makes sense to you.

Trying to find that balance between being prophetic and pragmatic is very important. We always want to do the right thing. Be thinking about some doable steps toward your goal. If we're not going to get the whole loaf, is there half a loaf that might make a real difference for people? Sometimes we don't think about a pragmatic approach that is needed to couple with the prophetic approach.

Another very practical tip would be to know your audience — which is very different from those who might be in your church. When you talk to members of Congress, or anybody in government, have a real quick, tight message ready. If you get more time, great, but be ready with that two-minute or three-minute pitch.

NFJ: There is talk that Justice Anthony Kennedy might retire from the Supreme Court. If so, how could that affect issues of religious liberty?

Melissa: That's a huge matter for our country, really, and for those of us who care about religious liberty. I have my differences with all the justices, as I'm sure we all do. But Justice Kennedy has been very thoughtful on issues of church-state, including on the establishment clause side where you'll probably remember the *Lee v. Weisman* case that dealt with school-sponsored prayer at a middle school graduation.

He said that was inappropriate because he felt like it put coercive pressure on students who were just trying to go to their graduation ceremony and not participate, necessarily, in a religious exercise. So, he's been a leader on those kinds of issues.

Then, thinking about the free exercise clause, he wrote a very important opinion in a case called *Lukumi Babalu Aye*. He looked past the formalistic neutrality of an ordinance and asked, "What's really going on here?" What he found was discrimination against a small group of practitioners of the Santeria faith in Florida.

He looked at the text of the ordinance and found smoking guns that, if you didn't

have a careful eye, you might have missed. He's very sensitive.

So, just speaking to religious liberty issues, if he retires soon, we're going to want to look carefully at the next justice's record on religious liberty — because that will be a really, really important appointment.

NFJ: We've always had division and disagreement in American life, but we seem unusually polarized right now. What can we do about polarization?

Melissa: Yeah, boy, that's a great question and it's something that I know we're all struggling with right now. One of the things I'm so grateful for in my church is that we have people from different political parties worshipping, working and ministering together.

If we have ever taken that for granted, we shouldn't now. It's one of the few places in the United States where people are crossing lines of party differences. The church is a special place, and we want to protect that ability to have differences politically and come together for worship.

But I do think it's important to try, in very sensitive and careful ways, to have conversations in religious communities. We're not going to all agree on politics — but how do we tamp down some of this vitriol and bitterness in our culture? How do we bridge those gaps?

Talking to people in religious communities where we know we do have some differences but also those things that bind us together is a wonderful place to start. How do we decrease the bitterness? How do we build bridges with people? How do we stand together on the non-negotiables in our culture — that ensure people are valued and not taken for granted, or overlooked or treated differently because of their color or their skin or the way they worship or anything else?

This is an opportunity for our congregations to really stand up and be, as Martin Luther King Jr. called the church, "not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state."

NFJ: You're doing research on religion and the presidency. What are you finding?

Melissa: Well, it's a lot of fun, I must admit. One thing I'm finding is that from the beginning we had religion and the White House intersecting — for a lot of reasons. We've had presidents who have been religious themselves. They move into the White House, which is their home, and they exercise their faith there.

I love reading about how the different presidents worshipped. Thomas Jefferson actually worshipped in the House Hall, the House of Representatives, on weekends because that was one of the areas in Washington, D.C., early on, that could hold a congregation. So, that's an interesting thing to put beside our understanding of him and his church-state views, and this idea of equal access to federal buildings that we've supported and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty has supported.

I loved reading about FDR who was a vestryman in his Episcopal church in New York for all the years he served as president. Apparently, he would interrupt some White House meetings to conduct church business when called upon.

We've had religious communities reaching out to presidents and presidents reaching back from the very beginning. I've mentioned George Washington's letter to the Touro Synagogue, and we're familiar with Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists (in which he referenced "building a wall of separation between Church and State"). That was because the Danbury Baptists wrote to the president and the president wrote back.

You shift forward to FDR sending a letter to something like 120,000 clergy in the United States. He addressed it to "The Clergy of America," to ask them about Social Security issues and economic circumstances in their neighborhoods. So that's been fun to see.

Then JFK, about seven days after calling Congress to pass a comprehensive civil rights bill, called on clergy — white and black, Jewish, Protestant, Catholic — to come to the White House and talk about how they could work together to support the moral principle of racial equality. There are notes of that great conversation between

clergy and the president.

From fairly early on, you can see staff in the White House — informally at first — handling some First Amendment issues on behalf of the president. This is a relatively modern-day example, but President Eisenhower had a Jewish liaison on his staff with whom he would consult for guidance when there were civil rights matters that had something to do with religion or church-state issues.

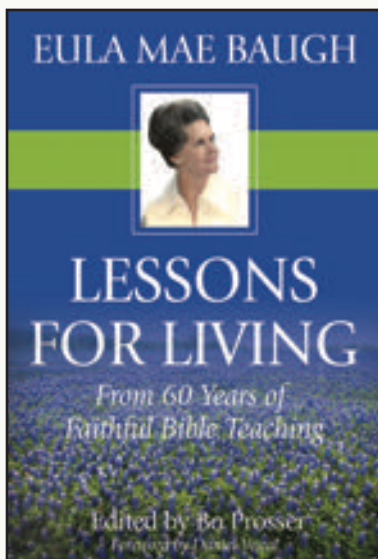
You can find a fair amount out there, some of which is well known but other stories — and ways of structuring and doing the work of the White House — that may not be as well known. So, that's been a lot of fun.

NFJ: So, is this a book?

Melissa: I'm working on a book right now about religion in public life, and that will be part of it.

NFJ: Well, thank you so much for sharing your insights. And we really do honor the work you have done and look forward to what you will be doing.

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YWH 9145

BY DAN DAY

While unsure about the last four numbers, I am positive about the first three letters: YWH. They were on the license plate on the car in front of me at a stoplight. The car was soon lost in traffic, but my mind has been whirling ever since: YWH 9145!

Those who know something of Judaica will recognize those letters as the consonants chosen long ago by the Jewish community to represent the unspeakable holy name of God. When YWH appears in their sacred texts (what Christians call the Old Testament) they never utter it.

We less-restrained Christians say the word as “YaHWay,” and in our English Bibles YWH appears as Lord. But the word is printed in capital letters, LORD, so we can’t miss it if we know what we’re seeing.

So there I was, braking my car at the corner of Glenwood Avenue and Brier Creek Parkway in Raleigh and I pull up behind God. Didn’t see that one coming! And honestly, it was disturbing. God is supposed to be in holy sanctuaries, not sitting at a busy intersection without so much as a warning light.

A few days later I was reading a *TIME* magazine article about the “High-Stakes Summit” scheduled between North Korea and the United States. On the third page I found a photo of an 86-year-old North Korean farmer, Yoon Seok-Sahn, one of the 500 or so residents of the South Korean village of Tongilchon, which is nestled next to the Demilitarized Zone.

Yoon is weary with seeing the 80 children of his village race for cover to the nuclear shelter in frequent practice drills and with having the night air filled with PA

system broadcasts of North Korean propaganda. For decades he’s been waiting, longing to walk the forbidden five miles north to the village where his uncle once lived and to discover if he has any kin there still living.

So far so good! ... A nice human-interest snippet to close out a heady article about international diplomacy. But in that photo of Yoon Seok-Sahn, he is shown holding a framed print of Sallman’s *Head of Christ*. Yes, it’s the same one hanging from a million Sunday school classroom walls — that “portrait” of Christ.

I re-read the article (April 9, 2018, p. 37), seeking an explanation for Yoon’s display. But there was not one word about his religion or anything about the picture. Yet, there it was: an image of YWH’s “son” being inexplicably held up on a barren hilltop in South Korea confronting me — and a zillion other readers.

Once again my mind was whirling, perhaps even more than when I bumped into God at the traffic light. That’s when I realized that if I had approached this same intersection from the opposite direction, I would have had to deal with a homeless fellow who works that corner most every day. I’ve seen him out there walking past drivers’ closed windows in 30-degree snow, holding his sign: “Homeless. Can you help me? God bless.”

If I take Jesus’ word about a holy presence being found in the “least of these,” it appears God was also lurking on that

side of the intersection — without a name badge.

Currently, many people complain of God’s absence from our world: “They have taken God out of the schools or removed God’s name from our monuments” some say, while others complain that college professors belittle even the notion of God.

Some wonder if God can be found even in our churches. But if my recent experiences are any indication, YWH is doing just fine and showing up in places we might never expect — looking at us through the peace hopes of an elderly farmer on a wintry Korean hilltop and through the yearning eyes of yet another panhandler at the corner.

Perhaps the problem is that God is seldom obvious, predictable, in-your-face plain. Like that YHW car, it was so nondescript. I couldn’t tell you whether it was a sedan or an SUV, a Ford or a Subaru, if it was white or silver or blue. It was just another car, and it was gone in a matter of seconds.

So God comes, not with trumpets or sirens and blinking lights but with a shuffling gait, a foreigner’s stare, and for just a moment. Lest we lose the holy in all the traffic, a serious attentiveness to life as it happens is essential. **NFJ**

—J. Daniel Day, a retired pastor and professor in Raleigh, N.C., is the author of *Seeking the Face of God: Evangelical Worship Reconceived* (2013, Nurturing Faith).

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Questions Christians ask scientists

What does science have to do with my day-to-day faith?

The war between science and religion gets a lot of press, but many people — believers and nonbelievers alike — think the two do not overlap. In this view, science and faith are like strangers who live in different neighborhoods, invest in different communities, and work different jobs.

There is nothing wrong with being strangers, these folks might say, and why try to manufacture a relationship where there is none?

One version of this perspective says that science tells us what the universe is like and faith tells us how we should live. The late biologist Stephen Jay Gould wrote:

Science covers the empirical universe: what it is made of and why does it work this way. Religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value. These two do not overlap... Science gets the age of rocks, and religion retains the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, and religion determines how to go to heaven.

There is a lot to recommend from this view: It seems reasonable, it lets science be science and faith be faith, and it appeals to everyone's peacekeeping instinct: why fight?

One can in fact live a long life of faithful devotion to Christ, be a pillar of one's church community, identify with and serve the poor and marginalized, work for peace and reconciliation, be a prophet of justice, and commit oneself to personal meditation and study, without knowing any science. From this point of view, science does seem independent of faith, like an extra, like a stranger.

But sometimes even strangers are intimately related.

I drive through downtown Decatur, Ga., nearly every morning. At one point I turn right off of East Ponce de Leon Avenue onto Commerce Drive across from a row of townhouses. Last week, just as I made the



BY PAUL WALLACE

Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to editor@nurturingfaith.net.

turn, a man and woman met and hugged on the corner. They were very happy to see one another. I recognized neither of them, but seeing their faces and spirited embrace gave me an emotional lift that lasted for hours.

They were and are strangers to me. But they're not unimportant to me. For a moment they meant everything to me. And maybe I'm important to them too. In fact, maybe they were there because of me.

One rainy day several months ago I ordered a birthday cake for my wife. The cake shop was slammed, so they called a back-up employee to fill my order. This employee lives in one of the townhouses at the corner of East Ponce and Commerce. As she made her way to the cake shop she slipped on a wet stone tile, sprained her wrist, and ended up in the ER. There she ran into a nurse who was a friend from high school. They had not seen each other for 10 years.

It was a very happy meeting. The pair decided to meet again for breakfast one day. On the appointed morning she took the subway to Decatur and walked down Ponce toward the townhouses. She waited with anticipation and found herself looking out of her window, eager for his arrival. When she finally saw him she walked outside, crossed over Commerce, and met him at the corner. They hugged just as a black Corolla, driven by a lanky man with glasses, turned right off Ponce onto Commerce. They will be married in the fall.

I really did order a cake for my wife and see a couple hug on the corner. The rest of this story is fabricated. But it is believable, isn't it? The world — there is only one, after all — is made of connections, and most of them are not obvious.

Science and faith are like this: they seem unrelated but are not.

For example, who is this Christ to whom we are devoted? He is a wanderer, a teacher and a prophet, but he is also the "firstborn of all creation, in whom all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible" (Col. 1:15). This humble carpenter, who commanded us to serve the orphan and the widow and to pray for those who persecute us, is also the Word, the logos, the very organizing principle of creation itself.

We cannot claim to follow Jesus of Nazareth and turn our backs on creation.

The Bible is not content to tell the story of Jesus and throw in some color commentary. Nor does it start with the Exodus or the call of Abraham. It starts with the creation of the universe. Nor does it end with the ascension or the founding of the church, but with the end of time. Our faith sets the largest possible stage. It is about all things, and this includes science.

God calls creation good and very good. It is worthy of our attention and study. Science therefore has a clear place in the Christian worldview, and, as a historical

point, it is probably no accident that it arose (largely) within that view.

And when we do science, what do we learn? We learn that creation is ongoing, that it never stopped, and shows no sign of stopping. We learn that we are not strangers here: we belong, we are related to all things, we are at home.

But we also see, in bright detail, the danger woven into creation, from the specifics of different contagions to human-created problems such as global warming to the threats of natural disasters such as tsunamis and asteroid impacts.

This has consequences for how we think about God. Apparently, God is the kind of God whose creativity never rests, and science illuminates that process for us. God is the kind of God who creates slowly, over billions of years, gradually, indirectly. God is the kind of God who is not finished with us yet — creation never sleeps.

God is the kind of God who, for whatever reason, has placed us in an unsafe cosmos. God is the kind of God who was

incarnated into the flow of an evolving creation. God is the kind of God who generates complexity out of simplicity, and who has given creative agency to matter itself — a creative creation!

For a scientist like me, scientific knowledge helps me grow closer to God. One of my favorite ways to meditate is to take walks at night. When I do this I receive not only the obvious beauty of the stars and planets and Milky Way, but I also visualize the nuclear reactions sustaining the stars, the iron oxide deserts and polar ice fields of Mars, the helium rain falling under Saturn's clouds, the grand rotation of our galactic pinwheel, and, on fall evenings, the Andromeda galaxy falling toward us at 70 miles per second!

All of this and more fills my mind and draws me into a posture of awe and gratitude and humility before God.

But you don't have to be a scientist to

have experiences like this; you only have to be interested. Science has taught us so much about so many things. Those hummingbirds in your backyard, those sassafras trees at the park, the moon, the rivers, the oceans — they are all treasure troves of scientific

knowledge and wonder. A few minutes researching any of them will pay off for years to come with a deepened appreciation for creation and, therefore, for the Creator.

Finally, there is great practical value in recognizing and nurturing the relationship between faith and science.

It is false and unhelpful to separate them. Science, taken out of its natural context of faith, grows cold and meaningless and brutal. Faith, separated from science, becomes otherworldly and sentimental and dangerous.

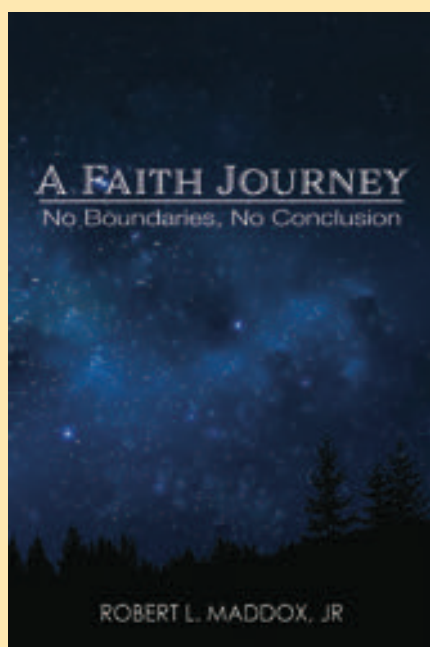
While they may appear to be strangers, in reality they are deeply related and need one another. We separate them at our peril. **NFJ**

We cannot claim to follow Jesus of Nazareth and turn our backs on creation.



New releases from

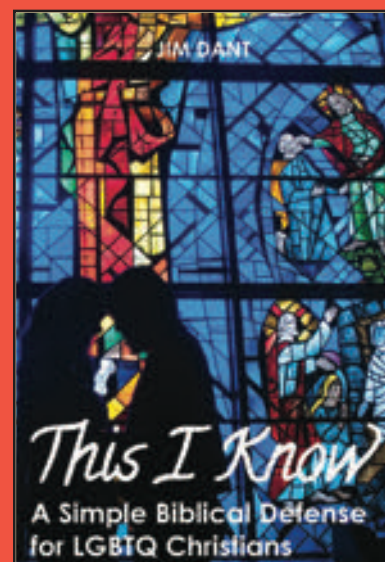
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When asked years ago “What keeps you going, exploring, reaching out?” Robert Maddox answered, “an existential confidence and a restless ambiguity. Just as the physical universe has no known boundaries, neither does my faith journey.” This approach to the Christian life surfaces in his memoir as he tackles delicate exegetical and theological issues and shares his sense of call to and varied experiences in Christian ministry, a journey that remains challenging, exciting, and endless.



Daphne Reily is the mother of a transgender teenaged son. In her memoir she tells her story of dealing with a range of emotions and faith struggles as she sought to love and nurture her child unconditionally through his transition. By sharing her experience, she hopes that other parents will acknowledge their fears and concerns as normal and find their faith to be sufficient through the journey with their child. She also offers her story as a resource for extended families and their friends and communities of faith struggling with questions related to transgenderism and / or seeking to provide support for transgender persons.



New Bestseller!

“Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.”

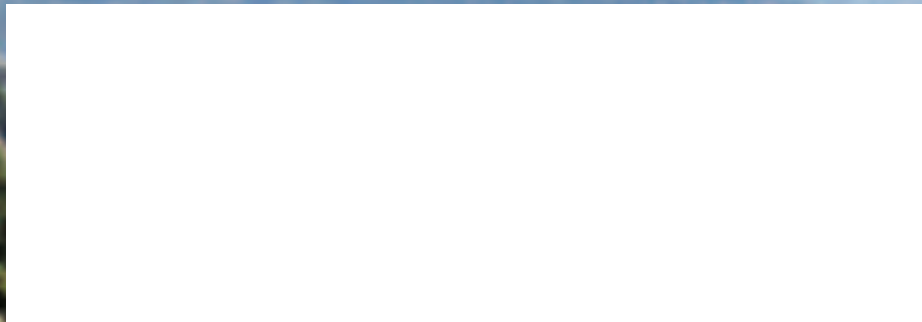
These words may ring hollow in the ears of a member of the LGBTQ community. They learned the tune as children. They memorized the words. They delighted in the idea of being cherished by God and guarded by scripture. But somewhere along the way, someone in the church turned the Bible into a weapon and Jesus into an inaccessible friend.

Many LGBTQ people have had to learn to trust this song again. They’ve had to be reintroduced to the Jesus who loves them and to the Bible that guards them. I want my LGBTQ brothers and sisters to know, Jesus loves them and the Bible says no different.

—Jim Dant, in *This I Know*

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