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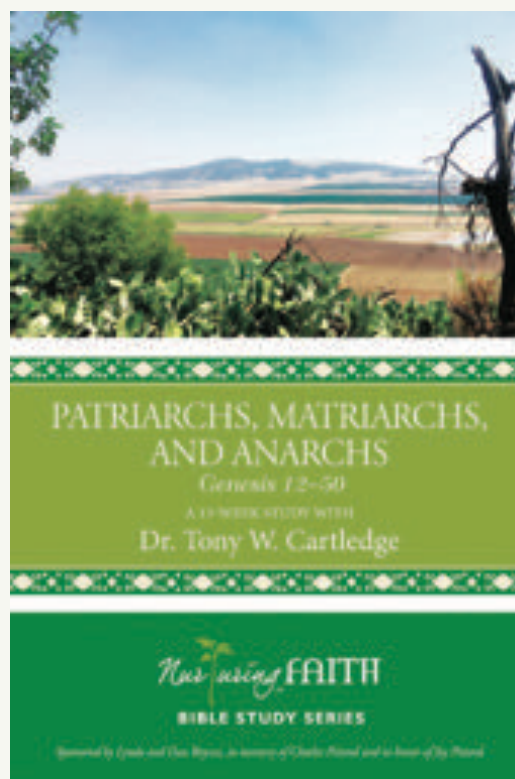
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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. A lone tree near the Bluff Mountain Trail, along the Blue Ridge Parkway, sheds its leaves. Nature reminds us that we too experience seasons that can lead to reflection and change.

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BEHIND THE SCENES

PREPARED, BUT INCONSPICUOUS — Media and technology coordinator Bootie Cothran said the goal of his tech-ops team is for those gathered in the sanctuary, as well as others joining via live streaming or radio, to experience worship rather than a production. Photo by John D. Pierce.

Technology best used to ‘enhance worship,’ says Bootie Cothran, media coordinator

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

GREENVILLE, S.C. — A well-officiated ballgame is one in which the officials go mostly unnoticed. The lack of attention is a positive sign of the efficient and effective execution of the rules of play.

The same can be said of the role of technology in worship, said Bootie Cothran, media and technology coordinator at Greenville’s First Baptist Church.

“We’re always very respectful of the place as a worship setting and try to be behind the scenes and not distract,” he said. “There’s an intentional aspect of trying to enhance worship and not get in the way.”

PREPARATION

Bootie and his well-trained volunteers work mostly in glass-enclosed, well-equipped sound and video booths elevated in the rear of the sanctuary as part of the original building design.

Their goal is for those gathered in the sanctuary, as well as others joining via live streaming or radio, to experience worship, not a production.

Should something fail on the technical side (which didn’t happen during the five Sundays I served as guest proclaimer at the church in the fall), Bootie said they have a plan: “The joke is if something goes wrong and people turn around, duck!”

Hiding behind control boards is rarely needed, however. While perfection may be unattainable, preparation is the key to smooth operations, he noted.

Therefore, Bootie is part of the weekly worship-planning meeting. He and his crew pay close attention to the placement and use of microphones.

An additional rehearsal prior to Children’s Sabbath, for example, gave the tech-ops crew the chance to be sure the young singers would be heard. “[Sound] is the starting point,” he said.

Thanks to a \$10,000 gift, needed equipment has been added or updated. However, Bootie said he avoids falling for every new technological toy.



QUALIFYING RINGS - Bootie Cochran's excellent performance at the 2018 Miami competition led to his participation in the American Ninja Warrior finals in Las Vegas. NBC photo.

"My job is to help hold back on the latest and greatest technology," he said. "I take a lot of pride in trying to be a good steward."

TEAMWORK

While the church invests well in staffing and equipping for technical operations, it also provides ministry opportunities for those gifted in the use of technology.

"On a Sunday we'll have seven or eight people doing technical operations," said Bootie.

Those roles include camera and sound operators, along with someone following the order of worship to provide play-by-play for radio listeners. While some volunteers fill responsibilities more often, there are four crews that rotate on a weekly basis.

The full service is available by live streaming (and for later viewing) and on the radio. And video of the weekly sermon is posted on Vimeo and YouTube, accessible from the church website.

"The thing I love about this role is how it became its own ministry," said Bootie. "It gets young people involved in church in a new way."

Will Dodson joined the church's tech-ops ministry as an eighth grader and volunteered all through high school. After receiving a broadcast journalism degree from the University of South Carolina, he returned to Greenville where he is an editor with the local NBC affiliate.

Bootie also got his start as a teenager, working with the late Bill Dunlap who directed the church's technology at the time.

"He taught me to be prepared," said Bootie, "and that the best thing we can do is not be seen."

That mentoring reminds Bootie to engage other young persons whose interests and gifts in technology can be developed and used in Christian service.

NINJA AT THE KNOBS

While Bootie avoids attention during worship, he enjoys the spotlight in another aspect of his life. He has competed for several years in the competition, *American Ninja Warrior*, reaching the televised finals in Las Vegas in 2018.

At age 50, he remains a fitness enthusiast and trains for another chance to compete successfully. His popularity is evident locally and beyond with bumper stickers and hashtags for "Bootie's Bandwagon."

The "ninja community" he said is welcoming and has brought some lasting friendships. He and a couple of other "ninjas" plan to open a gym in Greenville in 2019.

However, he is not ready to simply help others reach their fitness goals. He has more in store for himself.

"I'm ready to see if I can push myself a little further in season 11," he said. "There are so many young people out there doing this now. But I'm kind of hanging in there with them."

POSSUM KINGDOM

Bootie, who grew up in the congregation and "had a knack" for technology, began managing the church's data network before "video took over." His more-encompassing fulltime position shows a shared commitment to using technology in helpful ways to enhance and expand the congregation's ministry.

When not running the smooth technical operations for the church or swinging bare-chested on the rings of an obstacle course in Miami, Las Vegas or elsewhere before spotlights and TV cameras, Bootie lives a much simpler life than most.

He built a home on remote family land about 30 miles outside of Greenville, a place known as Possum Kingdom. For 15 years he's lived there alone and hunts for or grows as much of his food as possible.

Stereotypes of techno-geeks go out the window with Bootie — whose name has long been with him but is now more widely known.

"I've been Bootie around my house for as long as I can remember," he said. His name is Scott, but he believes the nickname evolved from being called "Scottie-boo" as a small child.

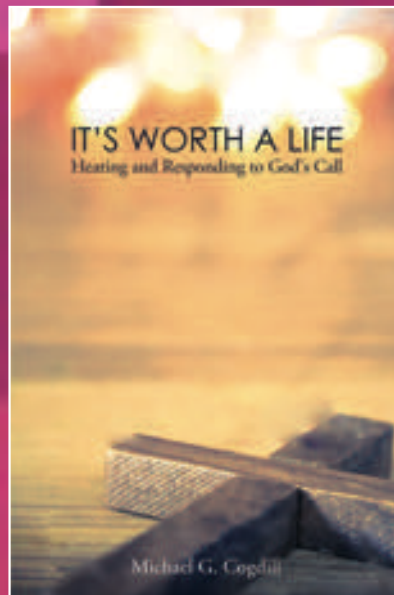
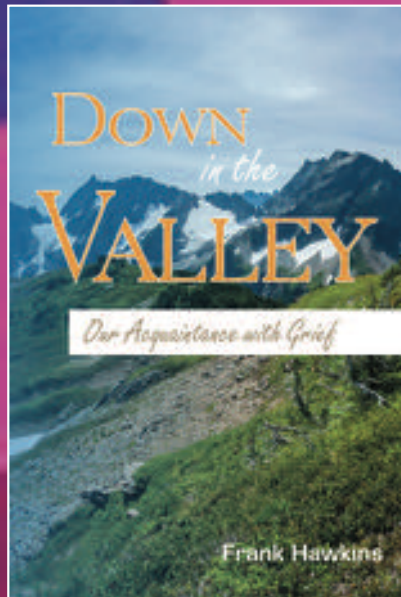
Those who worship with the Greenville congregation in person or through technological delivery of the services aren't likely to see Bootie. He stays behind the scenes— or, at least, that's the weekly goal.

And after work he's likely to be fishing or hunting all alone in Possum Kingdom.

However, viewers of the popular NBC show *American Ninja Warrior* can expect to see the bald, slim-but-fit church tech-ops director pushing himself to the limit once again. **NFJ**



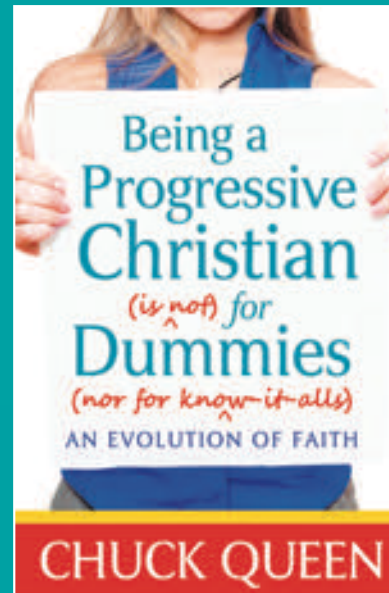
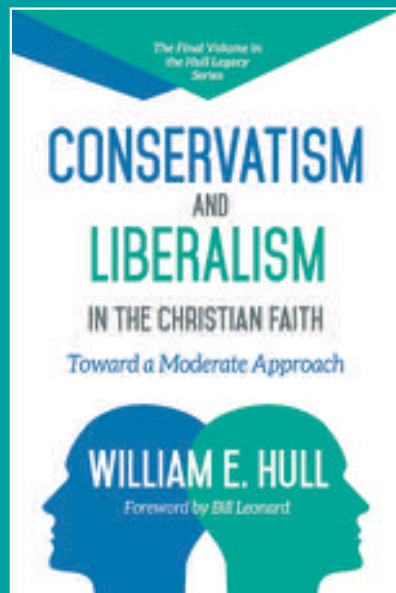
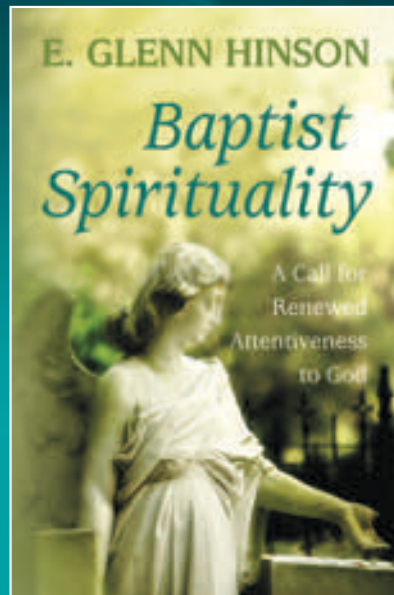
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Worth Repeating

“We write ‘In God We Trust’ upon the god we trust.”

—Author Brian McLaren, speaking to the Mercer Preaching Consultation

“Every major faith tradition calls us to care for the earth. And every major faith tradition calls us to care for our neighbors and those who are most vulnerable. And climate change impacts both of those.”

—Susan Hendershot Guy, president of Interfaith Power & Light (RNS)

“Our preaching and teaching should mirror Jesus’ original intent.”

—Pastor Greta Fowler of New Zion AME Church in Thomson, Ga., pointing to Luke 4 when speaking to the Mercer Preaching Consultation about the “brand of Jesus” one chooses

“It invites us to ask, ‘Is it possible that God’s intentions are wider and freer than I and my tradition have assumed?’”

—Julie Pennington-Russell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, D.C., on the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 (ethicsdaily.com)

“Being a part of a religious community increases the risk of an early, tragic death for LGBTQ youth. In sharp contrast, participation in a religious community decreases the risk of suicide for heterosexual people.”

—Jane Clementi, whose son Tyler took his life at age 18 (RNS)

“For white evangelicals, the idea of the United States as a Christian nation serves to solidify racial and ethnic boundaries around national identity, which then serves to bolster anti-black or anti-immigrant prejudice.”

—Sociologist Andrew Whitehead of Clemson University, on a Public Religion Research Institute study showing most white evangelicals, unlike any other religious group in America, see immigration as a threat to their customs and values (HuffPost)

“A wise mentor once told me there is no difference between doing the wrong thing and doing the right thing the wrong way. In the Kingdom of God, leaders are governed by the standards of Christ, not simple pragmatism.”

—Joel Snider, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga., now a coach with the Center for Healthy Churches

“As a Christian, I am concerned for the well-being of all those in peril. And I stand in solidarity with my brothers and sisters in Christ in the persecuted church, many of whom will be harmed by this closed door.”

—Russell Moore, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, on the U.S. significantly reducing legal immigration (Christianity Today)

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In search and need of a better gospel

By John D. Pierce

Have you heard the gospel lately?

Have you heard *about*
the gospel lately?

Listening to leading American “Christian” voices in the public square, one is more likely to hear stirred-up fear and hostilities than a clear expression and extension of divine and human grace.

Is there a greater commission for Christians now — to go to all ends to preserve cultural dominance and political power — than the one Jesus offered? Which is the overriding message on our lips (and keyboard fingers)?

Surely, within the church context, Jesus is still offered as a means of personal salvation for those who respond in the prescribed manner. But how is that message of forgiveness and love being heard in the marketplace where fear and exclusion are readily and forcibly preached?

For the gospel to be truly good news, it must convey the life-changing (not just soul-saving) love of God as expressed in the fullness of Jesus, not just his death and resurrection. The life and teachings of Jesus were more than filler between his birth and death.

Yet some Americanized versions of the Christian faith largely ignore Jesus’ fuller life and high calling. Instead the gospel gets reduced to a transactional recitation of a “profession of faith” with some degree of sincerity, while pretty much disregarding what was revealed as the Way of Christ.

However, evidence of our born-again status should be revealed by how consistently we live as Jesus said and showed us. And his wide offer of grace and clear charge to share that news include nothing about nationalism or cultural self-preservation.

The political and social rebranding of “Christianity” — to mean something other than following Jesus — is at best confusing and at worst justification for ugly attitudes and abusive behavior.

How the gospel is articulated really matters. And how the ones doing the articulation choose to live matters even more. Words are meaningless, even unhelpful, if the gospel is not also conveyed in our attitudes and actions.

The clearest witness is the one we often do not recognize but others do. It’s when the men’s accountability group at the coffee shop brings in Bibles among their bagels — and takes turns spouting off ignorant condemnation of various people unlike them.

It occurs when one’s religious/political faith is shaped more by a ranting television or radio commentator than a humble Sunday school teacher who long ago shared the ways of Christ week after week, year after year.

Basic lessons, for some odd reason, seem to be the hardest for us to learn. That is especially true of the generally accepted Christian concept that we, though imperfect, are to both speak and live in the ways of Jesus — who revealed God most fully and in whom we find our salvation.

We cannot rightly assume, however, that words so familiar to many of us — such as “gospel” and “salvation” — convey the meanings we associate with them. The public Christian witness is so polluted by verbiage and activities designed for exclusion and political gain to the point that it doesn’t offer much that a good person

would find appealing.

Our honest failure to live up to the ways of Christ is not the problem. Admitted imperfection can actually help rather than harm our efforts to share the gospel in authentic ways.

Humility rather than pompous assurance of being right on every topic gets a better hearing. And treating people in just, loving and unselfish ways allows others to see Christ rather than only hear what we have to say about him.

In such a time we need at least as much alertness and sensitivity to what is happening around us outside the congregational cocoon as when within it.

How is Jesus being conveyed in our words and deeds? Do we simply expect others to delineate between what we profess and how we perform?

Last year I was sitting in a lobby outside a meeting room where a handful of men were preparing for a large morning Bible study. One of them brought up the most recent Israeli-Palestinian clash in which several Palestinians died.

One man stated the number of casualties. Yet another quickly affirmed: “Only the right ones were killed.” He went unchallenged, even by the Bible teacher.

I didn’t stay around for the Bible study. I’d already heard “the Christian witness” being offered that day.

Too often the gospel gets twisted into nothing more than baptized nationalism or culturally accepted attitudes of discrimination. It is important how we tell the story. Otherwise, its rejection is understandable and deserved.

Day in and day out, I wonder how the Good News of Jesus is being conveyed by and heard from those of us who dare to claim his name. [NFJ](#)



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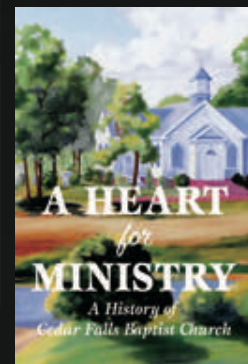
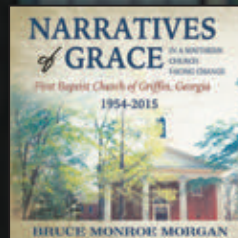
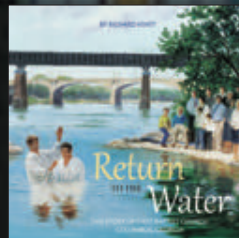
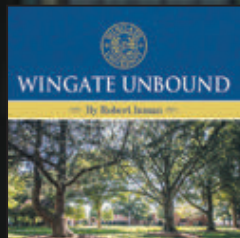
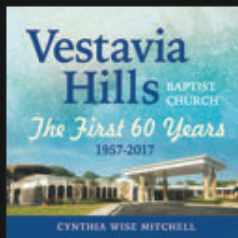


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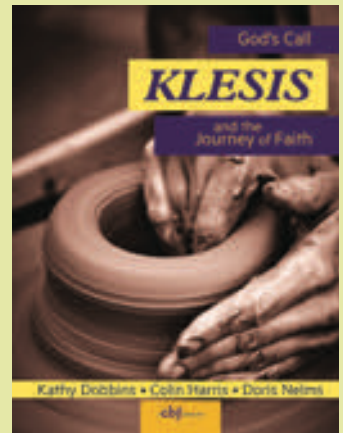
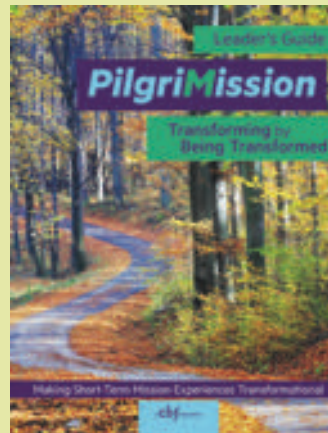
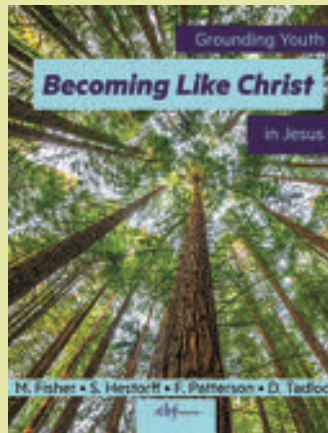
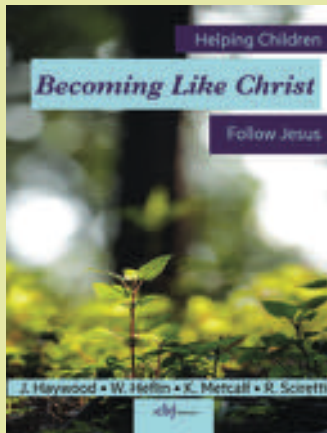
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Roy Smith remembered as compassionate leader

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — Roy J. Smith, 89, was remembered for his leadership skills, pastoral passion and (as his pastor Emily Hull McGee noted) “a laughter that made your heart sing.”

Ed Beddingfield, who played guitar and sang with Roy at his bedside just two days before his Oct. 18 death, invited family and friends gathered at an Oct. 27 memorial service at the First Baptist Church on Fifth Street here to sing along to a medley of “Precious Memories,” “I’ll Fly Away,” “Softly and Tenderly” and “Angel Band.”

Roy’s daughter Ginger Smith Graves, on behalf of her two brothers, told of growing up “with so much laughter and joy.” She spoke of her dad’s deep commitments to her mother, Doris, for 53 years of marriage and to a longtime family friend, Charlotte Cook Smith, who was his beloved wife for his last 14 years of life.

Professionally, Roy is best remembered as an effective and respected leader among North Carolina Baptists, including through divisive and challenging times. Yet it was never bitterness, but rather his warm spirit and contagious laughter that marked his life.

David Hughes, retired pastor of the Winston-Salem congregation, noted that most descriptions of effective leaders leave out having love for people. But he said of Roy: “Leaders don’t just lead people; they love them... Love was at the core of this person.”

Mike Queen, retired pastor of First Baptist Church of Wilmington, N.C., echoed that affirmation: “He just loved people and they loved him.” (See Larry Hovis’ expansion of this important observation on page 13.)

Mike recalled asking Roy if he’d preached in every Baptist church in North Carolina. “No,” Roy responded, “but I’ve



Charlotte and Roy Smith often sang familiar songs by Johnny and June Carter Cash at church and community events. Roy served the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina from 1962 to 1997, including 13 years as executive director-treasurer. Photo by John D. Pierce.

preached in more of them than anyone else.”

Roy was also invited to numerous church and community gatherings to bring along his guitar where he’d sing classic gospel and country tunes — with a preference for Johnny Cash. And Charlotte would carry the June Carter Cash parts.

Their late-in-life romance was the subject of a feature story I wrote in 2011 titled, “Red Carnations: A Love Story for the Ages.” After grieving the deaths of their spouses, Roy — who’d convinced a reluctant Charlotte to have lunch with him — brought two shades of carnations.

“The white carnations represent the past, and we can’t do anything about that,” he said to Charlotte. “But the red carnations represent joy and happiness, and that there can be a good future.”

Their romance had friends accusing them of acting like teenagers. And Roy’s proposal was in the form of an original song.

My visiting in the home of Charlotte — a wise advisor and Nurturing Faith director — and Roy was always a treat. We talked about whatever was happening in the news — especially the parts that impacted

our shared passions for freedom, truth and justice.

We always had a grand time. However, I would kid Roy that he was mostly glad to see me because Charlotte would serve Lexington (N.C.) barbeque rather than make him eat “rabbit food.”

Being a fan of classic country music myself, the conversation often moved quickly to Cash, Haggard, and Jones and some bluegrass favorites. We’d end up in the den with Roy holding a guitar.

Faithful supporters of our publishing ministry, Charlotte and Roy have provided annual gifts to support Nurturing Faith’s engagement with global Christians, including contributing writer Tony Cartledge’s participation in and writings about the Baptist World Alliance.

Some services of remembrance just hit the mark more than others. This was such an occasion for a man who packed much good into a single life and left a legacy of love, leadership and laughter.

Singing “Softly and Tenderly” along with Ed Beddingfield and his guitar in the ornate sanctuary in downtown Winston-Salem, the word’s “Coming home, coming home” rang true. **NFJ**

Providing Christian leadership from a platform of love

BY LARRY HOVIS

On Oct. 27, 2018, I had the privilege of attending the memorial service for Roy J. Smith at the First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, N.C. For 43 years he served as a Baptist pastor and denominational worker. In retirement his service continued as he preached regularly, served on boards of various Baptist organizations, faithfully attended denominational gatherings, and advocated for women in ministry, among other causes.

Among the four ministerial colleagues who presided over the memorial service, David Hughes, former pastor of the Winston-Salem congregation spoke on 1 Corinthians 13 — as assigned by Roy in planning his funeral.

David began his remarks by noting that an Internet search on the word “leadership” revealed no entries that included “love” as an essential quality, characteristic or practice of a good leader. Searching for “Christian leadership,” he found but one reference to love in the top range of results.

That seemed curious to David, since the apostle Paul stated that the greatest of all gifts is love. Therefore, shouldn’t love be a defining characteristic of Christian leaders?

He proceeded to describe how as a Christian leader *par excellence*, Roy revealed love as an essential leadership practice.

Since then, I’ve reflected on the importance of love for Christian leaders. How can Christians provide leadership from a platform of love? There are many ways, but taking my lead from 1 Corinthians 13, I’ll describe four.

First, Christian leaders are patient with others. Verse 4 says, “Love is patient; love is kind. Love is not envious or arrogant or boastful.”

Love is patient. I have to confess I’m



Roy J. Smith

not a very patient person. I can’t stand to wait in line at the grocery store or be stuck in traffic. And I can get very impatient with family members, co-workers and church members.

But I find that if I’m willing to slow down just a little bit and give them (and me) time and space to process concerns or challenges, more often than not, I calm down and find that we can accomplish much together.

Second, Christian leaders are flexible. Verse 5 says, “Love does not insist on its own way.”

Sometimes it’s OK to lose, to let others have their way, even if it’s not the path or solution or position we would choose. Some battles just aren’t worth fighting.

Sometimes the best course of action is to accept someone else’s preferred course of action, even if it’s different from ours, even if we are the “top” leader.

Now there are some big questions that are worth taking a stand for, and sometimes a Christian leader must make a hard decision that is unpopular, but maybe there aren’t as many of those as we think.

Third, Christian leaders give others the benefit of the doubt. Verse 6 says, “Love does not rejoice in the wrong but rejoices in the right.”

Too often we secretly look for others to mess up, whether they are above us or below us on the organizational chart. Rather than believing that their motives are pure, that they are doing the best they can, that they are doing what they think is right, we assume they are stupid and evil and are actually trying to do us harm.

But what if we took the opposite approach? What if we gave them the benefit of the doubt? What if we assume they mean well, even if their words or actions don’t line up completely with ours? What if we start from the position of trying to understand them before trying to argue with them?

As a leader, more than anything else, I want people to give me the benefit of the doubt, and I need to do the same for others.

Fourth, Christian leaders assume that they may be wrong and others may be right because our present knowledge is imperfect. Verse 12 says, “For now, we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part.”

It’s pretty hard to actually admit this. We all think we are right and everyone who doesn’t agree with us is wrong. But the opposite could be true. A little humility goes a long way in the practice of Christian leadership.

•••

At the reception following Roy Smith’s memorial service, I spoke with someone who had worked under Roy’s leadership as executive director. He said Roy was technically his boss, but he felt more like a colleague, because Roy always related to him from a platform of love. **NFJ**

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

You never know what you'll find

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

Every other year, Nurturing Faith Experiences and Campbell University Divinity School co-sponsor a study tour of Israel and parts of the West Bank. And every year, one of the most memorable outings occurs at a place many participants have never heard of: Maresha.

Mareshah (a biblical spelling) was a city in the kingdom of Judah, going back at least to the Iron Age. It is cited in Joshua 15:44 as part of Judah's inheritance, and in 2 Chronicles 11:5-10, which claims it was built up as a fortified city by Solomon's son Rehoboam.

Some Bible readers remember this place as the hometown of the prophet Micah, a fiery preacher who championed the cause of social justice and predicted that Jerusalem would one day become like a plowed field. The city's name is spelled Moresheth in Micah 1:1 and in Jeremiah 26:18 — the only Old Testament example of one prophet quoting another by name.

The reason we take our groups to Mareshah is to participate in a "Dig for a Day" experience led by the staff of Archaeological Seminars. In the post-exilic period, Maresha expanded from the upper tel onto lower slopes where a hard layer of nari covers a deep deposit of soft limestone.

Residents there — mostly Edomites (called Idumeans in Greek) — dug through the nari to the soft bedrock, where they carved out massive underground complexes used for producing olive oil, weaving, raising pigeons, and a variety of other activities in a dry and comfortable environment.

When the Hasmonean leader John Hyrcanus conquered the city in 110 BCE, he reportedly forced residents to either convert to Judaism or dump their houses



PREPARATION— A representative of Archaeological Seminars orients eager diggers at Mareshah.

into the underground caves and leave.

Archaeologists are currently excavating the hundreds of underground rooms — often filled with debris nearly to the arched ceilings — and because the dumped material is not stratified, even untrained volunteers can be helpful in excavating the soil and finding ancient artifacts.

We always find loads of pottery, along with occasional bones and pieces of metal. On rarer occasions, particularly notable finds come to the surface. This happened recently when excavators uncovered a small compartment dug to the side of an underground room, apparently used as a repository for the ancient owner's file of parchment documents. The documents are long gone — having deteriorated in the damp environment — but more than 1,000 clay seal impressions (called bullae) remained.

According to the Israeli newspaper

Haaretz (online, Sept. 16, 2018), the seals included portraits of both humans and Roman deities, along with animals and designs such as a cornucopia.

That's quite a find. Most of the impressions would date to the second century BCE, when the area was largely Hellenized following the expansions of Alexander the Great.

Would you like to get your hands in the dirt at Maresha? Here's your chance: our next study tour will take place May 11-22, 2019, and space is still available. Registration information is on the opposite page.

Join us and visit many of the amazing places you've only read about and dreamed of seeing one day. Our tours take in many archaeological sites and places, such as Maresha, that most groups never visit.

Exploring the Holy Land is an experience that goes beyond words and pictures. Why not make it your experience? **NFJ**



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Campus ministry is testing ground for what the church can be

BY LAWRENCE B. POWERS

Pains of change are all around the church in America. Much of this can be attributed to the ways old institutions are propped up by people of faith, hoping those old models will continue to bring in new congregants.

All the while, young adults — the future of congregational leadership — are leaving in droves. Church leaders seem wary of giving space to these young adults for fear of the change they might bring to the structure we've grown accustomed to.

Even with these realities and fears, there is a solution that provides leadership opportunities, innovation and lasting impact on the local church. In what may be surprising for many, it is a solution that has been there all along.

My current campus ministry role has given me a bird's-eye view of what the future of the church could be. Serving students from six campuses, whose views on politics, theology, sports teams, and the church fill a large, long spectrum, I have witnessed something many Christians have long forgotten: young adults still care about their faith — and the Christian church tied to it. Yet, in many respects, churches have not always been willing to listen to the voices of young adults and continue to exist much as they have for decades.

Reflecting on where campus ministry has been, and looking toward where it is going, I realize the issue may be rooted in how campus engagement is understood.

To date, campus ministry has existed as a “parachurch” engagement effort that seeks to be a place where students plug into a group that is similar in theology and practice as the congregation they left.

Congregations have also partnered with an on-campus ministry with hope there will be a return on their investment, as students plug into their churches while in college. This reciprocal model seems to have worked for many years, and congregants remember its success fondly.

However, this model seems to be barely holding on. Students seem to have no time for “churchy” conversations that avoid tough topics and ignore the realities of the world around them. There is a global world, and they desire a faith that speaks to it.

Working to discover a new path forward, I wonder if there is a need for redefining what it means to be parachurch. What does campus engagement alongside the church look like if it does not exist as a feeder of young adults into our pews?

One way is to view campus ministry as more of an “incubator” where students are invited to explore the future of the church in a space where they have ownership and leadership. Such a move makes campus ministry a testing ground for what the church can be, not just a mirror of it. This shift calls for innovation, creativity, and leaders who can step back and advise, rather than dictate.

Often it is said that college campuses are the “largest mission field” for a Christian individual. The reality is that college

campuses are the largest experiential learning spaces for faith impact and change in the world.

As melting pots of all cultures, religions, theologies and thought, they are perfect places for exploring a new way to be the church in the world. A college campus offers the ability to speak to and explore the relationship of faith to any culture, nation or worldview.

Our current models, where most everyone looks and thinks the same except maybe on the smallest levels, will not survive without shifting in some way. As we engage the campus together, we must continually invite students to see the fullness of what they have to offer, both in their campus ministry groups and in the future of the church.

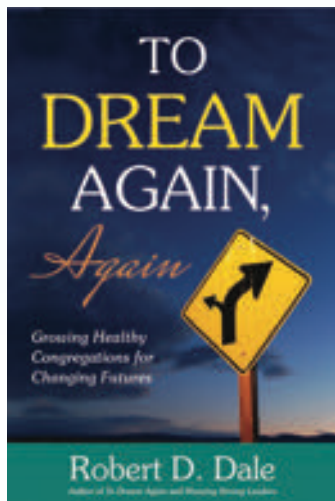
I cannot predict the future of the church, but I do have great hope for it. As we face the bleak realities of our faith communities, financial, relational and partnership support of a new type of campus ministry is more critical than ever.

Where some appear dead set on maintaining a model of campus ministry that is no longer effective, and others have deemed it useless and therefore defunded it altogether, we must recognize its potential for engaging young adults, and giving them space to not just participate in the future of the church, but to create it. **NFJ**

—Lawrence Powers is Triangle area campus minister for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina.



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—George Mason, Pastor
Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

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The Center of a Jesus Worldview

By John R. Franke

For thousands of years Polaris, or the North Star, has been used as a guidepost and point of reference for navigators and astronomers. It is famous for holding nearly still in its place while the entire northern sky moves around it.

That's because it's located nearly at the north celestial pole, the point around which the entire northern sky turns. Hence, Polaris marks the way due north.

While it is not the brightest star in the nighttime sky, it is relatively easy to find since it is bright enough to spot even from the suburbs. In a dark country sky, even when the full moon obscures much of the starry host, Polaris can be found.

That fact has made this star a boon to travelers throughout the Northern Hemisphere, both over land and sea. Finding Polaris means you know the direction north.

At one time in human history, people quite literally depended on the North Star for their lives and livelihood. They could sail the seas and cross the trackless countryside and deserts without getting lost.

During the days when slavery existed in the United States, the North Star was a beacon of guidance and hope, lighting the way north to the Free States and Canada.

In the midst of the complexities and uncertainties of the world around us, the debates and controversies of doctrine and theology that abound in Christian communities, love is the North Star of Christian faith and life. It is a shining beacon of clarity in the midst of a crowded universe, the very center of the Jesus Worldview.

Like the stars in the northern sky, all of the particularities and nuances of

Christian belief and practice orbit around and are oriented by love. In fact, without love everything else we believe and do amounts to nothing with respect to our faith.

Remember Paul's words in 1 Cor. 13:1-3: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

Texts such as this one, along with many others, point to the centrality of love in the message of good news proclaimed by Jesus. Yet surprisingly, we find a relative lack of engagement with this message in the history of Christian theological reflection concerning Jesus.

Instead, discussions about Jesus have tended to focus on Christological questions such as intra-Trinitarian relationships among Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the relationship between the divine and human natures of the person of Christ; and the nature of the atonement.

The shape of this conversation can seem to suggest that the details of Jesus' life and ministry have little doctrinal significance for the major questions of theology as they have been understood in the classical tradition. With respect to this history, commentators have observed the tendency of theology to be more focused on the didactic structure of the epistles rather than

the story structure of the Gospels.

While these traditional theological questions are not unimportant, their overemphasis has had the effect of situating theological discussions in a more abstract context that can often seem to be removed from the day-to-day life of the witnessing community.

In addition, their theoretical nature has often led to divisions in the Christian community that are at odds with the way of life proclaimed by Jesus.

The purpose of theology from the perspective of a Jesus Worldview is not to resolve abstract theological questions but rather to form witnessing communities that participate in the divine mission by living God's love in the way of Jesus Christ for the sake of the world.

God's abundant, self-sacrificing love for us means that we must love each other as well. Indeed, this is how we know God lives in us. We even read that as we do this, God's love is perfected in us.

The primacy of this all-encompassing love is underscored by the words of Jesus in Matt. 5:43-44 that we must love our enemies as well as each other and pray for those who persecute us.

In fact, it has often been said that if you take love for enemy out of Christianity, you effectively "unchristian" the Christian faith.

Truly, love is the center of a Jesus Worldview. It is this center that we will explore in the year ahead. **NFJ**

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



Learning from children and the tooth fairy

BY GINGER HUGHES

The tooth fairy visited our house again.
Our little girl lost another tooth,
and she was thrilled.

She wrote the sweetest note to the tooth fairy thanking her for the money she'd left for her previous teeth, and pointing out the fact that she had indeed lost one more. She laid the note, along with the tooth, on the table and went to sleep.

The following morning, on top of the note, were two crisp \$1 bills. And though clearly the price of teeth has been adjusted for inflation since I came along, my daughter was thrilled.

However, as excited as my daughter was, my son was less than enthused.

"Mama, I didn't get any money from the tooth fairy," he grumbled, his little lip extending in a pout. "Mama, will you look at my teeth and see if any of them are loose yet?" he asked pitifully.

Overhearing the exchange, my daughter walked over, smiled, and said, "Here brother, you can have one of my dollars." And just like that, she handed over half of her prize.

This isn't the only time she has done such. Many days at school she earns a trip to the prize box for some sort of recognition

or accomplishment, and almost every time she gets something for her brother rather than for herself.

Needless to say, all these prizes make my son happy, but it's my daughter's thoughtfulness, generosity and the attitude in which she gives that really catch my attention.

It makes me wonder, do I give generously? And not only generously, but do I give cheerfully as she does?

When the plate is passed at church, do I give from the first of my earnings or do I toss in a token gift if there's any left over at the end of the month? Do I give generously, or do I hoard what isn't mine anyway?



Do I give of my time to worthy causes, or do I spend it all on myself or my family? When I give, do I give joyfully, or is it with a begrudging heart?

Preachers tend to talk a lot about tithes, tenths and how much to give. But I'm curious about one thing: if we focused less on the appropriate amount and more on

having the appropriate heart, would the numbers take care of themselves?

If our hearts are truly grateful for all God has done for us, wouldn't we give generously?

If our hearts are overwhelmed with thanksgiving for the abundant blessings bestowed on us each day, wouldn't we give cheerfully?

If our hearts are full of love for a God who loves us recklessly, wouldn't we give out of our love for God?

I watch my daughter these days as she holds her most precious possessions. If an opportunity to share comes along, she opens her hands and freely gives.

No wonder Jesus said that to enter his kingdom, we need the faith of a child. **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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When I give, do I
give joyfully, or is it with
a begrudging heart?

Thoughts

Learning to love the Google machine

By Brett Younger

I get to technology late. I bought a new electric typewriter really cheap right after they were obsolete. I avoided email until I was the only one who had never heard from a Nigerian prince. I did not have a cell phone until I realized other parents were having conversations with their children. I don't have a Facebook page, so someone else made one for me without me knowing it. Did you know they could do that?

But every once in a while, a decade or so after everyone else, I experience the joy of technology. I walk everywhere, because we do not own a car. My office is up two flights of stairs. Many of the people who come to my office are well-dressed and expect their minister to be likewise. About a month ago I put these facts together and googled “black sneakers that look like dress shoes” and found this:



I am so happy with my Skechers Dress Knit Relaxed Fit Memory Foam Oxford Shoes. For a while I expected someone to say, “Hey, you’re wearing tennis shoes to work,” but I no longer think it is going to happen.

This has led to a new appreciation of my Google machine. You can Google your way through life. The possibilities are amazing.

Google “ideas for a humor column” and come up with fantasy football, sandwiches and learning to love Google.

Google “ideas for a religious column” and choose between cloning saints, what happens to New England Patriots fans after they die and learning to love Google.

Google can enrich your everyday life.

If you want to get up earlier, Google “ideas for getting up earlier” and set your coffee on a timer, put a warm robe by the bed, and tell yourself “getting up is fun.”

Google “good quick breakfasts” and go to Dunkin Donuts, Whataburger or Chick-fil-A.

Google “things to do on your commute” and listen to a podcast, make your to-do list, or get your worrying out of the way.

Google “how to get along with a grumpy co-worker” and stay cool, take a timeout, and say their name.

Google “things to daydream about” and imagine sitting in a bathtub full of bubbles with a good book, going on a road trip with your best friend or lunch.

Google “cures for an afternoon slump” and rub peppermint oil on your hands, brush your teeth, or try some yoga.

If you want to read one of the “classic books that you should have read by now,” you can choose between *To Kill a Mockingbird, 1984* and *The Lighter Side: Serving Up Life Lessons with a Smile*.

If you want to see something that will not make you smarter, Google “movies that are not educational but are fun” and watch *Airplane, Anchorman* or *Caddyshack*.

If you want “ways to kill time on YouTube,” you can find bad lip reading, honey badger and sneezing baby panda.

If you can't sleep, Google “when you can't sleep” and turn down the thermostat, take a hot shower, and drink some milk.

The Google machine has more applications to church life than you might think.

If you are stuck listening to a dull sermon, Google “things to do during a dull sermon” and pray the preacher will do better next time, plan something reasonable to say to the minister after the sermon ends, or see if a yawn really is contagious.

If you feel you are preaching a dull sermon, you may wish you had Googled “things to do when preaching a dull sermon” so you could vary your timing, intensify your delivery, or throw in a story about a puppy.

If you are having trouble “keeping your child quiet during worship,” Google it, give him a phone, hand her a Goldfish, or let him wear black sneakers.

If you need “recipes for the church potluck,” Google your way to buttermilk mac and cheese, million dollar mac and cheese, and bacon mac and cheese bites.

Google your way to “ideas for livening up a dull Bible study” and find suggestions such as turn down the thermostat, paint something, and use pillows instead of chairs.

Google “ideas for adding fun to a boring church meeting” and throw stuffed animals at anyone who says anything negative, bring an egg timer, or go to a movie instead.

Google “how to end a column” and use a relevant quote (ex: “Google is your friend”), a thought-provoking fact (ex: “Google processes 40,000 searches every second”), or echo the introduction (ex: “I get to technology late, so you probably already knew this”). **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.

ATTENTION TEACHERS: HERE'S YOUR PASSWORD!

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



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



Youth teaching plans by **Jeremy Colliver**, Minister to Families with Youth at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga., are available at nurturingfaith.net.

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*

Jan. 6, 2019

Psalm 72

A Prayer for Justice

The Sunday we call “Epiphany” found its way into the church calendar as a remembrance of the wise men’s arrival to pay homage to Jesus, thought of as Christ’s first manifestation to the Gentiles.

The Magi had reportedly come in search of “the king of the Jews,” and brought gifts they considered to be fit for a king. They had been directed to Bethlehem by priests or rabbis who cited a line from the prophet Micah indicating Bethlehem as the messiah’s birthplace.

By the time Jesus was born, the “glory days” of a strong king in Israel were long gone. The country had been firmly under the Roman thumb for 60 years, but the desperate hope for a new king who would return Israel to both peace and prominence remained in full force.

As Jesus began to preach and perform mighty works, many Jews thought he might be the one to make Israel great again, but they were disappointed. Jesus had no intention of using his miraculous powers to wage war against Rome and set up another earthly kingdom.

Early Christians came to believe that Jesus was indeed the ultimate fulfillment of the Old Testament

May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. (Ps. 72:2)

hopes, but with a twist: Jesus said he had come to introduce the “kingdom of heaven.” This rule and reign of God exists now, a spiritual glimmer of a “new heaven and a new earth” to come, a kingdom in which God is king and justice reigns.

A prayer for a just king (v. 1-4)

The authors of Israel’s psalms had no idea that God’s redemption would come through someone like Christ, through struggle and suffering, through small beginnings and a spiritual kingdom. For much of Hebrew history, the people’s hope had centered on a king who sat on a throne and was willing to “go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Sam. 8:20).

For the psalmist, then, the best way to intercede for his country and people was to pray for a wise, powerful, and long-lived king. ⚡

The first verse of the psalm sets the stage for all that follows: “Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son.” The Hebrew word order puts special emphasis on these desired qualities. Literally, it reads “O God, your justice to the king give; your righteousness to a king’s son.” The psalmist prays for the king to have nothing less than God’s own perfect justice and righteousness to guide him throughout his reign. ⚡

Although this psalm was likely composed for use in the coronation of a king, the author’s primary concern

is with justice – the king is simply the one responsible for promoting and enforcing it.

The word for “justice” is *mishpat*, which has to do with making right and fair decisions, especially in legal matters. The king in Israel was the arbiter of last resort, so the psalmist prays that the king will make decisions as God would make them. ⚡

“Righteousness” translates the important term *tsedaqâ*, which refers to right doing in every sense: spiritual, social, and moral – right doing that grows from a right relationship with God and others.

Justice comes when right judgments (v. 2) are rendered for all people, including the poor. Disadvantaged people are often lost or underserved in a system run by the powerful. The true measure of a king, then, is whether he does right by the neediest of his subjects. The psalmist prays for such justice to pervade the land until the very mountains resound with wholeness and well-being (*shalôm*), as the hills are awash with righteousness (v. 3).

Other nations might oppress the poor, but Israel was to be different. The Torah included specific laws and warnings designed to protect the poor from usurious interest and the loss of their ancestral land (see, for example, Deuteronomy 15). Indeed, God’s intent was to bless faithful Israel to the extent that none would be poor.

Israel’s history was far short of sterling, however. Wealthy but unscrupulous people ignored the law or sought loopholes allowing them to take advantage of those who were less fortunate. Prophets such as Isaiah

Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



lambasted those who amassed large holdings by squeezing out the poor (Isa. 5:1-10).

The word for “poor” in v. 2 is *‘ōnî*. It describes one who not only lacks material things, but also is “bowed down” by the circumstances of life. The verbal form could be used to describe intentional affliction or rape, as in Amnon’s abuse of his sister Tamar in 2 Sam. 13:14 – a reminder that unjust economic systems may actively hold others down, making it very difficult for even hard-working people to escape poverty.

We note that the psalmist speaks of *your* poor. Though God of all people, Yahweh displayed a consistent and special concern for those who lacked the necessities of life (Deut. 10:17-19; Pss. 9:12, 34:6).

As a rule, most wealthy people are far more interested in increasing their riches than in helping the poor improve their standard of living. The psalmist knew that if the king did not proactively advocate for the poor and weak, the *status quo* would prevail. A good king was one who cared for all persons by stepping in to help those who could not defend themselves against greedy lenders and corrupt officials (v. 4). In doing so, he championed the cause of God’s special people. 📖

Prayer for an enduring kingdom (vv. 5-17)

Any king who could rule with such careful probity and concern for all people would certainly be a boon to his nation, beloved by his people. The only way to make his reign better would be to make it longer. Thus, the psalmist launches into a rhapsodic plea that the just king and his dynasty might last forever.

“May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations,” the psalm-

ist prayed (v. 5). Ancient life was filled with many uncertainties, but there were two things that did not vary. The sun rose every morning to blanket the earth with its faithful, warming light. And, the moon moved so resolutely through its phases that the ancient Hebrew calendar was based on the lunar cycle.

The psalmist knew that a consistent, dependable, and trustworthy leader would be a boon to the land, bringing peace to the people.

As the sun and moon resided in the heavens, so did the rain, occasionally pouring itself onto the earth in a watery barrage of blessing. The rains in Palestine were not as certain as the sun and moon, but perhaps even more welcome.

Most of the annual rainfall in Israel occurs during the winter months, framed by less certain “early rains” in the fall and “latter rains” in the spring. The authors of scripture often employed the motif of early and late rains as signs of God’s special beneficence to Israel (Deut. 11:14, Jeremiah 5:24, Joel 2:23), for they allowed the planting of additional crops.

Thus, the author prays for a just king who would be as consistent as the solar system and as invigorating as welcome rain (v. 6). “Rain that falls on the mown grass” may be an intentional reference to the latter rains, which came after the harvest – after the fields had been cut. Or, the skillful poet may have intended to touch the hearer’s (and reader’s) senses by calling to mind the lush smell of spring rain on fields newly mown.

The king could not bring rain, but he could foster an atmosphere in which righteousness and peace might flourish throughout the kingdom (v. 7a). What more could one ask than for such leadership to last as long as the moon marks the passing of time (v. 7b)?

Verses 8-17 continue and expand the theme with prayers that the king’s dominion would extend from sea to sea as he defeated all enemies (vv. 8-11).

Power alone does not make a great king, however: the ideal leader is one who “delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.” Such a king “has pity on the weak and the needy” and saves their lives, for “precious is their blood in his sight” (vv. 12-14). 📖 A truly good leader has concern for all people.

In vv. 15-17, the psalmist returns to the hope for a long-lived king who would rule over a fertile and blessed land. No earthly king could live forever, but one could pray that his legacy would continue: “May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun.”

Beyond dominion and long life, the psalmist prayed for a king so just that all nations could benefit from his leadership – a hope that echoes God’s promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3).

A blessing for the true King (vv. 18-19)

The final two verses of the psalm were probably a later addition. While the main body of the psalm is a carefully shaped prayer for the new king, these verses are a doxology to Yahweh, Israel’s God, “who alone does wondrous things” (v. 18). The poet praises God’s glorious name, and prays for the glory of God’s presence to pervade all the earth. The Hebrew word “amen” (repeated for emphasis) means something like “so let it be.” 📖

The psalmist’s heartfelt prayer for justice has never been fulfilled by a king on a throne or any other national leader. Only in Jesus do we find a righteous ruler whose compassion extends to all people and whose reign will outlast even the sun and the moon. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 13, 2019

Psalm 29

A Prayer for Peace

Most of us know what it is like to stand on the ocean's shore, on a mountain peak, or beneath a powerful waterfall – and to feel very small as we contemplate the incredible scope and splendor of creation. If a major thunderstorm should catch us there, we would feel even smaller.

Thunderstorms are powerful, fearsome, and dangerous. Lightning, wind, and flooding can wreak widespread destruction, and there is nothing we can do to stop them. The best we can do is seek shelter, ponder the awesomeness of nature's fury, and wait for the storm to pass so peace might return.

The Hebrews, like other ancient peoples, associated storms with divine power. Polytheistic cultures usually identified one member of their pantheon as the weather god. Because the land's fertility depended on regular rains, they gave extra attention to gods thought to control the weather.

Many of Israel's closest neighbors worshiped some manifestation of a god known as Baal, who proved to be particularly attractive to Israelites, as the biblical narratives show.

The author of Psalm 29 celebrated a belief that Yahweh controlled all aspects of nature as well as the lives of

May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace! (Ps. 29:11)

humans. The psalm testifies that a God who can wreak havoc with the weather is also capable of bringing peace amid all the storms of life.

A call to worship (vv. 1-2)

The psalm was likely sung as a hymn in worship, led by a priest or designated singer standing before the congregation on a Sabbath or festival day. The ancients would not have had hymnbooks, of course. The psalm may have been performed as a solo, chanted and repeated a line at the time, or presented in some other way.

In the opening verse, the psalmist calls not only the earthly congregation to worship – but also surprisingly invites the heavenly court to join Israel in praising Yahweh's glorious attributes.

The first three lines begin with the same phrase, "Ascribe to the LORD," a call to acknowledge God's majesty as an act of worship. The word translated "worship" literally means "to bow down" or "to prostrate one's self" in humility before God.

And what is it about Yahweh that we should recognize? "Glory and strength," the poet says, and "the glory of his name." The root meaning of the word translated "glory" is "heavenness," which leads to the idea of glory or majesty.

To worship the LORD "in holy splendor" (v. 2) could possibly mean "in holy attire," suggesting that one

be properly dressed for the occasion. Since the prior emphasis has been on God, however, the phrase more likely refers to divine grandeur. We are called to worship the LORD who is clothed with holy splendor.

A God who speaks with thunder (vv. 3-9)

Have you ever watched a thunderstorm approaching over the ocean or a large lake? With v. 3 the psalmist praises God's "voice" that is heard in thunder, first "over the waters ... over mighty waters." One may envision a thundercloud building offshore, visible for a great distance, booming over the ocean waves before washing ashore. Land to the east of Israel is mostly desert, so thunderstorms typically come from the West, sweeping in from the Mediterranean Sea.

Readers might also imagine the large Sea of Galilee as the locus of a storm. The "sea" is actually a large harp-shaped lake about 13 miles long and seven miles wide. It is located at 700 feet below sea level with mountains both east and west, where a wind tunnel effect can produce huge waves and frightful conditions when storms arise.

The verse may have a more metaphorical intent, however: the ancients thought of the sea as great waters of chaos that had to be restrained by the gods. The scriptures acknowledged Yahweh's power to control the seas, especially in creation, where God's spirit brooded over the waters (Gen. 1:2), created a dome-like "firmament" to separate the waters above from the waters below (Gen. 1:6), then drew limits for the waters under the

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sea so that dry land might appear (Gen. 1:9-10). 🇺🇸

So, while v. 3 may carry the visual image of a thunderstorm blowing across the sea or a lake, it also carries a reminder that Yahweh alone controls the waters of chaos and brings order to the world.

Verses 4-9 celebrate God's "voice" that is heard both in thunder and in the frightening din of a strong wind. The cedars of Lebanon were known for their towering strength, yet Yahweh's voice had the power to snap them like twigs (v. 5). Anyone who has observed the aftermath of a tornado, hurricane, or even a severe thunderstorm has seen tall trees twisted and splintered.

How does "Lebanon skip like a calf and Sirion like a young wild ox" (v. 6)? The mountains of Lebanon were heavily forested with cedars and other trees. "Sirion" is an alternate name for Mount Hermon, a large northern peak from which the headwaters of the Jordan River flow. When storms blow through, trees covering the mountains shift and dance in the wind, making it appear that the entire mountains are moving. Thus, the poet could compare the roiling, windswept mountains to playful young bovines that are always moving.

Thunder is the sound that lightning makes, so it is not surprising that the psalmist connects God's thundering voice to "flashes of fire" (v. 7). The word translated as "flashes forth" normally means "chops" or "hacks," so the NET translates it as "the LORD's shout strikes with flaming fire." This appropriately recalls the violence of a lightning strike that accompanies the thunder.

When thunder and lightning are booming overhead, the very ground seems to vibrate. Even the uninhabited wilderness, lacking large trees, "shakes" in response to the LORD's

resounding voice (v. 8). Since previously mentioned locations (Lebanon, Sirion) were beyond the northern reaches of Israel, the "wilderness of Kadesh" probably refers to a northern location. Some argue, however, that the writer has in mind the wilderness surrounding an area known as Kadesh in the southern Negeb, better known from stories in the Old Testament (Gen. 20:1, Numbers 20, etc.). If that is correct, the psalmist's intent would be to portray the mighty storm as sweeping across the entire nation, from its northernmost to the southernmost extremities.

Verse 9 is difficult to translate, though the author clearly intends to further illustrate God's power as seen in the storm. 🇺🇸 The precise translation of certain phrases is debatable, but the overriding imagery is as obvious as a storm: God's thunderous voice overpowers both land and people, leading all who worship to say "Glory!"

Note how the shout of "Glory!" in v. 9 reflects the call to ascribe to God "glory and strength" and "the glory of his name" in vv. 1-2.

A closing word of praise (vv. 10-11)

The final two verses bring the psalm to an end with a four-line blessing or affirmation from the worship leader. The subject of each line is Yahweh. The first two lines declare that Yahweh sits above the flood, as king, forever.

There is no Hebrew referent for "enthroned," which appears twice in the NRSV's translation of v. 10. The text simply says that Yahweh "sits" or "dwells" both over the flood, and as king. To "sit as a king" is to sit on a throne, however, so it is not a great stretch to translate the phrase as "sits enthroned" in both lines, as the second is parallel to the first. 🇺🇸

The final stanza can be read as a simple affirmation, as reflected in NIV 11, NET, HCSB, and others. The NRSV translators, however, chose to render the two verbs as precatives, as a twin entreaty asking God to give strength to the people and bless them with peace.

This is grammatically justified, as the imperfect and jussive forms of the verb are identical. Throughout the psalm, the author has expressed full confidence that God has power over the forces of nature, leading one to assume that Yahweh's power extends to people, too.

So, translating as an affirmation, "The LORD gives his people strength, the LORD grants his people security" (NET) is entirely appropriate. Since v. 11 is the first time the poet mentions God's people, however, it is also legitimate to read the verse as a wish that the Lord who rules the forces of nature will grant strength to God's people and bless them with peace.

How do we read this psalm today? Some might see in it a promise that the all-powerful God will provide perfect protection for those who trust, but if so, they miss the point. The psalm reflects the setting of a frightening storm – an awe-inspiring manifestation of God's power over nature, which can be destructive.

God's people will experience storms. The psalm itself is evidence of that: bad weather is not our only trouble. We may also face storms of financial disaster, physical injury, emotional heartache, or other difficulties.

The psalmist knew this, and declared that through all the storms of life, we can trust in the God whose power extends over all, the God in whom we can find strength to endure the fiercest of storms and yet experience the blessing of peace. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*


Jan. 20, 2019

Psalm 36

A Prayer for Love

Do you feel loved? It's a universal hunger. Some rare people may have a psychological condition that prevents them from feeling or appreciating love, but most of us – whether we admit it or not – have a deep-seated desire not only to be known, but also to be loved.

Faith in God brings many benefits, and one of them is the belief that there is a God who knows us and loves us. Those who trust only in themselves – or who follow the ways of the “dark side” – don't understand how much they're missing.

Today's text confronts us with a sharp contrast between the two. 

Bad to the bone (vv. 1-4)

Perhaps you have known someone who seemed evil to the very core, sold out to selfishness and with no apparent redeeming qualities. That's where this psalm begins. The first verse is notoriously difficult to translate. A literal reading would be “An oracle of transgression to/for the wicked is in the midst of my heart,” which may suggest that the psalmist is inspired to utter an oracle against the wicked.

The NRSV presents transgression as a personified force that “speaks to

O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart! (Ps. 36:10)

the wicked deep in their hearts; there is no fear of God before their eyes” (v. 1).

The NET puts it in more modern language: “An evil man is rebellious to the core. He does not fear God.”

However we translate the first sentence, the writer's unflattering opinion of the wicked is obvious: the wicked do not fear God (v. 1), they are too self-centered to recognize their wrongful actions as sin (v. 2), they constantly lie and deceive and care nothing for what is right or good (v. 3), and they are so sold out to evil that they lie awake in bed planning more mischief (v. 4).

We recognize this character type: someone who is so ego-driven that he or she tells lies with impunity and does whatever is necessary to advance his or her own cause with little thought for others and no concern for what is right or just.

We would expect this opening salvo to be followed by words of judgment against such wicked people. Instead, we are surprised by what comes next: a song of praise interrupts the negative oracle with a positive reminder of the attitude God's people ought to have.

Loved to the max (vv. 5-9)

We can imagine that the psalmist may have suffered at the hands of mean, lying, and selfish people such as those he has just described. How does

one endure mistreatment by others, especially if they are more powerful and society offers little comfort?

The poet turned his heart heavenward, confident that God's love – unlike that of many people – is as solid and true as all creation: “Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds” (v. 5).

There had never been a day when the psalmist did not awake to see the heavens above. Whether clear or cloudy, sunny or stormy, the heavens were a reminder of God's persistent love. The word *chesed*, translated as “steadfast love,” can also be rendered as “lovingkindness.” It is a quintessential Old Testament description of God's character and care for humankind.

The word for “faithfulness” is based on the same root as “Amen,” and its basic meaning is “to be firm.” In the Hebrew text, the words appear back-to-back for emphasis: a literal reading would be “O LORD, in the heavens (is) your steadfast love, your faithfulness upon the clouds.”

But God's presence is not limited to the sky: “Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O LORD” (v. 6).

God's righteousness and justice pervade both land and sea, according to the psalmist. The word for “save” is not to be understood in the New Testament sense of salvation, for here it refers to humans and animals alike. The word means “deliver,” and in this context it can have the sense of “preserve.”

This is no scriptural guarantee that God protects all creatures from harm, but a confession that God's righteous

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power holds the world together as a safe habitation for all.

Verses 7-9 should be read as a “second verse” to the hymn of praise. Here the poet returns to the theme of Yahweh’s steadfast love, which he declares to be “precious,” because “All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings” (v. 7).

The reference is figurative: Yahweh was not imagined as having literal wings, but readers would be familiar with the image of a bird sheltering its brood beneath its wings. If sung in the temple, though, one might also think of the wings of the cherubim over the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred symbol of God’s presence among the Hebrews.

God not only protects but also provides. The psalmist sings of how all people may “feast on the abundance of your house and drink from the river of your delights” (v. 8). Such feasting may call to mind the periodic worship festivals, when worshipers brought animals for sacrifice, but only a tiny portion was actually burned on the altar, with the remainder to be cooked and eaten by the pilgrims themselves, like some giant tailgate party without the tailgates.

It is not just physical sustenance the writer has in mind, though. His focus is on God as the source of life itself, “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light” (v. 9). Christian readers recall how John’s gospel pictures Jesus as employing similar images, speaking of himself as the bread of life (John 6:35, 48), as the source of life-giving water (John 4:10), and as the light of the world (John 8:12, 9:5).

Hope to the end (vv. 10-12)

In the final three verses, the writer brings the two previously disparate parts of the psalm together. Having confessed a belief in the steady love

and justice of God, he pleads that it will not cease: “O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart” (v. 10).

The Hebrew word for “know” means “to know by experience,” so the psalmist’s reference to “those who know you” is intended to describe faithful followers who listen to God and follow God’s way. As people who are “upright in heart,” they trust in God’s delivering power.

The psalmist must have felt a particular need for deliverance, apparently from someone he regarded as both haughty, unkind, and powerful enough to cause him economic or social harm. So he prayed, “Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me, or the hand of the wicked drive me away” (v. 11).

At various times in Israel’s history, the prophets denounced wealthy and powerful people who preyed on the poor, loaning money at exorbitant interest rates during times of famine, then foreclosing on their property or even taking fellow Hebrews into indentured servitude when they were unable to repay the debt.

Perhaps this is what the poet had in mind when he prayed that God would not let the wicked drive him away. In our own world, how many people have been left poverty-stricken or homeless due to predatory lenders or unfair employers who don’t pay a living wage or provide benefits to provide a hedge against illness or injury?

Evidently, the psalmist not only wished to be delivered from selfish, mean, or oppressive people, but he (or she) also hoped the wicked would get a proper comeuppance from God. The final verse reads awkwardly, unless we regard the word “there” as an emphatic expression, even as English speakers

sometimes say “So there!”

If the NRSV had inserted a hyphen this would be clearer: “There – the evildoers lie prostrate; they are thrust down, unable to rise” (v. 12). The expression is not a wish, because the poet does not use imperfect verbs that could also be translated in a jussive or precative sense. Rather, the verbs are in the perfect tense, indicating something that has happened, even though the threat remained all too real.

Hebrew prophets often used this form of speech, sometimes called a “prophetic perfect,” to indicate a coming event they were so confident about that they spoke as if it had already taken place. The NET offers an appealing alternative translation: “I can see the evildoers! They have fallen! They have been knocked down and are unable to get up!”^u

Do you ever wish harm upon those who have threatened or hurt you? It’s a common desire, and appears often as an acceptable response in the Old Testament. Jesus, however, turned that human proclivity upside down, urging his disciples to make a more caring choice by loving their enemies and doing good even to those who abuse them. “Do to others as you would have them do to you,” Jesus said (Luke 6:27-32).

Jesus’ command finds few adherents in these days of divisiveness and recriminations, but they remain a helpful corrective to the idea that one’s best defense is to bring or wish harm to those who are perceived as a threat.

Perhaps it would have been helpful for the psalmist to consider his own words of praise for God’s pervasive and precious steadfast love. Instead of just praying for God to continue showing love to him or her, praying for the strength to show that same love to others might have been a better course. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Jan. 27, 2019

Psalm 19

A Prayer for Goodness

Think for a moment: Where in creation have you sensed God's presence most closely? Perhaps you were on a mountain, or beside the ocean, and the sky was amazing. Maybe the heavens were brilliant blue and populated with towering clouds like mounds of cotton candy. Or, perhaps you fell silent before the brilliant light show of a colorful sunset, or watching the dawning sun crack the horizon and leap into view – and it was as if you heard God's own voice saying to you: "I'm here." 📖

The psalmist knew what that was like. He had seen thunderclouds stream in from the Mediterranean Sea and drop their payloads across the hills of Judah. He had watched the sun slide gently through vibrant layers of color when the winds called *hamsin* filled the air with desert dust.

And he had heard God speak without words.

Words without sound (vv. 1-6)

Psalm 19 is a favorite psalm for many people, but also a curious one: it appears to consist of two different psalms that have been combined into one. 📖 The first six verses of the psalm, which is labeled as part of the

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Ps. 19:14)

Davidic collection, comprise a hymn of praise that speaks in majestic terms of God's self-revelation in the glory of the sky and the daily movements of the sun. The latter part shifts to the style of wisdom teaching, with shorter lines and a more repetitive rhythm while giving praise for God's commandments.

We note as well that the first six verses speak of the deity, as "God," while the remainder of the text uses the word "LORD," our translation of the Hebrew name Yahweh.

The differences are sharp, but the two parts are connected: both speak of God's self-revelation, through the heavens in vv. 1-6, and through the law in vv. 7-14. Though the style, vocabulary, cadence and content of the two sections are quite different, the psalmist's conjunction of the poems effectively demonstrates that God's message can be revealed either with words or without them.

The psalm begins with a poetic celebration of God's splendor as revealed in the expansive beauty of the sky: "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." The first and second halves follow a common pattern in Hebrew poetry in which the second line of the verse repeats or expands upon the thought expressed in the first line. 📖

In v. 1, "the heavens" and "the firmament" both refer to what we would call the sky. The ancient

Hebrews did not understand, as we do, that the earth is round, with an atmosphere held in place by gravity, providing air to breathe and guarding against the vacuum of space. They thought of the earth as being flat and topped by a solid dome (the firmament), keeping out cosmic waters above and below the earth.

The ancients imagined that the sun, moon, and stars followed specific patterns or tracks set into the dome-like firmament, while clouds floated in the space beneath. Imagine what the psalmist would have said if he had been able to grasp the place of our earth as a tiny dot near the edge of one galaxy among millions of galaxies. For those who believe God is the creator of all things, the wonder of God's creation becomes far more expansive than the psalmist could ever comprehend.

The heavens speak constantly, the psalmist says, through both day and night (v. 2). 📖 The astounding beauty of clouds and sun shout glory during the day, and the unfettered glow of the stars in a land with no electricity to fuel competing ground-light put on a nightly show that would have been awe-inspiring to dwellers of the ancient world. 📖

While v. 2 speaks of the heavens gushing forth "speech" and declaring "knowledge," vv. 3-4a clarify that heavenly speech requires no words: "There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world." The plural verbs refer to the heavens, which speak in both day and night.

In vv. 4b-6, the psalmist focuses on the sun as a particular witness of

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divine glory. God has set up a heavenly tent for the sun, he says, from which it emerges each day like a proud bridegroom on his wedding day, or like a strong runner eager to begin his course. As the personified sun runs his circuit from one end of the heavens to the other, “nothing is hid from its heat,” a reminder that nothing hides from God either.

If you felt inspired to write a poem or devotional thought about how God has spoken to you through the wonder of creation, what would you write about? Would you echo the psalmist’s fascination with the heavens or speak of God’s presence in a mountain vista, a majestic waterfall, or a tropical beach? Have you sensed God’s glory in the bright blue of glacier melt or the colorful fish of a coral reef?

Can you think of other ways in which God speaks without words?

Sweetness without sugar (vv. 7-10)

As noted above, Psalm 19 makes an abrupt shift from praise to wisdom in v. 7. The cadence is less musical and more pedantic, and the theme turns from vistas of sky to matters of law.

Many readers would consider the move from heavenly heights to legal tenets to be a major comedown, but faithful Hebrews saw the law as the basis of their life with God, and thus a source of daily inspiration. The law was no collection of moribund rules, but a set of principles that could “revive the soul” and “make wise the simple” (v. 7), bringing joy to the heart and enlightenment to the eyes (v. 8).

Note the series of synonyms in vv. 7-9: laws, decrees, precepts, commandments, and ordinances all relate to the covenant between God and Israel. They bring such spiritual profit because all are “of the LORD.” The “fear of the LORD” in v. 9 is not

another synonym for God’s laws, but the mindset that motivates one to find inspiration in divine guidelines for life that are pure, lasting, true, and “righteous altogether” (v. 9). [See the online “Hardest Question” for more on this.]

God’s law in all of its manifestations is more appealing than the finest gold or the sweetest honey, the psalmist insists (v. 10). Note how repetition is used for emphasis: the law is more desirable than gold – “even much fine gold.” It is sweeter than honey – even “drippings of the honeycomb.”

Have you ever thought of the law as more enviable than gold, or more delicious than the sweetest baklava? Probably not. But can you imagine living in a world where there are no laws, where everyone can do as he or she pleases and get away with it, where property rights are not respected, where no system exists to provide services for the common good?

The societal laws that bring order to the world in which we live may not excite us, but life would be very different and much less pleasant without them. For Israel, the source of the law was God, and it served not only to maintain societal order, but also to ensure a proper relationship with God. The psalmist recognized that as a source of daily encouragement and revelation from God.


Devotion without guile (vv. 11-14)

With v. 11, the psalmist turns from celebrating God’s law to praying for the ability to keep every precept and avoid every fault, even those of which he was unaware (vv. 11-12). Most of us have more than enough known failures to confess, so the psalmist’s worries about being forgiven of hidden faults may seem over the top, but it illustrates the depth of his commitment to

keeping God’s teachings.

The translation of v. 13 can go in one of two directions. Literally, it begins “Also keep your servant from proud (ones) ...” The Hebrew word translated “proud” or “presumptuous” is a plural adjective, but what does it modify? The NRSV assumes that it describes bad company – insolent people whose harmful influence the psalmist hopes to avoid.

Most translations, however, see “proud” or “presumptuous” as referring back to the word for “sins” or “errors” in the previous verse. As the psalmist sought to avoid unknown faults, he also asked God to keep him from more obvious sins. Thus, NIV11 has “Keep your servant also from willful sins,” and NET has “Moreover, keep me from committing flagrant sins” (HCSB, NASB95, and KJV are similar).

Thus, the psalmist fears falling under the sway of willful sins, not presumptuous people, as he seeks a blameless life, free of “great transgression” (v. 13). 

The psalm concludes with a verse that millions have memorized: “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (v. 14).

The psalmist began his prayer by applauding God’s ability to speak through heavenly wonders, even without words. He continued by praising God’s gift of the law – revealed through words – that taught him to live rightly. He then closed the prayer with a plea that his own words and thoughts might be pleasing to the God who empowered and delivered him.

What are some ways you believe God has spoken to you? What kind of words do you use in speaking of yourself to God? Self-revelation works in both directions. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

New password for online teaching resources is: spring.

Feb. 3, 2019

Psalm 71

A Prayer for Deliverance

Desperation. Have you ever felt so desolate or troubled that all you had left was to call on God for help, or to seek shelter in God like a fleeing rabbit that hides from a fox in a narrow cleft within a rocky hill?

There is something about a towering mountain of rock that shouts images of strength and thoughts of protection. The barren peaks lining the western shore of the Dead Sea, the majestic rock formations of the American southwest, and similar sights in other lands leave us feeling small in comparison to their certain strength. Here, as in other psalms, the metaphor of God as a rock of protection stands clear. 🇺🇸

The psalm is written as a prayerful lament from an individual who faces severe trials, but the plaintive cries are interwoven with confident praise that appears to be born of experience. Indeed, the psalmist identifies himself as an older adult (v. 9) who has known and trusted God for many years (vv. 5-6) — to the point that expressions of praise outnumber those of sorrow. 🇺🇸

Refuge and rocks (vv. 1-3)

People find refuge in different places. When stressed, some find comfort

*For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.
(Ps. 71:5)*

by crawling into bed and pulling the covers over their head, at least for a while. Others hole up on the couch with a supply of snacks and a TV remote, trying to lose themselves in binge-watching a favorite program.

Others may seek solace by getting out of town and retreating to the woods on a long hike, or looking for anonymity in a lonesome bar.

The poet behind Psalm 71 sought safety in God: “In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame” (v. 1).

Why the concern about shame? Had he had been falsely accused of wrongdoing, or belittled by others?

Shame comes in many forms. Sometimes it’s justified: when we hurt other people by word or deed, we ought to feel shame. When we ignore another’s need and they suffer due to our neglect, shame is appropriate.

But many people suffer from shame they have not earned. Parents or the occasional misguided teacher may leave children feeling shame for not meeting their expectations. Classmates may boost their own insecurities by bullying others, heaping shame where it is undeserved.

Adults may also find themselves the target of unwarranted criticism from a berating spouse, a heavy-handed supervisor, or a social media troll.

How do we respond to such situations? Retreating into ourselves is often a dead end. Talking to friends or a

counselor can be helpful, but the psalmist looked higher, calling for divine intervention. “In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me,” he prayed, “incline your ear to me and save me” (v. 2). 🇺🇸 The psalmist wanted a solid foundation for security.

Some readers have attributed Psalm 71 to David, despite the lack of a superscription, because the next psalm concludes with “The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended” (Ps. 72:20). David famously hid from Saul in the rocky mountains near En Gedi, but any ancient Israelite would have been familiar with the stark mountains of southern Judah, where caves were common and hiding places many.

Thus, the threatened psalmist prayed “Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.” 🇺🇸 Such a prayer does not enclose us within stone, of course, or wrap us in armor like Ironman. The prayer asks for a firm and resolute heart that stays the course despite what others might say or the obstacles they may put in our way.

Hope and trust (vv. 4-6)

That is not to say that the psalmist does not seek practical and immediate intervention. He prays for rescue “from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel” (v. 4).


Where in our own world do we see people oppressed by others whose actions seem wicked, unjust, or cruel? Could it be desperate immigrants seeking a better life who are separated from their children and held in detention camps at the border? Or could it

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be hard-working, tax-paying residents who suddenly find their legal status revoked so they can be deported?

A person who has been abused or abandoned by an uncaring or addicted partner might pray this prayer, or someone whose reputation has suffered from mean-spirited and unfounded accusations. Can you think of other situations? Have *you* ever felt as put-upon as the psalmist?

When humans fail us, it is good to know that we can put our trust in God for solace and vindication. “For you, O Lord, are my hope,” the psalmist prayed: “my trust, O LORD, from my youth” (v. 5). 

Trusting God is easier when we’ve had practice, and the psalmist claims to have trusted God not only from youth, but also from infancy: “Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother’s womb” (v. 6a).

The psalmist’s claim is not just hyperbole: while babies cannot articulate trust in God specifically, they are utterly unable to care for themselves, and have to trust implicitly in others for sustenance, protection, and comfort. In looking back over his life, the poet believed God had been with him from the very beginning, a present help in time of need, trusted if not yet known.

This thought leads the psalmist to give thanks: “My praise is continually of you” (v. 6b). The quick switch from lament to praise may seem odd, but is common in the psalms of lament, where sorrow and celebration are often intertwined. The latter part of this psalm is a prime example of how such elements are mixed.


Downs and ups (vv. 7-24)

The Revised Common Lectionary text for the day calls for only vv. 1-6 to be

read, perhaps because the full 24 verses would be quite long if read along with all four texts for the day. Verses 1-6 serve as a powerful introduction to the psalm, and we have given them the lion’s share of attention, but for a Bible study, we want more than an introduction.

Beginning with v. 7, the psalm exhibits strong confidence that God will indeed deliver, giving him cause for future praise. The poet understands that his life has an impact on others: “I have been a portent to many,” he says.

Did he think that others saw his past deliverance as a sign of God’s power, or his present distress as an indication of divine wrongdoing, leading them to pile on? The latter seems more likely, for the psalmist insists that God has been his refuge against those who claim that God has forsaken him (v. 11).

Despite threats from enemies who plot against him (v. 10), the psalmist could insist that “My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day long” (v. 8). 

This does not mean the psalmist is home free: his troubles continue. Indeed, v. 9 suggests that accusations against him have persisted into his elder years, as he prays “Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent.”

Sensing his ever-present need, the psalmist pleads for God to hasten to his side (v. 12) and put his accusers to shame, so that the scorn and disgrace he has experienced might fall upon them instead (v. 13).

Verses 14-16 are reminiscent of a vow in which the psalmist asks God for deliverance in response to his trust, then promises to glorify God in return by offering praises “yet more and more” (v. 14), and proclaiming “all day long” (v. 15) that God alone is truly righteous (v. 16).

The next few verses follow the same pattern. The psalmist insists that God has been his teacher from childhood, and that he has continually offered appropriate praise, “even to old age and gray hairs” (vv. 17-18a). He appeals for divine favor by promising that if God proves true and does not forsake him, he can then proclaim God’s mighty power “to all the generations to come” (v. 18b-19).

The psalmist believed that the life God had given him included “many troubles and calamities,” but he also believed that God would engender a revival of both personal spirit and public honor, bringing the comfort he sought (vv. 20-21).

The psalm closes with further testimony. The poet’s promises to “praise you with the harp,” “sing praises to you with the lyre,” and “shout for joy when I sing praises to you” (vv. 22-23) have led some interpreters to think of the psalmist as one of the temple attendants trained both to play and to sing jubilant praises during worship services in the temple.

Whatever his identity, the psalmist closes his prayer with further words of praise and confidence that “those who tried to do me harm have been put to shame, and disgraced” (v. 24). Whether we are to read this as a later addition after the psalmist had been vindicated, or as a statement from one so confident that he could speak of future events as if they had already happened, the psalmist’s absolute trust in God is clear.

Can you think of times when you have sought God’s help, and experienced it? How did you respond? Too often we pray for God’s help but fail to recognize God’s hand in the good things that happen.

The psalmist reminds us that we can be a “portent” to others for good or for ill. What will others learn from you? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*


Feb. 10, 2019

Luke 5:1-11

Going Deep

Do you remember when you made a clear decision to follow Jesus? For people raised in church, the first step might have been easy: trusting Jesus just seemed the normal thing to do. Adults who don't have a church background might find it harder, or at least more momentous, to leave the old life behind and make a firm choice to become a disciple.


Try to recall what it was like for you. What elements went into that decision? Now think about this: How hard would it have been if you were the *first* to make such a decision?

To this point, as Luke tells the story, Jesus followed his baptism and temptation with a period of traveling and teaching with no apparent support or company. Mark's gospel has Jesus calling disciples before the first chapter is ended, but Luke gives readers an opportunity to learn more about Jesus before challenging them, like Simon and the fishermen, to follow him. 

A sermon in a boat (vv. 1-3)

The previous chapter described how Jesus appeared in the synagogue of Nazareth, his hometown. There he declared his mission statement and

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." (Luke 5:4)




implied that he had come in fulfillment of a prophecy from Isa. 61:1-2, but his former neighbors were so offended that they tried to throw him from a cliff (Luke. 4:22-30). 

Jesus managed to slip through the angry crowd and walked the 25 miles or so northwest to Capernaum where he also taught with authority in the synagogue, healed a man, and was more gladly accepted. In fact, Jesus became so popular that it was hard to escape the constant presence of people seeking his touch (Luke 4:37, 42-43). But Jesus was not interested in attracting groupies. This sets the stage for Jesus' call to several persons to follow him in a way that would go beyond fascination and make them models for discipleship.

Simon Peter plays a very prominent, though not always favorable, role in both Luke and Acts, so it is not surprising that his strong personality dominates this story. Note that Luke's account differs somewhat from that in Mark and Matthew, where Jesus appears to have called Peter, James, and John the first time he met them. John 1:35-51 suggests that they had been acquainted earlier, and Luke says plainly that Jesus had not only eaten dinner at Peter's house, but also healed his mother-in-law of a serious fever (4:38-39).

Luke 4:42-44 indicates that Jesus had left Galilee and begun to teach in the synagogues of Judea, 100 miles

or more to the south, but the following story strangely finds him still — or back — in Galilee. Crowds in search of healing pressed so incessantly against Jesus that he had little opportunity for teaching, even though the text insists that 'some among them wanted to know the word of God.'"

As Jesus continued to teach, the crowds continued to grow, and a day came when the people pushed Jesus to the edge of Lake Gennesaret, an alternate name for the Sea of Galilee (v. 1).  With his back to the water and hardly room to breathe, Jesus noticed two boats on the shore. Knowing that one of them belonged to Simon Peter, Jesus called him over and asked permission to teach from his fishing boat. From this floating pulpit he safely and calmly taught the multitude, now gathered around the small bay as if in an outdoor amphitheater (vv. 2-3).  

A miracle in the nets (vv. 4-7)

Surprisingly, after setting up Jesus' sermon-on-the-sea, Luke tells us nothing about what he had to say, only that "he taught the crowds from the boat." Perhaps Luke knew that readers would be more interested in what happened next: after concluding his sermon, Jesus turned away from the crowds and called to Peter, challenging him to "launch out into the deep" and go fishing again (v. 4).

This may have served several purposes: in addition to thanking Peter for the use of his boat by providing fish, Jesus also managed to put some distance between himself and the crowds. In the process, he had a

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quieter opportunity to reveal himself personally to Peter, the “Rock” upon whom so much would depend.

Peter is generally portrayed as the real leader of the disciples. All 12 disciples are listed four times in scripture (Matt. 10:2-4, Mark 3:16-19, Luke 6:14-16, Acts 1:13). In every case, Peter is listed first (and Judas Iscariot last).

Many preachers have taken Jesus’ challenge to Peter as a metaphor for personal evangelism, turning it into a three-point sermon: (1) “Launch out into the deep . . .” (“Take the risk!”), (2) “. . . and let down your nets . . .” (“Share your faith!”), (3) “. . . for a catch . . .” (“Expect results!”).

As attractive as that might be, the story was not about evangelism, but a challenge to faith and obedience. If we grant Luke’s order of events, Peter would have heard Jesus’ teaching and witnessed his healing power. Still, he must have questioned Jesus’ surprising suggestion that they go fishing again, and in deeper water.

Peter was a professional fisherman, and he had already toiled all night, which he must have considered the best time for fishing during that season. Despite his expertise, he had caught nothing, and it may have hurt his pride that Jesus — trained as a *carpenter* — was telling him how to fish.

Yet, Peter obeyed: “If you say so, I will let down the nets” (v. 5). And, as we know, Peter’s faith was rewarded with a miraculous catch, bringing in “so many fish that their nets were beginning to break,” and Peter had to signal for James and John to bring their boat and help them get the haul to shore (vv. 6-7).

Peter’s experience suggests that we might think about what tasks Jesus might be calling us to “launch” into. Could it involve sharing our faith with

a neighbor, learning to control some negative habit, or serving the church or a social ministry in some way? It is not the size of our ability that matters — Jesus didn’t ask Peter how big his net was — but our willingness to use it.

A confession amid the fish (vv. 8-9)

The flabbergasting catch of fish was all Peter needed to put him over the top. Coupled with his previous encounters with Jesus, the experience led Peter to believe that he was in the presence of God himself — or at least God’s earthly representative. The rustic fisherman knelt amid the pungent catch and confessed his sinful nature (v. 8). Many remember Peter for his later denial of Jesus after the crucifixion. Luke shows us that, from the beginning, Peter knew he had a dark side — as we all do.

Since we are also sinful, Peter serves as a fitting model for us. We remember that Isaiah, when confronted by the presence of God, also confessed to his own sinfulness (Isa. 6:1-6). When our sinful human nature comes in contact with God’s holiness, the contrast is obvious.

Luke notes that this miracle made an equally strong impression on “all who were with him” (v. 9). James and John are mentioned by name and called Peter’s “partners” (v. 11). Surprisingly, Peter’s brother Andrew is not named in the story, though we would have expected him to be in the boat with Peter. Jesus offered to his future disciples a teachable moment, and they made the most of it.

Can you remember any spiritually “teachable moments” in your life — particular events or experiences in which you felt the Spirit nudging you toward a greater understanding of or response to Jesus’ call?

A new kind of catch (vv. 10-11)

And how did Jesus manage this moment? He predicted that his follower-friends would no longer catch fish, but people. This would be a major change. Those who catch fish do so in order that the fish may die and the fishermen might be fed or enriched. In contrast, those who “catch” people do so because they have already been “caught” by Jesus, and so the persons they bring into the kingdom might live and *not* die.

In the Old Testament, fishing was sometimes used as a metaphor for gathering people for judgment (Amos 4:2, Hab. 1:14-15, Jer. 16:16). That eschatological theme is not absent from Jesus’ teachings, but the emphasis is more on bringing people into the kingdom of God rather than just gathering them to be judged, as in the parable of the dragnet (Matt. 13:47).

It is notable that Luke records no vocal response from the newly challenged disciples. There is no debating of pros and cons, no private discussion, no pursuit of further information about potential benefits. There is not even a recorded disposition of the net full of fish, the professional gear, or the valuable boats.

The new disciples did not respond with words, but with actions: “When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him” (v. 11). One assumes that there were other family members or hired crew who stayed behind to look after the boats, nets, and fish. For Peter and Andrew, James and John, however, their lives as fishermen were over. They left it all to enroll in Jesus’ traveling school of faith and ministry.

Following Jesus’ call required radical changes in the lives of these four fishermen. If we were to wholeheartedly respond to Jesus’ claim on our lives, what changes might he lead us to make? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 17, 2019

Luke 6:17-26

Finding Joy

Have you ever — ever — thought of poverty as a blessing, hunger as an advantage, or weeping as a door to laughter? Have you imagined riches as a plague, or happiness as a curse? Could it be a bad thing for others to speak well of you?

That's not the way of the world as we know it — it seems completely inside out and upside down. But those who have studied the life and teachings of Jesus are not surprised when Jesus turns customary views on their head.

But why did he see things that way? Why were his teachings so shocking?

Jesus was not simply promoting a different worldview. He had in mind a different world.

Words of power (vv. 17-19)

Today's text comes from Luke's version of Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount," but with significant differences. 🇺🇸 Matthew locates the sermon in a mountain setting, shortly after Jesus called his first four disciples from their nets by the Sea of Galilee.

Luke's shorter version of the sermon is set a bit later, after Jesus took his disciples into the mountains and named the Twelve who would

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. (Luke 6:2)

become known as apostles. Afterward, Jesus "came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon" (v. 17).

Luke finds theology in geography. He thinks of mountains as places of prayer and being close to God. Jesus' descent from the mountain to a level place is an intentional transition from prayerful retreat to active ministry among the people.

On "the level place," Jesus faced three groups of people. In addition to the Twelve, there was a "great crowd of disciples." The term "disciples" suggests that these were people who had seen Jesus' mighty works, heard him teach, and decided to throw in their lot with him — at least for the moment.

Joining the many disciples was a "great multitude of people," others who were curious but not yet committed. Many would have been from Galilee, the northern part of Israel where Jesus was teaching. Luke noted that others came from as far south as Jerusalem and Judea, the southernmost reaches of Israel; and from as far north as Tyre and Sidon, the primary cities of Phoenicia.

Luke demonstrates more interest in Gentiles, women, and the poor than the other gospels. His note that people from Tyre and Sidon were present indicates that non-Jews had also come "to hear him and to be healed of their

diseases" (v. 2). Their journeys must have been successful, for Luke says that "All in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them" (v. 19).

This is an amazing statement: *all* of them were healed. Perhaps we are to imagine that Jesus wanted to deal with the people's pressing physical needs first, so they could focus more easily on the difficult teachings to come. The image also indicates how personally Jesus related to the people, getting down and walking among the crowds so they could touch him.

Words of blessing (vv. 20-23)

Luke marks the beginning of Jesus' teaching with a piercing look: while Matthew said Jesus "opened his mouth" to teach (in the Greek), Luke says he "lifted his eyes to his disciples and said . . ." Jesus didn't just glance up: the point is that he looked at his disciples, making eye contact and talking directly to them.

The remainder of the crowd could also hear: at the close of the sermon Luke notes that Jesus "finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people" (7:1). Nevertheless, Jesus' primary audience was the disciples, and his sermon was not about how to enter the kingdom, but about what life is like for those who have already surrendered to God's rule.

The first part of Jesus' sermon consists of four blessings (vv. 20-23) and four matching woes (vv. 24-26). "Blessed are you who are poor," Jesus said, "for yours is the kingdom of God." The major challenge of discipleship is the willingness to surrender

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everything to follow Jesus. The more possessions one has, the harder it is. Those who are destitute have nowhere else to turn than to God, and the scriptures often attest to God's special care for the poor.

Readers familiar with Matthew's Beatitudes recall that Matthew speaks of those who are "poor in spirit" and who "hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Matt. 5:3, 6). Luke does not equivocate or spiritualize Jesus' words, but speaks of people who are literally poor and hungry.

Jesus had announced his ministry in the Nazareth synagogue by citing Isa. 61:1, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

Unlike the following blessings, which appear to await fulfillment, the poor can rejoice because the kingdom of God is already theirs. They don't have to earn it. For those who cast their lot with Jesus, living close to the belt makes it easier to live close to God. This is why Catholic monks and nuns take vows of poverty: having no possessions to speak of, there is less between them and God.

The theme continues in v. 21, where Jesus pronounced "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled," and "blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Here the blessing lies in the future, but it is sure.

The fourth blessing relates not to one's financial condition, but to social position. Choosing to follow Jesus in a world dominated by other religions — or no religion — could expose followers to ostracism. Jesus pronounced such followers as blessed even "when people hate you, and

when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man" (v. 22).

How could ill treatment of this magnitude become a blessing? A day would come, Jesus said, when the tables would turn. "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets" (v. 23).

Whether "that day" occurs when Christ returns to earth or when the believer dies and returns to Christ, it will be a day of both vindication and rejoicing. But potential joy lies not only in the future: mistreated disciples can take comfort now in knowing that Israel's faithful prophets had received similar treatment when they proclaimed God's way to people who didn't want to hear it.

They would be blessed, not in the world's way, but in God's way.

Words of woe (vv. 24-26)

The reversal of fortunes Jesus declared to poor and oppressed believers finds its counterpoint in a set of matching woes pronounced upon the rich and powerful.

"Woe to you who are rich," Jesus said, "for you have received your consolation" (v. 24). Those who put their trust in worldly wealth may have all they need now, but no amount of money will buy their way into heaven. Elsewhere Jesus spoke of the spiritual handicap that comes with enormous wealth: "Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25, cf. Matt. 19:24, Mark 10:25).

Why is this the case? The more financial security we have and the more self-satisfied we become, the harder it is to put our trust in Jesus, who asks us to give all we have to his

service. We love our money and our stuff too much to put them in jeopardy: generosity can be challenging.

Investing in self rather than God, those who are full face the prospect of emptiness, and those who live for party time will find themselves mourning instead.

Why would others speaking well of you lead to woe? The issue is not having a good reputation or being a person who is worthy of praise. Given that the preceding comments were tied to wealth and self-satisfaction, perhaps what Jesus has in mind is the sort of fame that comes with our modern celebrity culture, when someone's worth may be measured by how many Twitter followers they have or how often they appear in gossip magazines.

False prophets who misled the Israelites received adulation from the crowds, too — but they were praised for the wrong reasons, and their predictions of success despite the people's faithlessness fell flat. 📌

We can't help but observe the sharp contrast between Jesus' teaching and the popular but heretical "prosperity gospel," whose proponents tickle people's ears with the promise of physical health and material riches in return for following Christ — and contributing to their ministries. Such teaching is diametrically opposed to Jesus' warning that wealth and fame can lead to woe.

Few passages in scripture are more challenging than this one — especially to those who are financially comfortable but also seek to be faithful. Jesus doesn't necessarily expect followers to liquidate their assets when they choose his way, but he does expect us to give a higher priority to serving him than to preserving our wealth.

A strong challenge calls for deep introspection. Have you tried it lately? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Feb. 24, 2019

Luke 6:27-38

Being Kind

Children often squabble, and parents or teachers just as often say “Be nice!” Wouldn’t it be a lovely world if everyone was nice, treating others with kindness and consideration? Jesus told his followers that they needed to do more than be nice: they should *love* other people, whether they had any reason to like them or not.

Today’s text follows Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, the subject of last week’s lesson. There Jesus pronounced blessings and promised joy to those who were poor, oppressed, and even mourning. In the verses that follow, Jesus shifted to the subject of love, and turned the popular concept of love inside out.

The call to unselfish love (6:27-31)

Jesus’ command to practice forgiving love takes the form of four imperative statements, following the preceding pattern of four beatitudes (6:20-23) and four “woes” (6:24-26).

It begins with an instruction to “love your enemies” (v. 27a). The word “enemies” calls to mind the Roman soldiers and officials who ruled Palestine in the first century. They were hated by the Jews, making

But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. (Luke 6:27-28)

this an especially radical command.

The ruling Romans were not the only people who could be considered as enemies, however. The poor people Jesus had just addressed suffered from economic oppression or social ostracism from those who were more wealthy, powerful, or popular — even from fellow Jews. Then as now, mistreatment is common and unkind “enemies” are many.

Jesus’ directive raises a question: Can one really command love? If we think of love as a sentimental feeling, the answer must be negative: one can’t force another to feel a certain way. But Christ-like love is not so much a *feeling* as a *choice*. We show love to others because it is right, not because we have a warm feeling toward them. Sometimes we don’t! The command to love our enemies is the central focus of this section: three further imperatives interpret what Jesus means.

Jesus went on to say, “Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (vv. 27b-28). These orders direct the disciple to respond in a way that is the opposite of what the world expects. They are all positive actions toward those who act negatively toward us. The disciples would have remembered Old Testament laws that granted “an eye for an eye,” but Jesus announced a new ethic that went beyond retalia-

tion. Christians are not to return one evil for another, but to meet hostility with kindness, cursing with blessing, abuse with prayer.

In case the disciples did not yet understand, Jesus provided four specific illustrations of how one might demonstrate active, unselfish love — even toward abusive persons. Insults are hard to take, and many fights have begun with a single ugly word. Few insults could be more provocative than a slap on the cheek. How should the Christian respond to such an affront?


Human nature might lead one to strike back, but Jesus insisted we should do the opposite of what is expected. To offer the other cheek also (v. 29a) is not the response of a “wimp,” but of a strong person who seizes the initiative through a positive, loving action.


Jesus cited another case: if someone were to take the disciple’s outer coat, he or she should offer their shirt as well (v. 29b). This would cause any thief to stop and think, for such radically unexpected behavior would confront the abusive person with a display of genuine love.

Two further examples are given in v. 30. The disciple shows unselfish love by freely sharing with those who beg, and not seeking the return of goods taken by others. We may think of situations where this does not seem the wise course of action — times when handouts may not be the best course of action, or when it is appropriate to recover stolen property. But, Jesus intentionally made “over the top” statements to indicate the radical kind of generosity believers are to show, without qualifications.

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Jesus then built on the previous commands and illustrations with a summary statement that we often call the “Golden Rule”: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (v. 31). 

Matthew’s version of Jesus’ command echoes the same thought: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). 

If disciples could only love as Jesus loved and commanded, the summation of God’s revealed teaching through the years would be fulfilled in their lives.

The reward of unselfish love (6:32-36)

Do you think of yourself as characteristically loving and kind? Many persons imagine themselves as “loving people” because they are kind to their friends, but Jesus challenges us to go much further and show active love to all — even to our enemies.

In vv. 32-36, Jesus offered three illustrations of “loving” actions based on a lesser standard, the rule of reciprocity. One could “love those who love you . . . do good to those who do good to you . . . and lend to those who from whom you hope to receive” (vv. 32, 33, 34), but still fall short of Christ-like love.

Even sinful people are likely to interact positively with those who do things for them. In the Gospels, the word “sinners” often referred to ordinary Jewish people who did not follow the Law as strictly as the Pharisees, but it could have a broader meaning. The point is that anyone can show love to those who love them back, but there is no reward, or credit, in that.

The Greek word translated as “credit” is the same word that means “grace” (*charis*). “What credit is that to you?” (vv. 32, 33, 34) means “Where is

the grace in such an arrangement?”

Grace is God’s unmerited love shown to undeserving people. To demonstrate Christ-like love is to display God-like grace: showing love to people who do not deserve it. This kind of love is not motivated by the goodness or beauty or kindness of the other, but *chooses* to show goodness and beauty even to those whose actions are mean and ugly.

Unselfish love does not seek recompense, but it does receive a reward, Jesus said. “But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return” restates the command first given in v. 27, and is followed by a surprising promise: “Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked” (v. 35).

It may seem problematic or unexpected that Jesus would encourage unselfish behavior by the promise of a reward, but the solution is found in the nature of the prize: “you will be children of the Most High.”

For the Christian, the greatest reward of all is to become Christ-like, to bear the image of Christ’s love, to be called the true children of God. We are most like Christ when we love as God loves, and “he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked” — who may, at times, include us.

The command in v. 36 is really another restatement of the basic point: Christian disciples are called to demonstrate love through patient forgiveness. “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” The word translated “merciful” is an especially forceful term, indicating a deep level of compassion for others. Matthew (5:48) uses the word “perfect” instead of “merciful.” When we show true mercy, we are most “perfectly” like God.

Living in this way may seem

counterintuitive to us. Our society is built on the premise that all people have certain rights, and our culture teaches us to insist on our rights at every opportunity. Sometimes, however, demanding our “rights” is an exercise in selfishness that ignores the needs of others.

The love shown by Jesus is seen most graphically when we *don’t* demand our rights, but are willing to endure personal injustice and still offer forgiveness, absorbing the pain for the sake of the one who caused it.

Jesus approached the issue from another angle in vv. 37-38. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged;” Jesus said: “Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (v. 37).

This is no guarantee that every person we encounter will be forgiving or nonjudgmental: others can be hateful even when we are kind. It *does* promise that God will be forgiving, and will not condemn us.

Jesus’ command is a reminder that we should always approach others with grace. We don’t know what other people have been through in their lives, or what they are dealing with at any given moment. We don’t know what has made them as hard or unforgiving as they are. Sometimes we may feel judgmental toward someone for their actions, only to feel ashamed when we later learn their situation. It is better to treat everyone with grace and kindness, whether they treat us in the same way or not.

Those who dare to follow Jesus’ teachings reflect God’s grace and live out the truth of the gospel. This has life-changing effects, not only on the offender, but also for the Christian. As we practice redemptive love, even at the cost of suffering, we experience what it means to be like Christ, “children of the Most High.” **NFJ**

CLASSIFIEDS

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Here's a look at the texts and topics for 2019.

Epiphany

What Are We Praying For?

Jan. 6, 2019

Psalm 72

A Prayer for Justice

Jan. 13, 2019

Psalm 29

A Prayer for Peace

Jan. 20, 2019

Psalm 36

A Prayer for Love

Jan. 27, 2019

Psalm 19

A Prayer for Goodness

Feb. 3, 2019

Psalm 71

A Prayer for Deliverance

Not Your Typical Teacher

Feb. 10, 2019

Luke 5:1-11

Going Deep

Feb. 17, 2019

Luke 6:17-26

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Feb. 24, 2019

Luke 6:27-38
Being Kind

Mar. 3, 2019

Luke 9:28-43
Climbing Higher

Lent

Deliberate Devotion

March 10, 2019

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
A Joyous Confession

March 17, 2019

Genesis 15:1-21
A Hair-Raising Prediction

March 24, 2019

Isaiah 55:1-9
A Stunning Invitation

March 31, 2019

Joshua 5:1-12
A Cutting Reaffirmation

Purposeful Love

April 7, 2019

John 12:1-8
The Scent of Love

April 14, 2019

Luke 22:14-23:56
Of Passion and Pain

Easter

April 21, 2019

John 20:1-8
Best. News. Ever.

Resurrection Realities

April 28, 2019

Acts 5:27-32
First Allegiance

May 5, 2019

Acts 9:1-20
Blind Devotion

May 12, 2019

Acts 9:36-43
Shocking Faith

May 19, 2019

Acts 11:1-18
Stunned Silence

May 26, 2019

Acts 16:9-15
Eager Acceptance

June 2, 2019

Acts 16:16-34
Doubled Deliverance

Pentecost

June 9, 2019

Genesis 11:1-9
What Did You Say?

Season After Pentecost

June 16, 2019

Romans 5:1-5
Imaginary Numbers

On the Road with Jesus

June 23, 2019

Luke 8:26-39
A Bad Day for Pigs

June 30, 2019

Luke 9:51-62
A Hard Row to Hoe

July 7, 2019

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
A Mission Trip to Remember

July 14, 2019

Luke 10:25-37
A Wonder on the Road

July 21, 2019

Luke 10:38-42
A Better Way to Go

July 28, 2019

Luke 11:1-13
A Good Way to Pray

Aug. 4, 2019

Luke 12:13-21
An Investment Gone Bad

Aug. 11, 2019

Luke 12:32-40
A Word to the Wise

Aug. 18, 2019

Luke 12:49-56
A Really Sharp Word

Aug. 25, 2019

Luke 13:10-17
A Straight-up Answer

Sept. 1, 2019

Luke 14:1-14
A Way to the Top

Choices That Matter

Sept. 8, 2019

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Make the Right Choice!

Sept. 15, 2019

Jeremiah 4:11-28
Delay and You'll Pay

Sept. 22, 2019

Jeremiah 8:18-9:3
Go on and Grieve

Sept. 29, 2019

Jeremiah 32:1-15
Never Give Up

Oct. 6, 2019

Habakkuk 1:1-2:4
Faith for Hard Days

Oct. 13, 2019

Jeremiah 29:1-9
An Unlikely Garden

Oct. 20, 2019

Jeremiah 31:27-34
A Surprising New Start

Oct. 27, 2019

Joel 2:23-32
A Harvest to Remember

All Saints Day

Nov. 3, 2019

Ephesians 1:11-23
At Home with the Saints

Random Readings

Nov. 10, 2019

Luke 20:27-38
Trick Questions

Nov. 17, 2019

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Right Things

Nov. 24, 2019

Colossians 1:11-20
Blown Minds

Advent

Dec. 1, 2019

Isaiah 2:1-5
When Soldiers Plow

Dec. 8, 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10
When Stumps Sprout

Dec. 15, 2019

Isaiah 35:1-10
When Sorrow Flees

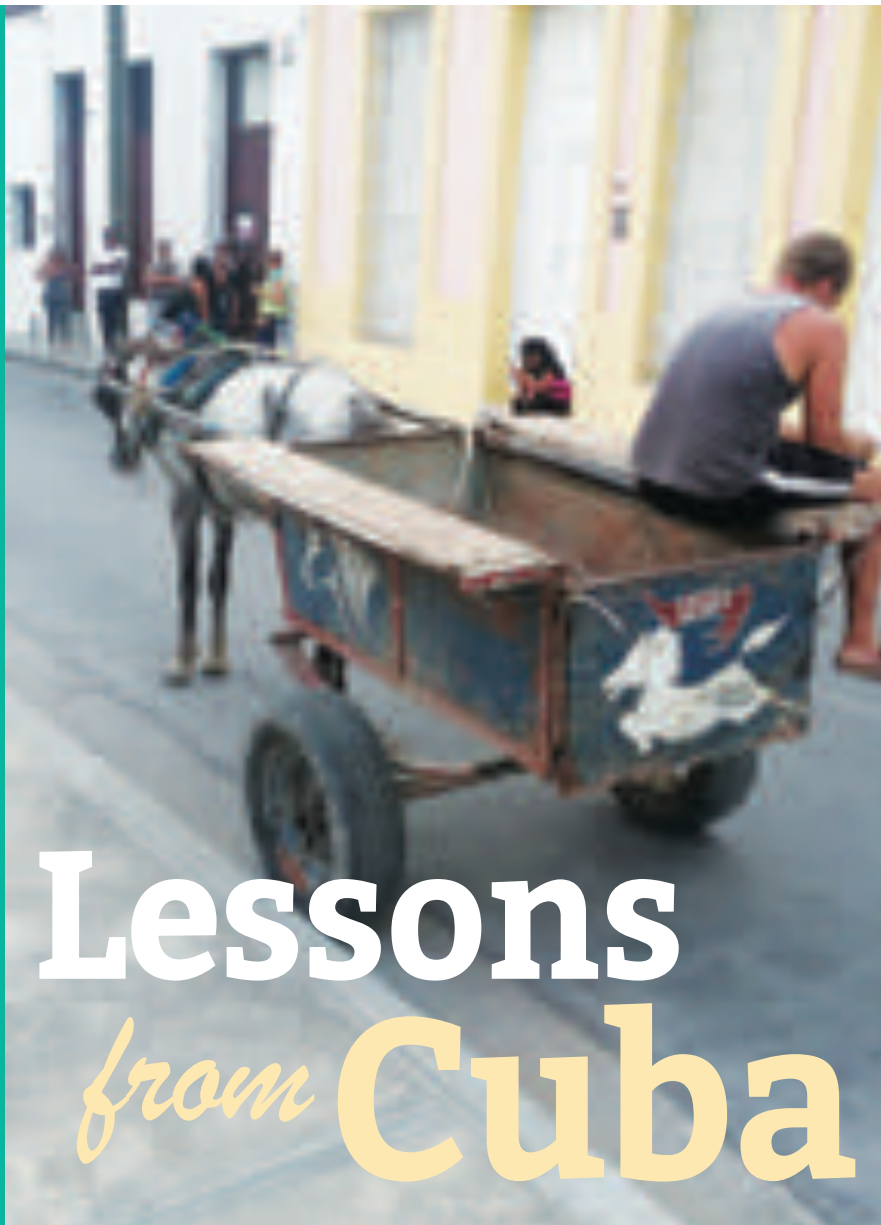
Dec. 22, 2019

Isaiah 7:10-16
When a Son Astounds

Christmas

Dec. 29, 2019

Isaiah 63:7-19
When Prayer Makes Bold



Lessons from Cuba

Church leaders model how adaptive change requires a visionary spirit

BY TIMOTHY BONNER

The visionary spirit of innovation is alive in Cuba. The Eastern Baptist Convention (*Convencion Bautista de Cuba Oriental*), based in Santiago de Cuba, has opened 40 new churches in the past two years.

How are they doing that when the Christian church in the U.S. is declining?

The Cuban economy rebounded from the Russians abandoning Cuba in the early 1990s and has stabilized after 10 years of desperate struggle. There is no one starving in Cuba today, and all but the most remote

areas have electricity.

Our bilingual guide, Pastor Joey, joked that Cubans eat two meals per day: In the morning they eat beans and rice. In the evening they eat rice and beans.

All households get a ration of those foods monthly, along with sugar and flour. However, I observed that many people live in extreme poverty by American standards.

Most do not own nor have access to an automobile. Horse-powered travel along with walking and hitching rides were everywhere in the eastern provinces we visited after landing in Holguin.

The most frequent question asked by my American friends was, “Aren’t they all

Catholics in Cuba?”

It is true that 85 percent of the Cuban population identifies as Catholic. What that really means, however, is they were baptized in the Catholic Church as infants.

Only 15 percent of that 85 percent remains active in the church as adults. That represents 12 percent of the population. Demographics of Cuba indicate that active Christians make up only 15 percent of the population. Protestants are a small minority in an atheistic culture.

Eastern Baptist Convention pastors are doing very effective evangelistic work. They said repeatedly, “We preach the Bible — and the word of God changes lives!”

Examples of their outreach, resulting in people making lifestyle changes, include addressing alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution, stealing and other crimes. In response, Cubans are turning to these churches for acceptance, direction and guidance.

Churches organize small groups called “cells” that meet at least once during the week for Bible study and prayer in homes. Also, each church has “missionaries” who are sent into outlying areas to start new house churches.

Pastor Joey’s church has 46 members and sponsors five missionaries. The pastor is the supervisor and mentor for the missionaries.

To be an official church, there must be an ordained pastor (with a four-year seminary degree), a minimum of 21 members and their own leadership group, and have government permission — which can be very difficult.

To be a “member” of the church, one must be baptized (after six weeks of Christian education), participate regularly in a weekly study/prayer group (cell) for one year, and get confirmed by the church. Convention leaders have worked intently on church growth after setting it as their main strategic plan 10 years ago.

When asked what Christian leaders wanted us to know about them, Pastor Eduardo said:

“One, we try to preserve historic Baptist principles by teaching the Bible. We want the church to have a genuine desire to follow the word of God.

“Two, the church is growing by the grace of God, not by us. We cannot even preach in the open like you can or use the media of radio and television. It is despite the government trying to keep us from growing. God continues to open doors for us.

“Three, having North Americans come along and work with us helps open doors, too. We need more space to do our work. Most churches have people turned away every Sunday because there is no room for them in the church (and they can’t get close enough to see or hear the service). Our Sunday school classes mostly meet in homes because we don’t have space. And finally, we need help with more teachers and materials for our summer programs (day camps) for children.”

In addition to biblical preaching, spiritual formation comes from experiential learning along with worship, prayer and Bible study.

Pastor Joey said: “When I get up, I pray to God to help me, my family and my church to do what he wants us to do. I leave my house and pray that I don’t get robbed and can get a ride to where I need to go. When I get a ride and get where I’m going, I thank God and ask him to help me find the people who need the church and to help me say what he wants me to say. I work with the people there, and then I must find a way back. I pray for God’s blessing to find a ride and not get beat up or robbed. When I get a ride, I tell them about my church and how good God is. I invite them to come and to tell their friends and relatives to come too. When I get back, I thank God for all he has given me that day. At home I get with my family and we pray for all the church members and all I have contacted.”

In addition to not owning a car, Pastor Joey lives in a risky environment that we would call a slum here. His church is one room, no bigger than most living rooms in middle-class America. Several churches we visited met on the patio of a home, and one met under a big tree.

Joey told us, “I don’t need an office; give me the streets!”

His family of four lives in a four-room townhouse, and all the rooms are small. His salary is equivalent to \$20 per month, and

he does not have a second job. Yet, Pastor Joey is one of the most joyful persons I have ever met.

Pastors in Cuba said they know the government has spies and that some are probably members of the churches. The one-party government is socialist, not communist. Party membership is not mandatory, and since 1991 the government has not required members to be atheists.

“You get better services — medical and educational — if you are a member,” said one pastor. “I see it as like paying taxes.” However, another pastor said, “I am never going to pay them anything!”

Where churches are alive and growing, the government knows it can’t stop them, the pastors said — although it has tried many times. Church leaders showed us their actions are based on faith, courage and the perspective of abundance with gratitude.

Cuba allows some free enterprise for small businesses. Private ownership of homes is permitted, and people can raise and sell food crops for humans or livestock, sell prepared food out of their homes (patio restaurants) or rent rooms.

“Home” seems to be where freedom is tolerated most. For government approval, churches must have a kitchen, bedroom and bathroom, which basically make them into homes.

Public education through high school is free in Cuba, with females educated alongside males. However, there were no female students in the seminary we visited or female pastors of churches. Hardly any women were seen driving cars or horse-drawn carriages or riding motorcycles or bicycle taxis.

Although women are not allowed

to be pastors, they are expected to be lay leaders — and a vital part of most of the 13 churches we visited. Bill Wilson of the Center for Healthy Churches concluded: “Their cars are mostly from the 1950s, and so is their theology.”

We left Cuba with more questions than when we arrived. We found Cuban culture to be very different, with virtually everyone walking to church or, if in the city, riding in the back of a flatbed truck they call a bus. Thus, their churches fit the parish model.

Perhaps U.S. churches need to focus more on integration with our neighborhoods. Do we focus too much on acquiring real estate for country-club-like churches? How might we be better evangelists?

Cuban church leaders fear the rapid changes they know are coming. One pastor said his teen sons have video games now and would rather play them than participate in family prayer or Bible study.

Time in Cuba taught me that effective leadership for adaptive change requires a visionary spirit with conscious intention for long-range planning, collaboration, prayer and empathy — the ability to hear, speak and lead from the heart.

It requires healthy relationships — with God and other persons. Engaging the power of change is a matter of perspective. The entrepreneurial perspective is an open mindset coupled with visioning for social innovations. It is the ability to see things from above. **NFJ**

—*Timothy Bonner participated in an educational visit to Cuba with his D. Min. cohort from Central Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kan., and staff from Churchmet in Jefferson City, Mo.*



Herbert Hoover (1929–1933)

By Bruce Gourley

It was a great time to be rich.

In a decade characterized by soaring wealth inequality, stock prices shot upward a record 39 percent in 1928. Large corporations, benefiting from few regulations and declining labor unions, reaped huge profits and paid low taxes.

The top income tax rate stood at 25 percent, far below the 73 percent rate at the beginning of the decade. Middle-class Americans also benefited, but at a cost.

For primarily white city dwellers, with skills and/or education, their income and consumption moved upward. Purchasing houses, automobiles and household appliances, they enjoyed a good life financed by mounting consumer debt.

While the rich partied and middle-class debt ballooned, discontent simmered among the majority of Americans — the poor, many of whom were rural farmers or urban minorities. Largely unskilled persons, their average weekly earnings hovered near or below those of five years earlier.

Republican President Calvin Coolidge, engineer of the economic boom, enjoyed high approval ratings among the middle and upper classes, citizens more likely to vote than poor whites and minorities.

Upon Coolidge's decision to not seek reelection in 1928, a scramble for the Republican Party's presidential nomination ensued. Among nine contenders, Herbert Hoover, sitting U.S. Secretary of Commerce, emerged as the party's candidate. In November he handily won the presidency.

Born in West Branch, Iowa, in 1874 to a blacksmith who also owned a farm implement store, Hoover became the first



president from west of the Mississippi, and remains the only president hailing from Iowa.

His parents were prominent Quakers in the local community, and both died before Herbert's 10th birthday. He spent his remaining childhood years with various relatives, first in Iowa, then in Oregon.

Remaining on the West Coast, a young Herbert enrolled in newly established Stanford University and majored in geology. Upon graduation he worked as a geologist and engineer for mining firms in California and Australia. From his managerial perch he opposed labor movements and criticized minimum wages and workers' compensation.

Returning to the states to marry his college sweetheart, Lou Henry, the couple soon departed for distant shores,

where Hoover worked in China and other nations for mining conglomerates and as an entrepreneur. By 1908 he had gained enough success, experience and renown in the industry to recast himself as a leading mining consultant on the global scene.

In addition, Hoover lectured part time on the subject of mining. A series of lectures delivered at Columbia and Stanford universities were published in a book, *Principles of Mining*. The volume became a standard university textbook.

During this time Hoover's views on labor swung leftward in tandem with the progressive bent of national politics. As did other progressives, he embraced eight-hour workdays and organized labor.

Independently wealthy by the age of 40, Hoover turned to public service during the Great War (World War I).

Working on behalf of the American government, he successfully led a succession of relief agencies abroad during and after the war, including the U.S. Food Administration, an agency charged with providing food to the U.S. armies and allies overseas. His efforts were credited with saving millions of lives.

Among the most prominent and powerful Americans in immediate post-war Europe, Hoover accepted an appointment by Democratic President Woodrow Wilson as a U.S. delegate at the peace conference in Versailles. From his international experience, Hoover cautioned against harsh reparations for Germany and intervention in Russia.

Throughout this period Hoover, a political moderate who had long worked both sides of the aisle, publicly aligned with the

This is the 31st article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, online editor and contributing writer for Nurturing Faith Journal, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.

Republican Party. In doing so he indicated his willingness to accept the party's presidential nomination in 1920. Perhaps his affiliation with Republicans came about in part due to a belief that the Democrats would not be able to win the coming presidential election.

Despite Hoover's national and international experience and name recognition, Republican Party leaders viewed him with caution, and he was not chosen for the nomination.

Even so, Republican Warren Harding, upon winning the presidency, offered Hoover the position of Secretary of Commerce. Hoover accepted the offer and for the next eight years, under Presidents Harding and Coolidge, competently led the department from a pro-business, conservative mindset.

His accomplishments as Secretary of Commerce included establishing a closer relationship between government and business interests, allowing corporations a large voice in crafting business regulations. He also played a prominent role in the development of early air travel, as well as in shepherding automakers, state governments and local municipalities to develop regulations designed to reduce the high rate of automobile casualties.

Hoover's extensive experience and prominence in the corporate, public and government spheres amid a booming economy led to an overwhelming 1928 presidential victory in which he carried all but six states.

Religion played a prominent role in Hoover's victory, but not directly on his part. His presidential opponent, Democrat Al Smith, angered many Protestants on two fronts: his vow to repeal prohibition, and his Catholic faith.

Hoover, the first Quaker candidate yet publicly non-religious, from a position of strength refrained from overtly attacking his opponent on issues of religion and alcohol. Meanwhile, his surrogates actively stoked fears of Smith's Catholicism and spread rumors that the Democrat was a drunk, effectively delivering many anti-Smith votes.

Of the presidential contest, Hoover declared "the religious issue" the "worst

plague" of the campaign season. In his Republican Party nomination acceptance speech on August 11 he noted that from his Quaker roots, seeped in religious persecution, he stood for "religious tolerance both in act and in spirit. The glory of our American ideals is the right of every man to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience."

Hoover's wording of religious "tolerance" in the free exercise of religion, couched in the context of an era of nationalistic Protestant dominance in America, fell short of the principle of equal religious freedom for all guaranteed by government neutrality to religion enshrined in the nation's First Amendment and voiced by most presidents until the late 19th century.

Despite the religious friction evident in the election contest, Hoover won the presidency at a time when Republican and Democratic leaders alike, following years of national prosperity, were largely in agreement on maintaining prosperity by further lowering taxes on the one hand, while simultaneously increasing restrictions on immigration, the latter to assuage public fears of immigrants taking jobs away from Americans.

The president-elect felt pressured to maintain prosperity. In December 1928, one month after his victory, he presciently mused: "My friends have made the American people think me a sort of superman.... They expect the impossible of me and should there arise in the land conditions with which the political machinery is unable to cope I will be the one to suffer."

Despite his pro-business mindset, and perhaps fearful of the possibility of economic calamity, President Hoover at times spoke in seemingly progressive tones. In his inaugural address he declared, "We want to see a nation built of homeowners and farm owners. We want to see more and more of them insured against death and accident, unemployment and old age. We want them all secure."

"All," in reality, referred to whites only. America's black citizens felt neglected by Hoover. The president's policies did little to advance the economic fortune of blacks, even as Hoover quickly purged blacks

from many leadership positions within the Republican Party in order to appease southern white Republicans.

African-American civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois and many other black leaders bitterly perceived Hoover as a blatant racist. President Hoover's legislation and policies, to be certain, did specifically benefit middle- and upper-class whites, while at the same time advancing his corporatist agenda.

For example, Hoover canceled private oil leases on public lands not from environmental concerns, but to prop up the price of oil. He oversaw the addition of three million acres of national parks land and more than two million acres of national forests, but only partially for conservation purposes, as his vision of federal lands gravitated to recreational purposes (parks) and extractive industries and logging (other federal lands).

Certain other accomplishments were considered more uniformly progressive, including the creation of the Veterans Administration and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Nonetheless, two days defined the Hoover presidency — October 28 and 29, 1929 — when in the space of 48 hours a decade of national prosperity suddenly and spectacularly imploded as some 30 billion dollars of wealth disappeared in an unprecedented stock market collapse.

President Hoover's response to the financial disaster did little to reassure the American public. Policies of beefed-up government partnerships with businesses, appeals to individual hard work, calls for charities to help the needy, and a refusal to use federal funds to alleviate growing poverty pleased corporations but alienated tens of millions of citizens.

The president's feeble measures proved far too little. Unemployment climbed and stocks spiraled further downward.

In an effort to deflect personal blame, Hoover accused Mexicans of causing the financial crisis. By doing so he tapped into existing popular sentiment that Mexicans took jobs from Americans and depended on public assistance.

From 1930 to 1936 Hoover's Mexican Repatriation, a mass deportation of

Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, resulted in the removal of hundreds of thousands from the U.S.

In June 1930 Congress passed and Hoover signed the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, raising fees on thousands of imports. Intended to promote the purchase of American products by Americans, the measure instead led to many nations raising tariffs on American products, resulting in the reduction of international trade.

Crop surpluses grew and commodity prices plunged, but impoverished city dwellers had little means of accessing or purchasing the abundant, cheap food. Farmers burned corn for fuel while millions in cities lined up at soup kitchens. Many farmers declared bankruptcy.

One year later, in the face of rapidly rising unemployment, Hoover created the President's Organization for Unemployment Relief. The agency's name belied the reality that it provided no funding to assist jobless citizens.

Instead, the organization merely sought to coordinate efforts among local relief agencies. Doomed from the beginning due to its refusal to provide monetary aid to relief agencies, the federal organization closed less than a year later.

President Hoover, meanwhile, rarely spoke of his religious convictions. But on Oct. 9, 1930, against the backdrop of the ongoing financial meltdown and to an audience in South Carolina, he argued that capitalism served to further public religion.

"I cannot conceive of a wholesome social order or a sound economic system that does not have its roots in religious faith," declared Hoover.

"Economic aspiration," he insisted, is "one of many instruments to accomplish the profound purposes of the American people, which are largely religious in nature." Almost in one breath, the president positioned religion as the roots of capitalism, and, conversely, capitalism as a root of religion.

Hoover's religious faith, however, precluded government intervention on behalf of the needy. While the president relentlessly refused to assist penniless Americans, homeless families began build-

ing shantytowns in major cities across America.

Known as "Hoovervilles," they were made out of cardboard, tarpaper, lumber, tin and various other scraps that could be found. Some were nothing more than big holes dug in the ground. Unpleasant and unsanitary, the crowded shantytowns grimly visualized widespread abject poverty and desperation in a nation once prosperous.

And still the president, advocating for capitalism and warning that government assistance to families would harm individualism, refused to allocate federal monies to assist his nation's most destitute citizens. To the contrary, on multiple occasions from 1930 to 1932 he vetoed bills that would have provided federal relief to Americans victimized and left penniless by the excesses of capitalism.

"My friends have made the American people think me a sort of superman.... They expect the impossible of me and should there arise in the land conditions with which the political machinery is unable to cope, I will be the one to suffer."

At the same time, Hoover angered suffering Americans all the more upon his creation of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a government program that channeled billions of dollars to bail out faltering banks, railroads and corporations.

Ironically, Hoover's refusal to direct federal resources to assist the needy during a time of farm commodity abundance stood in stark contrast to an earlier position on humanitarian relief. While in France on Feb. 4, 1919, working with the Woodrow Wilson administration to feed hungry citizens in distant European nations during World War I, Herbert Hoover in a letter to Wilson argued that "There is no right in the law of God or man that we should longer continue to starve people now that we have

a surplus of food."

However, when American citizens needed help from their government in obtaining food, President Hoover stood by idly. Criticized by the poor and middle class alike, he could not even find refuge in his favorite place: baseball stadiums. An avid fan of baseball, he frequently attended games, often enduring the boos of irate Americans during the Depression.

Often referencing baseball in speech and written words, Hoover once declared: "Baseball is the greatest of all team sports." Of the significance of baseball, he enthusiastically insisted that, "Next to religion, baseball has furnished a greater impact on American life than any other institution."

Meanwhile, a downturn in tax income due to the Depression threatened to create a federal deficit. With no other viable options, Hoover turned away from tax cuts and enacted tax increases. Corporate taxes inched up to 13.75 percent from 12 percent, top individual income tax rates soared from 25 percent to 63 percent, and the estate tax doubled.

Some of the new revenue bolstered the federal bailout of banks and corporations. Bankrupt Americans received nothing.

A climax arrived in the spring of 1932, a presidential election year, when tens of thousands of destitute World War I veterans from throughout the nation, along with families and friends, converged in Washington, D.C., to petition early payment of bonuses promised by the government for military service.

Radio stations and newspapers covered the developing story as the veterans created a Hooverville, eventually named Camp Mark, in the city. The needy men who had once served their country on foreign battlefields became known as the Bonus Army.

Sympathetic local citizens provided Camp Mark residents with the limited food and medical assistance they could afford. Veterans spent weeks lobbying their representatives in Congress. Allies in Congress brought a bill to the floor. The House of Representatives passed the legislation, but the Senate voted it down.

Still, many veterans refused to move from Camp Mark and remained insistent in

their demands. As the conflict transfixed the nation, Republican and Democratic party leaders alike selected their candidates for the upcoming presidential election.

Despite national economic calamity and the tense standoff with military veterans, Republicans gave the nod to Hoover to run for a second term. Democrats, meanwhile, turned to a long-time progressive and party leader who advocated for government intervention to assist Americans harmed by the Great Depression: Franklin D. Roosevelt, the governor of New York and a distant cousin of former progressive Republican President Theodore Roosevelt.

With the presidential candidates selected, the continued presence of the veterans' Hooverville raised the political stakes all the higher. Bruce Barton, the Christian capitalist and marketing executive who in the 1920s helped enable Coolidge's corporatist presidency while re-imagining Jesus as a modern businessman (see "Religion and the American Presidents: Calvin Coolidge," *Nurturing Faith Journal*, November/December 2018), wrote to Hoover and implored the president to force the veterans to leave the nation's capital.

Living conditions at Camp Mark deteriorated. Desperation and tempers reached fever pitch. Facing no good options, Hoover finally ordered U.S. troops to evict the veterans. Led by Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur and enforced by tanks in the city streets, troops burned Camp Mark to the ground, the conflagration painting the night sky red. Resorting to violence, the military forces drove the veterans out of Washington.

The Bonus Army debacle seared the nation's conscience, drawing widespread criticism and condemnation. Democratic presidential candidate Roosevelt denounced Hoover's lack of humanity and conscience with the retort, "There is nothing inside the man but jelly!"

Against the backdrop of spiraling unemployment and homelessness, the spectacle and tragedy of Camp Mark and the Bonus Army cemented President Hoover's downfall.

On the campaign trail Hoover repeated his belief that the government should not



Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt in convertible automobile en route to the U.S. Capitol for Roosevelt's inauguration, March 4, 1933

intervene to stop the Depression, while expressing confidence that capitalism and hard work would eventually return the country to prosperity.

Hoover's words fell largely on deaf ears. Hostile crowds greeted him as he traveled. Eggs and rotten fruit rained down on his train and automobile caravan. Hecklers frequently interrupted his speeches.

To no one's surprise, Roosevelt easily defeated Hoover. Having overwhelmingly captured the presidency four years earlier, Hoover's defeat in 1932 was even more lopsided. Carrying only six states, garnering less than 40 percent of the popular vote and barely topping 10 percent of the electoral votes, Hoover's defeat signaled the end of more than a decade of Republican corporatist reign in the White House.

Embittered in defeat, for the remainder of the Great Depression years Hoover repeatedly attacked Roosevelt's progressive New Deal policies that provided federal assistance to impoverished Americans as socialist.

In October 1933, mere months after Roosevelt took office, in a letter to Christian capitalist Bruce Barton, the former president voiced his hatred of Roosevelt's policies of using federal money to relieve poverty.

Without evidence he declared,

"The country is going sour on the New Deal, despite the heroic efforts of the Press." Expressing fear that the nation was swinging to the "left," Hoover lamented that America "will drive into some interpretation of Hitler or Mussolini."

Five years later Hoover visited Adolf Hitler in Germany during a 1938 tour of Europe on the eve of America's entry into World War II. Although voicing his opposition to the persecution of Jews and criticizing Nazism, Hoover did not perceive Hitler as a threat to western Europe or the United States. Instead, Hoover maintained that Roosevelt, contemplating entry into the war in opposition to Hitler and possibly as an ally with Stalin's communists, posed the bigger threat to world peace.

Hoover's hopes of again running for president never materialized, and for the remainder of his life he criticized Roosevelt and the New Deal. Hoover spent much of his time writing, and produced many books, including three volumes of memoirs.

In addition, he served in minor government positions under presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Upon his death on Oct. 20, 1964 at the age of 90, he had lived longer than any president except John Adams.

Hoover remained a Quaker throughout his life. As president and when in Washington, he and his wife, Lou Henry, attended services at the Florida Avenue Meeting House of the Friends in Washington, a worship house constructed shortly after Hoover became president. Upon his death, the former president's body was buried in his hometown.

"As some 75,000 mourners stood in silent tribute," the *New York Times* in a dateline of Oct. 25, 1964 declared, "Herbert Clark Hoover was buried today in a grassy knoll overlooking the two-room cottage where he was born 90 years and 76 days ago. The simple, graveside ceremony reflected the Quaker faith of the 31st president of the United States."

Simple as his faith and burial may have been, Hoover's chief presidential legacy is a story of how the excesses of unfettered capitalism, blessed by religion, can destroy millions of lives and cripple nations. **NFJ**

Clergywomen numbers increased significantly in two decades

BY ADELLE M. BANKS

Religion News Service

The share of women in the ranks of American clergy has doubled — and sometimes tripled — in some denominations over the last two decades, a new report shows.

“I was really surprised in a way, at how much progress there’s been in 20 years,” said the report’s author, Eileen Campbell-Reed, an associate professor at Central Baptist Theological Seminary’s campus in Nashville, Tenn. “There’s kind of a circulating idea that, oh well, women in ministry has kind of plateaued and there really hasn’t been lot of growth. And that’s just not true.”

The two traditions with the highest percentages of women clergy were the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ, according to the “State of Clergywomen in the U.S.,” released in 2018.

Fifty-seven percent of UUA clergy were women in 2017, while half of clergy in the UCC were female in 2015. In 1994, women constituted 30 percent of UUA clergy and 25 percent of UCC clergy.

UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray credits the increase to a decision by her denomination’s General Assembly in 1970 to call for more women to serve in ministry and policymaking roles. She noted that as of 2018, 60 percent of UUA clergy are women.

“All that work in the ’70s and ’80s made it possible for me, in the early 2000s, to come into ministry and be successful and lead thriving churches,” said Frederick-Gray, “and now be the first woman minister elected to the UUA presidency.”

Campbell-Reed and a research assistant gathered clergywomen statistics that

had not been collected across 15 denominations for two decades.

Barbara Brown Zikmund, co-author of the 1998 book *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling*, welcomed the new report as a way to start closing the gap in the research.

“While the experiences of women and the evolution of church life and leadership have changed dramatically over the past two decades, there have been no comprehensive studies on women and church leadership,” she said.

Campbell-Reed’s research found a tripling of percentages of clergywomen in the Assemblies of God, the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America between 1994 and 2017.

But Campbell-Reed also found that clergywomen — with the exception of Unitarian Universalists — continue to lag behind clergymen in leading their churches. In the UCC, for example, female and male clergy are equal in number, but only 38 percent of UCC pastors are women.

Campbell-Reed noted that clergywomen of color “remain a distinct minority” in most mainline denominations. Those who have risen to leadership in the top echelons of their religious groups, she said, have done so after long years of service.

“Some of them are also being recognized for their contributions and their work, like any other person who’s got longevity and wisdom, by being elected as bishops in their various communions,” she said of denominations such as the United Methodist Church and the ELCA.

Campbell-Reed also pointed out the role of women who serve churches despite being barred from pastoral positions in congregations of the country’s two largest denominations, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Roman Catholic Church.

Former Southern Baptist women

like herself have joined the pastoral staffs of breakaway groups such as the Alliance of Baptists, which have women serving as pastors in 40 percent of their congregations. And Catholic women constitute 80 percent of lay ecclesial ministers, who “are running the church on a day-to-day basis,” she said.

Patricia Mei Yin Chang, another co-author of *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling*, said the new statistics prompt questions about the meaning behind them, such as changing attitudes of congregations or decreases in male clergy.

“Those are two really different causes and they may differ across denominations,” she said.

Campbell-Reed, whose 20-page report concludes with two pages of questions for seminaries, churches, researchers and theologians, said she thinks the answers about the often-difficult job hunt for clergywomen relate to sexism.

“Just because more women enter into jobs in the church or are ordained does not mean that the problems of sexism have gone away,” she said. “At times, the bias is more implicit but no less real.”

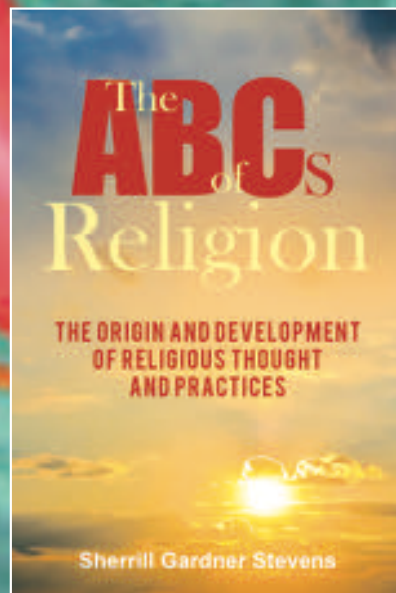
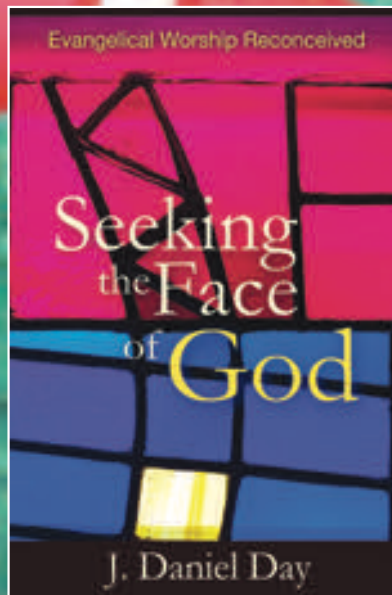
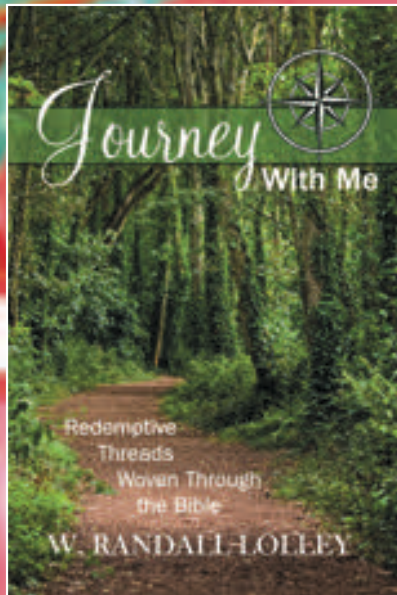
But some women are reaching “tall-steeple” pulpits — leadership in prominent churches — instead of being relegated to struggling congregations, often in denominations on the decline.

Frederick-Gray said her denomination, which she said is working on race equality as well as gender equality, is seeing greater opportunities for women to preach in its largest churches. Of the 41 largest congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association, 20 are served by women senior ministers.

Women’s leadership, Frederick-Gray said, is necessary at a time of decline for many religions.

“The decline is not the responsibility of women,” she said. “But maybe we will be the hope for the future.” **NFJ**

Helpful



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EDITOR'S NOTE: The evolving Jesus Worldview Initiative, guided by Nurturing Faith, seeks to provide resources and experiences that create a congregational culture focused on the priority of following Jesus over all other ideologies and allegiances. The full potential for this initiative will be tied to collaboration and support. While engaging others and exploring funding sources, we continue writing and talking about this important topic and how it might be addressed most effectively. This latest article considers the rightful place of Jesus' teachings known as the Beatitudes, and how the concept of a nurturing God (as revealed in Jesus and elsewhere in scripture) is worthy of our embrace and reflection.

Blessed Reflections

To get 'closer to God,' try following Jesus

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Readers of this journal are likely engaged in congregational life and share a personal commitment to spiritual growth — sometimes conveyed as getting “closer to God.”

A 2017 Pew Research study asked 4,729 Americans why they did or did not attend “religious services.” By far, the number-one reason why regular worshippers attend religious services, according to the survey, is “to become closer to God.”

BELIEF IN GOD

Unlike some religious studies that examine a particular slice of the American demographic, such as Christians or evangelicals, this Pew study surveyed Americans at large about religion in general.

In other words, respondents were free to interpret for themselves their understanding of “religious services” and their concept of “God.” Approximately 70 percent of respondents identified themselves as Christian. That percentage is on par with the American population in totality.

So, with the understanding that most Americans who attend religious services do so primarily in order “to become closer to God,” another question arises: What does one mean by “God”?

Pew Research has investigated that too. In the same study, 80 percent of respondents expressed a belief in “God” —



almost identical to the 81 percent of regular worshippers who attend religious services in order “to be closer to God.”

Yet of all survey responders, only 56 percent reported they “believe in God as described in the Bible,” while 33 percent “believe in some higher power/spiritual force.”

PERCEPTIONS

Yet another question deserves attention: What does “God as described in the Bible” mean?

The Pew study did not delve into biblical verses specifically, but did ask questions to determine if respondents believed in God as omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent and/or active in human affairs. The majority of respondents affirmed all four concepts.

Of more help in deciphering how Americans define God is a 2006 Baylor University survey that asked respondents to describe their perceptions about God. From this survey four distinct understandings of God emerged:

“Authoritarian God” (31.4 percent) — God is defined as judgmental in nature and capable and eager to inflict punishment on the unfaithful or unrighteous. Of the 31.4 percent of respondents who place their faith in an authoritarian God, almost half live in the South. Most perceive God as masculine, and nearly half believe the government should fund faith-based organizations.

“Benevolent God” (25 percent) — According to this perception, God judges humans, but is not likely to act in “wrathful ways.” A benevolent God primarily exerts a positive influence in the world, and is less willing to punish individuals. Only 30 percent of these believers think of God as masculine.

“Distant God” (23 percent) — This God, as perceived, does not interact with the world and “is not especially angry either.” Rather, God is “a cosmic force which sets the laws of nature in motion.” A distant God is most represented among West Coast Americans. Less than 5 percent of believers

in a distant God interpret the Bible literally or consider God as masculine.

“Critical God” (16 percent) — Defined as detached from but watching over the world, this God eventually punishes evil people. Believers in the critical God are most represented in the eastern U.S., and believe that “God’s displeasure will be felt in another life and that divine justice may not be of this world.”

TAKEAWAYS

These studies reveal that it is not enough to say one believes in God, even “God as described in the Bible,” or that one seeks to get closer to God. While some 80 percent of actively religious persons say they attend religious services in order to be closer to God, the perceptions of God — among Christians in particular — vary widely, and often in opposing ways.

As Editor John Pierce and I have written about previously, the contemporary use of “Christian worldview” and “biblical worldview” — as expressed by the Barna Group, among others, and used widely in evangelical circles — often excludes, or at least marginalizes, Jesus.

Hence, we argue for a “Jesus worldview” in which faith is focused on the life and teachings of Jesus as the model for Christian living. So-called “Christian” and “biblical” worldviews portray God as highly authoritarian, whereas a “Jesus worldview” reveals a nurturing God.

BLESSEDNESS

In the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-12), when teaching his closest followers, Jesus reveals who God is and what being close to God looks like. God is the source of blessings, Jesus says, and followers are close to God when these blessings of God are evident in their lives.

If, as surveys indicate, being “closer to God” is the primary reason why Christians today attend church, the Beatitudes might be considered Jesus’ blueprint for congregational life. Those who show evidence of the eight blessings of God — as Jesus taught in the Beatitudes — are therefore living close to God.



JESUS

WORLDVIEW INITIATIVE

God’s people are “poor in spirit.” (v. 3) — Those whose spirit is devoid of self-importance and egomania are a part of the “kingdom of heaven,” or “kingdom of God.” Such congregations are composed of those who do not see themselves as superior to others.

God’s people “mourn.” (v. 4) — Jesus teaches that people close to God mourn, and that God comforts them. Mourning is an expression of grief over painful loss or broken relationships, whether in one’s own life or in community. Those who mourn over brokenness in their own lives and in the world comprise a congregation that is close to God.

God’s people are “meek.” (v. 5) — Power, privilege and domination are not the marks of God’s kingdom. In Matthew’s account just prior to the Beatitudes, Jesus rejected the evil temptation of using earthly power to force the world to follow him. Instead, he chose a path of humility. Meekness, not power and domination, leads one to “inherit the earth,” according to Jesus. Congregations close to God are composed of those who choose humility over dominance.

God’s people “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” (v. 6) — Evil is the opposite of righteousness. Turning away from evil and seeking what is right and just, personally and corporately, is a sign of God’s kingdom. At its most basic level, evil is the mistreatment of oneself or others. Congregations close to God are composed of those who treat everyone from a right and just perspective.

God’s people are “merciful.” (v. 7) — Righteousness and justice go hand in hand with mercy. Congregations close to God are composed of those who freely receive and extend mercy.

God’s people are “pure in heart.” (v. 8) — Deceit and duplicity are absent in the kingdom of God. Congregations close to God are composed of persons who are honest and authentic.

God’s people are “peacemakers.” (v. 9) — Personal hatred and group warfare are alien to the kingdom of God. Reconciliation, the resolving of divisions and conflict in a just and right manner, is so inherently a part of God’s kingdom that those who do peacemaking are considered “children of God.” Congregations close to God reject hatred and warfare, and strive for reconciliation.

God’s people are “persecuted for the sake of righteousness.” (vv. 10-12) — Those who reject evil by seeking the just treatment of all persons will suffer insults, false accusations and worse. But they are doing the work of “the kingdom of heaven,” which itself is their reward. As in the case of Jesus’ own life and the opposition he garnered from religious leaders, such persecution almost always comes from those opposed to the essential dignity of all humanity as the equal creation of God. Congregations close to God accept the suffering — often from within — that comes from treating all of humanity with justice and righteousness.

CHALLENGE

Contemporary promotions of “Christian” and “biblical” worldviews tend to define God by authoritarian and exclusive doctrine and dogma hostile to the embrace of all of humanity as equally created in the image of God. Jesus’ worldview — expressed in the Beatitudes — counters such misrepresentations of God.

In his 2018 book with the English title, *Rejoice and Be Glad*, Pope Francis said: “In the Beatitudes, we find a portrait of the Master, which we are called to reflect in our daily lives.”

Being “close to God” is why most churchgoers attend church. Whether one thinks of being “close to God” in terms of Jesus’ teachings is a different matter.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing 21st-century Christian congregations is to be people of God — as revealed by Jesus — for Jesus is the one we claim to follow. **NFJ**

Canoeing the Mountains

A conversation about church leadership
with author Tod Bolsinger

BY RICK JORDAN

Tod Bolsinger joined Fuller Seminary in 2014 as vice president for vocation and formation and assistant professor of practical theology, and now serves as vice president and chief of leadership formation.

Ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1993, he served as pastor of San Clemente Presbyterian Church from 1997 to 2014. Prior to that, he was associate pastor of discipleship and spiritual formation at First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood.

The author of *Canoeing the Mountains: Church Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, Tod will lead the Leadership Institute as part of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina Annual Gathering on March 28 in Greensboro.

RJ: In a relatively short period of time the American church has lost its social status/advantage. Is this a good or a bad thing?

TB: It's neither good nor bad; it's just different, and relatively few churches or church leaders who were trained in a Christendom world were trained for a world where the church doesn't have the "home court" advantage of Christendom.

Consider that the time of most rapid growth in the church was the period from the death of Christ until Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Holy Roman Empire, the growth of the underground church in China, the growth of the church today in the majority world.

There is little evidence that shows the true growth of evangelism and discipleship requires the church having social status and

advantage, but it just feels to those who were trained for that world of social status and advantage like a tremendous disruption or loss.

RJ: In your book you note that Lewis and Clark and their discovery team found they had to enter unexpected and uncharted territory when they faced the Rocky Mountains. How does a 21st-century American church create a mission statement or cast a vision when the territory ahead is uncharted?

TB: The key to developing a future vision in uncharted territory or in a time of rapid change is not to try to predict the future, but instead focus on two things:

First, what is our core mission? In other words, what will NEVER change? What are the core elements of our church's reason for being that will never change? What are the needs of the world that the church is called to care about that will never change? What of our mission will never change? What of our core values will never (or should never) change?

Second, what is the culture that we must embody? In other words, what kind of relationships must we foster? What are the values and principles, the behavior and actions that will foster the healthiest and most trusting relationships?

In times of great change, focusing first on core mission and building a culture of trust is the key to the future. Knowing what we will always be called to do and what will

never change about our mission and our relationships is the paradoxical way forward.

But, once we are clear on what will never change, and once we have established trust, we then must be prepared to change, even lose, everything else.

RJ: Through history the people of God have not always been on top — such as slavery in Egypt, Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, Jesus crucified, disciples persecuted. What can we learn from them to help us in our time?

TB: In times of exile, the people of God are always called back to God and to be opened to God. In the exile, Israel had to re-learn faithfulness and to rediscover the God who was bigger than their nationalism, their internal divisions and their lack of faithfulness.

It's out of the exilic period that Israel recovers (and the church discovers) God's love for and mission to the nations. Out of periods of discipline, the scriptures tell us, the church grows in faithfulness to God and God's mission.

RJ: Obviously the 1950s are not going to come again. We cannot live in our past. But there is value in remembering our past, isn't there?

TB: Absolutely. The church's central spiritual practice is a "remembrance" in the Lord's table. It is by eating in remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus that we are called regularly to a fresh following of Christ in the world.

The reason Israel set up markers and created rituals of remembrance was not to live in the glory days, but to tell the story anew in the lives of each generation.



"For many of us, remembrance has become nostalgia, and tradition has become traditionalism, and looking back has taken the place of the call of God..."



SACAJAWEA — “When [Lewis and Clark] went off the map, there was only one person prepared for uncharted territory, one person who wasn’t lost, and one person who they needed to listen to... the Native American teenaged nursing mother. When we go off the map, those who were not trained in Christendom are the experts.” Photo by John D. Pierce from Lewis & Clark National Park in Oregon.

Looking back is meant to inspire and guide us for faithfulness today with a vision of God’s good future (Revelation 21–22).

But for many of us, remembrance has become nostalgia, and tradition has become traditionalism, and looking back has taken the place of the call of God to “do this . . . until he comes.”

RJ: Metrics for success as a church should probably change from bodies, budgets and buildings. What are the appropriate metrics for our time now?

TB: Metrics are really necessary, because what you count is ultimately what counts. We should measure what matters. The problem, of course, is trying to have a good discussion about what does matter.

I still think to some degree that measuring people attending and engaged matters, and measuring money given and invested in ministry matters. Measuring baptisms would seem to matter (it did in Acts), and measuring the number of people prepared for and able to take on leadership matters.

I’m not sure the size of a church matters as much as its ability to birth new, sustainable ministries. And I’m pretty sure that there needs to be some kind of metric about discipleship and spiritual maturity.

So, yes, I think there is a need for metrics, but even more I think there is a need for clear discerning discussions about what matters that you measure.

RJ: I love that you elevate the role of Sacajawea. What can the church learn from her?

TB: This may be the most important lesson from the story of Lewis and Clark. When they went off the map, there was only one person prepared for uncharted territory, one person who wasn’t lost, and one person who they needed to listen to.

Not the man who was tutored by the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence, but the Native American teenaged nursing mother. When we go off the map, those who were not trained in Christendom are the experts.

Those who are familiar with ministering without privilege and power are the voices we need to hear. Lewis and Clark didn’t abandon their mission or abdicate their leadership; they simply became humble enough to collaborate with and listen to a person from the margins who was the true expert.

When we make room for leaders to come from the unchurched, the majority world, from those who have been margin-

alized by the Christendom church, and we learn to work together so that expertise and experience, tradition and innovation, center and margins come together, new discoveries will be found.

The leadership of the church of the future looks more like a collaboration of Lewis, Clark and Sacagawea than a President Jefferson.

RJ: Can you say a word about the role of prayer and discernment?

TB: Prayerful discernment may be the most important spiritual practice and most important mark of spiritual leadership. Wise resilient persistence in the face of resistance and fear are necessary when we are leading people off the map.

Learning to hear the voice of God beckoning us forward and slowing us down, calling us to boldness and warning us to be careful, giving us a charge to keep and telling us to lay it down — all of these require a life of listening, of discerning, and of wisdom born of prayer. **NFJ**

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

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REBLOG

Why 'I'm not a racist, but ...' likely conveys racism

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah (1:17 ESV) offered these timeless words: “Learn to do good; seek justice; correct oppression...” If only we could hear and heed them in our time.

The term racism can be misapplied. But it also can be defined and used too narrowly to hide or defend racism.

A belief in racial superiority is the widely acceptable definition of racism.

Since few people (though a growing number now that it's more politically en vogue) express their racist views publicly — and since we can't see into the hearts of others — frequently using the term racist has a sense of unfair judgment.

Therefore, I tend to use “racial insensitivity” or other descriptors to avoid being unfairly judgmental of others who are out of touch, at best, with their racist tendencies and opposition, at least philosophically and politically, to racial justice.

In doing so, however, I fear being too gracious at times. Here's why:

Most of the people I know no longer find it socially acceptable (unlike in the earlier years of my life) to espouse blatant racist ideas and terminology. In fact, in most cases, they do not think of themselves as being racist.

Any accusation of such receives pushback such as, “Hey, I have black friends at work.” Or “I like everybody who acts right.”

Often these are the same persons who say a nice word about MLK who has been dead for decades and gives them a day off from work or school each winter. Yet, they have no sympathy (and certainly not empathy or support) for those who protest clear, documented acts of racial injustice today.

In fact, they ridicule them. And they aggressively support every political maneuver to retain unrecognized white privilege. Yet, denial of white privilege is evidence of white privilege.

However, justice only matters in the present tense.

Racial sensitivities and commitments to justice are not determined by one's claim of black friends at work, or the liking of an MLK quote on Facebook in January, or expressing appreciation for a favored black athlete.

That proves nothing about one's heart. While words matter, more so do actions.

The larger, more impactful question is whether we support or resist the systemic retention of unequal political, social and economic empowerment. It is power and privilege that secure supremacy.

Lessons can be learned from the past, but justice only matters in the present tense. **NFJ**

Blogs, daily news, events, social media connections and more may be found at nurturingfaith.net 

Entertainment, information, preservation

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The Nurturing Faith Board of Directors and guests enjoyed a tour of the Peabody Awards exhibit and archives at the University of Georgia as part of their September 2018 gathering in Athens, Ga.

The awards — housed at UGA's Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication — have honored the best in the electronic media since 1941. The Peabody was established with the rise of new media forms not considered by the Pulitzer Prize that awards achievements in newspaper, magazine (and now online) journalism, literature and musical composition in the U.S.

The university's Special Collections archives preserve the historic record of the Peabody Award — and the development and influence of the electronic media industry since the days of radio.

Archivist Mary Miller gave the group an insightful tour and concluded by asking how what we experienced might relate to the expanding publishing ministry of Nurturing Faith.

Director Frank Granger, minister of Christian community at Athens' First Baptist Church, noted that interviews have played a major role throughout the growth and effectiveness of electronic media and that Nurturing Faith often features inter-



views that provide insights in ways other approaches may not.

Publications themselves are ways of preserving history, others noted.

Mary told of the university depository receiving a collection of family films from Pebble Hill, a hunting plantation near Thomasville, Ga. Included was a 26-second clip of African-American workers, dressed in team uniforms, playing baseball around 1917. It is believed to be the earliest film of its kind.

She noted the fragility of film and the importance of having old recordings transferred and preserved. Her warning was a needed reminder to dig out (soon, I promise) the mini-cassettes from interviews I've done over many years.



I think of the ones with John Claypool, Will Campbell and others who are no longer among us. And there is the one in which President Carter shares how he prepares to teach Sunday school each week.

These need to be transferred, transcribed and preserved for future benefits.

For those who might want to see this exhibit for themselves, the Special Collections Library at UGA is open to the public and worth a visit. If for nothing else, one should see the impressive collection of microphones used in historic and evolving ways.

Among the most recent winners of the George Foster Peabody Award are: Carol Burnett for Lifetime Achievement, and Institutional Awards to *60 Minutes* and The Fred Rogers Company.

There is a proper and needed role for entertainment, information and preservation. All three come together in this good effort to honor excellence and preserve important culture-shaping history. **NFJ**



SHOW & TELL — Archivist Mary Miller of the University of Georgia's Special Collections gives a tour of the Peabody Awards exhibit to members of the Nurturing Faith Board of Directors.



PREPARING JOURNALISTS — University of Georgia journalism professors (left to right) Janice Hume, Jon Peters, Dodie Cantrell-Bickley and Keith Herndon say they are preparing students for jobs yet to emerge due to technological advances, but with a firm commitment to the ongoing defense of the First Amendment guarantee of a free press. Photo by John D. Pierce.

Media Matters

Journalism in a time of change and challenges

ATHENS, Ga. — A panel discussion with journalism professors from the University of Georgia highlighted a dinner event at First Baptist Church in this college town that hosted the September 2018 meeting of the Nurturing Faith Board of Directors.

Executive Editor John Pierce facilitated the discussion with four faculty members of the Henry W. Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communications. The following conversation is adapted from that presentation.

Participants included Janice Hume, a

media historian who heads the journalism department and is a member of the Athens congregation.

Dodie Cantrell-Bickley is a former news anchor, investigative reporter, executive producer and news director who lectures in journalism and directs *Grady Newsource*, the school's daily broadcast.

Jon Peters, a specialist in communication law and policy, also holds an affiliate position in the university's law school. He is the press freedom correspondent for *Columbia Journalism Review*, and writes about legal

issues for publications including *Esquire*, *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, *Wired* and *The Nation*.

Keith Herndon holds the William S. Morris Chair in News Strategy and Management and directs the James M. Cox Jr. Institute for Journalism, Innovation Management and Leadership. After decades as a newspaper reporter and then an independent media consultant, he returned to his alma mater where he teaches practice and journalism. He is the author of *The Decline of the Daily Newspaper: How an American Institution Lost the Online Revolution*.

John Pierce: First question: What trends in journalism are you and other professionals paying the most attention to today?

Keith Herndon: One of the things we often hear about is the doom and gloom. But the trend actually isn't doom and gloom. The trend is transition.

We're moving from an analog world to a digital world, and I like to look at it in terms of just labor data. Over the last five years, legacy print — newspapers, magazines, book publishing — lost almost 90,000 jobs. But electronic media, which would be video and film production, television broadcasting, cable programming and Internet publishing, grew by about 130,000 jobs. So the net of where our students go to work is a gain of over 40,000 jobs.

So it's not doom and gloom. It's just change — and change can be difficult for people. So what we have to do is train our students to not be afraid of the transition that's happening in the media. There are jobs out there. They're just not the kind of jobs that used to be there when we were an analog business.

Janice Hume: One of our major challenges is not with our students, but it's with their parents. Somebody tells mom and dad they want to major in journalism and they are thinking, "But all the newspapers I know have closed or laid off people."

That's not true. We're in this little wonderful window where our students walk out of the Grady College into really fantastic jobs, jobs that it would have taken in my generation years of working in small markets to get up to *Fortune* magazine, *The Washington Post* or the *LA Times*. Not every student gets a job at that level, but we have students who walk out of Grady into those kinds of positions. It would have been unheard of in my day. So there are lots of opportunities for them.

Jon Peters: A lot of the changes I'm following relate to law and policy. New communication technologies are changing the way we think about long-held legal doctrines and principles.

My students discuss problems related to privacy. We have to think about things like encryption or a website's terms of service. There are substantive areas of law being digitized and challenged, and one of my primary interests has been the way we gather information and what that means for source protection.

If I'm a journalist and make a promise of confidentiality to a source, because of the way that we communicate today with fellow reporters, with editors, and with sources, if we do it digitally, we basically leave little digital breadcrumbs behind us that could lead an interested party — a governmental actor or a nongovernmental actor — back to you.

That person then wouldn't need to use a legal process to compel you to identify your source but digitally could pick your pocket.

About seven or eight years ago I was having a conversation with the then-director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, a nonprofit organization in D.C. that is dedicated to media law. She had just come back from a meeting with a high-level attorney for the [National Security Administration].

The Reporters Committee for decades has tracked and logged the number of subpoenas, legal orders to compel the press to reveal some kind of information. This gave us a sense of the government's interest in journalistic work. The Reporters Committee had found, somewhat curiously, that the number of subpoenas was on the decline.

So she was having this conversation with the NSA attorney who said, off the record: "Well, we don't need to subpoena you any more. We can go through digital back doors and get the information in other ways."

Hearing that changed the way I think about a lot of areas of media law and how to protect my students, my clients and everything between.

Dodie Cantrell-Bickley: It's a very exciting time to be in journalism education. I retired and did not have plans to go back to work were it not for this opportunity here.

When we were growing up in this industry there was a specific path. Now it would be incredibly fun to be young because they get to trailblaze, and we get to trailblaze with them.

The need for what journalists do is more important than it's ever been, though I suspect that in different times in our history there have been many people who have said that.

We look forward to answering your questions because I think if you don't recognize that already, you'll hear more stories like Jon's and go, "Wow, somebody needs to tell us about this stuff."

John Pierce: How do you respond with both your mind and your gut to the current attack on the independent press as deliverers of "fake news" and being "the enemy of the people"?

Keith Herndon: While we were eating dinner I joked that I like to call myself sometimes a commandant at the enemy combatant training center. We do have fun with that from time to time, but on the day after our president used that language, "enemy of the people," I went into class and I was quite emotional.

I got up on my soapbox with my students because I had to make sure they understood that we're at a time where we're hearing rhetoric we've never heard before. The rhetoric that's out there is different and it's dangerous, and as educators of journalists, we have to get them to understand that their first mission is the defense of the First Amendment.

So I go into my classes explaining to them that no matter what else they do as a journalist, the First Amendment is foremost. And defending that does not make you the enemy of the people. It makes you a proponent of the people, and that's the way we teach it.

Janice Hume: We have in the Grady College, when coming in the building from the front, etched over the doors: "Democracy's next generation." I think any of us will get very passionate about this.

There's not a week that goes by in my classroom that we do not stress the critical role of journalism in a democratic society. **Our primary function is to inform citizens so they will have the information required to self-govern. That is the essence of democratic government, and they cannot get that information without a robust, healthy, free and independent press.**

We teach our students that we're the only industry protected in the First Amendment, in the Constitution. With that comes a tremendous responsibility.

So in addition to teaching our students about the critical role of journalism in a democracy, we try very hard to teach them how to fulfill that role in ways that have integrity, with adherence to fact, with telling a true and a full context, and with making sure they are the kind of journalists who can carry that flag and be democracy's next generation.

Dodie Cantrell-Bickley: We're Americans and, for all our problems, we've been the beacon, the purveyors of hope and freedom for the rest of the world for most of our lives. So it's very easy to hear conversations like you're hearing now and look at it as, "This is somebody defending their profession" or "This is all just classroom rhetoric."

My mother grew up under the Nazis and didn't talk about it. But every now and then I would see something or she would say a little something and I'd ask, and then she would tell me something.

When I was 11, I walked into her room. I came barreling in while she was changing clothes, and went, "Gross!" — because she had this horrible scar on her leg. I said, "That's gross!" — because I was a creepy kid, instead of going, "Oh, gosh, Mom, what happened?"

But she sat me down and said, "Your grandfather and I were walking down the street and the Gestapo picked him up and swept him away. I had to find him, and then I had to watch while they tortured him. Then he was sent away and I was sent away. I had to spot English and American fighter planes. One day, they came down and the girl who was with me, the bullets cut her

in half and they didn't take the dead down until the end of the day. The next morning I didn't want to go back up. But the man held a SIG Sauer to my head and said, 'If you go up, you may die. But if you do not, you will surely die. So you choose.'"

Now I don't have a lot of those stories, but I have enough to know that this is more than just conversation. This is more than just talk. This is not something that is just taught in a journalism school.

When studying for a master's degree I bought some books over the Internet. One was by [Chief Justice William] Rehnquist, called *All the Laws but One*, and another was called *Terrorism and the Constitution* [by David Cole].

My mother said, "You bought these with the Internet? You don't buy subversive propaganda over the Internet. Now the government knows who you are." She was terrified.

This has happened before, and there are real consequences. So, it makes what our students are learning and the perception and support of the public vital.

Jon Peters: I always discuss with my students some historical examples of efforts by the government, going back to our founding, to restrict speech critical of the government. We don't have to look far from the Declaration to find it.

Of course, we declared independence in 1776. In 1789 we have a Constitution. In 1791 we have a Bill of Rights. With the Bill of Rights we would like to think and hope we had free speech from there on — and that is absolutely not the case, because it took us only until 1798 for the first Congress to pass the Sedition Act.

This Sedition Act made speech critical of various government actors a federal crime that was punishable by large financial fines and/or imprisonment. The stated reason for the Sedition Act was to give the Adams administration a club to use against the French at a time when war with France did seem reasonably imminent.

In reality, the purpose of the Sedition Act was to give Adams a club leading up to the election of 1800, in which Thomas

Jefferson was opposing him. And if you read the language of the Sedition Act, the evidence lay in two different provisions.

One was the scope of the law that included criticism of the president, of Congress, of various other administrative officials in the executive branch — though, curiously, it exempted criticism of the vice-president, who was then Thomas Jefferson.

The other bit of evidence was what is called the law's sunset provision, which is an expiration date for a law. The law was set to expire on the date of the next presidential inauguration. So we have that in 1798. We know that Jefferson wins the election of 1800. He made that a campaign issue.

Then we fast-forward to the run-up to World War I. In 1917 we pass an Espionage Act that includes yet another sedition provision. So these are not new problems in the sense that your government before has tried, and probably unfortunately always will try again, to restrict speech critical of it.

However, what does strike me — if not unique but at least as alarming this go-around — is the nature of the anti-press rhetoric. On one hand I think there is reason and room to criticize individual journalists and stories that get things wrong. That is a healthy part of cleansing the news ecosystem.

So readers, viewers, listeners ought to hold us to account for the mistakes we make. And that means those of us in the press, when we make mistakes, have to make right by them. We have to publicly correct them. In some cases, the most extreme ones, we need to retract stories. But that is not what we're witnessing here.

What we're witnessing here is an effort to de-legitimize the press as an institution, not simply targeting stories that are negligent on the facts or outright getting something wrong. So I worry a little bit about the effect of that doctrinally on First Amendment law, but what I worry about more is the effect of the rhetoric on the norms that form the basis of those First Amendment rights.

Janice Hume: And I worry about the safety of reporters who are out there covering the news, doing their job, and worry for

their physical safety. We want our reporters to be safe. We want our students to be safe.

John Pierce: What is the impact of a 24-hour news cycle?

Keith Herndon: Exhaustion — and I use that word with a double meaning. It's exhausting for the industry to keep up, but it's also exhausting on the consuming public. It's like we have this fire hose turned on and it's always on and there's always something happening.

You used to could tell if it was important because there might be a bulletin or a late edition or something. Now it's on all the time, and there are the crawls and everything is important. Sometimes it's very difficult for the consuming public to discern what really is the headline.

That's one of the big issues, but also there is this race to be first that our industry has to grapple with. I always think that it's better to be accurate than first, but in all honesty, there are people in our industry who believe the opposite.

But we have to understand that we're not going to put the technology genie back in the bottle. It's going to be an always-on, 24-hour news cycle, so we have to adapt our journalistic processes, and we have to adapt as consumers as to when to be fully engaged and when not. Those are things in this digital transition that haven't been sorted out yet.

Dodie Cantrell-Bickley: It was nice as a [television] journalist back when you knew you would have the 6 and 11 [evening broadcasts] and the morning. You felt you had a little more time. But the reality is, work expands to fill the time available, and it has been a challenge on the bottom line to continue to do great work and to take your time to make sure you get it right. And you do so with fewer resources because of the economic realities.

I'm having my Pollyanna moment here: I do think we have shown ourselves as human beings under stressors of history, that some pretty great things can come out of that. I think this 24/7 news cycle will

eventually sort itself out. We will decide how we want to discipline our intake and how we want to direct those around us.

How are we going to use these new technologies to do what's wonderful about them, to educate at a level we could never do before? I mean, we all have an encyclopedia at our fingertips. Frankly, there are a lot of wonderful things about that.

But in this 24/7 news environment, as Keith said, I think it will shake out. We've found ourselves re-proving ourselves in human history to be able to get the positive. That's not to say there's not some harm that happens along the way.

Janice Hume: Keith was talking about how getting it first is often more important than getting it right. We forget that Twitter hasn't been around very long. The Boston Marathon bombing was really the first moment when we realized this thing called Twitter is going to be how people consume news.

Oh my, and we got it wrong. The wrong people were accused on social media of the crime. All the things we were afraid of — in terms of not being accurate, libeling people — happened in the blink of an eye.

So, in addition to the 24-hour news cycle, we live in a moment where Twitter is nonstop and it is part of the news gathering and news disseminating process. That's changed the way we think about the news cycle, the way we report the news, and the way we tell stories.

John Pierce: This question plays into what you were just saying: What is the result of anyone being able to disseminate information widely via social media without the filter of an editor with responsibility and liability?

Dodie Cantrell: A second set of eyes for anything, anytime sounds very simplistic, but is important.

Jon Peters: We used to have institutional resources that supported the decisions we made around content, and that could be an editor or an attorney. It could be an insurance company that might weigh in about

your liability.

We have made a shift in the last 10 years toward a journalistic workforce that is increasingly freelance and is divorced from those types of institutional resources. That can make it harder to calculate legal risk and liability.

We have also found, in some important media law cases, where a party in the case is not conversant in the First Amendment. That party and that party's attorney, who perhaps is not a media lawyer but a general interest lawyer who happens to be representing a freelance journalist client, don't make sophisticated First Amendment arguments that defend the core doctrines we have developed going back to the mid-1960s.

Also, I've seen conflicts arise in contracts between freelancers and news organizations that are really problematic. It is common now, when a freelancer signs a contract, to find some kind of indemnification clause and/or a liability waiver clause that has the effect of telling the freelancer that if you get sued in connection with the project you have to defend yourself.

I have argued that is really bad for accountability investigative journalism because those are the types of stories that will produce the most adversarial responses.

Keith Herndon: Another angle is that as news organizations have let go of staff and converted staff to contractors — relying on freelancers — we are seeing what is being referred to in some publications as news deserts: places where there's not news coverage.

In some of those cases we are relying on what we would refer to as "citizen journalists" without the support of any organization, without the support of anything, to go to the city council meetings or to the county commission meetings in these places and be the eyes and ears of the community.

I'm not necessarily one who likes the phrase "citizen journalists" because I don't know there's a difference between a journalist and a citizen journalist. If you're there covering something and reporting, then you're a journalist, right?

But there are places where what we would consider as organized news media doesn't exist. It's either going out of business or it's pulled back from communities, and we rely on some of those individuals to cover a meeting or to tell their neighbors what's happening.

John Pierce: And religion is one of those areas.

Keith Herndon: Absolutely. Even in places where there are news organizations, the number of reporters assigned to cover the institution of religion has been dramatically reduced.

John Pierce: Look in the crystal ball or peek around the corner and give us an idea of what you think might be next that impacts the world of communications and news.

Keith Herndon: I'll start by saying **technology and the news are inextricably linked**. I kid my students that they're getting a STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics] degree. You have to understand what's happening in the world of social media and this notion of 24/7.

We're seeing a tremendous shift in the way we consume news. There's an explosion in video — and video is becoming way more important in how we consume information.

There's also an explosion in audio storytelling — in podcasting and news type and documentary type programming around that. We just had a podcasting symposium at Grady. There's some really interesting revenue growth occurring in podcasting.

It is giving some traditional media companies some hope. Where they might be losing some of their legacy advertising revenue, they're making some of it up in podcasting. Podcasting, in the next couple of years, is going to be a billion dollar business.

There are over 500,000 podcasts on iTunes right now. There are probably about 5,000 of them that are worth listening to.

The future is going to be more video, more audio delivered to you on network speeds that you can't even imagine now. So

much-faster networks, more video, more audio, and our students have to get really good at telling those succinct stories in that format for people who read and watch and listen on their smartphone. That's the future.

Janice Hume: We have to make sure that what we are teaching is the story. We tell stories that matter. Because the technology changes so quickly, the cutting-edge technology we are working with right now will be obsolete by the time our students are in their first year of their new job.

So the core is the story. What makes it newsworthy? How do I report it? How do I tell it in the most engaging way that people have to pay attention? Those are the core skill sets we teach, and all the other stuff is surrounding it.

Twenty years ago, would you have ever thought there would be a gaming lab in a college of journalism and mass communication? We have people doing research in virtual reality.

One of our colleagues in journalism does this really fantastic eye-tracking research where he researches literally where your eyeballs land on pages and how long you rest at a certain place so that we know how to design screens that will be more effective. All of this is technology based and very new.

We're going to learn over the next 10 years about how this technology is impacting our news and our storytelling. It is very exciting, but the crystal ball doesn't exist. We're training students for jobs that don't exist yet, and so that's a real curricular challenge.

We spend a lot of time talking, sometimes arguing, about what kinds of courses we offer students to make them ready for jobs that we don't know what they're going to look like. That's a big challenge for us, and one I think we've handled pretty well. But we're starting another curriculum review right now, and we're already beginning to argue.

Keith Herndon: Somebody sent me a job posting. They want to hire a story scientist. That is somebody who is going through all

the data and figuring out where someone comes into the story or how they get to the story. How much are they reading of it? Where do they exit from the story?

If you look at that over large data, then you can say, "Oh, they're all leaving on the average around the fourth paragraph. There's a problem with the story there." So they could go to the editor, the story scientist, and say, "The data are showing us that you're losing most of your audience here. Fix it."

Janice Hume: I showed my age in front of my students just last week. On Fridays they bring in research they've done and run the class. They're talking about robots writing stories. My reaction is, "Oh," and their reaction is, "Isn't this cool?"

I have to check myself. There are some things robots can do, and that's fine and it leaves the thinking people to the better stuff. But I have to always check myself and not be the old woman.

John Pierce: This aligns so well with the discussion at our board meeting today. We no longer do long-range planning because we don't know what's coming next. In our own organization and publication we've adapted to and adopted things that we never imagined a few years ago.

I often say we live at the busy intersection of changing technology and changing culture. For us, a big part of that changing culture is congregational life and Christian culture at large.

So what you're saying really resonates with us as we navigate both the changing technology and changing culture — and discover opportunities we never imagined.

Before coming to this meeting, interestingly, the *Grady News* was in my family's mailbox because our daughter Meredith is a 2015 graduate. As I flipped it open, the first words from Dean Charles Davis were: "The single most important thing we do as a college is hire world-class faculty and staff."

We've seen evidence of that from you. Thanks for sharing your expertise with us. This is very helpful, and it encourages us in our own work. **NFJ**

Times change, **mission remains**

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The trends articulated so well by journalism professionals on the preceding pages are faced in ongoing, deliberate and sometimes experiential ways by the Nurturing Faith staff and Board of Directors.

Pausing to reflect on and recount the many shifts in response to changing times and technology can be breath-taking. What began 36 years ago as a single, denominational-focused print newspaper has expanded into a magazine-formatted journal focused on issues and trends impacting congregational life.

A scholarly yet practical weekly Bible study curriculum was introduced, as well as book publishing that has resulted in 80 titles — with more in the pipeline. The Nurturing Faith brand has been extended to producing resources and providing personalized, small-group experiences.

The Jesus Worldview Initiative that has arisen from writings in the journal is still taking form. Rather than outlining a future course, Nurturing Faith seeks to be sensitive, cooperative and responsive to opportunities that arise.

Indeed times and technology change — yet the important mission remains. So does our need for generous, faithful support.

One way to look at what lies before us at this strategic time is to consider the

Mission, Methods and Means of this non-profit, publishing ministry.

THE MISSION

This journal's mission is to provide relevant and trusted information, thoughtful analysis and inspiring features, rooted in the historic Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience, for reflective Christians seeking to live out a mature faith in a fast-changing culture.

It is with that kind of commitment to free, thoughtful, Jesus-focused faith that we carry out every aspect of the expanding and evolving ministry of Nurturing Faith. Our independence allows us to explore these and other possibilities without interference.

THE METHODS

Combining print, digital and experiential ways of engaging those desiring thoughtful and helpful information on Christian living, Nurturing Faith carries out its mission in a variety of ways.

Whether teaching the superb Bible studies written by Tony Cartledge, reading articles in the journal or online daily news and blogs, delving into a timely book, or sharing a week-long experience with editors and other readers, Nurturing Faith seeks to live up to its name.

Mature, Christian living in a changing world is a worthy goal.

THE MEANS

While both our current productivity and new possibilities are very high, the impact

of Nurturing Faith is limited only by our ability to fund needed operations including expanding our reach through enhanced marketing and development.

We are grateful for our many faithful supporters — and seek many others who will help us continue and expand our work.

Let me count some ways you can make an impact through charitable giving to Baptists Today, Inc. (Nurturing Faith):

- Make ongoing, generous gifts — whether annually, quarterly or monthly.
- Make a one-time, generous gift when you realize funds from the sale of property, an inheritance or other financial benefits.
- Include Baptists Today, Inc. in your estate plans. The impact will be significant.
- Ask your financial advisor about ways of charitable giving that are most advantageous to your tax status.
- Make a gift in honor or memory of someone.
- Call or email Nurturing Faith to explore ways your gifts — now and in the future, undesignated or designated for a particular project — can be a vital part of this uniquely effective ministry. [NFJ](#)

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Questions Christians ask scientists

As a Christian and a scientist, what do you think about atheism?

Halloween is my favorite holiday. That may sound strange coming from a Christian, but the emotional, religious and social pressures that come during the seasons of Advent and Lent – Easter tend to shut me down.

In October there's no hype and I feel free to celebrate the annual cooling of Atlanta by laughing at what scares me. What scares me? Plenty of things.

Cancer scares me. The vulnerability of my children scares me. My own weaknesses scare me. And for a number of years the so-called New Atheists scared me.

I am not making this up. This group, led by the “Four Horsemen” — Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and the late Christopher Hitchens — frightened me with their sustained frontal assault on all religion everywhere.

Religious faith, they claim, is a mass delusion, a kind of mental disease that must be eradicated through education. They look to science to provide a worldview that, if universally accepted, will result in widespread human flourishing.

My fascination with this brand of atheism began years ago with the publication of Harris' *The End of Faith*. I was instantly and morbidly hooked.

For years I read atheist books, lurked furtively about atheist blogs, and came to know a number of atheists personally. My fascination persisted long enough to baffle me: Why should I care so much? That was a scary question.

As a professor of physics and former working scientist, I have told myself that I care because the New Atheists claim that science — of all things — disproves God's existence.

During my years as a seminary student I told myself that I care out of theological



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.

interest. But what really scared me was the possibility that my fascination was a flag signaling my own unconscious unbelief.

I gradually began to ask myself: Am I a closet atheist?

No. In my time of trying on *Yes I never felt the familiar click and closure of discovery, of having come across something true. Yet I remained unsatisfied. I could not get to the bottom of my disagreement with these people.*

Then one day, a few years ago, I was leafing through my well-worn copy of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* when I came across — for the hundredth time — a section in which James distinguishes between two psychological types: the “healthy-minded” and the “sick soul.”

Yet this time I saw clearly what separates me from the New Atheists: pessi-

mism. I saw that if I were more optimistic, I'd probably be an atheist.

Consider the glass. Is it half-full or half-empty? James' healthy-minded optimist regards the glass half-full by minimizing its emptiness.

For this person, “the good of this world's life is regarded as the essential thing for a rational being to attend to. [The optimist] settles his scores with the more evil aspects of the universe by systematically declining to lay them to heart or to make much of them, [or] by ignoring them in his reflective calculations. Evil is a disease; and worry over disease is itself an additional form of disease, which only adds to the original complaint.”

In contrast, James' sick soul sees the emptiness of the glass first and can't stop wondering why it's that way. This impulse is due to the pessimist's conviction that “evil is . . . something radical and general . . . which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial arrangement of the inner self, can cure, and which requires a supernatural remedy.”

What truly separates me from atheism is not my belief in God, which sits a long way from the point of departure. It is instead my conviction that evil and weakness are not just problems to be solved, but stand as reliable clues to the secret of the world.

For me the emptiness of the glass is, in James' words, “the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only opener of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.”

Contemporary atheism swells with optimism. Given its wall-to-wall phalanx of writers bent on mocking everything that smells of religion, it may seem that this label is ill applied. Yet under its bluster and iconoclasm, atheism is full of good cheer and high spirits. Anyone who knows an actual atheist knows this.

This sanguinity is likely drawn from science, which is without question the most optimistic enterprise ever concocted by

human beings. Science provides contemporary atheism with a powerful alternative to religion.

James writes, “The idea of [biological and cosmic evolution] lends itself to a doctrine of general meliorism and progress which fits the needs of the healthy-minded so well that it seems almost as if it might have been created for their use. Accordingly we find [science] interpreted optimistically and embraced as a substitute for the religion they were born in.”

Yet, as a philosophy, science fails to satisfy. It wears blinders and refuses to acknowledge whole classes of questions that are important to regular people everywhere, questions of good and evil, and of human weakness, and of meaning.

It seems that New Atheism, in its wholesale dependence upon science as a philosophy, imports science’s blinders — bound as they are to its optimism — into its worldview. And this is where the problem lies.

Imagine a clear fall Saturday in

London’s Hyde Park. Footballers are out; lovers doze on picnic blankets; tourists stand in clumps; university students pass by laughing. And then, over at the park’s edge, behold!

There passes the Atheist Bus, one of those U.K. buses that, a few years ago and with Dawkins’ support, were plastered with the brightly-lettered, chirpy slogan, “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.”

This is the zenith of optimism. It is optimistic because it assumes that the default condition of human life is peace.

It is optimistic because, in its refusal to acknowledge the deeper problems of life, it redraws human experience on a solvable and finite scale, presuming that what people really need is to “enjoy their lives.” (After all, it’s a beautiful day in the city. What else could there be to need?)

It is optimistic because the creators of the campaign failed to imagine a poverty-stricken teenager, or a man desperate for a job, or a drug addict, or a mother who just

lost a child to social services, reading their sign. They failed to consider the truly lost and lonely of the world, those who may have nothing but the faintest hope of a loving God keeping them alive.

Or maybe they did think about such a person and decided that they too need to just “stop worrying and enjoy their life,” starting with a breath of fresh clean godless air. Now *that’s* optimism.

I don’t buy it. And as a Christian, I’m not *supposed* to buy it, for it is only through the channel of pessimism — the full and unqualified acknowledgment of life’s dark underside as a clear and present reality — that faith is able to do its transformative work.

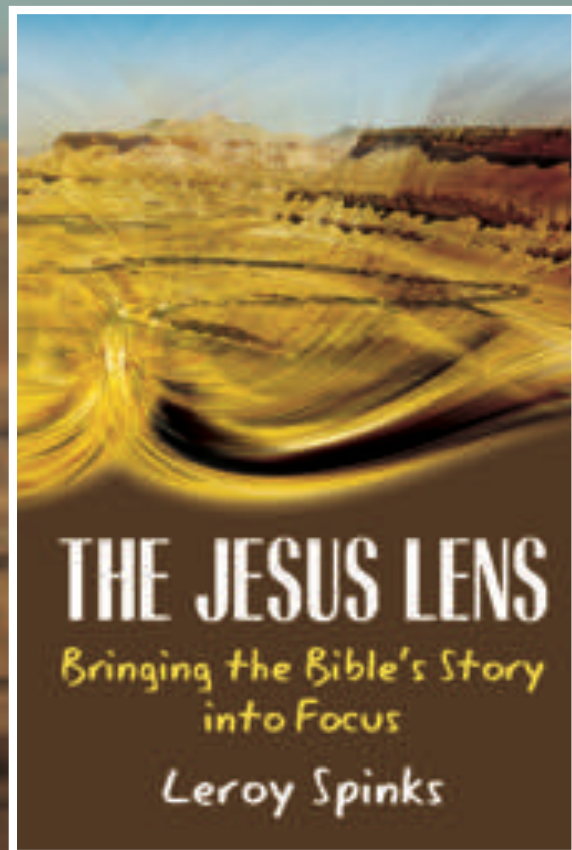
The Christianity I know takes note of the blue London sky, of the footballers, and of the picnicking lovers, but it starts with the addict on the street.

You know, the one optimism forgot about; the fragile one standing alone over at the edge of the park, watching the Atheist Bus roll jauntily past. **NFJ**



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