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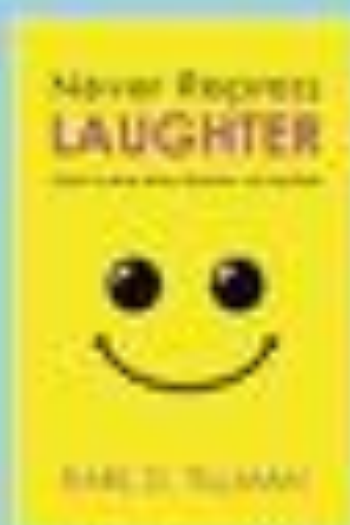
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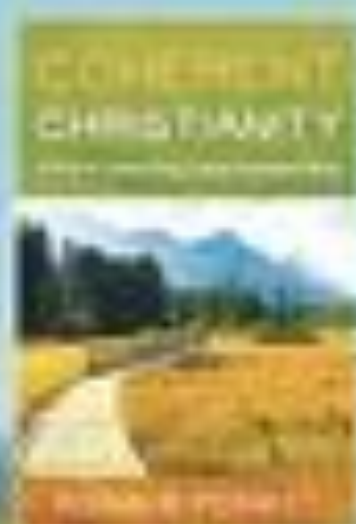
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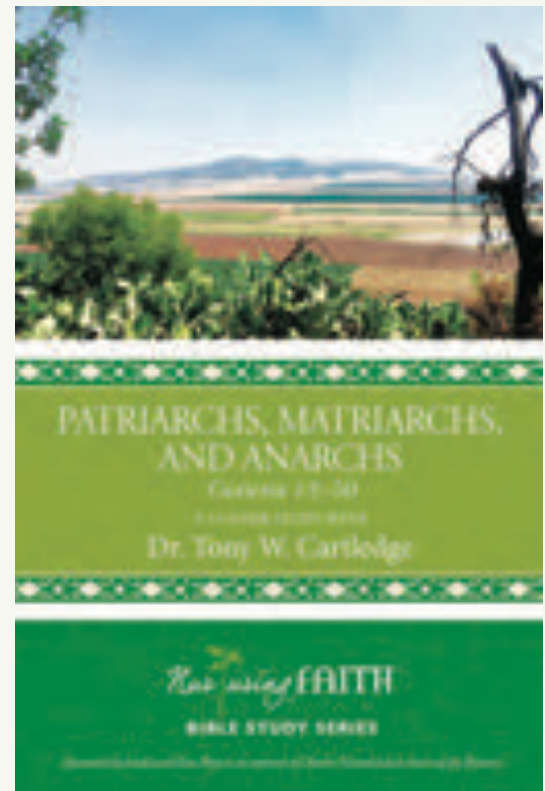
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WON'T YOU BE MY HERO?

Mr. Rogers left the world a better place,
and showed us how we can too

Fred McFeely Rogers was born in 1928 and died shortly before his 75th birthday in 2003. For more than three decades he produced and was the central figure in the award-winning children's TV show, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.

Rogers had intended to become a pastor, but felt led instead to become a minister to children bringing a message of love, acceptance and personal responsibility through the media. He attended seminary during his lunch hours and at night before becoming ordained as a Presbyterian minister.

He was an icon to many, a superhero of kindness. And he was my friend.

FROM TV NEIGHBOR TO FRIEND

Once upon a time I had a daughter, lively and sweet and wonderful, and her name was Bethany. She was named for the village where Jesus' friends and neighbors lived: Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Bethany was the great joy of my life, but while traveling in January 1994, she and I were struck by an extremely drunk driver. In the space of a single heartbeat, Bethany's life on earth came to an end.

While recovering from the wreck and its aftermath, I wrote thank-you letters to those I thought had been special to Bethany, and one of them was Mr. Rogers. Often, she and I had watched *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* together, and I thought he had contributed to her spunky self-esteem and caring nature.

About a week later, the phone rang. It was Mr. Rogers. One of the first things he said was, "Please call me Fred." So I did.

Fred was as kind and pastoral as any skilled minister could be. He promised to pray for my family and asked us to pray for him.

He said he wanted to stay in touch, so I began to send him poems and reflections I was writing as a way of working through my grief. He always responded with a personal note that was kind and encouraging. Most of the time, he closed with the Hebrew word *chesed* (steadfast love) or the Greek words *agapé* (unselfish love), written with the correct pointing, breathing marks and accents.

Later that year Bethany's mom and I visited Fred at WQED in Pittsburgh. I can't put into words what it was like to be greeted and



hugged by Mr. Rogers, but if I could convey a message from him, I have a good idea what it would be.

LOVE YOURSELF

Fred wanted children and adults to appreciate themselves as children of God, with all of our good points and growing points, all of our strengths and all our shortcomings. In almost every program he would look straight into the camera, straight into the eyes of children who were watching, and tell them that he liked them just the way they were.

He would often sing: "*It's you I like, not the clothes you wear, not the way you fix your hair but it's you I like...*"

Some people accused him of teaching children to grow up with an attitude of entitlement, rather than having to earn their place in the world. That shows they didn't understand Mr. Rogers at all. He wanted children and adults to have a clear-eyed vision of their value and potential as the foundation for becoming emotionally healthy and responsible.

Mr. Rogers' office at the studio was a small, unassuming room with no desk or computer. It contained a well-worn sofa and stuffed chair that had belonged to his grandfather, Fred McFeely. Little side tables held cans of teal blue soft-tip pens used for writing scripts or

songs on yellow legal pads, or for corresponding with people who had written to him.

Behind the sofa hung two plaques, one with the Greek word *charis*, meaning “grace,” and the other with a phrase from the Song of Songs, in Hebrew lettering: *'ani ledodi, vedodi li* – “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.”

On a narrow wall was a large piece of Chinese calligraphy. When I asked what it meant, Fred said, “I was told that it means, ‘If you want to see yourself clearly, don’t look in muddy water.’”

If we want to understand how unique and precious we are in God’s eyes, we can’t trust the muddy water of this society’s values or other people’s prejudices to tell us who we are or what we are worth. Mr. Rogers didn’t quote scripture in the “Neighborhood,” but he lived it, and his Christ-like and caring demeanor was a clear pool in which children and adults could see they were valued and worthy of love.

LOVE OTHERS

Fred believed more than anything that children who are created and valued and loved by God should also be loved on earth, and should learn to love others.

He once wrote: “Deep within us — no matter who we are — there lives a feeling of wanting to be lovable, of wanting to be the kind of person that others like to be with. And the greatest thing we can do is to let people know they are loved and are capable of loving.”

Fred didn’t have to reference the story about Jesus being asked to name the greatest commandment: he demonstrated daily that the most important thing we can do is to love God and to love others as we love ourselves. He often said, “You can’t really love someone else unless you really love yourself first.”

Mr. Rogers never lost sight of his own childhood, when he was bullied and called “Fat Freddy.” It enabled him to understand the needs of children so well, and was part of what prompted him to devote his life to helping children grasp what is really important in life.

In 1995, Fred was the commencement speaker for North Carolina State University, and he invited me to come. During a

luncheon in the field house following graduation, Fred noticed a little boy pressed against the glass entrance, trying to see inside.

Leaving both his lunch and the VIPs at the head table, Fred walked over to invite the child inside. He got down on eye level and talked with the little boy at great length, and then gave him a big goodbye hug. He understood who the really important people were.

Fred was colorblind; by sight alone he couldn’t tell which lights in the big traffic signal in his studio house were red or green. But he was also colorblind when he looked at children.

In the late 1960s, when segregation was more public than it is now, Fred heard of how a hotel manager had poured cleaning chemicals into the hotel swimming pool to chase some black children away.

It wasn’t long before *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* featured a sketch with Francois Clemmons, an African-American opera singer who played the role of a policeman. Imagining a hot day, Fred invited Francois to sit beside him, take off his shoes, and cool his feet in a plastic pool.

When Officer Clemmons objected that he didn’t have a towel, Mr. Rogers said, “You can share mine.” The image of their pale and dark feet sharing the same small pool and being dried with the same towel sent a powerful message of love and acceptance for all people.

Fred was a walking testament to love, even to his weight. Fred claimed that he weighed 143 pounds every day of his adult life, and that pleased him immensely. On *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* as well as in other contexts, he pointed out that the numbers 1-4-3 indicate the number of letters in “I love you.”

BE THANKFUL

Fred rose early every morning to read his Bible and pray — and he often encouraged others to be thankful.

Fred spoke at many graduation ceremonies and other occasions, and rarely did so without encouraging the audience to think about all the people — those still on earth or in heaven — who had made it possible for them to be there: parents and grandparents, teachers and coaches, ministers and

friends, who had helped them become who they were.

Inevitably, he would ask everyone to pause for one minute and give thanks for the special people who had loved them and helped them along the way. Then he would say, “I’ll watch the time.”

Entire stadiums — or rooms full of celebrities — would fall silent as they pondered the importance of being thankful.

Fred was a big believer in prayer. He didn’t hesitate to ask others to pray for him, and when they concluded, he would often say, “Thank you, God.”

I’ve never known anyone more kind, more grace-filled, or more like Jesus than Fred Rogers. I keep his picture on my desk as a reminder of how I’d like to follow Jesus as faithfully as he did.

I don’t always succeed, but I remember that he was known to say, “Some days, doing ‘the best we can’ may still fall short of what we would like to be able to do, but life isn’t perfect on any front — and doing what we can with what we have is the most we should expect of ourselves or anyone else.”

The world is a better place because Fred Rogers did the most he could with what he had.

Real heroes are the people who don’t ask for acclaim, but whose lives are so inspiring that we can’t help admiring them — and trying to follow. **NFJ**



BEING NEIGHBORLY — With puppets from the beloved TV show *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Tony Cartledge takes on the persona of his late friend Fred Rogers. Churches or other groups interested in Tony’s presentation of “Lessons from the Neighborhood” may contact him at cartledge@nurturingfaith.net. Photo by Susan Cartledge.

Worth Repeating

“Evidence seems to indicate [a new Christian movement] is already underway and will be led by the emerging generation. This new movement will bend toward God and justice, bending slowly at times but always bending from the results of radical love.”

Mitch Randall, executive director of ethicsdaily.com

“All evangelical Christians believe that the Bible is transformative, but when less than a quarter of them read it at least weekly, the real problem is that they don’t read it enough to truly make a difference.”

Larry Eubanks, pastor of First Baptist Church of Frederick, Md. (ethicsdaily.com)

“The understanding of sin as moral peccadillos ... was the view emphasized by moralists throughout the centuries. But a more complete theological view sees moral missteps as symptoms of a disease of the soul, not at all the disease itself.”

Tricia Gates Brown, an “everyday theologian” and pastoral counselor in Oregon ([Christian Century Blog](http://ChristianCenturyBlog.com))

“Any claim that the whole universe simply ‘came into being’ raises the questions ‘How?’ and ‘Why?’”

Roger E. Olson of Baylor’s Truett Seminary, responding to Stephen Hawking’s final declaration that there’s “no possibility” that God exists (patheos.com)

“There are people sitting in pews together that disagree on lots of issues — not only homosexuality... And if there were an emergency, they would be there working side-by-side, caring and praying for each other.”

Longtime United Methodist Flo Martin, regarding tension within the denomination following rejection of the One Church Plan (CNN)

“It is particularly important that experts from the leading Holocaust memorial institutes in Israel and the United States objectively evaluate as best as possible the historical record of that most terrible of times — to acknowledge both the failures as well as the valiant efforts made during the period of the systematic murder of six million Jews.”

Rabbi David Rosen, AJC international director for inter-religious affairs, on Pope Francis announcing the opening of Vatican Archives to researchers next year ([American Jewish Committee](http://AmericanJewishCommittee.com))

“When women, who represent more than half of the people in our churches, are educated, empowered and treated as equals, the church as a whole can prosper at significant rates.”

Meredith Stone, assistant professor of scripture and ministry at Logsdon School of Theology in Abilene, Texas (ethicsdaily.com)

“The difference between apology and repentance is not lost on the abused.”

Church historian Bill Leonard ([Baptist News Global](http://BaptistNewsGlobal.com))

“I always thought Portland would be a good place to try it, because we’re one of the least religiously affiliated cities in the country.”

Cheryl Kolbe, local Freedom of Religion Foundation president, on Portland, Ore., City Council extending protections from discrimination to atheists, agnostics and those who claim no religion (RNS)

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Jesus and our unnecessary additives

By John D. Pierce

Christ alone is just not enough for some of us. There is a propensity to keep adding requirements for what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus.

There is always some theological affirmation or political ideology to which someone seeks our allegiance in order to be considered verifiably “Christian.”

While working more comfortably with words than numbers, it seems fair to judge this practice as bad math. Such additives actually dilute our primary commitment and distract from our primary tasks.

Therefore, I would argue that to *add* to Jesus is to *subtract* from Jesus.

Why Christ alone is not enough for some of his followers is a question worth considering.

Perhaps it comes from a desire to be a part of a smaller, esoteric group that holds the truth and limits kingdom membership to the few that get everything right. Or maybe it is simply an effort to find an easier route to divine approval.

Softening Jesus’ demands to love God with all our being and our broadly defined neighbors as we love ourselves is quite tempting.

And to temper his call to love our enemies and those who mistreat us is appealing. It is far easier to affirm a doctrinal statement than to turn the other cheek or give to everyone who asks.

Joining a political effort requires far less from us than to “bless those who curse you (and) pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:28 NIRV).

Of course, Jesus took an odd approach to math as well, saying such things as “the first shall be last.”

But Christ alone is not a lonely number. Our math fails when we think adding to what Jesus said and did somehow

improves our response to his calling.

From the religious elites who stirred Jesus’ wrath to modern, self-assigned, godly gatekeepers, there are those who want to carve new rules on the door of the spiritual clubhouse and enforce their “members only” policies of exclusion.

Too often such defining elements of Christianity more clearly reflect the values of those adding the rules than the one who first said, “Follow me.”

Let us beware when someone seeks to more narrowly define the Christian faith than Jesus defined it. Such additions are really subtractions.

Let us be wise when faithfulness has more to do with echoing the religious beliefs and/or political ideologies of others than just doing the hard stuff Jesus called his followers to do.

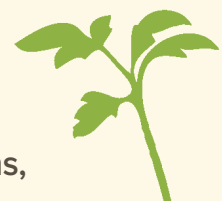
My most used line today is simply this: Following Jesus is hard, but it is not complicated. Any addition or alternative is a lesser choice. **NFJ**



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Remembering Jack U. Harwell

*Editor's Note: Editor Emeritus Jack U. Harwell, 86, died January 18 in Atlanta.
He served as editor of this publication from 1988–1997.*

BY WILLIAM T. NEAL III

Jack Harwell will be remembered by many as one of the most influential Baptist journalists of the latter 20th century. People who knew him or read his editorials felt very strongly about him, one way or the other. Yet even his opponents respected him as a worthy adversary.

His supporters were enamored with his “straight shooter” approach to telling the truth. But many fundamentalist Baptists felt he was a troublemaker, trying to stir things up when it came to calling racism what it was, or speaking in support for women in ministry.

For more than 20 years Jack served as editor of the *Christian Index*, at the time the oldest religious newspaper still in publication in the U.S. His most famous and courageous editorial appeared in the *Index* following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

He called King a great leader and called on Georgia Baptists to shed their racist past and speak up for the equality of all persons. That editorial was reprinted in the *Atlanta Constitution* and resulted in the Harwell family receiving hate mail and even death threats.

After being forced out of his editorship at the *Index* by a minority of powerful fundamentalists (despite an overwhelming vote of support for Jack at the previous Georgia Baptist Convention meeting), he went on to become the second editor of *Baptists Today*, now *Nurturing Faith Journal*. In that new role he had a wider national Baptist audience.

Jack was in demand to fill many Baptist pulpits, and to serve as keynote speaker for



banquets and other programs. However, he took great pride in being a layman rather than an ordained minister. He let it be known that one of the problems in Baptist life was there were too many preachers running the show and not enough lay representation. As one might imagine, that idea irked a lot of pastors, mainly the ones seeking power for themselves.

However, when pastors wanted to move to another church, they often went to Jack for advice and support. He was known as a “king maker” (or rather “pastor maker”) in Georgia.

In his later years Jack did become an ordained minister and served on the staff of First Baptist Church of Morrow, Ga., working with senior adults and helping with pastoral care. He was deeply loved by the members of that congregation. I met one of them while visiting Jack during his

last hospital stay.

This man told me that Jack was the one who had led him to Christ just a few years before. Throughout his career as a denominational journalist Jack remained a strong believer in the local church, and in the end that was where he lived out his Christian witness.

Jack had his public persona, but I had the privilege of seeing a more intimate personal side to this great man. He was haunted by a life of many tragedies and disappointments in both his professional life and his personal life.

For example, he went through something that no one should have to experience: the death of a child. While always busy in his career, he also took on responsibilities for extended family members and numerous friends. He was generous to a fault.

He did not always make the right

My favorite Jack Harwell story

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

A tiny black-and-white image of Jack Harwell — in his younger, bespectacled days — was a weekly visitor to my family’s home in northwest Georgia. It was set within his allotted words on the editorial page of the *Christian Index*.

Even many years later, as a young campus minister who got to know Jack personally, I could not have imagined how closely my vocational path would follow his as destiny delivered.

Yet I ended up at the same two publications — at different times from Jack — that he served as editor.

Editor William Neal, who had been Jack’s associate, recruited me to be managing editor of the *Index* in 1994. Then I became executive editor of this publication in 2000 — where Jack had been the second and longest tenured editor at the time.

Through the years and varied experiences, Jack was a constant source of affirmation and encouragement. He and his wife, Teliea, a photographer, would even contribute feature stories and provide leads to me.

Following his recent death, my mind traced many conversations and experiences related to Jack. One story he told me stood out from the others.

Jack was chosen as publicity chairman



Jack U. Harwell, left, then editor of the *Christian Index*, served as publicity chairman for the Atlanta Billy Graham Crusade in 1973.

for the 1973 Billy Graham crusade in Atlanta. Such events were extremely well planned and prayed over — from securing the biggest venue to the smallest organizational detail. Nothing was left to chance.

When the successful services concluded, the famed evangelist stopped by Jack’s office to debrief the publicity aspects of the revival to see if anything could be learned for upcoming mass meetings.

During their conversation, Jack recalled making a passing reference to the “good ol’ days.” Graham laughed heartily, Jack said, and then got serious.

“You know when the good ol’ days

were, Jack?” he asked, before answering his own question.

It’s different for each person, Graham explained with much insight. The good ol’ days, he said, were whenever someone was at his or her peak, physically and vocationally.

Graham’s words made a lot of sense, Jack recalled. Our tendency is to view history from our own perspectives of influence and strength.

Each time someone speaks of society’s present decline and yearns for the “good ol’ days” or the “glory years,” I think of what Jack Harwell told me Billy Graham told him. The lens through which we evaluate history is a very personal one that recalls the era of our own vigor, comfort and sway.

Of course, we also tend to remember the “good” and the “glorious” aspects of such times, rather than the hardships that were present.

Being a nostalgic person, I enjoy taking pleasant memory trips. But I’m glad to live in this moment in time — with air conditioning, seat warmers, GPS technology and other good things.

But I’m also grateful for those who’ve gone before me to pave the way with creativity, competence and courage — people like Jack U. Harwell, who added some goodness and glory to those who knew him in various seasons of life. **NFJ**

decisions, but I knew him as a man with a big heart, who truly loved others and certainly loved the Lord. He was also a man who could forgive. I know of people who were once his enemies who became his friends.

If you were to ask him to name his mentors, he would probably list people like his father; his former boss, John J. Hurt, editor of the *Index* and later the *Baptist Standard* in Texas; and the legendary Baptist leader Louie D. Newton, who became one of his closest friends and chief supporters.

If you ask me to name my mentors, Jack Harwell would be on that short list.

I will forever be grateful for the time he took to teach me, and for the friendship we shared over the years.

Jack was a faithful servant of Jesus Christ, and many readers of this journal are among the beneficiaries of his Christian witness in both word and deed. He will be missed, but never forgotten. **NFJ**

—William Neal is vice chair of the Board of Directors of Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith and the former editor of the *Christian Index*, where he also served as associate editor to Jack Harwell.

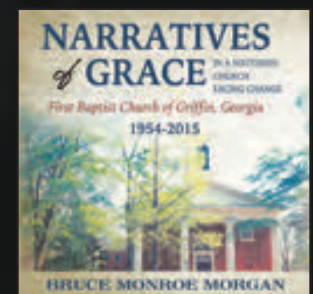
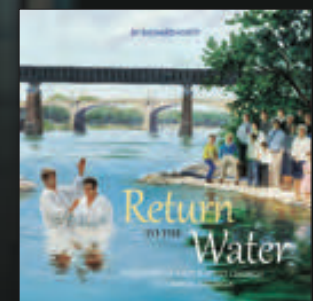
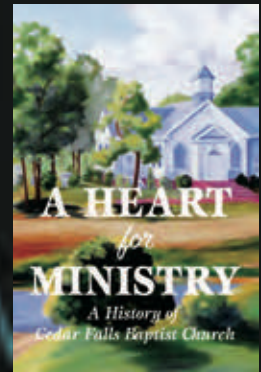
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We need each other

BY LARRY HOVIS

Our family struggles with knees—specifically, left knees.

As I write, my wife, Kim, is recovering from knee replacement revision surgery. That's right, I said "revision." This surgery replaced some of the new parts that were installed in her left knee just two years ago.

We are also celebrating the sixth anniversary of my famous "gas pump hose fiasco." After speaking at the Wednesday night gathering of the First Baptist Church of Burlington, N.C., I drove home, stopping just a mile from our house for gas. While pumping gas and shivering in my shirtsleeves, I decided to get my jacket out of the car, but I was separated from the car door by the gas pump hose. That's when I made a critical mistake.

Instead of walking around the hose stretched between the pump and my Honda Pilot, I took a short running start and tried to hurdle the hose suspended a foot or two off the ground. My toe caught the hose. I went flying forward and somehow landed with all of my considerable weight on my left knee.

I felt the most intense surge of pain and rolled forward, coming to rest on my right side, clutching my left knee, unable to bend it at all. As I lay there on the cold pavement, I realized it was a dark area where no one could see me. My car separated me from other customers and the gas station. I feared if a car drove up, I might be run over. So I started yelling for help.

It took a few minutes to get the atten-

tion of another customer. She called for others and soon there was a small group of strangers gathered around me, all concerned for my welfare. The first rescuer asked if I wanted her to call an ambulance. I fished my phone out of my pocket and asked her to call my wife since we lived so close by.

The woman obliged, but then insisted on calling an ambulance. Since Kim would never be able to get me into her car to take me to the hospital, I didn't argue.

As we waited for Kim and the ambulance, someone noticed that I was shivering on the cold pavement. Soon, several people covered me with their coats. Finally, I had the covering that led to this crisis.

The ambulance arrived. They loaded me on a stretcher and took me to the emergency room of Forsyth Hospital, where later that night I received emergency surgery to reconstruct my shattered left kneecap.

While I was riding in the ambulance, one of the gas station customers drove my car, following Kim back to our house, so we wouldn't have an extra car stranded at the station. Kim then came to the hospital to be with me.

In all of the confusion we never got the names of any of the folks who came to our aid. We didn't know any of them, but they were there when we needed them.

This experience has given me another lens through which to view the state of Baptist life. The Baptist movement was started partly in reaction to ecclesiastical and governmental overreach into matters of faith. Since our beginning, we have championed soul competency and congregational

autonomy.

Early in Baptist history, our forbears realized that even with those cherished values, we still need each other. So, we developed voluntary organizations beyond the local church for the purposes of fellowship, support and cooperation.

The height of Baptist cooperation occurred in the middle decades of the 20th century, and has been eroding ever since. Even connectional denominations have become more fragmented, experiencing what Lutheran historian Martin Marty calls the "baptistification" of American Christianity.

Still, it's worse for us Baptists. Our default position is toward independence. We have to work hard at community and cooperation. It doesn't come natural.

As long as things are going well, Baptists can go it alone pretty easily. But when hard times come, we realize we need others. Recently, I was asked to help a church in crisis. That congregation's troubles were not widely known in the community, and that's how they wanted it. But the minister of a neighboring church, a close friend of a minister in this church, was aware of both the troubles and my efforts to help.

She said, "I'm glad the Baptist community has been supportive of the church. They need help. I bet you spend a lot of time with situations like this, and most of us are never aware of it. That's not the kind of thing you put in an annual report. But it's good to know that you're there when we need you."

Most of the time we can get along fine on our own. But sometimes we fall, and we need help getting back on our feet. That's true even for us Baptists. **NFJ**

—Larry Hovis is executive coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina (cbfnc.org).



*As long as things are going well, Baptists can go it alone pretty easily.
But when hard times come, we realize we need others.*

'We should be patient with ourselves, since God is patient with us.'

A psychiatrist and a theologian respond to

12 questions about prayer

BY ARTHUR FREEMAN
AND FISHER HUMPHREYS



Is prayer the same thing as meditation and contemplation?

Often these three words are used interchangeably. However, these are three distinct practices, and some writers use each word to speak of just one of the three practices.

Contemplation is silence. “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). You remain quiet in the confidence that the Spirit of God always lives in your heart. You allow the chatter in your mind to fade away, content to sit calmly in the presence of God.

Meditation is repetition. “On his law they meditate day and night” (Ps. 1:2). You quietly repeat over and over in your mind a Bible passage such as “I will fear no evil” (Ps. 23:4).

Prayer is talking to God. Jesus said, “When you pray, say, ‘Our Father...’” (Matt. 6:9). Think of yourself as God’s child, and talk to God as children talk to their parents.

Is prayer a conversation with God?

In our human conversations we usually listen as well as talk. In prayer we talk to God. But does God speak to us when we are praying?

Christians believe that God’s word is heard primarily in Jesus (John 1:1, Heb. 1:1-2) and in the Bible (Ps. 119:11). However, many Christians have experienced God speaking to them through an interior voice. Often this happens while they are praying.

No one is in a position to say that God cannot speak in this way. God is free to speak in any way God chooses.

However, we can’t assume that every interior message is really from God. We must practice discernment if we are to know whether an inner message is something God is communicating or rather something we are projecting.

So we ask questions such as, “Is the interior message consistent with what we know God has said through Jesus and through the Bible?” If it is not, then it is not from God.

We should keep in mind that, if God never said anything else in addition to what God has already said in Jesus and the Bible, we would be all right. What we know through Jesus is all we need to live and die as faithful Christians.

How can it be that God, who created and governs the entire universe, listens to us little human beings when we pray?

Because God is unimaginably wise and is present everywhere in the universe, God is able to listen to our prayers.

Because God is love, God wants to listen to our prayers, just as caring parents want to listen to their children.

What are some principal kinds of prayer?

Here are five of the principal kinds of prayer:

First, we offer thanks to God for God's blessings. For example, we thank God for creating us, for preserving our lives to this day, for loving us, for sending Jesus to our world, for forgiving our sins, for giving us hope for the future, for our homes, for our families, for our friends, for the church, for giving the Spirit to the church, for our country, for meaningful work and for many other things.

Second, we offer worship to God. Worship is similar to thanksgiving, but the two differ in that thanksgiving is about things God has done and worship tends to be about who God is and what God is like.

So in worship we say things such as “We worship you, O God of love and kindness” and “We adore you, our Creator, for your goodness and mercy” and “We bow before you, Lord of the universe, God of power and wisdom.”

Third, we confess our sins. We may do this in a very general way. For example, “We have not loved you with all our hearts, and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.”

Sometimes, though, in private, we will want to confess very specific sins. For example, “Lord, I lost my temper and hurt someone I love.” Often our prayers of confession are accompanied with a request for forgiveness.

“Lord, have mercy on me, for I have done things I ought not to have done, and I have left undone things I ought to have done.” John wrote, “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us” (1 John 1:9).

Fourth, we make requests. Requests for ourselves are called petitions, and requests for other people are called intercessions.

Some Christians think it is immature or even naïve to ask God for things, but many of the prayers in the Bible are requests. The Lord's Prayer contains six requests.

Of course, we must not be greedy when we pray, but it certainly is all right to ask God for the things we and others need.

Fifth, in prayer we offer ourselves to God.

We pray, as Isaiah did centuries ago, “Here am I; send me!” (Isa. 6:8).

We Christians commit ourselves to live as God's people and to follow the way of Jesus with the help of the Spirit in the fellowship of the church.

These five kinds of prayer can be briefly stated this way: “Thank you. We worship you. We have sinned. Help us. We give ourselves to you.”

It is not necessary while we are praying to distinguish these kinds of prayer from each other. Still, it can be instructive to be aware that there are several kinds of prayer.

Does our prayer really make a difference to God?

This is the principal theoretical question about prayer. We know that our prayers make a difference to us; we are helped by our praying. And we know that our prayers make a difference to other people; people are encouraged to know that we are praying for them.

‘God wants us to be thankful for what we should be thankful for, namely, the good things in our lives and in our world.’

But does prayer really make a difference to God? When we pray, does God do anything differently than if we had not prayed?

On the one hand, it seems pretty implausible that the creator of the universe would do anything differently because we pray. On the other hand, Jesus taught us to pray for things such as our daily bread (Matt. 6:11).

If we are to be sincere in making our requests, we need to believe that prayer makes a difference to God. Otherwise our requests would be just a matter of trying to guess what God was already planning to do and then asking God to do what God was going to do anyway.

Here we need to be clear. We can't by our prayers *manipulate* God, and we

certainly can't *control* God. God would never allow that to happen. In any case it would be a disaster if it did happen because we would surely use God's power unwisely.

In prayer we simply make requests. That's all. We ask. Then we leave it up to God how to respond.

Good parents listen to their children because they love them. They don't allow their children to manipulate or control them, of course; but they are responsive to their children's needs and requests.

If a child asks her mother to stop for ice cream on the way home from school, the mother may decide to do that. Or, she may decide not to do it. It's her decision. So in response to prayer, God may or may not do something that God otherwise would have done.

This is the understanding of prayer that children have, but it isn't childish. In the 1950s Leonard Hodgson, an Anglican theologian who was Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, wrote:

“If we cannot be content to think of prayer as wholly concerned with the self-disciplining of our own minds, or as an attempt to cajole God into doing something other than what He intends, or as a futile request to Him to do what He is going to do anyway, there remains only one possible alternative. Our thought about prayer must rest on the foundation of belief that God voluntarily waits upon our asking.”

What about unanswered prayers?

Early in our prayer life we may become disappointed, hurt or even angry with God when our prayers are unanswered. As we mature and our prayers mature, we come to see that our unanswered prayer may be part of a larger plan of God.

God's plan may include a great number of people with similar petitions. The hoped-for result may be currently in development by God. Of course, our request may not be in line with God's will because it was not broad enough or helpful enough to many people.

Some people actually experience a deepening of their faith when their prayer is unanswered. They can sense the greatness and wisdom of God, and they realize that

their prayer is not adequate for what God has in mind. This can be both humbling and enlightening.

People may learn that the prayer was answered long ago or in such a way that it will take them a good while to understand what God has done. Unanswered prayers may be an occasion for looking deeply into ourselves.

What does it mean to pray without ceasing and to give thanks in everything?

Paul wrote: “Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks” (1 Thess. 5:18). We think both of these sentences are frequently misunderstood.

“Pray without ceasing” has been understood to mean “pray all the time, around the clock.” As a result, some Christians have gone into monasteries and convents so that they can devote all their waking hours to prayer.

Others have trained themselves to say prayers constantly throughout the day, no matter what else they are doing. For example, some have disciplined themselves so that they are continuously praying a prayer called the Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.”

While these are not bad things, neither are they what Paul had in mind. What he meant is much simpler; in fact, it is just common sense. He meant this: “In the past you have prayed. Keep doing that. Whatever happens, don’t stop praying. Pray without ceasing.”

“In everything give thanks” has been understood to mean “give thanks for everything that happens.” Many Christians feel that they should discipline themselves to be thankful for everything that occurs in our world and in their lives.

So they grit their teeth and try to work up some gratitude for horrific things such as an accident that cripples a child or a disease that takes a parent’s life.

But what Paul meant was simpler than this. It’s common sense. He meant: “In all the ups and downs of life, with all the changes that life brings, be sure to continue to thank God for all the good that is in your



life and in the world. Do this even if a lot of bad things are also happening.”

God doesn’t want us to be thankful for bad things. God wants us to be thankful for what we should be thankful for, namely, the good things in our lives and in our world.

And God wants us to continue to pray for as long as we live.

‘If we are to be sincere in making our requests, we need to believe that prayer makes a difference to God.’

Are we too busy to pray?

Sometimes we feel too busy to pray, but should we? What should one put ahead of God?

Our lives seem so cluttered and congested at times, but somehow we must find a way to put the most important thing in its rightful place. It is an act of intentionality, practice and habit.

Joy can come from prayer. We can feel the presence of God as we pray. Our love for God and others may increase. We begin to see the priorities in our lives. We learn from God about how to live our daily experiences.

Our vision becomes that of God, how to love God and do God’s will. We also see ways to love our family, friends and others, as difficult as that may be at times. Treating them with compassion, respect and understanding can be the fruit of prayer.

Praying a longer prayer early in the morning is a good way to begin the day. Throughout the day shorter prayers can follow.

Is prayer therapeutic meditation?

For some people this is so. Prayer can be used by the Great Physician to give us healing that we need in our lives. It can relieve some of the tension and sadness in life.

It can help us deal with anxiety, depression and other disorders. It can be calming. It can help us plan our days and our lives more wisely. This can be immensely helpful to us.

But prayer also offers us something beyond therapy. It helps us to draw near to God. A person who enters prayer with a firm belief in God and God’s goodness and God’s willingness to listen to and to respond to prayer will have a good chance of encountering God and of experiencing what fellowship with God can give.

Can prayer restore a broken relationship with God?

Yes, it can. A break with God can come for a number of reasons. It can stem from a loss in our lives for which we “blame” God.

We may later realize that God does not cause death to any of our loved ones. Accidents and illness occur due to physical and biological laws of this world.

Sometimes we just stop praying. What can cause this dry period? It could be related to the lack of a prayer schedule. It could be the belief that God does not answer prayer.

It could happen due to a fatigue in attending church and Sunday school, and reading the Bible. Attention to work and family can be overwhelming and drive us away from prayer. So can many other things.

We can reflect on the possibilities of what happened and discover the cause. Then, we can re-motivate ourselves to return to God in prayer.

Start slowly and deliberately. Do not in any way force new prayer. We can begin our return to prayer with short prayers — one daily, perhaps.

We should be patient with ourselves, since God is patient with us. God understands our lapses and, with love, forgives them. After all, even though we may be absent from God, God is never absent from us.



We can come back to God with contrition, hope and deep desire for a new relationship. God loves us all constantly.

Can we understand the evil and suffering in the world through prayer?

Prayer is the best place to begin trying to understand evil and suffering. If we have developed a trusting relationship with God, prayer can be even more helpful. We trust God's wisdom and goodness in giving freedom to human beings and in creating a world that operates by cause and effect.

Of course, we may pray for a miracle for a family member suffering from a dread disorder. On rare occasions we may see some positive results. On many occasions God may ask us whether we have done all we could to alleviate an injustice or the suffering of someone. Prayer is no excuse for our inaction.

In some cases, medical care can lessen disease and suffering. Sometimes friends, the private sector and elected officials may

lessen the suffering of society. God has given us creative minds and opportunities to use these minds, especially in prayer.

A saying associated with St. Benedict is *ora et labora*—"pray and work."

What happens when we attain union of our will with God?

This seems to be a very rare occurrence, especially in our current secular environment. It is a worthy goal, and it has numerous sub-goals to be attained before we can experience something as wonderful as this.

There are words to express this goal: divinization, *theosis* and resurrection. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a great theologian of the past century, called it costly discipleship.

Reaching this goal demands relinquishing most of our ego. Many Christians are not familiar with this goal, but when they hear of it, they may become intrigued. It really means becoming saintly.

Occasionally, we meet people whose goodness and compassion are remarkable.

What do they have that we yearn for? They pray ceaselessly, they love all of God's creation, and they yearn for the presence of God.

When we meet and come to know some of these Christ-like people, we may study them, imitate them, and come to love them as they love God. Even if we do not reach the heights they have reached, we can gain new Christian understanding from them. **NFJ**



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

What do we need to jettison?

BY CHRIS CALDWELL

For the 25 years I served as a pastor, I never bought the line, “What Jesus wanted was a movement; what he got was a church.”

Now I serve outside the church, and I still don’t buy that line. When others say, “Institutionalize and die,” I still say, “or, don’t institutionalize, and die sooner.”

Even so, when Jesus told his followers to leave their tunics in the closet back home he was indeed speaking a needed word to today’s churches trying to drag tons of 20th century tunics through the 21st century.

So when I was recently asked what question a thriving church should be asking today, I settled on, “What do we need to be jettisoning?” What do we need to let go of to lighten the load for the sake of the ship?

Everywhere, churches are riding perilously low in the water, and everywhere experts call out advice on how to improve churches’ engines or fine-tune their designs, all in the name of keeping them afloat. I’m all for that, and tweaking a church’s engine or design is kind of fun — at least for us church geeks.

Most church leaders I know, be they ministers or lay leaders, dig coming up with cool new things to try. It’s way easy to imagine a church leadership retreat with

everyone saying about a new ministry idea, “Yes, let’s START doing THIS!” What’s way hard to imagine is those same leaders saying, “Yes, let’s STOP doing THAT!”

In a world of declining church rolls, shrinking budgets and many leaders struggling with burnout, thriving churches need the wisdom to know when respectfully to lay a program beside the path and keep walking. Or, to stick with the original metaphor, let’s not overly romanticize churches as sailing galleys driven by the wind of God’s Spirit alone.

Yes, galleys do have sails; they also have those slots running down the side where the long oars stick out. And there are people in today’s church galleys who have to go below deck and row to keep the ship going, especially during doldrum days or doldrum decades.

Maybe before we try implementing yet another “Save Our Ship” program, we should consider freeing up some energy by putting some things on a “Not-To-Do” list.

I once heard a young pastor ask a group of pastors how he was supposed to know if something was a “sacred cow.” An old pastor drawled, “Just touch it.”

Sacred cows have their place, but they aren’t worth much when it’s time to row. They are just traditions, plus they have those clumsy hooves. Meanwhile real people



with blistered hands and weary shoulders are pulling away at the oars.

On a more hopeful note, my friend Bill Wilson tells me one of the most reliable places to find a thriving church is to show up in the 10 years after its building burned down. As people have to live into the truth that a “church is more than its buildings,” they are liberated and enthusiastic.

Or consider my friend Kelly Burkhart, pastor of Baptist Temple in Houston. When he went there 15 years ago, the church occupied 10 percent of the pews in the thousand-seat sanctuary, and the church’s ministry was being crushed by the weight of mere buildings.

Having sold off two-thirds of their buildings, including the old sanctuary, they now happily reside in the beautifully remodeled remaining one-third, and you can feel the vibrancy when you walk inside. During construction, Kelly said they met in a hotel ballroom and ran the church out of two plastic tubs.

It was the best thing that ever happened to them, he says, and now they thrive as a small church freed of sacred cows and focused instead on a few life-giving ministries. “We’re not a very busy church,” I heard Kelly say.

“Heresy!” cries the sacred herd. “Sanity,” say I. [NFJ](#)

—Chris Caldwell is a professor and administrator at Simmons College of Kentucky, a historic black college founded in 1879.

Maybe before we try implementing yet another “Save Our Ship” program, we should consider freeing up some energy by putting some things on a “Not-To-Do” list.



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It helps us to read the stories of others, and this collection of call stories calls us to first carefully listen. But be alert. Perhaps the voice of God will even be calling you as you read.

—Linda McKinnish Bridges

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Jesus the Truth

By John R. Franke

Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6). In this series on a Jesus-shaped worldview, I want to reflect on the claim that Jesus is the truth.

It has often been interpreted as mandating that Christians should attempt to impose the *idea* that Jesus is the truth on the world and contend for it at every turn in order to extend the kingdom of God. This mindset has often engendered a belief that a necessary aspect of faithful discipleship is honing our ability to win an argument about an idea — Jesus is the truth — so as to redeem the world.

However, examining the actions of Jesus in John’s gospel suggests a different approach. In the account of the interrogation of Jesus by Pontius Pilate, the ruler seeks to clarify the identity of Jesus by asking if he is, in fact, “the King of the Jews” (18:33).

After inquiring as to the basis for Pilate’s question, Jesus replies that while he is indeed a king, his kingdom “is not from this world” (18:36). This means that Jesus and his followers will not engage in forms of intellectual or material compulsion in order to save his life or secure his kingdom.

Such tactics are not only unnecessary but also problematic in that they would secure a kingdom by forms of coercion and assimilation that produce oppression and marginalization. That sort of kingdom was the only one known in the time of Jesus.

He makes it clear that his proclamation of the kingdom of God is not like that of the Roman world or any of the other domina-

tion societies that came before it. Pilate is puzzled by the idea of a king and a kingdom that affirms notions of non-violence, invitation and hospitality rather than force.

Hence, he seeks to clarify the status of Jesus: “So you are a king?” To this Jesus responds: “You say that I am a king. For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Every-

one who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (18:37). Perhaps even more puzzled, Pilate concludes his conversation with Jesus by famously asking: “What is truth?”

The generally convoluted nature of theoretical and philosophical discussions of truth, coupled with their relative inconclusiveness, have led many to conclude that, at the end of the day, Pilate’s conclusion, while certainly cynical, is also perhaps the most realistic and compelling.

Let me suggest simply, without denying that philosophical discussions about truth have their place, that truth is a person: Jesus Christ. Truth is not finally to be found in arguments, abstract notions or theories, but rather in Jesus and the way of life he lives in the world for others.

In the Gospel of John this affirmation is expressed by calling Jesus the *logos* of God, the living and active Word of God, the very basis of creation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life



was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it” (1:1-5).

John explicitly says what he means when he calls Jesus the *logos* of God — and he certainly means more than abstract truth: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (1:17-18).

Jesus, then, is presented as the all-encompassing truth of God, a truth that is personal, relational and gracious. John fills out this picture in terms of Jesus’ relationship to the Spirit: “When the Advocate comes,” says Jesus, “whom I will send to you from the Father — the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father — he will testify about me” (15:26).

The Spirit of truth bears witness to Jesus (not to some philosophy or theory) as the incarnate manifestation of truth — truth that has “moved into the neighborhood,” as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*.

The church is called to bear witness to this reality not by winning an argument or still less by imposing its will on the world. Instead we demonstrate our commitment to the conviction that Jesus is the truth and the light of the world by following his example of love and self-sacrifice for the sake of others, even our enemies. **NFJ**

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

Truth is not finally to be found in arguments, abstract notions or theories, but rather in Jesus and the way of life he lives in the world for others.

When being first means being last

BY GINGER HUGHES

As our family enjoyed some fun-filled days at Disney World recently, I had the opportunity to observe a lot of people. Standing in lines for elevators, restaurants, rides, ice cream vendors, and yes, bathrooms, affords you a lot of time to watch and listen.

Throughout our days I noticed so many kind people — people who hold the door allowing you and your tired kiddos to walk through first, people who motion for you to go ahead of them in line, and those who give up their seat on the bus so you can sit down with your tired little one.

There are those who bend down to pick up the park map that fell from your overstuffed bag, and those who pause long enough to make eye contact, smile, and ask where you're from as you both wait for your order number to be called so you can enjoy more chicken tenders and fries.

But as we waited, I noticed something else. Some people are determined to be first. The thought of motioning another person ahead is an unknown concept. The idea of standing on the bus to allow an elderly person to sit down never crosses their minds, or if it does, they stifle the prompting.

I watched some people practically push their way to the front of the line to get



“there” a few minutes quicker.

One morning my daughter and I were waiting for the elevator and had been for some time. Just as we heard the elevator to our right “ding,” and were about to step toward the opening door, another family with several children and two strollers quickly walked up and onto the elevator with barely a glance in our direction. Their family filled the elevator, and we were left waiting once again.

It seems we have this natural desire to be first and to get ahead. We're tempted to go through life trying to push our way to the top, to get “there” no matter the cost.

Whether motioning for the person with only five items in their grocery cart to go ahead of us at the checkout, or trying to climb the proverbial ladder in our careers, society teaches us to look out for number one. We live as though our schedules and plans are so important that there isn't any room to think of others.

In the ninth chapter of Mark, Jesus tells his disciples, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant to all.”

Perhaps this is why so many of Jesus' teachings aren't very popular in today's society. They go completely against the culture.

The idea of being last doesn't feel good. The idea of serving rather than being served doesn't either — at least not at first glance. Yet as a Christ follower, this is what is expected of us.

We may act as if letting someone in front of us will completely wreck our plans. We may live as though our dreams, hopes and goals are the most important.

While there is nothing wrong with having big dreams, perhaps we would do well to remember that the best goal is always about helping others. At the end of this life it won't matter in the least if we made it to the “top” if we climbed over and stepped on others to get there. What *will* matter?

- Did we love God?
- Did we point others to God?
- Did we help others along the way?

—Ginger Hughes is the wife of a pastor, a mother of two and an accountant. She is a Georgia native 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.

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

Faith and Frisbees

By Brett Younger

The *Book of Mormon* — the Broadway play, not the actual book — follows the story of a young Mormon missionary in Uganda. The violence he sees makes him start to lose faith in his religion, but instead of abandoning his church, he decides to reaffirm everything he has been taught.

He sings a triumphant solo that starts reasonably, “I believe that the Lord God created the universe,” but then gets shaky: “I believe that ancient Jews built boats and sailed to America. I believe that God will give me my own planet. I believe that in 1978 God changed his mind about black people. I believe that God lives on a planet called Kolob. I believe that the Garden of Eden was in Jackson County, Missouri.”

Wonderful people belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but those beliefs sound odd to many of us.

Jediism is a religion inspired by *Star Wars*. Jedii believe that the Force is a reality. The religion asks followers to beware of the dark side that leads to fear and hate. Four years ago the Temple of the Jedi Order received tax-exempt status in Texas. Being a Jedi sounds like fun, but Jedii are not allowed to marry, so many of us cannot convert.

Pastafarianism (the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster) began with the demand that Kansas schools teach students the theory of the Flying Spaghetti Monster along with the theory of evolution. Pastafarians believe there is a relationship between pirate population and national disasters.

Members of *Iglesia Maradoniana* pray to Diego Maradona, the soccer legend. His fans started this religion for him in 1998. They claim more than a million followers in more than 60 countries.

Frisbeeterians follow the teachings of George Carlin. They believe that when you die your soul goes up on to the roof and stays stuck there until someone knocks it down with a long pole and your new life begins.

Much of what passes for religion is nuts.

In my hometown, religion is all over the place. New York is much different: 4 percent is mainline Protestant, 6 percent is evangelical, and less than half of 1 percent is Baptist. Many of my neighbors know about as much about Christianity as they do Pastafarianism. One person’s deeply held belief is another person’s Frisbee.

Christians do not always recognize how difficult what we believe is for those outside the church. Resurrection, creation, communion, souls and salvation seem strange to many.

For those who care about the future of Christianity, this is no time for us to be known for our opinions, our politics or our institutions. Christians should be known for the essence of our faith — for love that encompasses and illuminates how we live.

Focusing on God’s love helps us think and act with love. God’s love invites feelings of gratitude, challenges our minds with mystery and offers us strength to care for those who are hurting.

Think about those you know who are truly loving. Those compassionate people show us the lives that are possible. Love has become who they are. We can live with compassion that begins with God’s love for all — love that hopes all things, endures all things and outlasts all things.

A River Runs Through It is the story of a Presbyterian minister, the father of two sons. They share fly-fishing and a passion for life. The older son becomes a novelist. The younger son is, as his father describes him, “beautiful” but he can’t stay out of trouble. His family tries to help him, but eventually he is murdered over a gambling debt.

His father preaches a sermon in which he says: “Each one of us here today will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question, ‘We are willing to help, God, but what if anything is needed?’ Either we don’t know what part of ourselves to give or the part we have to give isn’t wanted. And so, it is those we should know who elude us, but we can still love them. We can love completely without complete understanding.”

The heart of Christianity is loving completely without completely understanding those in our family, in our church, in other churches, in no church at all, those we understand, and those we do not.

When we wonder if George Carlin’s philosophy might be simpler, when we think our lives would be easier if we thought more about soccer legends than hurting people, or when we find ourselves in a religious debate, we need to put it to this test: Is it about love?

Christianity at its best is loving others because at the end of it all, at the heart of it all, our faith is about love. **NFJ**

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





The Bible Lessons that anchor the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies are written by Tony Cartledge in a scholarly, yet applicable, style from the wide range of Christian scriptures. A

graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Duke University (Ph.D.), and with years of experience as a pastor, writer, and professor at Campbell University, he provides deep insight for Christian living without “dumbing down” the richness of the biblical texts for honest learners.

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- > 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 May/June password (**peace**) 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*

May 5, 2019

Acts 9:1-22

Blind Devotion

Perhaps you have heard this question: “When did you meet Jesus?”

We may not know how to answer the question. Some believers have little problem remembering a time of intentional conversion when they confessed their sins, professed their faith, and “met Jesus” for the first time.

Others may have experienced faith as a growing awareness that the Jesus they have learned to love through childhood calls for a public response – they may not envision their action as “meeting Jesus” so much as professing the Jesus they have trusted all along.

Though our initial experiences may be different, for all of us there is a difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus in a personal way through prayer, worship, and living out the belief that Christ lives in us.

Today’s text zooms in on the personal experience of the church’s first great missionary: the Apostle Paul’s “close encounter of the third kind” with the risen Lord.

Paul meets Jesus (9:1-9)

Sometime near the year 35 CE, a radical young rabbi built an infamous

*He asked, “Who are you, Lord?”
The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom
you are persecuting.” (Acts 9:5)*

reputation by campaigning against a movement of Jews who had forsaken tradition to follow a man named Jesus, who they claimed to be the very Son of God, slain through the persistent charges of Jewish leaders, but resurrected in glory and spiritually alive in his followers.

The movement was sometimes called “The Way,” and Saul of Tarsus, a trained rabbi who was rabidly devoted to the law, felt compelled to stamp out the new sect of Jewish Jesus-followers before it could spread out of control.

Saul may have been inspired by the fervor of others when Stephen, one of the first “deacons,” addressed an angry Sanhedrin before being dragged outside to be stoned to death. 🇺🇸 Saul was not only present, but also apparently kept the coats of those who did the stoning, approving of their actions (Acts 7:58, 8:1a).

The event sparked an outbreak of severe persecution, causing many followers of Jesus to scatter from Jerusalem (8:1b). Saul personally led a team of temple police or activists who dragged Jesus followers from their homes and imprisoned them (8:3). As the bedraggled believers scattered into the surrounding countryside, Saul’s fearsome reputation grew.

After Jerusalem was sufficiently “cleansed” and the church had gone underground, Saul set his sights on Damascus, having heard that many Jesus-followers had relocated there. He obtained letters from the high

priest addressed to synagogue leaders in Damascus, giving him authority to seek out renegade Jews who had turned to Jesus and bring them back to Jerusalem, bound as prisoners (vv. 1-2).

Luke, who is often reserved in his language, describes the young firebrand as “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” Today we would call Saul a religious extremist of the first order. The FBI would be reading his email, tapping his cell phone, and keeping him under surveillance.

Damascus is about 136 miles north and slightly east of Jerusalem as the crow flies, but the road was considerably longer: Saul would have required nearly two weeks of steady walking and Sabbath resting to get there.

Saul did not travel alone: other activists came with him to aid in capturing converts and ushering them back to Jerusalem to stand trial for their putative heresy.

As Saul and company neared the city, however, the would-be captor was taken captive by a blinding light from heaven. With his eyes so rudely assaulted, Saul fell to the ground, where his ears also came under attack by a resounding voice: “Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?”

The now-blind zealot knew in his heart that only God could cause such an event, but he did not feel guilty of having persecuted God. “Who are you, Lord?” was his only question (vv. 3-5). 🇺🇸

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting!” was the answer. There was nothing else for Saul to say. He recognized the encounter as a true vision of the true God, who had self-identified as

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Jesus, whose followers Saul was in fact abusing.

The heavenly voice instructed Paul to continue on to Damascus, trusting that he would be told what to do (v. 7). Saul's companions apparently did not see the light or anything else, according to Luke, "but they heard the voice" (v. 7) and recognized that Saul had been blinded by something they had not seen. Following Saul's instructions, they led him into the city.

In Damascus, Saul lodged with someone named Judas (according to v. 11), likely one of the synagogue leaders to whom Paul's letters were addressed. There Saul prayed and fasted for the next three days, taking neither food nor water (v. 9).

Saul's whole sense of meaning and purpose had been turned upside down, and he had only the brief vision to help him make sense of things. No wonder he couldn't eat – and no doubt he spent much time in prayer, hoping God would speak again.

Perhaps you can recall a time when your life was turned topsy-turvy. Did you find that an appropriate time for prayer, if not fasting?

Paul meets Ananias (9:10-18)

God did speak again, this time appearing in a vision to Ananias, a disciple of Christ living in Damascus. God instructed Ananias to go to Judah's house on "Straight Street" and pray for a man named Saul, of Tarsus. Ananias did not seem surprised by the visionary appearance of God, but he was less comfortable with the command.

God told Ananias that Saul was also praying and had been told in a vision to expect a man named Ananias to come and pray for his sight to be restored (v. 12). Even so, Ananias objected. Why should he take the risk of exposing himself to someone so dangerous

and set in his ways as Saul (vv. 13-14)?

The divine response brought a prophetic surprise: God had chosen the most zealous of *Jews* to carry the gospel to the *Gentiles* (v. 15). The same Saul who had caused suffering among Jewish believers would become so committed to Christ that he would be willing to suffer greatly while proclaiming the gospel faithfully (v. 16).

It must have been hard for Ananias to believe such a thing. Paul's fire-breathing reputation was a difficult barrier to cross, but the power of God's vision was even stronger. Ananias chose to be obedient, took the risk, and ministered to Paul. Soon Paul's sight was restored, and the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit entered his life. Paul sought to be baptized immediately, and only then did he break his three-day fast (vv. 17-18).

Ananias' willingness to reach out to Paul raises important issues for contemporary Christians. What if Ananias had refused to cross the barrier of Paul's past reputation? What if he had let human fear overcome divine persuasion? Paul might have continued to wander in *physical* blindness, and the countless people he touched would have continued in *spiritual* blindness.

The text challenges us to ask how often we let the reputation of others color our response to them. Do we hide our faith when around people we think may be hostile to the gospel? Do we avoid ministry opportunities in places that aren't perfectly safe? Do we shy away from people who have different ethnic backgrounds or political views than our own? Do we welcome people who have stumbled through divorce or other past trials and accept them fully?

One might pray that God would give to our churches the spiritual insight of Ananias, that we might look past barriers of differentness and bring new life to the church. 🇺🇸

Paul meets Damascus (9:19-22)

Paul's new-found faith was a fire in his bones, and he soon began to spread the same holy blaze that he earlier had sought to stamp out. According to Luke, after a few days among the disciples in Damascus, "Immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God!'" (v. 20).

Luke's account is somewhat at odds with Paul's own version of the story in Gal. 1:13-2:14. There Paul said that he left town and traveled first to Arabia, perhaps on an extended spiritual retreat, before returning to preach in Damascus.

In either case, the people were astonished when Paul began to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. Paul had come to Damascus with letters empowering him to extradite Christians to Jerusalem for punishment, but now the only writings he quoted were from the Old Testament (v. 21).

The longer Paul preached, the more eloquent and powerful his words became. Soon he was confounding even the best of the rabbis with the account of his personal experience with the risen Christ, combined with carefully reasoned arguments from scripture that Jesus was truly the Messiah (v. 22).

The radical change in Paul's life led him to have an exceptionally open understanding of the faith. Paul believed that Christ had come to save all people, and that Christians were called to share the gospel with all persons. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," he insisted (Gal. 3:28). Christ turned Paul's life around in ways he never thought possible.

How has meeting Jesus affected *our* lives? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 12, 2019

Acts 9:36-43

Shocking Faith

Some things are easy to believe, while other claims stretch the bounds of credulity. Suppose I were to tell you that I once went for a walk on an isolated road and was surprised to see a minivan-sized pod descend from the heavens with a crackling fizz before levitating silently before me.

A round door slid open and a skeletal ramp extended from the bottom with a soft whir. I watched as a bumpy ball-like figure rolled down the ramp and stopped. Two thin and many-jointed arms unfolded from each side, and three stalk-like protrusions emerged from the top.

The creature began to speak, using English it had apparently learned from hacking into Amazon Prime's movie collection. Extending a spindly arm in my direction, the alien astronaut said "Hi – My name's Forrest ... Forrest Gump."

Would you believe that story? No?

Some things just don't fit into our understanding of reality. As such, they are difficult for us to believe.

The sting of death (vv. 36-37)

Today's text relates a story that we typically accept as scriptural truth but

Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. (Acts 9:40)

would have a harder time believing if someone claimed it had happened last week.

Let's rewind the tape and replay the story: nearly 2,000 years ago, a woman lived in a quaint town on the Mediterranean coast of Palestine. The name of the town was Joppa, and the woman's name was "Gazelle." 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

Of course, no one called her that. Her Greek-speaking friends called her Dorcas, and those who spoke Aramaic called her Tabitha. Both words translate to "Gazelle" in English. Truth is, she would have answered to most any name if it was spoken by someone in need.

Tabitha's life appears to have revolved around doing good deeds and being kind to people. Luke's account suggests that she was a regular Mother Theresa of the ancient world. Poor, helpless women would come to her, widows who had no one to support them or no market for their skills, and she would offer hope and help.

Tabitha seems to have run a sort of soup kitchen and clothes closet from her home. There wasn't a poor widow within miles who didn't own a dress or a shawl that Tabitha had made for her. When all others turned away, there was always Tabitha. She was a rock in a roiling, stormy sea. 🇺🇸

Imagine the day when a gaunt-faced little woman came knocking at Tabitha's door, but no one answered. She called Tabitha's name, but no

one came, and there was no scent of a cooking fire. With fearful thoughts, the woman pushed open the door, knowing it was never locked, and found Tabitha lying against the wall on an earthen bench. The great saint of Joppa was obviously very sick. She wasn't moving. She was barely breathing. The woman ran out to get help, but when she returned, there was no breath at all. Tabitha was dead.

Oh, the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth that was heard in Joppa that day. Oh, the mourning and the grieving and the wondering of "What will we do? What will we do?" Oh, the hopelessness that descended on all the gathered women who came to Tabitha's house, wearing Tabitha's clothes but bereft of Tabitha's love. They did for her what they could. They washed her worn body and dressed her in clean clothes and carried her upstairs to her bed.

The power of hope (vv. 38-39)

There were some, however, who couldn't bear the thought that Tabitha was dead and gone. They refused to give up hope. They had heard that Simon Peter was visiting in the town of Lydda, about 10 miles to the southeast. Peter was emerging as the foremost leader in the early church. He was blessed with a special measure of God's Spirit, and many people had found healing through Peter's ministry. Whether Peter could help a dead woman they didn't know, but it was worth a try, so they found two men who could run fast and sent them in search of the crusty apostle.

And Peter came, though he didn't

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run. He came to the house, and looked with kindly eyes at the weeping women, and commiserated with them, and admired their smocks and dresses that Tabitha had made. Then he threw them out and shut the door.

The miracle of life (vv. 40-43)

All alone, Peter knelt beside the bed where Tabitha lay, and he prayed. Luke doesn't tell us the words he used or how long he prayed, and he probably didn't know. But God heard Peter's prayer and somehow the power of God became tangibly present to the apostle. He looked up at the frail, cold body before him, and he said "Tabitha, get up!"

As if she were waking from sleep, perhaps, Tabitha opened her eyes and discovered that there was a man in her bedroom. She gave a start, but then she remembered being sick, and sleeping, and maybe she thought she'd heard angels singing, but now she was clearly back in her own bed. Tabitha was shaky and weak, but alive. She managed to sit up in the bed, and then Peter offered a helping hand, and soon she was standing up in her bare feet on the rough wooden floor.

Peter opened the door and called the gathered widows and saints to see what God had done. They crowded into the room with weeping and laughter and big hugs for Tabitha, assuring themselves that she was really alive. The story of Tabitha's resurrection spread throughout Joppa and many believed it, Luke says. As a result, many also believed in the Lord. 🙏🙏

Do we believe?

But what about us? Do *we* believe that story, that God worked through Peter to bring a dead woman back to life? That notion flies in the face of all that we know to be true. Dead people stay dead.

Still, most church-going Christians

would probably affirm the story. We believe it because it is in the Bible, where we assume the normal rules governing the universe must have been suspended for a while, and it really seems like another world altogether.

It may not be that hard for us to believe that God could raise dear old Tabitha to life, but the important question is, do we believe that God can bring new life to us?

Are there areas of our lives that feel so settled and fixed that there's little life about them? Are there ways in which pain or long-time frustration has left us feeling numb? Do we sometimes find ourselves going through the motions of life like a busy sleepwalker, wishing to goodness that we could feel *alive* again?

Do we believe that the power of God can bring us new life?

Think about the vocabulary Jesus used when he talked about living in relationship with God and being part of the kingdom. When the Pharisee Nicodemus wanted to learn more about the kingdom of God, Jesus said "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (or, "born again," John 3:3).

Jesus went on to tell Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

In conversation with his disciples, Jesus compared the difference between his way of life and the world's way of life: "The thief comes only to kill and destroy," he said, but "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

On the night before his crucifixion, according to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus told his disciples "I am the way, the truth, and the life. . ." (John 14:6).

The conclusion of John's gospel reminds us that it's all about life: "These things are written so that you may come

to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Can we believe it?

When the Apostle Paul wanted to explain the symbolic importance of baptism, he said "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).

The New Testament writers fully believed that God is in the business of bringing life to the world, not just through creation, but through a living and vital relationship with those who follow God's way. We are never more alive than when we are in tune with the Spirit of God in us . . . but the question remains, do we believe it?

Some of us may have done some terrible things in our lives, and surely all of us have done things that bring us shame. We may have held racist attitudes and acted on them by treating people of other ethnic backgrounds poorly. We may have put others down to build ourselves up.

We may have misbehaved in many selfish ways, but there came a day when we realized that we were on a dead-end road. Our wild ways had lost their thrill. Climbing the economic ladder had lost its appeal. A certain deadness may have taken over.

Yet, in the midst of it all, we can believe that Jesus Christ is present and willing to hear our prayer and offer us the kind of new and purposeful life that comes from being in touch with the Spirit of God.

That experience can lead us to ongoing worship and prayer and service to others as we celebrate that new life, keep our spiritual batteries charged, and witness of our faith.

Can we believe it? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 19, 2019

Acts 11:1-18

Stunned Silence

I thought it was the right thing to do. I was pastor of a rural church many years ago when a member who coached football asked if he could bring his team, for one Sunday, to worship together with our congregation.

I was overjoyed! Here was an opportunity for my church to demonstrate the love of Christ and the openness of the gospel – maybe even a chance to crack the door of our segregated congregation to racial inclusiveness on a regular basis.

Thinking it wise, I discussed the matter with the deacons and obtained their support. When the appointed Sunday came, two school buses rolled into our parking lot. The football team had arrived – along with some additional parents, chaperones, and friends. One side of our sanctuary was filled with guests, a majority of whose faces were brown. On the other side, many of the faces were red.

Afterward, several members of the congregation expressed outrage. Two deacons publicly recanted their favorable votes. Despite my personal visits and best efforts at conflict management, some members boycotted my preaching from that day forward.

My youthful idealism took a beating that day. I had grown up in a

If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God? (Acts 11:17)

racist community, but God had shown me the ugliness of my ingrained prejudice and taught me the importance of openness to all people. I wanted my church to learn what I had learned. Surely, I thought, God wants all persons to learn how to worship together and appreciate each other more. I did what I thought was right – but I soon had a lot of explaining to do.

Challenged by a vision

I found some comfort in knowing that I was in good company. Acts 11 contains the account of how the Apostle Peter himself – the one to whom Jesus entrusted the keys to the kingdom – was once required to explain himself for having associated with Gentiles.

While visiting early believers west of Jerusalem (9:32), Peter had come to the coastal town of Joppa, where God spoke to him in a vision and led him to a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius worshiped God but was a Gentile, so Peter knew it could be awkward. Judaism had strict rules about associating with non-Jews.

Perhaps that is why the crafty apostle rounded up six fellow Jewish Christians to accompany him as witnesses on the journey to Caesarea. Upon arrival, Peter saw that Cornelius had gathered his family and close associates for the occasion. The centurion asked him to share whatever the

Lord had laid on his heart, but Peter had hardly begun speaking when the Holy Spirit descended upon his Gentile hearers just as surely as upon Jewish believers at Pentecost (Acts 2).

The evidence of divine acceptance was clear, and Peter concluded: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (10:47).

A baptism was held. A meal was served. We can imagine a time of great gaiety and celebration, even as Peter continued to teach new believers the rudiments of the gospel – and as the word of his newfound associations traveled back to Jerusalem.

Called on the carpet (vv. 1-3)

Not everyone was celebrating. Back in Jerusalem, a strong cohort of Jewish believers was convinced that Christians must also observe Jewish traditions. The group, often called “the party of the circumcision,” would become a major thorn in the sides of Peter, Paul, and the entire Gentile mission enterprise. The party had sufficient influence to call Peter in and demand that he explain his actions.

Verse 3 implies that the circumcision party was not particularly concerned that Peter had preached to the Gentiles, or even that he had endorsed their baptism. Their complaint was this: “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”

Instructed by a sheet (vv. 4-10)

Peter defended himself by simply telling his story, reprising the same account

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that is told in Acts 10. While praying on the roof of Simon the Tanner's home in Joppa, Peter had fallen into a trance and experienced an intense vision. He had been hungry, and in his vision something like a great sheet descended from heaven, containing "four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air" (v. 6 – "beasts of prey" does not appear in 10:12).

None of the animals were *kosher*. When the Lord, knowing Peter's hunger, said "Get up, Peter, kill and eat" (v. 7), the apostle was confused. Thinking perhaps that God was testing him, Peter replied "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth" (11:8). Like Ezekiel of old, Peter insisted that he had never broken the dietary laws, and he did not intend to begin now (cf. Ezek. 4:14).

God's response brought a new revelation to Peter: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (v. 9). The entire sequence was repeated three times, just to make sure that Peter had gotten the point. The times were changing. The gospel message was not only good news – it also contained new news, and Peter was one of the first to understand.


Summoned by a Centurion (vv. 11-14)

While Peter was still mulling over the significance of the vision (compare 10:19), the messengers from Cornelius arrived, and Peter recognized that the vision was God's way of showing him that the gospel was for all people.

To Cornelius, Peter had said "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34b-35). To his hostile inquisitors, Peter explained it this way: "The Spirit told me to go

with them and not to make a distinction between them and us" (11:12a).

In Peter's mind, not making a distinction extended beyond preaching. He took the vision and the Spirit's word as divine permission to eat with and associate with the Gentiles just as he would with fellow Jews. Had not the vision specifically referred to food?

Pointing to the six "brothers" he had brought along as witnesses, Peter recounted his first meeting with Cornelius, who had seen a vision of his own.  An angel had charged him to send for Peter, whom he had never met, and told him exactly where the apostle might be found. He had then promised that when Peter arrived, "he will give you a message whereby you and your entire household will be saved" (v. 14).

Amazed by the Spirit (vv. 15-17)

Peter then described how the Holy Spirit had fallen on Cornelius' party "just as it had upon us at the beginning" (v. 15). This implies that the Jewish believers to whom he was speaking had also been present at Pentecost and had received the Spirit – but that was no guarantee they would always remain open to the Spirit's teachings.


Since the Spirit's presence fell on his audience just as Peter began to speak, the miracle was clearly not the result of his preaching, but of God's choice and God's Spirit.

Remembering John the Baptist's promise that Christ would baptize with the Spirit even as he baptized with water, Peter concluded that God had been at work among the Gentiles in Caesarea (v. 16). The "Spirit baptism" of the Gentile believers was all the confirmation Peter needed to see that Christ was doing a new thing, and that he needed a change of attitude if he was

to keep pace.


Thus Peter argued: "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (v. 17). Peter recognized that it was both possible and foolish to get in God's way. He had a personal history of challenging Jesus' decisions and being put in his place (Matt. 16:21-23). Peter had learned to stand back and listen when the Spirit spoke.

Silenced by the story (v. 18)

As Peter spoke of his experience, the leaders of the Jerusalem church listened quietly. There was little they could say: "When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life'" (v. 18). 

We note that the group acknowledged only that God had granted *repentance* to the Gentiles – not equal rights, or even eating rights, with Jewish Christians. Many battles were yet to be fought over this issue, most of them with Paul as the defendant (compare Acts 15). Peter learned that God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, but others would still have to learn by personal experience. Even Peter would later have his doubts, and Paul publicly chastised him for backing away from sharing meals with Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-14).

Overcoming prejudice is not easy, but it is at the heart of the gospel – and the whole gospel is for all people.

Do our churches still practice "distinctions" in whether people are welcome to worship and free to lead without regard to race, gender, or social status?  What can we as individuals do to break down barriers between people who are equally loved and in-Spirited by God? [NFJ](#)

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 26, 2019

Acts 16:9-15

Eager Acceptance

Has your life turned out just as you thought it would when you were younger? Have you ever wondered if God has been at work in your life, despite the stumbles you've had or sidetracks you've taken along the way?

It is likely that God's plan for our lives is not as specific as some would have us believe, but the scriptures insist that God may have something to do with the doors that open or close before us. Sometimes we see the hand of God only in retrospect.

Today's lesson is an example of divine guidance in the life of Paul, who found his second missionary journey to be a time of closed doors and open ones, a time to cross both the Aegean Sea and the gender divide. 📖

The best laid plans . . . (16:6-8)

The time was probably around 50–52 CE. Paul had recruited his friend Silas to join him on a new mission trip through Galatia and beyond. They began by visiting the churches Paul had established on his first journey through southern Galatia (cf. 15:36). 📖 In Derbe they met a young man named Timothy, who also began to travel with them.

On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. (Acts 16:13)

With Timothy aboard, the team worked its way along the now-familiar trail, continuing to strengthen the young and growing churches (16:1-5). Soon, though, Paul became anxious to seek new horizons for sharing the gospel. His party continued westward through the region of Phrygia on a course for the Roman province of Asia, the easternmost part of Asia Minor (now Turkey).

It appears that Paul had intended to follow the Meander Valley on down to the city of Ephesus, near the coast. In some unstated fashion, however, the Holy Spirit prevented them (v. 6). The disciples then turned northward toward Galatia proper, the old kingdom of the Gauls. They wanted to visit the highly civilized province of Bithynia, on Asia Minor's northwestern coast near the Black Sea, but once again, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (v. 7). 📖

We'd like to know how Paul's party got the message. Were they turned back by the border patrol? Did one of them fall ill? Was there a sense of danger in their heart, or did God speak through a prophet in one of the churches? We have no way of knowing, except that in some way Paul perceived that the door to Bithynia was closed.

Sitting still was not an option for Paul, who was convinced that God wanted him to be going *somewhere* with the gospel. With both the north-

ern route to Bithynia and the southern road to Asia blocked, Paul and his team followed the only course left without turning back: they traveled due west through Mysia (the northwest corner of Asia Minor) to the busy port city of Troas, located on the Aegean Sea (v. 8). Once there, God confirmed to Paul that he was on the right track.

A guiding vision (16:9-10)

God's Spirit had led the early evangelists to avoid Asia and Bithynia by *closing* doors, but now God *opened* a door: Paul had a vision in which a man appeared and pleaded for him to "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (v. 9).

It is possible that the man in Paul's vision was Luke, for at that very point the author of the book of Acts began to use the pronouns "we" and "us," indicating that he had joined the missionary expedition. Acts includes a number of sections that appear to be direct excerpts from a first-person travel diary, beginning here with v. 10: "When he (Paul) had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them."

A new door was opened, and Paul's party did not hesitate to go through it. They left at once and embarked on a ship to cross over to the southern coast of Macedonia. The wind must have been favorable, for they covered the 125 nautical miles past the island of Samothrace and on to the port of Neapolis in just two days. When they later made the same journey in reverse (20:6), it was a five-day voyage.

Their target city of Philippi was

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a brisk nine- or ten-mile walk from the port at Neapolis. Luke describes Philippi as the leading city (literally “the first city”) of that part of Macedonia. It had the favored status of a Roman colony, meaning that it was considered to be a literal part of Rome, just geographically removed. Many of its residents would have been Roman soldiers who had retired with a military pension and a gift of land in a Roman colony. 📖

Praying women (16:11-15)

Once in Philippi, Paul and company followed his normal practice of looking for a synagogue, but they could not find one. Since only ten men were necessary for a synagogue to exist, the Jewish population of Philippi must have been very small. In asking around, though, they heard about a prayer group that met on the Sabbath day, just outside the city by the Gangites River. Imagine their surprise when they joined the group for prayer and discovered that it was entirely composed of women.

Since there were so few Jewish men, it is likely that the women who gathered for prayer were proselytes rather than native Hebrews. At least one of them is described as a “God-fearer,” a technical term used to describe a Gentile who worshiped the Hebrew God but had not yet converted to Judaism.

We take note that Paul and his companions did not hesitate when they saw that the group was entirely female. They “sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there” (v. 13b). Some writings attributed to Paul come across as sexist, but his actions here and elsewhere showed that he accepted women as responsible persons who were capable of making their own decisions and of providing leadership in church. The record

shows that a church was established at Philippi, and its foundation was laid by a group of women who gathered by the river to pray.

Paul’s letters suggest that the church in Philippi was the sweetest and most supportive fellowship of all the churches he started. We know that there were also male converts in Philippi, such as the “Philippian jailer” whose conversion is described in vv. 25-34, and the “brethren” Paul addresses in v. 40. The church apparently used Lydia’s home as a meeting place, and women apparently played a lead role.

Lydia was clearly the pacesetter in the group. Her home city was Thyatira, located in a geographical region that was also called Lydia – located in the area of western Asia Minor that Paul had been prevented from visiting. Thyatira was widely known for its skilled craft and trading guilds. Among these were centers for the production of a purplish dye made from madder roots. 📖

Lydia was a successful businesswoman dealing in the prized purple cloth, perhaps as an agent for the trade guilds in Thyatira. She may have been a widow or single adult: the text mentions her “household,” but no husband. Her household probably consisted of other relatives, business associates, or servants.

Since Judaism was more common in Lydia’s homeland, it is likely that she brought her faith in the God of Israel with her. Indeed, Lydia may have been the leader of the prayer group that now found itself enlarged by the presence of Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke.

As the visitors sat down and told them the story of Jesus, “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly . . .” (v. 14b). Other members of Lydia’s household were in attendance with her, and they, too, believed. Quickly, they

were baptized as a public sign of their faith, perhaps in the very river that ran beside their place of prayer. 📖

Lydia’s persuasive power as a salesperson became quickly evident, for she insisted that the missionary team take lodging in her home (v. 15). Paul generally preferred to look after himself so he would not appear indebted to anyone, but Lydia was so convincing that Luke wrote that “she prevailed upon us.”

At Philippi Paul and company not only preached for the first time on European soil, but also stretched their comfort zones to go directly to the Gentiles with the gospel message.

Something new . . . for you?

The story of Paul’s first visit to Philippi can speak to us on several levels. Some of us may be like Lydia, knowing about God but wanting to know God better. The story of how Jesus came from God to redeem all people must have resonated deeply, and she responded immediately. Is there a response we need to make?

Others may be where Paul was in vv. 6-9, making plans that didn’t work out. With Paul, we can learn to be patient and keep searching and remain open in spirit until we understand the path God has for us.

Perhaps we may find encouragement from a powerful symbolic image in the heart of the story. Once they felt the sense of God’s calling, Paul and company took passage on a sailing ship, and they made good time because the winds were favorable.

We can trust that the wind of God’s leadership and calling is blowing in our lives, too. We may feel it on our face, or hear it whistling in the lanyards, but if we don’t hoist our sails, we remain dead in the water. The fresh wind of God’s Spirit is still blowing today: are we ready to go sailing? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Reminder: the password for online teaching resources is **peace**.

June 2, 2019

Acts 16:16-34

Doubled Deliverance

Have you ever had a good day turn so sour, with one aggravation leading to another, that you found yourself humming Mary Chapin Carpenter's classic country song, "Sometimes you're the windshield, sometimes you're the bug"?

Let's hope you never had one go quite as badly as a day in the life of Paul and Silas, at some point after they had begun their missionary work in the Roman city of Philippi. Their day began on a fresh new morning, progressed to a riotous beating, and ended with imprisonment.

Our text for today tells the story of some people who were free and others who were in bondage – the trick is in learning to tell one from the other.

Slave masters (vv. 16-22)

Paul and Silas were on their way to a prayer meeting outside of Philippi, probably in the company of Timothy, Luke, Lydia, and others. Together they worked their way through the crowded streets of ancient Philippi, then populated by former soldiers and others who had displaced the native Greeks and turned the city into a shrine to the power of Rome.


Was Paul deep in thought about a

You always have the poor with you, Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30) (John 12:8)

sermon he planned to preach that day, or admiring the energy of merchants hawking their brightly colored wares on the roadside, or praying as he walked?

Whatever he was doing was rudely interrupted, for Paul was suddenly assaulted by the ragged voice of a wild-looking girl who screamed while pointing toward Paul and Silas. "These men are slaves of the most high God!" she raved. "They proclaim to you a way of salvation!" (v. 17).

Paul recognized the voice, because the tormented girl had accosted them every time they had come this way. Paul knew she was emotionally disturbed – and that she was speaking the truth. Even so, there's only so much screaming a body can take.

The girl was a slave, owned by a group of men who profited greatly from her reputation as a mantic: it was commonly believed that she was possessed by a spirit that could predict the future. Superstitious people paid large sums to have their fortune told (v. 16). 

We can imagine a righteous anger swelling up as Paul felt the Spirit's power leading him to shout back, not at the girl, but to the sickness that had held her mind in bondage for so many years: "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" (v. 18).

And it did.

The girl was freed from the inner demons that had controlled her mind. She became calm and at peace. One


might think that all would rejoice in seeing the poor girl healed from the bondage of her illness, and no doubt there were some who did.

We would say "Hallelujah!" and imagine that she was set free, but she probably remained a slave. That may disappoint us, but that's the last we hear of her: the girl drops out of the story because Luke was more concerned with what happened to Paul.

The girl's owners were livid that Paul had damaged their merchandise by excising the girl's oracular spells. They forcibly grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the two magistrates who ruled the city.

Rather than complain directly about their financial losses, the owners kicked it up a notch and hid their greedy motives behind a veil of Roman pride, turning a personal offense into a treasonous crime.

We could translate their charges this way: "These men – these Jews – are throwing our city into confusion and proclaiming customs that are not lawful for us – being Romans – to accept or observe" (vv. 19-21).

They succeeded in fanning the flames of prejudice to the point that a surrounding crowd began to riot, and the magistrates themselves rushed from the bench to strip the robes from Paul and Silas before ordering that they be beaten with rods (v. 22). 

Such beatings were often given as a warning before throwing offenders out of town. Paul and Silas were not evicted, but dragged to the deepest dungeon of the city jail, then fastened securely in wooden stocks designed to spread the legs until one's hips almost came unjointed.

Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



There the two men were left to ponder their fate and consider the error of their ways. Would you call that a bad day? 🇺🇸

A jail master (vv. 23-34)

Now the story takes a surprising twist. Paul and Silas, beaten and sore and hungry, pondered their fate just long enough to decide which hymn they would sing first.

Can you imagine it? Out of a dank, dark pit strewn with excrement and vermin and two bleeding believers, there came the sound of singing.

Their duet may not have been beautiful, but it was singing nonetheless – singing that offered praise for God’s unspeakable goodness, sung by men who had encountered humans in their most unspeakable badness.

The text makes a point of telling us that the other prisoners were listening, and we have to suspect that the jailer must have been listening, too (v. 25). The singing in the shadows went on past midnight, but there was yet another surprise.

A sudden earthquake shook the prison to its foundations. In short order, the bone-rattling temblor broke loose the stocks, jarred open the doors, and left the prisoners free to leave (v. 26).

That certainly got the jailer’s attention. Looking into the silent darkness, he assumed that the prisoners were gone and he had failed in his duty to keep them bound. As a matter of honor, he unsheathed his sword and prepared to kill himself, paying the price of failure (v. 27).

Just as he took the long breath he thought would be his last, however, the jailer heard Paul’s voice again. He recognized it from all that singing, but this time it sounded sweeter than the song of any bird. “Don’t hurt yourself!” Paul cried. “We are all here” (v. 28).

That’s when a spiritual earthquake hit his soul. The man cracked. His hard shell, his inflexible Roman training, his determined self-sufficiency: all of his accustomed defenses were gone, and he saw himself for what he was – a sinful man who was scared to die.

He had seen such courage in Paul and Silas that he turned to them for help, and asked the immortal question that has been repeated uncounted times: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

The jailer may have meant no more than, “How can I get out of this mess?” He probably wasn’t thinking of eternity, but he knew he was in deep trouble. He was in bondage to fear and evil and death as well as to his superiors, and he didn’t see any way out. “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (vv. 29-30).

Paul and Silas responded in a way that he may not have expected and probably did not understand: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (v. 31).

That was enough to persuade the jailer to take Paul and Silas home with him, where he listened carefully as “They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house” (v. 32).

With all the faith and hope and understanding available to him, the jailer believed and was saved – set free from his inner bondage and fear.

And then, in a scene we can only imagine, the jailer took fresh water and washed clean the wounds left from the beating Paul and Silas had received. They must have used that same source of water to baptize the man and his household “without delay” (v. 33).

The prison-master welcomed Paul and Silas into his home, where he gave them food and “his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God” (v. 34).

Things were looking up.

The real master

This story of twists and turns, tragedy and triumph is a favorite to read and remember. When we get to the end, we realize that the people who thought they were free were actually in bondage, and those who appeared to be prisoners were the only ones who were truly free.

The slave girl’s owners, the magistrates, and the jailer are all shown to be slaves – slaves of greed, slaves of power, slaves of prejudice and fear. They remind us of how we may also live in bondage to the fearsome spirits of greed and control, or the inner demons of fear and loneliness, or the haunting specter of an unforgiven past.

The promise of Jesus Christ – the promise Paul proclaimed in Philippi – is the promise of freedom. We recall the Fourth Gospel’s account of Jesus saying “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32).

In Christ, we can be free from the burdensome guilt of our past mistakes and emboldened to look forward. 🇺🇸

In Christ, we can be free from the present domination of sin, something Paul discussed in Romans 7:21-25. Freedom comes in realizing that Christ loves and accepts us as we are. The more we give ourselves to Christ, the weaker temptation’s hold on us.

Christ also sets us free from the mad materialism that leaves so many in bondage to a mountain of debt. In following Christ, we are freed to develop more healthy priorities. 🇺🇸

Who is it – or what is it – that holds us in bondage? What inner demons steal our peace and joy and vision of the future?

We don’t have to remain in their thrall. We can be free. “If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 9, 2019

Genesis 11:1-9

What Did You Say?

Unity and solidarity. Community cohesion. Commitment to purpose. All good things, right?

One would think so, but today's text relates a familiar story in which uniformity takes a back seat to diversity. The imaginative account of humanity's pre-history in Genesis 1–11 insists that God's desire for humankind includes an appreciation for what makes us different as well as what we have in common.

Within its larger context, the Tower of Babel story follows the account of how Noah's descendants spread out and populated the earth, building cities and speaking different languages (Genesis 10).

The placement of the story leads some readers to imagine that Noah's family first migrated southeast from the mountains of Ararat to the plain of Shinar, staying together and growing large enough to build a city and a tower before God dispersed them to the lands they are said to have settled in the previous chapter.

This is unlikely. The story appears to preserve an altogether different tradition of how the earth was populated, but it *is* positioned for a purpose: to close out Israel's account of pre-history with yet another story of human failure

The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. (Gen. 11:5)

and divine intervention. ↓

In its earliest form, the story functioned as an etiology designed to explain why the known world had different cultures that spoke different languages. In addition, the multi-layered story also comments on the tall stage towers in Babylon, and it offers a humorous Hebrew explanation of the name “Babel.” ↓

A human aspiration (vv. 1-4)

Before diving into the story, we take note of its careful structure. The first four verses speak of human actions. Verse 5, at the center, marks how God became aware of what the people were up to. The final four verses then describe God's actions in response to the humans. ↓

The story presupposes a time when everyone spoke one language. “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words” (literally, “they were all of one lip and one words”). The people are described as the population of “the whole earth.” Whether the text intends to imply that they migrated “from the east” or “eastward” (the Hebrew is unclear), they came to a fertile plain “in the land of Shinar and settled there” (vv. 1-2).

“Shinar” was a name given to the area east of the Euphrates when the Babylonians occupied it during the second millennium, at a much later time than the setting of the story. The cuneiform spelling was “Sha-an-ha-ra.”

But how does one find permanent shelter on a plain? Both caves and rocks were rare, but the people learned that blocks made from river mud could be dried in the sun and used along with wooden beams to build houses. In time – probably by observing what happened after a house fire – they learned that mudbricks baked in a fire became hard and impervious to rain.

Verse 3 reflects the emergence of building technology. By firing mudbrick and using mortar to strengthen and level the courses, the early inhabitants learned to build larger and larger buildings despite the lack of stone.

The story points to a time when the people decided to build both a city and a tower so tall that its top would reach the heavens. The effort, they believed, would strengthen their unity and civic pride: they wanted to “make a name for ourselves, otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth” (v. 4).

Modern readers may chuckle at the idea of wanting to build a reputation when there was no one else to admire it, but that did not bother the ancient storyteller. ↓

While the people of Babel sought to avoid being scattered abroad, careful readers recall that God had commanded the earliest people to “fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28), a command repeated in Gen. 9:1 and reflected in 9:7. ↓

Both the Sumerians and Babylonians built tall stage towers, or ziggurats, designed to honor the various gods they worshiped. One of the largest towers was built in the city of Babylon. It was called the *É.temen.an.ki*, meaning “house of the foundation of heaven and earth.”

Additional information at
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Ancient records claim the seven-story tower was about 300 feet square at the bottom and of equal height, with its upper stories covered in bricks glazed blue to blend in with the sky. The Hebrew story reflects a familiarity with such structures. 🇺🇸

A divine intervention (vv. 5-9)

While the people wanted to build a tower reaching into the heavens, the author notes that Yahweh (the name for God in this story) had to “come down” in order to investigate what they were doing (v. 5).

The narrator may have thought the hubris involved in thinking that humans could build a tower to the heavens was laughable, but Yahweh took it seriously. The more technologically advanced and capable people become, the less they feel a need for God and the more they become gods unto themselves. “This is only the beginning of what they will do,” the narrator credits Yahweh with saying, “nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (v. 6).

Yahweh’s concern was not for divine safety, but for humanity’s future. When people feel no need for God, they no longer rely on divine revelation as a guide for behavior: they do what they like with what power they have.

When people become gods to themselves, they may look down on persons less accomplished or wealthy and assume the right to oppress or enslave or even kill them without concern. The wealthy prosper, while the poor suffer.

So, the storyteller says, God decided to short-circuit the ambitious project by mixing up the people’s words so they couldn’t understand each other.

“Come, let us go down” (v. 7) reflects the Old Testament belief that

God presided over a heavenly council of assistants, typically thought of as angels (see also Job 1:6). 🇺🇸

God understood that people naturally prefer to live among people they can talk to. The term translated as “understand” in v. 7 is the word that normally means “listen.” People who don’t understand each other are unlikely to listen to each other.

It’s equally true that people who speak the same language are unlikely to understand each other if they do not listen to each other.

God’s response, perceived by the writer as divine judgment on human arrogance, caused the people to abandon their efforts to build the city (v. 8, note that the tower is not mentioned after v. 5). While that seems negative, the upshot was positive: the people sorted themselves out into language groups and began spreading out to fill the earth, thus fulfilling God’s intended purpose for humankind.

The concluding etymology of the city’s name is an apparent dig at the Babylonians (v. 9). In their language, known as Akkadian, they called their great city “*Bab-el*,” which means “gate of god.” The Hebrew word *bālal*, meaning “to mix” or “to confuse,” is used in the story and has a similar sound. The narrator stretches the similarity to imply that the two names are etymologically related. 🇺🇸

A learning opportunity

Modern readers may find several lessons in the Tower of Babel story. The most obvious speaks to the danger of living without reference to God, thinking that we have no other responsibility beyond looking after ourselves.

Choosing to live apart from God and build our own towers of wealth or influence won’t get us to heaven: it will leave us high and dry and wondering

why nobody understands us.

The story, at least by implication, also highlights the importance of obeying God. The narrator may presume that the people knew of God’s commands to spread throughout the earth and intentionally disobeyed, but the characters in the story seem to give no thought to God at all – or to their future. A city can only grow so large without becoming economically and environmentally unsustainable.

A lesson of special importance for today concerns the danger of becoming insular and isolationist. It is tempting for a nation, a city, or a church to focus on itself alone, seeking to grow in power and make a great name for itself without thought for others.

The theme of looking beyond ourselves and caring for our neighbors runs throughout both the Old and New Testaments – and sometimes the people we need to care for most are those who speak different languages.

Our calling is not to build our own insular kingdoms so we can be proud of our greatness, but to share the caring presence of Christ throughout the world.

We recall that today’s reading is on Pentecost Sunday, paired with the story of how the Holy Spirit descended on the early Jewish believers at Pentecost, enabling everyone present to hear and understand the gospel in their own language, effectively reversing the story of Babel (Acts 2).

Whether it is the language of words or of customs, we will serve God better if we learn to appreciate others’ languages rather than insist that everyone else speak our own.

An egocentric drive for uniformity led to a fracturing of relationships in Genesis 11, but in Christ we are called to find unity in diversity and thus become a blessing to all the peoples of the world. 🇺🇸

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 16, 2019

Romans 5:1-11

Imaginary Numbers

Do you like puzzles that force your mind to do mental gymnastics? Whether in newspapers or on our smartphones, puzzles involving words or numbers offer a chance to exercise our minds.

Some puzzles are fairly easy, while others can be mind-bending. When I was in college, my calculus course felt like one puzzle after another – especially after the professor tried to explain the use of “imaginary numbers.”

I couldn’t imagine them, and I have a good imagination.

One of the most difficult puzzles any of us face is trying to get our heads around the theological concept of the “Trinity,” a church doctrine that developed over time and was affirmed at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 CE. There, a gathering of church leaders ratified a statement declaring that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existed as one essence or substance (*ousia*) expressed through three “persons” (*hypostases*).[↓]

Not all Christians hold to Trinitarian doctrine, and the New Testament does not clearly set forth a Trinitarian belief system. There are texts, however, which speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in close proximity.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:1)

The familiar “Great Commission,” found in Matt. 28:19, is one example, as Jesus reportedly instructed his followers to make disciples in all nations, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

The doxology with which Paul concluded Second Corinthians is another: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor. 13:13).

Our text for today was not designed to teach the doctrine of the Trinity, though it does include separate references to God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Paul’s primary concern in this passage is an assurance of salvation so strong that believers can boast of it.[↓]

Proud of our peace (vv. 1-2)

The subject of pride is always a paradox for Christians. Some parents encourage their children to “take pride” in their appearance or their work, while others caution youngsters against being too proud.

In today’s text, Paul talks about three aspects of Christian faith that are proper causes for pride. A key structural word in the passage is “boast” – not in the sense of bragging, but of happily celebrating. Paul instructed the believers in Rome to exult in the *peace* they had obtained through faith in Christ

(vv. 1-2), in the *sufferings* they endured for the sake of Christ (vv. 3-5), and in Christ himself as their *savior* and Lord (vv. 6-11).[↓]

“Since we are justified by faith” connects Romans 5 with the two previous chapters, in which Paul had argued that salvation comes through faith, not works. Through this salvation, Paul taught, we can experience peace with God through Christ (v. 1).

As an ethnic Jew and trained rabbi, Paul was taught that God would ultimately redeem Israel. As a follower of Jesus, Paul had come to believe that God’s redemption had come in Christ, “through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand” (v. 2a).[↓]

Because of this new standing with God, Paul said, Christians can joyfully “boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (v. 2b, NRSV), or “rejoice in the hope of God’s glory” (NET). Our present life of fellowship with God through the Spirit is just a foretaste of the life that lies ahead for us, Paul taught.[↓]

Those of us who have experienced the loss of loved ones know the importance of hope that we may contemplate a glad reunion one day. Those who are oppressed and downtrodden in this world may yet find peace and joy through hope in God’s good future.

Back in 1877, while preaching at Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, Charles Haddon Spurgeon was expounding Rom. 15:13, in which Paul offers a wish similar to that expressed here: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



In the course of the sermon, Spurgeon illustrated the relationship between joy and peace with an oft-quoted (but rarely attributed) statement: “Peace is joy resting, and joy is peace dancing.”^U

Proud of our sufferings (vv. 3-5)

Despite his talk of peace and joy, Paul knew that suffering would remain in the picture. Believers face trials just as other people do, with no reason to expect anything different. Paul used the term *thlipsis*, which can be translated with words such as trouble, hardship, or suffering. There may be times when following Christ could even *add* to one’s trials, as Paul knew from persecution he had experienced.

Followers of Jesus cannot avoid trouble, but we can approach it with a positive attitude. Even suffering can be a cause for pride, Paul argued, because “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (vv. 3-5).

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

The words Paul used are significant. They speak of patient endurance and personal character that has been proved by testing. Just as a structural engineer may test potential bridge components by putting them under stress, so our own character is proved and even strengthened through testing.

For Christians, the ultimate

outcome of suffering is our hope in the future God has in store. Hope will never disappoint us, because it is ever-present. When all else is taken away, we still have hope, and that hope can empower our faith.

Even when our belief may feel shaky, we can still practice faith, for faith is like hope with feet on it – hope to the point of commitment and action. Many who have suffered loss can testify that hope has a power all its own. Paul attributed his hopeful confidence to the love of God, “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”^U

Proud of our savior (vv. 6-11)

Paul encouraged his readers to openly rejoice in the peace and hope that come through knowing Christ, and in the life of the believer. In vv. 6-11 Paul used four descriptive adjectives to portray the believer’s former state, which has been transformed by the power of Christ: we were *weak*, we were *ungodly*, we were *sinners*, we were *enemies* of God.

“While we were still weak,” Paul said – while we were still living under the world’s selfish sway – “at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (v. 6). The word translated as “weak” usually means “sick,” but can also describe a condition of weakness or helplessness. For Paul, it indicated an inability to save ourselves. But who would go so far as to die for people who were not only weak, but far from God?

“Christ died for the ungodly,” Paul wrote. The enormity of that simple statement becomes evident with vv. 7-8. On some rare occasions, we might hear of someone willing to die for another person – usually someone close to them. The amazing thing about Jesus is that he died for us “while we were still sinners.”^U

Our past experience gives rise to present hope. If we believe Christ has truly brought reconciliation with God through his death on the cross, then we have confidence of a true redemption (v. 9). As usual, Paul spoke of salvation in the future tense (cf. 5:10; 9:27; 10:9, 13; 11:14, 26). We have been “justified” to have a right standing with God now, but ultimate salvation lies in the future.^U

If God loved us enough to effect reconciliation through Christ’s death “while we were enemies,” Paul believed, then surely God will continue that saving work through Christ’s resurrection life (v. 10).

That thought brought Paul back to the theme of boasting, as he challenged believers to “boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (v. 11).

The word translated as “reconcile” has the basic meaning “to exchange.” Here, it means “to exchange enmity for friendship.” Wherever the terms “reconcile” or “reconciliation” are used in the New Testament, it is always God who does the reconciling, and humans who are reconciled by virtue of God’s work in Christ.

In Paul’s mind, the fact that we don’t deserve God’s reconciling love is no reason not to celebrate it with joy and even a bit of holy pride.

Paul’s notion of boasting about what God has done may not sit well with us, perhaps because we have all known people whose insufferable self-righteousness or certainty come across as offensive. The apostle did not instruct his friends to boast of their faith in the streets, but he urged them in worship or personal conversations to express a confident hope that was grounded in God, effected through Christ, and experienced through the Spirit.

May we learn to do the same. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 23, 2019

Luke 8:26-39

A Bad Day for Pigs

People familiar with children's literature have probably read *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst. Disney made a movie version in 2014: it returned such a nice profit that Alexander's bad day became a very good day for the producers.

Have you ever had one of those days? A long, hard day filled with obstacles?

In our biblical text today, Luke builds on Mark's depiction (in Mark 5) of a long, hard day in the life of Jesus. There were obstacles along the way, but because Jesus was involved, what started as a bad day for many people turned into the best day of their lives. 📖

The day is described in the form of two stories in two places, and the second story is a story within a story. A common thread runs through all three of the stories. Jesus met three people in hopeless situations, three persons who were absolutely helpless until they met Jesus. Our text for today deals with the first of these three hard cases. 📖

A wild man (vv. 26-30)

The story begins on a sun-washed morning on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, a mountainous area where

Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. (Luke 8:33)

the land slopes sharply into the water. The region was sometimes called "Decapolis" after ten Roman cities that had been built in the area.

The specific area Jesus visited is unclear (see "The Hardest Question" online for more), but fortunately our understanding of the story does not depend on it. Luke sets the account "in the country of the Gerasenes," but the action takes place at the water's edge.

"As he (Jesus) stepped out on land" – that is, as soon as Jesus got out of the boat – "a man of the city who had demons met him" (v. 27a). 📖

Though some still hold to a belief in evil spirits as conscious entities that prey on humans, most modern folk would recognize the man in this story as having severe mental illness, so crippling that he refused to wear clothes and chose to live among tombs (often in caves) rather than in a house (v. 27b). 📖

The ancients imagined that demons were drawn to cemeteries, and the narrator reports a belief that the man's demons had given him superhuman strength, enabling him to break through chains used to restrain him (v. 29b). His madness was overwhelming.

While we may use different categories to describe mental health, we must read and appreciate the story from the perspective of the original audience, for whom demons explained all manner of human troubles.

The text uses both singular and plural forms, speaking both of "the

unclean spirit" and "the demon" in v. 29, and as "demons" and "many demons" in vv. 27 and 30. This may suggest that the story has grown with the telling, but the number of his inner demons – whether we think of them as literal or metaphorical – is beside the point. The question is whether Jesus could do anything to help the man, whose inner turmoil had made him certifiably insane.

Commentators often note that the man was not only troubled, but almost certainly a Gentile. Jesus had come to a place that was "opposite Galilee" (v. 26), Luke's way of reminding us that he had entered Gentile territory. The man was a citizen of that area, which was inhabited largely by Gentiles and replete with pigs, which were anathema to Jews. 📖

Despite his troubled mind, there was a wisdom about the wild man that the other people missed. When he was in the presence of divinity, he knew it, and said so.

Jesus "had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man" (v. 29a), speaking not so much to the man as to the sickness within him. The wild man's response, interpreted as the voice of his inner demons, was fearful: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me" (v. 28).

Jesus demanded the man's name, to which he replied "Legion," Luke said, "for many demons had entered him" (v. 30). 📖

A wild stampede (vv. 31-33)

The story has the demons recognize that they are subject to Jesus, but they

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plead with him “not to order them to go back into the abyss” (v. 31). While the root meaning of “abyss” describes a very deep hole or chasm, in Jewish thought it was a common name for an underground abode that was home to the devil and his evil minions.

The account takes a surprising turn – one troubling to many – when Jesus agreed to a negotiation with the evil spirits, who asked to be sent into a nearby heard of pigs rather than being consigned immediately to the abyss.

Once forced from the man and allowed to enter the pigs, the demons’ presence prompted a porcine parade that turned into a stampede as the pigs ran down a steep embankment and into the sea, where they were drowned (vv. 32-33).

A tenet of Hellenistic demonology held that demons could not survive in water, so Jesus’ diversion of the demons through the swine did not prevent their destruction.

But why would Jesus deal with demons at the cost of much valuable pork on the hoof?

From a Jewish perspective, pigs were unclean, so the destruction of a large herd would be of no real consequence. If anything, Jewish readers might applaud the notion of fewer pigs in the world.

Did Jesus allow it as a way of demonstrating his power, knowing that the sight of the panicked pigs would have impressed all observers and helped convince their former victim that he had been freed from their influence?

Local people may have been awed, but the swine stampede was a major economic blow that would certainly spark enmity rather than leading the locals to feel kindly toward Jesus.

Commentators sometimes cite this as an example of how Jesus can upset social and economic norms, but that

wasn’t why Mark, Matthew, and Luke preserved the story.

They wanted readers to understand that Jesus’ power over evil extended beyond that of exorcising stray and pesky spirits: with a word he could send legions of demons to their doom.

What is more, he could do it on Gentile soil. God’s power was not limited to the Jewish homeland, and Jesus’ salvific mission extended beyond the Jews: he brought healing and hope to ham-eating Gentiles, too.

A world of difference (vv. 34-39)

The men tending the pigs were so taken aback that “they ran off and told it in the city and in the country” (v. 34), no doubt reporting the loss to the herd’s owners. Like crowds gathering to watch a house fire or to examine a whale carcass washed up on shore, people from the city came out to see what the excitement was about.

To their astonishment, they found the local wild man sitting calmly, wearing clothes without complaint, and apparently conversing clearly enough for all to judge that he was in his right mind. They had once feared the man because of his violent mental turmoil. In a surprising twist, seeing him healed frightened them even more (vv. 35-36).

The word Luke uses to express their fear is from the verb *phobeō*, from which we get the English word “phobia.” The wild man had once been plagued by fierce phobias, but now his healing – along with the mass suicide of swine – had left his former neighbors feeling phobic and fearful around him.

As the man had once been seized by his inner demons, his countrymen were now “seized with great fear,” so terrified of what Jesus might do next that they asked him to leave. Without argument, “he got into the boat and returned” to the other side of the lake

(v. 37).

The story ends with something of a flashback, for though v. 37 says Jesus had already sailed away, vv. 38-39 record a conversation between him and the no-longer-wild man. Feeling a natural attachment for the one who had freed him, and perhaps fearful that his demons would return, the man begged to get in the boat and stay with Jesus.

One might expect that Jesus – who often bade others to follow him – would welcome him aboard. Instead, Jesus told the man to go back to his home “and declare how much God has done for you.” Disappointed but obedient, “he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.”

So it was that Jesus appointed an ex-madman to go and tell of God’s work among his fellow Gentiles, even before he sent the disciples out on preaching missions of their own.

Here, as elsewhere, the gospel story is marked by surprising turns of events and unexpected twists, with the result that Jesus’ power was magnified and more people were touched by the inbreaking kingdom of God.

And how might we be touched by this story?

Are we plagued by inner demons of our own, fears or habits or temptations we can’t seem to control? Do we believe the liberating Spirit of Christ is still active in the world and available to us?

It’s possible that we might believe in the power of Christ to bring change, but – like the Gerasenes – we’re afraid of what that change might mean. Some of us may prefer to hold on to the demons we know for fear that liberation might include the loss of our piggish possessiveness and solitary selfishness.

Jesus might even send us to declare how much God has done for us. Are we ready for that? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 30, 2019

Luke 9:51-62

A Hard Row to Hoe

Have you ever wondered whether you would like to know when you will die, and how it will come about? We might think so at first, but on further reflection, the prospect sounds less appealing. It would be hard to not live the rest of your life in dread of the appointed day.

Today's text concerns a time when someone knew that his end was near. The Gospels insist that Jesus knew he was going to his death when he turned toward Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover. He knew that a cruel wooden cross was waiting where he would die, naked and alone before all who cared to watch. Only later would he be raised from death at the resurrection, and then drawn into heaven at the ascension. ↓

The first verse of our text is the watershed verse in the Gospel of Luke, because there Jesus intentionally and steadfastly “set his face toward Jerusalem.” As he traveled the long road from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus knew he was walking toward his death – and that any who followed him must be willing to walk the same path.

This, then, is the context in which we meet three different people who faced the question of whether they would follow Jesus. We don't know

Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

any of their names, or what they did for a living. We know nothing about their families or their homes, except that they had them, and that Jesus challenged them to give them up. It's just as well that we don't know any details, because looking at them is like looking in a mirror. Their challenge is our challenge.

All three stories end in the same way – without an ending. In each case, a potential follower came forward, and Jesus laid out the cost of discipleship. We don't know how they responded. Our stories are also open-ended. Will we follow Jesus despite the cost, or will we be too afraid or too selfish to follow through?

On the road with Jesus (vv. 51-56)

Jewish pilgrims from Galilee typically avoided Samaritan territory, even as Israeli travelers today drive around the West Bank when going north and south. ↓ Jesus apparently set out on a more direct route for Jerusalem, however, sending some of his followers ahead to find lodging in an unnamed Samaritan village (vv. 51-52).

Knowing that Jesus and company were en route to Jerusalem for the Passover, however, they closed the shutters and pulled in the welcome mat, a move that infuriated James and John, who wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume the offenders as Elijah had once done (vv. 53-54,

compare 2 Kgs. 1:10, 12). Jesus declined the offer and rebuked them before moving on to another village, which was apparently more hospitable (vv. 55-56). ↓

Are you sure? (vv. 57-58)

Having set the stage, Luke introduces three people whose interest in following Jesus leads to the most radical demands in the gospel. At first, Jesus comes across as unreasonable and uncaring. We know Jesus was neither of these, but he *was* realistic. Jesus believed in telling the truth, and the truth is that following Jesus is not easy.

As Jesus walked along, he was confronted by a fan so ardent that he claimed: “I will follow wherever you go” (v. 57). We cannot be sure what was in the man's heart, but when Jesus looked at him, he seems to have seen a groupie rather than a disciple.

Jesus was not interested in attracting people who were wowed by his miracles, carried away by his teachings, or mesmerized by being close to their favorite star.

Jesus was on a road that would ultimately involve victory and triumph, but it would first pass through suffering and death. The road would be hard and Jesus wanted him to know what it could be like to follow him: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (v. 58).

We don't know how the man responded. Jesus did not turn him away; he just warned him that the path of discipleship comes with a cost.

Jesus did not sugarcoat discipleship. If we want to follow Jesus, we

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have to be willing to go where Jesus goes. One who follows a man who is headed to a cross cannot always count on the comforts of home.

Follow me and live (vv. 59-60)

Jesus took the initiative in a second encounter, challenging someone else to follow. We know nothing about this person. Had he already spent much time with Jesus, or shown promise as a faithful witness? Perhaps Jesus saw a special opportunity for him. So, just as he had once challenged Peter and Andrew and James and John, Jesus said “Follow me.”

When Jesus called those first disciples, they left the boats and their father behind. This man was more hesitant: he said “Lord, first let me go and bury my father” (vv. 59-60).

We often tone down the demand by suggesting that the man’s father was probably still alive, and he felt responsible to stay with him until he died. Jewish burials in the first century usually took place on the same day as one’s death. If his father had just died and was awaiting burial, it’s unlikely that the man would have been around Jesus to begin with. 

The text does not speak to this, however. The emphasis is on the radical demand of following Jesus.

The key word in the conversation is “first.” The prospective disciple wanted to give something else a higher priority than following Jesus. Whether his father was still living or awaiting burial is beside the point. Jesus was on the road to his own demise and in no mood for quibbling.

“Let the dead bury their own dead,” he said, “but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (v. 60).

Jesus’ response reflects a bit of dark humor. Jesus was not suggesting that corpses should rise from the

ground and usher new inhabitants to the underworld. The man Jesus challenged had the opportunity to follow Jesus and find life. Apart from that life, he was as good as dead. In that sense, “Let the dead bury their own dead” seems to be a comment on what lies ahead for those who choose their way over God’s way.

We can talk about following Jesus. We can spend time with other people who talk about Jesus. We can sing songs about following Jesus – but if we don’t give Jesus first priority, are we really following Jesus?

Our calling is not to those who are physically dead, but to those who are spiritually defunct. “As for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God everywhere.”

Can I say goodbye? (vv. 61-62)

A third person encountered Jesus, another eager beaver plagued by ambivalence. “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home” (v. 61). Perhaps he wanted to show a contrast between himself and the previous man. He didn’t want to stay home until his father died. He was ready to go now — just as soon as he told his family goodbye. That seems reasonable.

Again Jesus called for an immediate and radical commitment: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (v. 61).

And again, we wonder what is going on. Is Jesus so demanding that he would not let a man go and kiss his mother goodbye? Jesus probably suspected that the man had more in mind than a kiss and a hug.

When someone left home, it was traditional to throw a farewell party that could last for days. The lengthy soiree might lead to second thoughts, and possibly a change of mind. Or, perhaps Jesus was thinking that a follower who

was always looking back would not be very helpful.

On the other hand, maybe Jesus didn’t have that in mind at all. Maybe he was intentionally severe because he wanted to stress that the demands of discipleship are not easy. No one who sets out to plow and keeps looking back will be very effective.

I still remember the first time my father let me break up a field with the old John Deere tractor. One doesn’t have to be as careful with a disk harrow as with a plow, but my father wanted me to do it right. He pointed toward a tree at the opposite end of the field and told me to drive straight at the tree without looking back, or my furrows would turn out crooked. After turning around, I was to put the front wheel in the edge of the last furrow and keep it there without looking around.

A farmer using oxen or donkeys must pay even closer attention to what is in front of him. If he wants to plow a straight furrow, keep his animals in line, and hold the plow at a steady depth, he can’t be looking back. His first priority must be the plow until the plowing is done.

A person can look back from the plow and still be a farmer, but probably not a very good one. Jesus’ words are not about moral fitness for the kingdom, but about practical usefulness. Jesus was looking for people to work the fields of kingdom love and to put that work first in their lives.

Jesus is still looking for people like that, for people who will give kingdom living priority in their behavior and their relationships and their goals. Lord knows, such living is not always easy, and that’s the point of this text: to remind us in no uncertain terms that the Lord knows it is not easy. And yet he calls us to follow.

We know what the next question is. **NFJ**

Being Church

Thoughts about traditions, trends and changing times

In this new series, *Nurturing Faith* Editor John Pierce raises questions with a variety of leaders about the future of congregational life. This second entry features responses from Chris Gambill, director of the Center for Congregational Health in Winston-Salem, N.C.

NF: Sunday school attendance has been a primary measuring stick, at least for many Baptist churches. Now there is less engagement in that designated hour for most churches and more activities during other times during the week. What do you see happening, and how might a church now better measure its faithfulness?

CG: I don't believe the "Three B's" (budgets, "butts" and buildings) are an adequate measure of faithfulness or effectiveness. Though these things still matter, they can hardly reflect the breadth or depth of a congregation's mission and ministry.

The starting place for any church that wants to measure effectiveness or faithfulness is to get clear about what success might look like. That means being able to describe what you hope your actions will accomplish.

It is more important to measure outcomes than simply the actions you hope will produce the outcomes.

NF: What trend, that doesn't necessarily surface to top, needs more attention from church leaders right now?

CG: I believe most churches need to reconsider their fundamental mission and ministry in light of the mission and ministry of Jesus in the Gospels. Traditional

churches are easily — and often — encased or locked in to behaviors that are sometimes disconnected from any clear or intended outcomes.

Sunday school is a good example. If you still have Sunday school at your church, then why? What is it you believe or hope you can accomplish through this particular form of ministry?

I find many churches are continuing to be busy but aren't sure why or what they are accomplishing. I believe the rise of "Dones" [those who have given up on church] is in part a testimony to the growing lack of tolerance for spending time and energy at church in ways that don't seem to have clear outcomes or valuable results.

NF: How has "church attendance" changed meaning, and what are the results?

CG: Lay Christians seem to have decided it is no longer necessary or worth the effort to attend church every week. I believe they are in fact redefining what membership means — and it is not just about attending regularly.

I think Christians are moving toward defining their faith — and faithfulness — as being less about showing up in a specific place week by week by week, and more about how they live their lives and the values they reflect.

NF: Divisive politics are present in every aspect of American society including

church life. What advice do you have for congregational leaders in dealing with this reality? Is it enough to simply avoid hot topics as much as possible?

CG: There is no avoiding difficult, challenging topics and conversations. We can postpone them, but we can't stop them from happening.

Timing matters. It's better to be able to pick the time, format, structure, etc. for a difficult conversation than to wait for it to erupt on its own at a time that might do more damage. It's more important to find healthy ways to talk about these things than to pretend you can avoid the conversation.

And we need to be clear that when we do talk about them, some people will not be willing to live with the outcomes. The fallout from having these [conversations] is painful and draining, but so is trying to pretend we are all in agreement when we are not.

In the end, a healthy conversation produces a healthier congregation.

NF: How might a congregation better identify, assess and maximize its assets?

CG: I highly recommend an appreciative-focused, congregational asset-mapping event as the centerpiece for doing this. There are books and models available to serve as guides, but the actual leadership of the event is critical.

In most cases, congregations would be well served by having a skilled consultant lead the congregation through such an event.

NF: If congregational culture is shifting, how might ministerial staffing correspond?

CG: The basic principle for designing any leadership structure is "form follows function." In other words, leadership



structures should reflect and support the primary mission and ministry outcomes a congregation is trying to achieve.

Of course, this implies that the congregation has articulated these. So the actual order is: (1) Clarify identity, mission and vision; (2) Identify primary areas of mission and ministry focus; (3) Create a leadership structure that is appropriate to accomplish the mission and ministry foci.

Another critical consideration is a philosophical one: Who will do the work: clergy or laity?

If the primary person required to do the work is clergy, then choose one with the right passion and skill set for that work. If the primary focus is for laity to be engaged in the work, then the leadership should reflect an empowerment posture that will enable the laity to act with skill and passion.

NF: Many pastors live under the shadow of a previous pastor from a time (usually in the '50s or '60s) when there was less competition for churches. What are the realities churches face today regarding competition that was unknown in the "glory years" some still remember?

CG: I have found that many churches are trapped by their own past. If there are those who can remember the "golden years," then there is often pressure to try and re-create those years. And it can't be done.

Clergy are often blamed for a failure that is the congregation's, not theirs. One key for moving forward is to identify the bedrock values, passions and formative characteristics that have shaped the congregation and then articulate them clearly.

With these, the congregation can potentially create new structures that will reflect these values without trying to re-create the forms of ministry where these values previously resided.

This is the best of both worlds and provides a way to build upon the past without being held captive to it.

NF: Churches don't seem to be the socio-economic enclaves they were in times past. Rather they seem to be formed more by affinities such as worship styles and theological orientation. Is that accurate? If so, what impact does it have?

CG: Worship styles and theological affinities are certainly more important today than geography or even socio-economic factors. And, there is also still a strong pull toward peer groups.

There's still significant stratification in churches around age that has produced many (homogenous) older congregations and some that are similarly mostly younger. I think what is really happening underneath this is not just age but generational differences. These play out in both conscious and unconscious ways in congregational life.

Generational differences — primarily worldview, I think — are very different among generational cohorts. These differences are hard to reconcile because they are often part of individuals' implicit biases, about which they are unaware.

NF: Many churches are learning to do more with less. What advice would you have for them in navigating this reality?

CG: Most congregations would do well to clarify their mission, vision and values and then become more strategic in how they spend their money. This is very different from what is more common — simply revising last year's budget downward and spending money in (mostly) the same old ways.

Churches need to think long and hard about sustainability. A new tidal wave of crisis is approaching (unseen) for many congregations around the cost of maintaining aging (and underused) buildings.

NF: What's the most hopeful sign you see today in congregations?

CG: I am not even a little worried about the Christian Church (capital "C"). I believe God is at work and stirring the hearts and imaginations of God's people. I am excited about the many small signs of new life I see everywhere. **NFJ**

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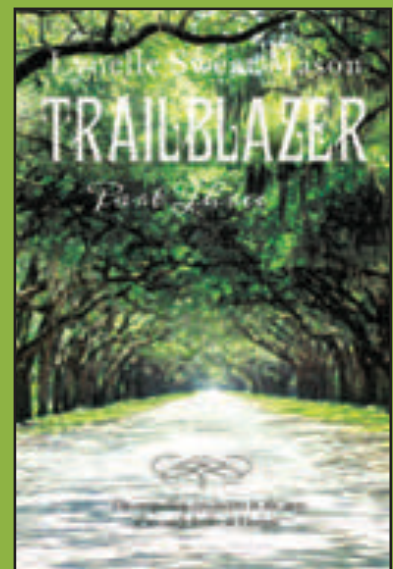


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The author of eight published books, Lynelle is a skilled biographer and former schoolteacher. She holds a master's degree in religious education and is a Stephen Minister.



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PART TWO

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1933–1945)

By Bruce Gourley

In the summer of 1936 and seeking re-election, Democratic President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, having rescued America from the nation's worst crisis since the Civil War, found himself in the middle of a growing political and religious whirlwind.

HOPE OR DESPAIR?

The worst of the Great Depression was over, and jobs were far more abundant. America's infrastructure — of roadways, bridges, dams, energy transmission, public buildings and public lands — advanced at an unprecedented pace. A newly established social safety net protected poor and middle-class Americans from the devastating effects of unbridled capitalism.

Hope had returned to America. The future looked promising. Nonetheless, despair grew within the ranks of the nation's wealthy capitalists. Roosevelt, many believed, was a socialist.

The American Liberty League, a Republican coalition of capitalists, was determined to defeat Roosevelt at the polls. Their presidential candidate, Kansas Governor Alf Landon, criticized Roosevelt as "communistic."

Across the Atlantic Ocean in Berlin, a portrait of Henry Ford, an outspoken critic of Roosevelt, prominently adorned the office of Adolf Hitler, Germany's chancellor. The Nazi leader admired Ford's virulent anti-Semitic views. Calling the industrialist an "inspiration," Hitler hoped Ford would become "the leader of the growing Fascist movement in America."

OPPOSITION

Nazi Germany welcomed foreign investment by capitalists critical of Roosevelt, including Ford and General Motors. Taking advantage of low wages, the automakers constructed plants in Germany that in part produced military vehicles for Hitler's growing armed forces.

Ford's German plant served as an "arsenal of Nazism," a post-war U.S. Army report concluded. The automakers were not alone. Coca-Cola, General Electric, IBM, Singer, Goodrich, Gillette, J.P. Morgan and Standard Oil (Exxon), among other corporate giants, invested in Hitler's Germany.

Simultaneously, many conservative Christians despised Roosevelt. Supported by popular radio personality and Roman Catholic priest Charles E. Coughlin and Louisiana Protestant minister Gerald L.K. Smith, the third-party, anti-Roosevelt Union Party rallied white Christians and challenged Roosevelt in 1936.

With verbal venom and a Bible in hand, Smith lashed out at Roosevelt's liberalism during raucous Union Party rallies. A "slimy group of men culled from the pink campuses of America with a friendly gaze fixed on Russia," Smith said of the Roosevelt administration during one rally.

SUPPORT

Undeterred, Roosevelt ignored the Union Party while castigating "economic royalists" who insisted upon "privileged enterprise, not free enterprise." Promising to protect ordinary Americans from the "economic

tyranny" of self-serving capitalists, the president supported progressive congressional candidates of both major parties.

In November the subterfuge of Hitler's American capitalist partners, Landon's charges of communism, and the venom of an emerging Religious Right all fell flat. Not since 1820 had a presidential candidate won as high a percentage of the popular and electoral votes as did Roosevelt in his second run for office.

Capturing more than 60 percent of the popular vote and all but the eight electoral votes of Maine and Vermont, the Democrat crushed not only crushed his Republican opponent, but also the immediate hopes of his capitalistic and religious opposition.

Roosevelt's support at the polls was widespread. Among voters more than three-quarters of poor Americans, unskilled laborers, union members, relief recipients, African Americans, Catholics and Jews voted for Roosevelt. On the other hand, only 42 percent of upper income voters did likewise.

REACTIONS

In the sanctuary of his church office Charles E. Coughlin wept bitterly on the night of the election. Gerald L.K. Smith temporarily faded from public sight. Both, however, would soon recover and remain opposed to Roosevelt.

Publicly chastised and greatly diminished, the American Liberty League briefly refashioned itself as a lobbying organization before disbanding.

His progressive agenda sanctioned by electoral mandate, President Roosevelt

This is part two of the 32nd 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.



quickly set about expanding upon his accomplishments. But in so doing, he stepped upon a landmine of his own making that would cripple his political capital for the remainder of his presidency.

In theory, the president could seemingly pass legislation unhindered. Democrats largely supported Roosevelt's agenda of further New Deal reforms, while hapless Republicans in 1937 occupied only 17 Senate and 88 House seats.

Yet while publicly compassionate, Roosevelt's administrative style was widely viewed as arrogant and distant by members of both political parties. Many Democratic congressmen resented the president rarely consulting them on legislative matters.

In February the president, emboldened, proposed legislation to increase the number of Supreme Court justices from nine to as many as 15 for the stated purpose of spurring more efficiency in the Court. But everyone saw through the thinly-veiled ploy.

In reality, Roosevelt wanted more

judges accommodating of his New Deal agenda. His efforts to "pack" the Court roiled D.C. and the nation at large.

MISSTEP

Amid the resulting fracas the Supreme Court unexpectedly ruled in favor of a minimum wage law from the state of Washington, reversing course from an earlier ruling opposing minimum wage legislation. The Washington case, combined with a statement from the chief justice declaring that additional justices were not needed in order to maintain efficiency, served to turn congressional sentiment against Roosevelt.

Although the Senate ultimately thwarted the president's attempt to enlarge the Supreme Court, Roosevelt nonetheless emerged victorious in that the Court never again opposed his New Deal policies. And during the course of his long presidency he replaced eight of the nine justices.

On the other hand, his misstep in picking an unwise and unnecessary

political fight tarnished his impregnable veneer and hampered his ability to govern at will. An uptick in joblessness during 1937–1938 further tarnished Roosevelt's image.

Growing anti-Semitism accompanied the economic downturn. Opposed to religious discrimination, Roosevelt addressed the subject of religious liberty in a letter of March 30, 1937, declaring: "The lesson of religious toleration — a toleration which recognizes complete liberty of human thought, liberty of human conscience — is one which, by precept and example, must be inculcated in the hearts and minds of all Americans if the institutions of our democracy are to be maintained and perpetuated."

The following year, in the 1938 Democratic congressional primaries, Roosevelt opposed anti-New Deal candidates. The strategy backfired. Alienating conservative Democrats, the president, overplaying his hand, appeared both power hungry and ineffectual. Republicans capitalized, scoring big gains in both the Senate and the House.

A legislative stalemate ensued, preventing further progressive advances. Chastised, Roosevelt withdrew from the offensive and played domestic defense for the remainder of his presidency. Although many of his earlier policies would remain enshrined permanently, the New Deal era was effectively over.

AT WAR

Meanwhile, fears from afar increasingly occupied the minds of Roosevelt, Congress and the general public alike. Hitler's war machine cast a shadow over all of Europe. With little opposition the Nazis marched into and occupied Poland in September 1939, whereupon Great Britain and France declared war upon Germany.

World War II had begun, the war to end all wars, the war that would supremely challenge and ultimately redefine the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The war itself, however, masked something even more sinister. Since his ascension to power in 1933, Hitler had isolated, persecuted and herded into concentration camps political opponents, homosexuals, liberals and Jews, the latter of whom Hitler determined to eradicate entirely.

All along, Americans had largely remained isolationist. Ignoring pleas for help from desperate Jews, the U.S. government, reflecting public anti-Semitism, admitted but few Jewish immigrants during the 1930s.

Like Hitler, American isolationists advocated non-interventionism and pressed for the U.S. to remain neutral in the European war. The deaths of American soldiers in World War I remained on the minds of many, as did a popular perception that Germany had been mistreated after the former war. Widespread sentiment marked a belief that America, far from Europe, had nothing to fear from distant Nazism.

Shrewdly, Hitler steadfastly maintained a policy of diplomatic and military neutrality toward America.

ANTI-SEMITISM

From a religious perspective, many conservative Christians shared with Hitler's Nazis a disdain of and opposition to Jews, homosexuals and liberals. Racial apartheid laws in America bore ideological similarities to Nazi racism.

According to a 1939 poll by *Fortune*, one-third of Americans believed that the U.S. government should take steps to "prevent Jews from getting too much power in the business world," while 10 percent of Americans said Jews should be immediately deported "to some new homeland as fast as it can be done without inhumanity."

Nearly 30 million Americans listened to Catholic demagogue Coughlin's isolationist, anti-Semitic, anti-communist and pro-Nazi radio broadcasts. Tens of thousands joined his violent Christian Front organization.

"Father Coughlin's brownshirts," a reference to brown Nazi uniforms, assaulted Jews and vandalized synagogues throughout eastern cities. An "organized campaign of terrorism," one New York newspaper declared of Coughlin's thugs.

Protestant minister Gerald L.K. Smith also preached a racist and xenophobic message befitting Nazism and attracted many followers.

All told, millions of Americans from 1939 to 1941 were members of pro-Nazi organizations, attended pro-Nazi rallies,

subscribed to pro-Nazi literature, and/or tuned in to pro-Nazi broadcasts. Not surprisingly, German agents quietly stoked such activity.

DIGNITY

Amid ascendant religious hatred, Roosevelt remained focused on the good in religion. In his 1939 annual State of the Union address the president cited religion as "indispensable" to Americans.

"Religion, by teaching man his relationship to God, gives the individual a sense of his own dignity and teaches him to respect himself by respecting his neighbors," Roosevelt declared.

Discrimination against persons of other ethnicity or faith, whether at home or abroad, Roosevelt criticized. Referring to religious persecutions in Nazi Germany and the Communist Soviet Union, he noted, "Where freedom of religion has been attacked, the attack has come from sources opposed to democracy."

Nazism espoused a racist white Christian nationalism that both co-opted and undercut Germany's churches. The Soviet government promoted atheism over religion. Both opposed democracy.

Roosevelt understood the inclusive nature of true Christianity. In a July 24, 1939 letter to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, he stated:

"Events abroad indicate in no uncertain terms the great stake which religion must play in the preservation of democracy against the savage and merciless inroads of Fascism, Nazism and Communism. These ideologies exclude the virtues of Christianity — faith, hope and charity, benevolence and brotherly love — those virtues which are the very basis of our moral code."

True religion, in Roosevelt's mind, focused on human equality, the basis also of democracy. In a letter written December 16, 1940 the president addressed both:

"Our modern democratic way of life has its deepest roots in our great common religious tradition, which for ages past has taught to civilized mankind the dignity of the human being, his equality before God, and his responsibility in the making of a better and fairer world."

Democracy remained in need of "those great ethical religious teachings which are the heritage of our modern civilization. For 'not upon strength nor upon power, but upon the spirit of God' shall our democracy be founded."

DIVISION

Many Americans disagreed, none more prominent than Charles Lindbergh, in 1927 the first man to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, and a frequent guest of the German government. His popularity comparable to that of Roosevelt, Lindbergh defended Nazi Germany, blamed Britain and France for the war, and called for America to remain uninvolved.

Lindbergh's defense of Hitler energized millions who harbored Nazi sentiments. "Will Lindbergh one day be our Fuehrer?" wrote prominent American playwright Robert Sherwood in his diary. Roosevelt, too, worried about Lindbergh.

Amid the rancor in the United States, Hitler's Nazis marched across Western Europe and into France in the spring of 1940, their military vehicles supplied in part by Henry Ford's German factory. In the summer they began bombing Britain.

Alarmed at the prospect of American engagement in the war, a national coalition of anti-war collegians formed the isolationist America First Committee, attracting the financial backing of anti-interventionist businessmen including Henry Ford.

Charles Coughlin and his terrorist Christian Front organization lent their support. Christian marketing guru, long-time Republican adviser, purveyor of Jesus as the world's greatest businessman in his best-selling 1925 book *The Man Nobody Knows*, and Republican U.S. congressman (1937–1941) Bruce Barton marketed the isolationist organization.

In a vastly divided nation, eastern urban dwellers trended to intervention while rural and midwestern Americans preferred isolation. Many German and Irish immigrants demanded neutrality.

Businessmen could be found on both sides. In the nation's capital, President Roosevelt quietly favored intervention but feared isolationist public opinion, while Congress leaned toward isolation.

FEARS

Eastern New York City and midwestern Chicago reflected America's divisions, the latter the epicenter of the America First Committee. In response to the release of the British movie *Pastor Hall*, based on a true story about German Protestant minister Martin Niemöller's sentencing to a concentration camp for speaking out against the Nazis, the two cities responded in starkly different ways.

Following a showing of *Pastor Hall*, New Yorkers took to Times Square in an anti-Nazi protest, while the city of Chicago, comprised of a high percentage of Germans and widely harboring anti-Roosevelt sentiment, initially banned the film.

At the same time Chicago allowed the showing of *Feldzug in Poland*, a propaganda production by the German government that blamed now-occupied Poland as the aggressor in the German invasion of the country. Local and national protests eventually led Chicago's leaders to reluctantly reverse course and allow the showing of *Pastor Hall*.

Nonetheless, the America First Committee, along with other Nazi-oriented groups, remained defiant. Parroting Hitler's hatred of Jews, communists and immigrants, the organization also considered as threats eastern elites and the Roosevelt administration.

Fascist sentiment, too, was embedded within Congress. In 1940 U.S. Texas Congressman Martin Dies, chairman of the U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee, focused primarily on rooting out communism in America, called for a figurative wall to be built around America.

"We must ignore the tears of sobbing sentimentalists and internationalists," he thundered, "and must permanently close, lock and bar the gates of our country to new immigration waves and then throw away the keys."

Amid the ascendancy of the America First Committee and a lack of leadership from a hesitant White House, the presidential election year of 1940 unfolded in dramatic and dangerous fashion. Fearful that America might succumb to calls for non-intervention in the war, a coalition of concerned and influential northeastern



newspapermen, business leaders and socialites prodded Roosevelt to publicly side with Britain and France.

Step by step, over the course of months pressuring the Roosevelt administration and Congress, the coalition of interventionists moved the needle. Widespread anger over the fall of Paris to the Nazis and of German attacks on military and commercial British ships aided their cause. Fears mounted of the possibility of a Nazi attack on American soil.

RE-ELECTION

Roosevelt, tacking to the middle regarding the war, secured a third Democratic presidential nomination. White House legislation authorizing the U.S. to sell old destroyers to the British Navy passed Congress shortly thereafter and with the support of Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie.

A controversial military draft bill, the first peace-time draft legislation in American history, was enacted one week prior to the November presidential elections, accompanied by promises that the draft was a defensive measure only.

Running on similar public platforms of opposing interventionism, the two presidential candidates and their surrogates resorted to a great deal of mudslinging in the final weeks of the election.

Although Willkie ran a spirited campaign, when the votes were tallied Roosevelt, in a close contest, emerged as the victor of a historic third presidential term.

"Roosevelt with his known faults," New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia summarized, was preferable to most voters than "Willkie with his unknown virtues."

Although refusing to publicly advocate for intervention, Roosevelt in a post-election address to Congress on January 6, 1941 warned that America and other world democracies faced an existential threat from Nazi Germany. He identified four essential freedoms that should be accorded to "everyone in the world" and that the U.S. should strive to ensure: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear.

MORAL CRISIS

Britain, meanwhile, grew increasingly desperate. Short on food, the Brits' once-storied navy reduced to bare bones, and much of London smoldering from German bombs, an invasion by Nazi troops seemed imminent.

Roosevelt, warned by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Britain's precarious position, weighed a most difficult choice. American assistance, the president believed, was the world's only hope against Nazi occupation of all of Europe. National polls reflected Roosevelt's convictions that America must aid Britain, and soon. Non-intervention, however, seemingly remained the prevailing sentiment in Congress.

As the world waited in anguish, in January 1941 Roosevelt gave perhaps his most important fireside chat to date. His homespun radio addresses of the 1930s, enormously popular with the American people and paired with New Deal policies designed to alleviate widespread poverty during the Great Depression, had helped restore hope in the lives of tens of millions.

Now, with the economy on the upswing and another moral crisis at hand, the president in plain and pointed language told his countrymen that the time had come to rescue Britain from the clutches of Hitler.

Knowing that many ordinary Americans shared Roosevelt's sentiments, Hitler's friends in America sprang into action. Determined to prevent passage of a congressional bill to aid Britain, tens of thousands of America First committee members circu-

lated oppositional petitions, posters and leaflets; staged rallies; and orchestrated a deluge of letters and telegrams to the White House and Capitol Hill.

Alarmed, pro-intervention groups sided with Roosevelt. In newspaper editorials, radio broadcasts, petitions, bumper stickers, posters and rallies they implored citizens and congressmen to support military aid to Britain.

The “great debate,” as Roosevelt described it, “was argued in every newspaper, on every wavelength, over every cracker barrel in the land.”

DECISION TIME

Ultimately, the decision rested in the hands of Congress, who called two of America’s most prominent citizens to testify.

On behalf of the non-interventionists, Charles Lindbergh, testifying on January 23, 1941 to a congressional committee before a standing-room-only crowd of enthusiastic onlookers, declared “that it would be disadvantageous for England” to seek a “conclusive victory” over Nazi Germany. Throughout America Hitler’s friends cheered.

Even more dramatic, however, was the testimony of Republican Wendell Willkie, a man of warmth and magnetism to match that of the U.S. president, and Roosevelt’s barely-vanquished rival in the 1940 presidential election. On February 11 the crowd was larger, the atmosphere more charged, and Willkie’s words more astonishing than those of Lindbergh.

Having barely returned from Britain on a tour arranged by the Roosevelt administration and designed to assess on-the-ground conditions, Willkie faced a divided Congress and a rapt audience. Calmly he sided with Roosevelt’s call to assist Britain in its hour of deepest need.

Burying his partisanship, Roosevelt’s recent opponent called for “the unity of our people ... in sending aid to Britain” to ensure that the besieged nation could stand “firm and strong” against Hitler.

Willkie’s testimony turned the tide in the “great debate.” Congress passed and Roosevelt signed the bill to aid Britain. Outraged, many Republicans deserted

Willkie.

At the same time, numerous isolationists recanted their views and became interventionists. America First, experiencing a drain of membership, became ever more extremist, with Lindbergh leading the way. For their part, interventionist organizations drifted further to the left.

UPHEAVAL

Polarized more than ever, the far right increasingly ranted against treasonous “Jews” and “communists,” the far left against traitorous “Nazis.” Powerful figures within government left and right secretly spied on their enemies, disregarding constitutional freedom of speech.

Still Roosevelt dithered, and Britain feared that America would not come to the rescue. Hitler’s decision to abandon a planned Nazi invasion of Britain, seemingly out of concern for a growing Soviet threat to the East, offered but little consolation.

Unknown to the American public, the Nazis in 1940 began isolating Polish Jews in walled “ghettos” while denying residents winter fuel and rationing food intake. By early 1941 the 400,000 residents of the Warsaw Ghetto were living on a starvation diet of 183 calories per day, while other Jews were forced into slave-labor camps. Many died, as the Nazis intended.

America, at the same time and amid domestic upheaval, gradually increased food aid and military assistance to beleaguered Britain. American warships convoyed British merchant vessels, while factories began shifting from the production of cars, refrigerators and washing machines to military output. The military draft was extended.

Still Hitler refrained from taking action against U.S. ships, isolationists clamored for neutrality, interventionists pressed for much greater assistance to Britain, and Congress and Roosevelt waffled.

Suddenly, one fateful day changed everything.

ATTACK

On Dec. 7, 1941 the German-allied Japanese by a stealth air attack bombed America’s naval base at Pearl Harbor,

Hawaii. Catching U.S. forces entirely unaware, the Japanese forces damaged or destroyed 19 ships and 328 planes and killed 2,403 persons.

An outraged Congress united behind Roosevelt and sided with Britain, France and the Soviet Union (the Allied forces) by declaring war against Japan the following day. Shortly thereafter Germany and Italy (with Japan, the Axis forces) declared war on the U.S., and the U.S. immediately returned the favor.

Most of America’s isolationists, including Lindbergh, quickly forsook their dissent and supported the war effort. Enrollment in the military forces soared. The nation’s factories, guaranteed sizable profits through government contracts, eagerly shifted to the full-time production of military vehicles, aircraft and equipment.

On Jan. 1, 1942 in the Declaration of United Nations the U.S. and 25 other nations pledged to fight together against the Axis powers. The phrase “United Nations” was coined by Roosevelt.

Rapidly expanding the national economy and further driving down the unemployment rate, the military buildup lifted America out of the lingering vestiges of economic malaise of the Great Depression. “Dr. New Deal,” in the words of Roosevelt, became “Dr. Win the War.”

Nonetheless, military preparations necessary for deploying adequate troops and equipment to Europe took time. The home front first drew Roosevelt’s attention, ushering in a dark chapter in America’s history.

RETICENCE

In February 1942 the president, under congressional pressure, signed a racist and xenophobic bill authorizing the internment of Japanese Americans in Hawaii and the western states. Relocated to isolated camps in military zones scattered throughout the West, nearly 120,000 people, mostly American citizens, spent the remainder of the war in forced confinement.

Also in early 1942 Roosevelt learned of Hitler’s campaign to “annihilate the Jewish race.” Initiated in January, the Holocaust would result in the murder of six million Jews.

Ignoring pleas by Jewish leaders to try and stop the genocide, the American president insisted that the slaughter could only be stopped by winning the war. Roosevelt's reticence proved fatal for millions of Jews abroad, while racism and xenophobia raged on the home front.

On the war front, America's rapidly-growing military first turned to the West, in June 1942 attacking and defeating the Japanese navy in the Battle of Midway and deterring the Japanese from further advances.

In November U.S. and British troops landed in North Africa. Following months of fighting, in May 1943 they defeated Axis forces in North Africa.

President Roosevelt, meanwhile, traveled extensively throughout the year, strategizing with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, meeting Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek in Cairo, and coming face to face with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in Tehran. The far-flung conferences, pivotal to the coordinated efforts of the Allied powers, strained the president's health.

In September Italy surrendered to Allied forces, paving the way for a frontal attack on German forces. By then it was too late for Germany's Jews.

PRAYER

Intense military preparation came to fruition when Allied forces made a pivotal attack on German forces in western France on June 6, 1944. Drawing from his own Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, Roosevelt personally helped compose a prayer for the secretive operation known as D-Day.

Upon receiving word that American forces had landed on the beaches of Normandy, the president provided the text of his prayer to afternoon newspapers. Imploring God's "blessings" and "grace" upon America's soldiers in the "struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity," Roosevelt acknowledged the darkness and death to come.

Weary and sick from wartime pressures, he expressed his hope for victory and ultimate "peace that will let all of men live in freedom."

"Many people have urged that I call the Nation into a single day of special prayer," the president declared. "But because the road is long and the desire is great, I ask that our people devote themselves in a continuance of prayer. As we rise to each new day, and again when each day is spent, let words of prayer be on our lips, invoking Thy help to our efforts."

As America prayed, the Allies slowly and relentlessly pushed back German forces in France, marking a turning point from which the Nazis would never recover.

In gratitude for their president's leadership amid the greatest foreign crisis ever, Americans elected Roosevelt to a fourth presidential term in November. Yet the war ground on.

LAST TRAIN

The Battle of the Bulge, another crucial engagement, in December 1944 went to the Allies, putting the vaunted German army permanently on the defensive. With victory in sight, in February 1945 Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin gathered in the Soviet Union for the Yalta Conference to shape a post-war plan of peace and to partition German-controlled territories between the U.S., Britain, France and the Soviet Union.

Shortly thereafter, American and British forces in March crossed the Rhine River into German territory, while Soviet forces closed in from the east.

Back home in America, Roosevelt, noticeably frail, lamented Stalin's refusal to commit to post-war democracy. His body crushed by the toil of worries and travels, the president on March 30 returned to rural Warm Springs, Ga., his place of quietness and healing to which he had previously retreated dozens of times.

Attending Easter services in a local church two days later, tremors shook Roosevelt's weakened frame, his prayer book and glasses falling from his hands. But in the days following, a regimen of relaxation, casual social events, conversations with locals and enjoyment of the spring air, and light official paperwork seemingly rejuvenated the president.

Roosevelt's 42nd visit to Warm Springs, however, would be his last. As he signed

official documents and an artist painted his portrait, early on the afternoon of April 12 Roosevelt suddenly slumped in his chair. Within hours the longest-serving president in American history passed away from a massive cerebral hemorrhage, shocking all of America.

A last train ride from Warm Springs to Atlanta and then on to Washington followed, the tracks lined with thousands of mourners. Some 500,000 people lined the streets as a military caisson brought the Roosevelt's body to the White House for his funeral.

LEGACY

Twice Roosevelt had risen to greatness. First he had pulled the nation up from the dark depths of an economic chasm wrought by unfettered capitalism. As if that were not enough, following years of stark ideological national turmoil broken only by the attack upon Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt had united and led America and her allies to victory over hate and fascism in the world's most devastating war.

Through it all, America's longest-serving president maintained a simple faith in the ideals of freedom and of human equality as expressed in democracy and Christianity, ideals he and the nation failed to fully uphold.

On April 15 FDR's body came to rest beneath the grassy lawn of Springwood estate in Hyde Park, N.Y., in sight of the house of his birth.

In Europe the same day, Allies liberated tens of thousands of Jews from a German concentration camp. Two weeks later Adolph Hitler committed suicide, and on May 7 Germany unconditionally surrendered.

Months later the U.S. unveiled a weapon of mass destruction against resistant Japan, dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan finally surrendered on August 15, bringing an end to World War II.

On Oct. 24, 1945 the United Nations came into official existence. Devoted to the betterment of humanity through advocacy for basic human rights, including freedom of religion for all, as well as the maintenance of international peace, the organization embodied the legacy of Roosevelt, one of America's greatest presidents. **NFJ**

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The Prodigal Son story *retold*

BY RON PERRITT

The story of the Prodigal Son (or the Loving Father) is being retold in many of our churches today. It goes something like this:

Once there was a man who had two sons. The second son demanded his inheritance, went to a far country and wasted his money in depravity and shameful living. He eventually came to himself and decided to return to his father whom he knew still loved him in hopes of being accepted if only as a humble servant or slave.

On seeing his wayward son coming home, the father said to his family: "This wayward son has offended and insulted me. Before I can accept him back, some restitution has to be made; someone must pay for this dishonor. To forgive this wayward son without penalty would be tantamount to abandoning my standards for justice."

He called his beloved first son and said: "I am putting you, instead of him, into the hands of enemies to be tortured and murdered. This will satisfy my requirements for justice. Then I can accept my wayward son."

The first son accepted his fate and agreed to go as an act of love so that his brother could once again be united with his father. At the first son's death, the father forgave his wayward son and that forgiveness was extended to others also.



The Return of the Prodigal Son (1773) by Pompeo Batoni

Does this sound familiar? It is the picture of God given all too often to explain why God "sent Jesus to die on the cross."

Around 1100 C.E. a man named Anselm, then Bishop of Canterbury, proposed this explanation of Jesus' death that became known as Penal Substitutionary Atonement. Jesus died as payment (penal) for my sins as a substitute for me (substitutionary) in order to effect forgiveness by the father (atonement).

It became enormously popular in the Catholic Church and came to Protestants through the Reformation. It has become the de facto standard explanation in many Baptist churches, and is likely the only explanation most Baptist Christians have ever heard.

The problem is that this is not the picture of God that Jesus gave us.

In Jesus' story, the father does not demand any type of payment or restitution for the insulting behavior of the

wayward son. The father loves the son and gladly welcomes him back into the family unconditionally.

But don't some passages in the New Testament suggest that Jesus' death was a sacrifice? The answer is yes — noticeably Matt. 26:28; Rom. 3:25, 5:8; Gal. 1:4; and 1 John 4:10.

For Matthew, Paul and others who had very strong Jewish backgrounds it would have been easy for them to see Jesus' death as propitiation. It is interesting that Matthew is the only gospel writer who makes this association and does so only once by modifying a statement found in Mark 14:24.

In all three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus tells his disciples on three separate occasions that he is going to Jerusalem to die but never describes his death in traditional sacrificial terms.

Jesus taught that God's will is that we love one another. Why? Because God loves us all.

That love is unqualified. God is perfect in love. We are called to emulate that love through compassion for all. We are to even love our enemies (Matt. 5:44, Luke 6:27).

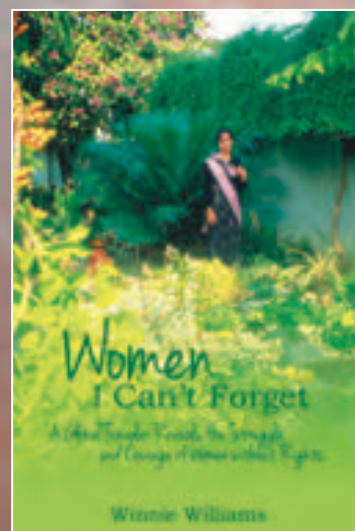
Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Jesus taught that God is perfect and thus did not require Jesus' death to be able to love unconditionally or to forgive.

Shouldn't we, who claim to be followers of Jesus, be faithful to tell the story of God as a Loving Father as Jesus told it? **NFJ**

—Ron Perritt, a retired professor from Louisiana State University and a member of University Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, serves on the Nurturing Faith Board of Directors. He is the author of Coherent Christianity: A More Liberating, Less-Traveled Way (Nurturing Faith, 2019).

**Jesus taught that God's will is that we love one another.
Why? Because God loves us all.**

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WALK *of* FAITH

Tour tells tale of Hollywood's
Christian beginnings

BY HEATHER ADAMS
Religion News Service

LOS ANGELES — April Clemmer pauses when walking past the First Baptist Church of Hollywood.

“This church is a survivor,” she tells the dozen or so people taking her Walk of Faith tour in a neighborhood better known for its movie-star-spangled Walk of Fame. “I will show you a lot of churches but very few” — First Baptist among them — “have been able to remain in their original locations.”

Clemmer, a Los Angeles resident and a Baptist herself, came up with the Walk of Faith tour after spending a decade researching Hollywood history. To her surprise, the deeper she looked, the more she found that the place synonymous with the American movie industry — and now clogged with lingerie stores, tobacco shops and fast-food outlets — was founded as a Christian community.

Clemmer starts each tour with a brief introduction and prayer — encouraging people to pray however they want. Then she takes people back to 1887, when the name Hollywood first appeared on an official document, and four years after Daeida and Harvey Wilcox, who had made a fortune in real estate in Topeka, Kan., moved to Los Angeles.

The couple bought 120 acres centered at what would become the intersection of Hollywood and Vine. After Harvey's death and Daeida's subsequent remarriage, Daeida began creating her vision of a Christian preserve. On Nov. 14, 1903, Hollywood elected to become an official city by a narrow vote — Daeida, as a woman, was unable to participate.



STARS AND MORE — Guide April Clemmer, left, tells about Hollywood's earlier, lesser-known Christian history as part of her Walk of Faith tour. RNS photo by Heather Adams.

The first laws passed by the town involved bans on liquor, pool halls, bowling alleys, riding bicycles on sidewalks, the use of firearms and speeding. In 1905, the *Los Angeles Times* described it as a place where “the saloon and its kindred evils are unknown.”

Instead, it was filled with churches that had taken up Daeida's offer of free land, regardless of denomination.

By 1910, Daeida's town of 500 had expanded to about 5,000, and water scarcity forced Hollywood to incorporate into the booming city of Los Angeles. Saloons soon followed, and by the time Daeida died in 1914 her vision was doomed as well.

While the typical Hollywood tour might include tourists, the majority of the Walk of Faith attendees are locals — and that's how Clemmer wants it. “It's important for local Christians to know there is a foundation of faith in Hollywood and that it's something that can be reclaimed,” she said.

Carla Myers, 50, a Los Angeles resident, agreed that Hollywood needed to return to its godly roots. “What the human soul needs at the core are community and connection and love and belonging. I feel inspired to keep walking the streets and keep listening to how God would have me

do my part,” Myers said.

Clemmer, who gives other historical tours of Hollywood, recently gave a tour to Karen Covell, who directs the Hollywood Prayer Network, an organization of and for entertainment industry Christians. Covell is encouraging her members to take the tour.

“She walks people through the decades, within a few blocks' area, giving insight into the vision of Christians, the passion of filmmakers and the hand of God throughout the last 100 years in Hollywood,” Covell said. “It's important to know what God has done in order to fully embrace what he's doing and is going to continue to do in our community.”

The tour also includes sides of Hollywood not every tourist sees. Clemmer took her group through a homeless encampment. While she assured tour participants they were safe, she made the point that poverty is part of the reality of Hollywood.

Along for that day's tour was 20-year-old Natalie Myers, a student at Biola, a private Christian university in La Mirada, south of LA.

“I've never heard of something like this before — a Christian tour in Hollywood,” Myers said. “Hollywood's not really thought of like that.” **NFJ**

Walter Rauschenbusch and the reception of the social gospel movement

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Westward rail construction opened vast lands but enriched only a few. In the East and Midwest, millions of toiling urbanites were weary and despairing. The economic chasm in 1886 was vast.

Former President Rutherford B. Hayes warned in a speech: “Free government cannot long endure if property is largely in a few hands and large masses of people are unable to earn homes, education and a support in old age.”

In his diary Hayes elaborated: “In church it occurred to me that it is time for the public to hear that the giant evil and danger in this country, the danger which transcends all others, is the vast wealth owned or controlled by a few persons.”

Unbeknownst to the former president, an emerging Christian movement focused on Jesus’ teachings about the Kingdom of God sought to address his very concerns. Walter Rauschenbusch, the newly-installed young pastor of the Second Baptist Church in New York City, recoiled at the sufferings of his immigrant, working-class congregation.

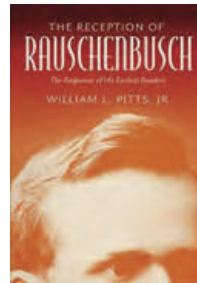
Struggling with the harsh economic inequalities of modern industrialization evident in his parishioners, Rauschenbusch aligned with others to advocate a gospel of societal justice derived from Jesus’ teachings in the Beatitudes and emphasis upon the Kingdom of God.

In the following decades the “social gospel” took definitive shape with Rauschenbusch, then teaching at Rochester Seminary in New York, as the intellectual figurehead of the movement.

A defining moment came in 1908 when the newly-formed Federal Council of Churches adopted “The Social Creed of the Churches,” a statement addressing “industrial problems” and echoing Rauschenbusch’s arguments in his landmark book, *Christi-*

anity and the Social Crisis, published the previous year.

No longer should Christianity focus merely on individual salvation, the Rauschenbusch-inspired Social Creed statement declared, but also “for equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life.” Living wages, better working conditions, eradication of child labor and provision for former workers in their old age, all moral imperatives, demanded sympathy and help from Christian churches. From 1907–1909 the best-selling religious book in the nation, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, brought the social gospel to the attention of church leaders throughout America.



A century after the 1918 death of Rauschenbusch, social gospel themes of human rights, equality and justice are common not only within American Christendom, but also in the larger public and political discourse. Historian William L. Pitts Jr., in his enlightening volume, *The Reception of Rauschenbusch: The Responses of His Earliest Readers* (Mercer University Press, 2018), offers granular insight into Rauschenbusch’s place within the social gospel movement.

Following the publication of *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, middle-class Christians of all ages wrote the Rochester professor, agreeing with his “key idea” that the church “had a social dimension and responsibility” to assist the less fortunate. But, Pitts acknowledges, “letters from the wealthy, the poor, and the very working-class Rauschenbusch proposed to help” were largely missing.

Silence from wealthy Christians may have indicated disinterest. Factory workers were perhaps too busy to pay much

attention. Many impoverished persons were likely unable to afford books, and not a few illiterate.

“The churches did not ultimately succeed in changing the economy,” Pitts observes. Then again, Rauschenbusch himself had not offered “specific steps to alter the economic structure.”

Identifying problems but not offering concrete solutions, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* raised Christian consciousness and “converted thousands of pastors, academics and activists to the social gospel” amid a larger progressive political movement in America.

As Pitts documents, for the remainder of Rauschenbusch’s life the prominent Baptist leader called Christians to transform the social order by “bringing it into harmony with the ethical convictions” of Jesus’ teachings that in the course of time bring about “a broader and nobler humanity.”

Although the social gospel movement faded amid the soaring wealth inequality of the 1920s, major Christian denominations absorbed Rauschenbusch’s message and gradually established departments devoted to social justice.

Today many young Americans, consciously or not, embody Rauschenbusch’s teachings. Reprints of his books are legion. Academic interest has spiked since the turn of the century.

While stark wealth inequalities and social injustices remain in the present, many politicians, citizens, social nonprofits and churches are advocating and generating policies to lift up immigrants, minorities and the working poor. The social gospel conviction and conversation that Rauschenbusch elevated a century ago continues within and beyond church walls.

In the words of biographer Pitts, “Rauschenbusch endures as the best-known spokesperson for the [social gospel] movement.” NFJ

Pavlovitz irreverently pushes readers from dismay to hope

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

When pulling John Pavlovitz' new book from a FedEx envelope, my first thought was: "Hmm, this is the only book I've received with 'butt-kicking' in the title." OK, it's in the subtitle — but still.

However, anyone familiar with Pavlovitz' widely read blogs and columns knows his voice has no semblance of a pacifying, safe-seeking pastor. He leans more toward stinging, prophetic utterances.

With widespread mischaracterizations of Jesus, and abuses of and by the church today, we need some plainspoken challenges from articulate, insightful, courageously loyal critics — and Pavlovitz is one of them.

However, Pavlovitz has more to offer than critiques and complaints. He is not mired in despair — instead offering a hopeful course of constructive action.

In *Hope and Other Superpowers: A Life-Affirming, Love-Defending, Butt-Kicking, World-Saving Manifesto* (Simon & Schuster), Pavlovitz pulls readers (and perhaps himself) from the dismay many thoughtful Christians and others rightfully feel about this time in American life — when so many professing believers are more concerned with losing cultural dominance and privilege than walking in the way of Christ.

That doesn't mean Pavlovitz has grown soft. The first words one reads are an endorsement by Rosie O'Donnell. Pavlovitz remains a straight-shooting, story-telling, at-times confrontational advocate for actually living according to the attributes and calling revealed by Jesus.

Should the North Carolina-based minister and writer offend the more sensitive or defensive reader or listener, then he just may be fulfilling his calling. Rather than repeated ranting, however, what readers find in *Hope and Other Superpowers* is Pavlovitz

helping to map a way out of this mess.

Indeed, many of us "dwell on the swirling, ever-present storm of bad news" that can lead to a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. In this writing, Pavlovitz drags us with him from the temptations of apathy and cynicism to claim our rightful roles as "fierce caretakers of hope."

Our mistake, he writes, is that we have too often sought the hope we need in outside sources rather than looking within.

"It isn't the sky that holds our hope for the planet, it's the mirror," he writes, "and the time has come for us to reconnect to the sacred, essential *why* of our lives and to live more fully from that place."

The essential question, said Pavlovitz, is: "What kind of person does this world need right now?"

With continual references to imaginary superheroes — suggesting young John once nestled up with a lot of comic books — Pavlovitz helps readers identify ways of "cultivating key traits" that he also calls "ordinary superpowers."

For those disappointed in and dismayed by the abject failure of a large portion of American Christianity to put the life and teachings of Jesus ahead of self-interest and self-preservation, this is needed good news. It is not naïve, but offers realistic and constructive guidance away from the kryptonite of distress and defeat to the horizon of hope.

He urges readers to focus on how their gifts match the needs before them — and to be willing to leverage whatever influence is personally available to bring about good,

even when facing obstacles and criticism.

"Whether in matters of activism or career or parenting, many well-meaning, deeply feeling people burn out because they allow the storms around them and inside of them to consume them," he writes, obviously out of experience. "If you aren't actively working to prevent it, the bad news and the harsh words and the mean people will get inside your system and create a toxic environment in which hope cannot survive."

Pavlovitz offers practical ways to combat such negative influences — such as separating one's identity from the criticism and taking time away from the fray.

Yet as surely as Clark Kent turns into Superman, we can come out of the phone booths (young person, ask your parents about those) of our lives to face the challenges ahead with hopeful giftedness.

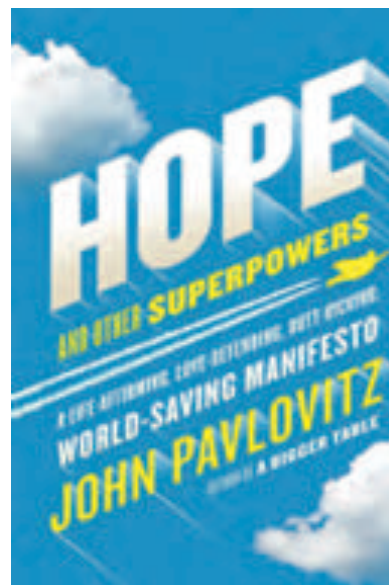
Instead of taking on the universe, however, each of us has a part of the world we

can influence for good.

Anyone can prosper in the best of times. Pavlovitz reminds us that, "Adversity ... is always an invitation to be transformed."

Perhaps his best directive is to never, ever accept negative criticism for being an empathetic and caring person. Being called a "bleeding heart" is not the insult it is intended to be — for the Golden Rule still applies.

"Your compassion isn't a shortcoming; it is the greatest of day-saving, despair-fighting superpowers," writes Pavlovitz. **NFJ**



Questions Christians ask scientists

Are beliefs about God just patterns of neurons firing in our brains?

Keith, my brother-in-law, is a Baptist like me. Unlike me, however, he spent a number of years in the Episcopal Church.

He'll tell you that Baptists know how to teach children and Episcopalians know how to teach teenagers.

Baptists tell the story to little ones in a hundred creative and memorable ways but, on the whole, Episcopalians do better when the waters get deeper and the questions grow difficult.

I can't speak for Episcopalians, but I can affirm — for my case at least — the Baptist piece. I was raised a Baptist and got a good sense of the story as a child, but things got a little vague as I entered the youth group: There was no confirmation process, and I never felt like church was a good place to ask my questions.

I'm beginning to think we Baptists should teach our children the value of periodically challenging their beliefs about God, in part because of the way our brains work.

I recently ran across an outstanding video (vimeo.com/157192392). I urge you to take eight minutes to watch it. It shows, through a perfectly transparent demonstration, the power of unchallenged ideas and the difficulty of changing the way we think.

In the video Destin Sandin of Smarter Every Day tries to ride a bicycle. At first glance the bike looks normal, but the handlebars are connected to the front tire via a simple gear system in such a way that the bike goes left when the rider turns right, and right when the rider turns left. It is a backwards bicycle.



BY PAUL WALLACE

Destin tries to ride it but fails spectacularly and repeatedly. His brain is simply not wired for the job. As a youngster he learned to ride a bike and over years of riding, that skill — that way of *thinking* — became entrenched, hard-wired into his brain.

The associated neural pathways hardened, and using them became automatic. And then a new situation was encountered in which the old skill and old pathways not only failed but also actively confounded his efforts.

Destin eventually learns how to ride the backwards bike, but it requires *eight months* of steady practice. It is not easy to rewire one's brain.

I suspect that, like knowing how to ride a bike, ideas about God often become fixed at a young age. Kids may innately believe in God, but I'm not talking about belief versus disbelief. I'm talking about what kids — and the grownups they become — believe *about* God.

In many cases, and perhaps most often when children are not taught to question their own beliefs, whatever one is taught about God at a young age persists for a lifetime.

Like all other concepts and skills, our ideas about God are associated with particular sets of neural pathways in our skulls. Large parts of these concepts and pathways are certainly products of our early experiences and educations and become hardwired as surely as Destin's bike-riding knowledge.

Maybe your idea of God's love is deeply influenced by your parents' devotion and constancy. Perhaps your belief in a watchful God is the result of a childhood in which you were granted no privacy.

It may be that your concept of God's judgment is wrapped up in the story of Noah's flood, which used to give you nightmares. And maybe the nativity story has prompted you to see God in out-of-the-way people and places.

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.

These theological ideas stay with us and, over time, the pathways become fixed and nearly impossible to change. But do our beliefs last because they're true or because that's the way our brains work?

Sorry for the ambivalence, but it's a little of both: God exists — whatever the word “exists” might mean in reference to God.

Put another way, I don't use the word “God” as a high-level reference or metaphor for certain kinds of neural activity, or for the “really real” brain.

One of the reasons the God concept has been so successful and has survived so long is because there is something to it. God is real.

But concepts — not reality — will, in the best of circumstances, change when they are sufficiently challenged. But changing our idea of God means, among many other things, an actual physical rewiring of the brain, which is difficult to do.

Just ask Destin, who encountered a new situation in which his old ideas simply

did not work. In fact, his old ideas aggressively frustrated his success.

When a particular God-concept is seriously challenged, we can remake our concept to fit the new reality (alternately, we can resign ourselves to falling over, or to running into walls, or to becoming fundamentalists).

It could be the death of a loved one, an addiction, the story of a pastor who molests an acolyte, or an intellectual challenge that threatens the old God-idea. It could be anything, really.

My Baptist upbringing painted God as a powerful and inscrutable, yet ultimately loving white man in the sky. Nobody ever told me this in so many words, of course, but that's pretty much what the all the church language, taken together, pointed to.

God was a cosmic omnipotent king who watched over us every day and kept tabs on us and went to great lengths to care for us and keep us all safe and happy.

I don't believe this anymore, and the shift didn't happen overnight. It took Destin

months to unlearn his bike-riding knowledge, but it took me years to unlearn my original God-concept.

The final minutes of Destin's video deliver the real punchline: After learning how to ride the backwards bike, Destin could no longer ride a *normal* one. In learning a new skill, not only did he create some new circuitry in his brain; simultaneously, the old circuitry eroded, presumably from disuse.

Contrary to the wisdom of the ages, it is possible to forget how to ride a bike.

He did eventually relearn how to ride a normal bicycle, but it took more time and more spills. And when he rides a normal bike today, it's not easy.

He has to *think* about it. In the video Destin looks at the camera and says with a smile, “I can't ride a bike like you can anymore.”

Once you expand your horizons, whether bike-oriented or theological, some things that used to be simple and intuitive become less so. **NFJ**



Raining *heads*

— AND —

horses



HORSE HEADS — Two horse figurines were found many miles apart after heavy rains in Israel. Credit: Clara Amit, Israel Antiquities Authority.

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

It's been dry in Israel for several years, a small reminder of periodic droughts mentioned in the Bible. That recently came to an end with a spate of heavy winter rains.

Israel typically has seasonal rains, usually beginning with scattered showers in October, intensifying through the winter months, and petering out in March or April. The months of May–September are usually as dry as unbuttered toast, with only eroded ravines and gorges — known as wadis — as a reminder of past gully-washers.

Winter rainfall was particularly abundant this year, pounding the dry soil with such force and persistence that in some places it has exposed treasures normally uncovered in controlled archaeological digs.

Two Roman period funerary busts, for example, were discovered when a woman strolling through an ancient cemetery at Beth She'an noticed something round emerging from the ground, and it wasn't a mushroom.

The rounded nob turned out to be the

top of a stone head, and when archaeologists came to remove it, they found another one right beside it.

The busts probably date to about the third century CE, when Beth Shan, also known as Scythopolis, was a prosperous Roman city. Scythopolis was one of the 10 “cities of the Decapolis” mentioned in the New Testament. It was not unusual for families to place a marker or bust on or near the sarcophagus when people were buried.

The two recently uncovered busts were made from local limestone, and almost certainly by local craftsmen, as they follow the Phoenician style of heavy brows and little detail, unlike the much more representative statuary that had developed in Rome.

The two human heads were mere youngsters compared to two small horse heads that were also revealed by the rain — in two different places.

A finely detailed depiction of a horse's head, complete with a molded bridle and reins was found by a passerby at Tell Akko, also known as Acre, on the Mediterranean coast in northern Israel. It probably dates to the second or third century BCE, during the Hellenistic period.

The other horse is considerably older, dating to Iron Age II, the period of the Israelite monarchy, in the neighborhood of

700–900 BCE. The older horse was found by an archaeologist, but not on a dig.

Ayelet Kedar-Goldberg, who works with the Israel Antiquities Authority, was out hunting for mushrooms with her daughters somewhere in the Beit She'an Valley. They didn't find any mushrooms, but one of her daughters noticed something sticking out of the wet ground, and Kedar-Goldberg recognized it as a figurine from the Iron II period.

The older horse has a pronounced topknot and the remnants of a bridle painted in red stripes, crisscrossing the nose. The hand of a rider, also painted red, rests atop the neck.

Horses were the luxury cars of the ancient world. Few people actually rode them, but royals and other wealthy folk were ferried around in chariots pulled by the steeds.

So valuable were horses that Solomon was credited with having 12,000 horses and 1,400 chariots, importing horses from both Egypt and Que (a Hittite kingdom in southeastern Turkey, 1 Kings 10:26-28).

The Israelites did not worship horses, so the figurines would likely have been decorative items or possibly toys for wealthy children: lost along the way, but not forever. **NFJ**

Finding Will in the Hall

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

My two daughters, two nieces and I visited the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, where we saw Webb Pierce's 1962 Pontiac Bonneville convertible adorned with steer horns, six-shooter door handles, a saddle console and more than 150 silver dollars.

Tacky was a big part of country music history — thanks mostly to the late designer Nudie Cohn who never met a rhinestone he didn't like.

The museum also houses hundreds of guitars strummed by the rich and famous, along with handwritten manuscripts of songs such as Dolly Parton's "Jolene" and Kris Kristofferson's "Help Me Make It Through the Night." There are exhibits showing every age and stage of the music genre.

A most pleasant surprise to me, however, was seeing a tribute to the Rev. Will Campbell. The small display notes that the author, civil rights activist and self-described "bootleg preacher" from Mississippi — who died in 2013 at age 88 — was the spiritual advisor to many country music singers.

His aw-shucks personality and insightful writings drew the attention of Waylon Jennings, Tom T. Hall, Johnny Cash, Kristofferson and many others who would find their way out to his Mount Juliet farm. He said of one star: "I've married everybody in his band at least once."

My own visit with Will there in 2004 was most memorable. We'd done interviews in other settings, but sitting in the small writing cabin — with Will relaxed in his old barber chair — was like no other conversation.

In the resulting feature story I noted that Campbell "does not seem to have lost any sleep over what others think or say about him," and has "never offered himself as a model for ecclesiastical excellence."

Indeed, Will spent a lifetime stirring



up things — from his firing as a chaplain at Ole Miss for playing ping-pong with a black man in 1955 to criticism from fellow civil rights activists for his extension of compassionate ministry to Klansmen.

Will even set aside his "deep-water Baptist" convictions, he told me, when Waylon and wife Jessi Coulter, whose mother was a Pentecostal preacher, asked him to baptize their baby boy, Shooter. Adding to the mix, Waylon's boxer friend Muhammad Ali, a Muslim, showed up at Will's house for the service.

In an act of self-definition, with a bit of defiance, Will once pasted his ordination certificate atop his Yale Divinity School diploma. He told me "it was a matter of priorities."

His daddy, uncle, cousin and a country preacher comprised the ordination council at the rural Amite County, Miss., Baptist church. "They misspelled even the name of the church (on the certificate)," he said. "But that's my orders."

Once when book royalties were running thin, Will asked Waylon for a job. He headed out on the tour bus but found Waylon vague about what he was supposed to do.

"I noticed I was the one that opened and closed the microwave the most, so I said, 'I'll be the cook.' ...but I didn't do much cooking. I would decide whether we would stop at Hardee's or McDonald's."

Will never considered himself much of a musician, though he said, "You have to know two chords on a guitar to get a driver's license" in the Nashville area. But his prolific songwriting friends Tom T. and Dixie Hall insisted that Will record a CD in their studio.

So at age 80 Will strummed and sang some tunes such as Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee," Merle Haggard's "Sing Me Back Home," Robert Lee McDill's "Amanda" that Waylon made famous, and Tom T. Hall's own "Old Dogs, Children and Watermelon Wine."

Will included an original song that deals with the "Mississippi madness" of the civil rights era. The song ends with his own imagined ending: "They'll stand around my coffin all night. They'll say Ole Will was a good ole boy. He just had some crazy ideas."

Will handed me his CD as a parting gift. But I also left his middle-Tennessee farm with good and lingering memories of someone whose authenticity and grace were noted and sought by the rich and famous, the poor and unknown, the successful and the marginalized, the singers and seekers.

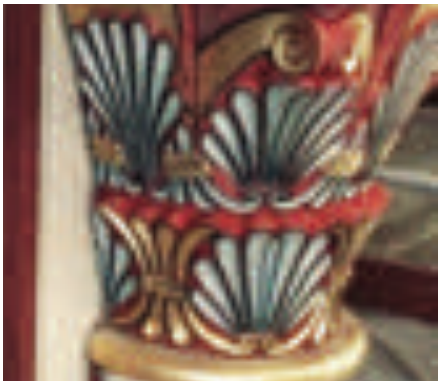
There's much I'll remember from my time with Will — who probably best described himself in this way: "Some of my friends like to say, 'Here comes ol' If-you-love-one-you-got-to-love-them-all Campbell.' But that's about what it boils down to."

So I'm glad those who look beyond the rhinestone suits, platinum records, gold convertibles and brass plaques at the Country Music Hall of Fame might find the simple tribute to ole Will — whose unconventional ministry was a well-played note of its own. **NFJ**

ART AND ARCHITECTURE



*Oldest church in Paris
getting restoration help
from American friends*



BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Saint Germain des Prés is often described as the quintessential Parisian neighborhood — and at its heart is the oldest church in Paris, with roots growing deeply to the year 543.

The current structure is more than 1,000 years old and is being restored — thanks in no small part to supportive Americans.

“This church is the central element of the neighborhood,” David Sheppe, an American businessman who twice lived in Saint Germain des Prés, told *Nurturing Faith Journal*.

FRIENDS

Sheppe heads the non-profit efforts of American Friends for the Preservation of Saint Germain des Prés to help restore the historic church in the neighborhood familiar to many Americans who have spent time



Above and left: Saint Germain des Prés. Photos by Agence Pierre-Antoine Gatier / P. Voisin.

there as expat residents, students, military personnel, tourists, business persons, artists or government leaders.

“There’s always been a heavy American presence in the neighborhood and that continues today,” said Sheppe, noting that Americans have long “contributed to the culture and fabric” of Saint Germain des Prés.

Writers F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were among the many Americans to live in the Paris neighborhood. And African-American jazz musicians such

as Duke Ellington found the community welcoming and its club scene attractive.

After World War I many who were part of the so-called “Lost Generation” made their homes in Saint Germain des Prés and contributed heavily to 20th-century art.

Sheppe said there is no hard evidence that Benjamin Franklin, John Jay and John Adams visited the church, “but they lived a block away” when signing the Treaty of Paris granting the U.S. independence from Great Britain in 1783 and bringing an end to the American Revolutionary War.

CONGREGATION

“I have had the privilege of living in Saint Germain des Prés on two occasions,” said Sheppe, noting his last time of residence was 2013–2106. And he didn’t have to look for the church.

“It’s hard to miss this church,” he said of the central structure. “And it’s a gorgeous church.”

He found the Church of Saint Germain des Prés to be both a moving place of worship and an important asset to the larger community. The Catholic congregation is active and welcoming, he added, drawing faithful parishioners and thousands of visitors each year.

“This place is incredibly vibrant,” said Sheppe of the historic church that in one chapter of its long history served as a prison. The parish of some 800 families is intergenerational and supportive, he said. And the music is fabulous.

However, the scale of restoration required for this project called for a broader circle of support. Learning a non-profit organization had already been formed in the U.S. to assist, Sheppe jumped into the effort to continue and complete the “overdue restoration.”

LEFT BANK

The Church of Saint Germain des Prés anchors the bustling neighborhood known for its museums, jazz clubs, universities, art galleries and cafés. Sheppe described Saint Germain des Prés as “a real living neighborhood” and “kind of intellectual center” of Paris.

Some 60 local artists — including modern painters and sculptors of international renown — donated works that were auctioned by Christie’s to benefit the restoration of the church.

“There are not many things that are 1,500 years old,” said Sheppe, noting that people from all walks of life want to be a part of this project to ensure the church “will be around for many, many more years.”

Research showed that 85 percent of the funding to restore the church would need to come from private hands, said Sheppe. So he joined with church leaders, community



volunteers and others to find more helping hands.

“Funding is coming from all over the world,” said Sheppe. “And the overwhelming majority is from small-dollar gifts from individuals.”

ENDURANCE

The original structure was destroyed in 885 when the Normans ransacked Paris. Its rebuilding was ordered by Pope Alexander III — with more threats to come. The current building has endured fires, war and a major explosion resulting from the storage of gunpowder during the French Revolution.

Philosopher, scientist and mathematician René Descartes is among the dignitaries entombed in the stately structure.

Led by noted Parisian architect Pierre-Antoine Gatier, a team of artisans is carefully restoring the stonework, stained glass, woodcraft, mosaics and murals — brightening the sacred space by bringing back the original colors dimmed by candle smoke and the passing of time.

“Typical stuff for a building that old,” said Sheppe, who is quick to note that the building itself, however, is not typical.

The work is being completed in phases. Among the artistic elements being restored and preserved are murals by Hippolyte Flandrin, who completed many works within the church between 1842–1864. He used a painting technique that involved hot wax.

“This church is not in any danger of falling down,” said Sheppe. “It was built well.”

Almost all of the work is on the interior, he said, adding that the last restoration took place in 1820–1830.

“It is in use every day, and by virtue of usage it suffers the ravages of time,” he said. Humidity, mildew, mold and smoke contribute to the need for a timely response.

Among the murals are more than a dozen biblical scenes that line both sides of the nave, said Sheppe.

REACH FOR A STAR

“Funding has more or less kept pace with the progress,” said Sheppe of the project that will cost an estimated \$7 million in U.S. dollars. Both public and private funds in France are contributing to the restoration, he added.

A popular fundraising project is for donors making \$100 gifts to adopt one of the 3,000 stars in the restored Monk’s Choir. The star may be named in someone’s honor or memory — after which the star’s designation is illuminated on an interactive online map. The Adopt a Saint Germain Star project is accessible at preservesaintgermain.org/adopt-a-star.

When asked about his most inspiring viewpoint in the church, Sheppe took a moment to review the various and stirring perspectives in his mind before settling on one.

“I think standing in the middle of the central nave and looking forward at the altar and beyond — and then looking up at the vaulted dark ceiling with some 3,000 stars,” he said. “It is so moving to see this firmament of stars.”

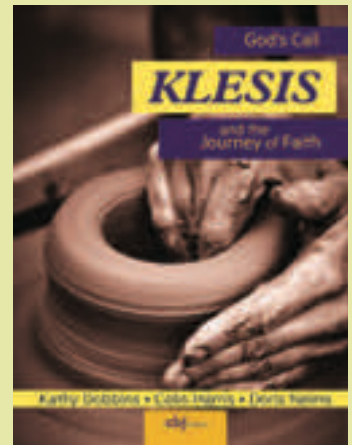
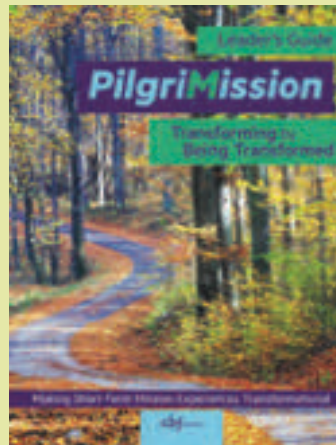
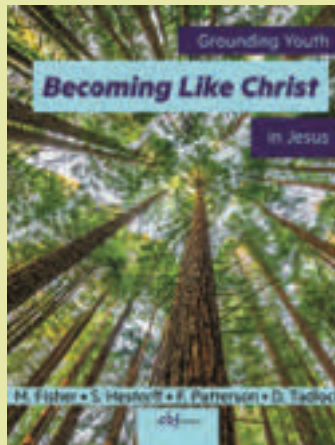
With artistic appreciation, Sheppe seeks to find the right words to more fully convey his affection for the oldest church in Paris, and to describe its physical presence and spiritual influence.

“It’s breathtaking but intimate,” he said. “This church is not gigantic.”

And Sheppe and many others, including the parishioners and other residents of Saint Germain des Prés, want to make sure it is around in all its glory for many more centuries. **NFJ**



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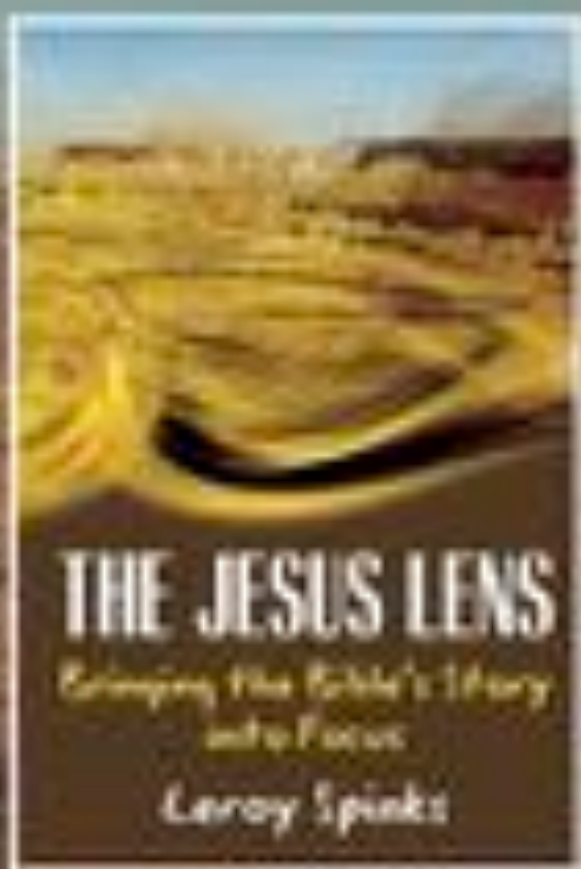
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