

JULY-AUGUST 2019

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Journal & Bible Studies

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tempts white
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through song

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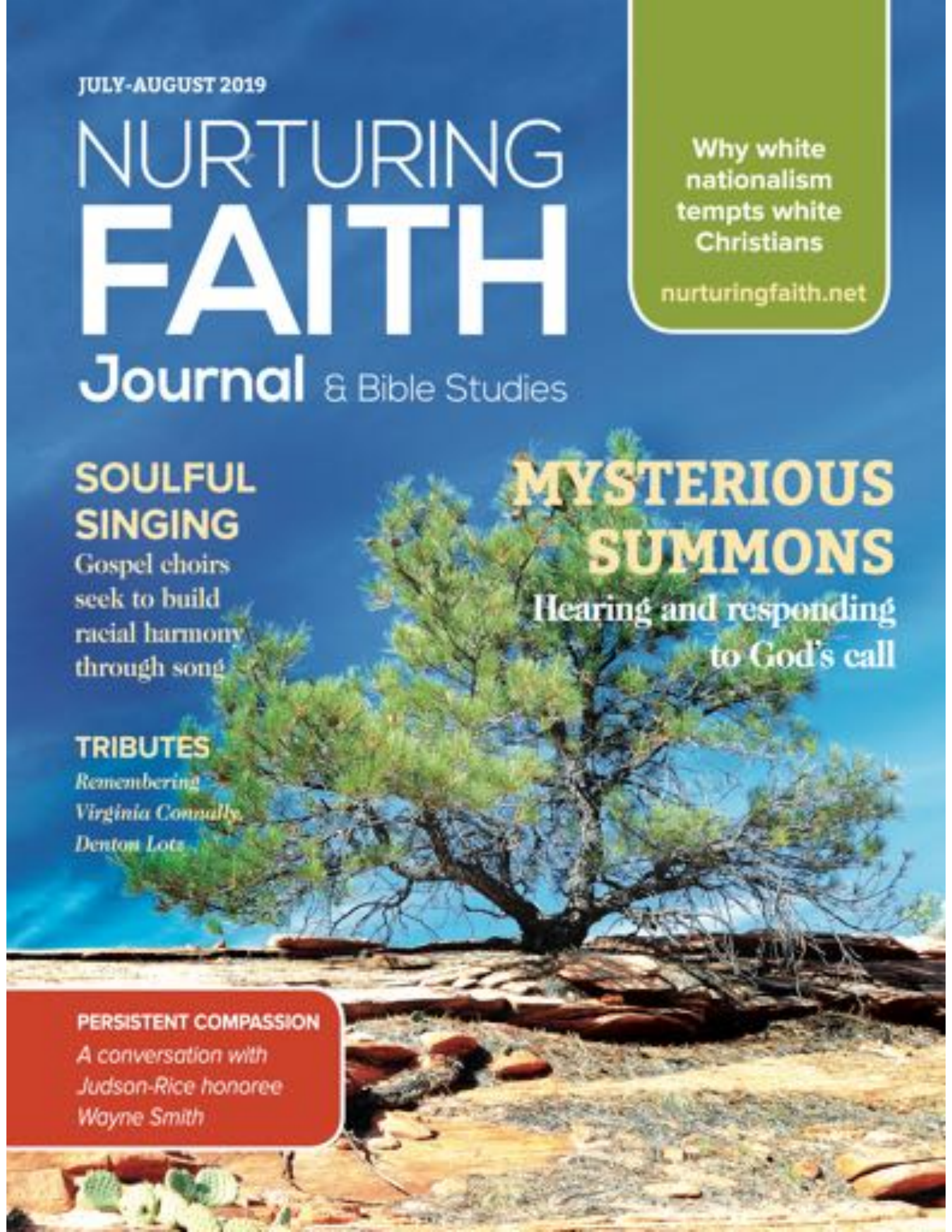
Hearing and responding
to God's call

TRIBUTES

*Remembering
Virginia Connolly
Denton Lots*

PERSISTENT COMPASSION

*A conversation with
Judson-Rice honoree
Wayne Smith*



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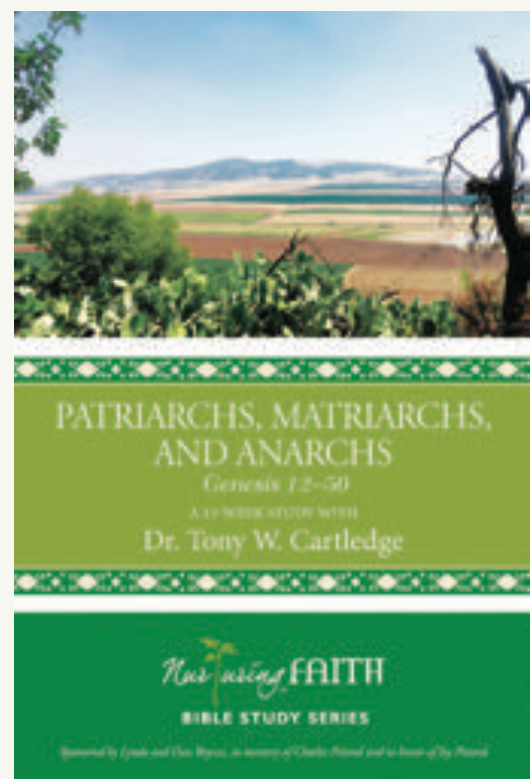
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Nurturing Faith Journal (ISSN 1072-7787) is published bimonthly by: Baptists Today, Inc., 988 1/2 Bond Street, Macon, GA 31201-1902

Subscription rates: 1 year, \$24; 2 years, \$42; 1 year groups of 25 or more, \$18; 1 year groups of less than 25, \$24; 1 year Canada, \$42; 1 year foreign, \$100. Periodical postage paid at Macon, Ga. 31208 and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address corrections to: P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318 • (478) 301-5655 • © 2019 Nurturing Faith •

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Cover photo by Bruce Gourley of a clinging tree in Zion National Park, Utah.

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BY JOHN D. PIERCE

MYSTERIOUS *Summons*

A conversation with Barry Howard, editor of *Call Stories*

The “call to ministry” is a common concept in congregational culture, but it remains “a mystical and mysterious summons to help others navigate their spiritual journey.” So writes veteran pastoral leader Barry Howard in the introduction to *Call Stories: Hearing and Responding to God’s Call*.

Howard, who recently retired from the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Pensacola, Fla., and now assists ministers and congregations through the Center for Healthy Churches, served as editor of this newly released book from Nurturing Faith.

With more than 40 contributors, this latest Healthy Church Resource offers multiple, personal call stories from ministers discerning and responding to this peculiar “vocation” — a word that has pejoratively come to mean merely one’s job.

Nurturing Faith Journal editor John Pierce asked Howard about the book’s origin and intent.

NF: Why this book, and why now?

BH: Last year Bill Wilson of Center for Healthy Churches wrote a column about nurturing a culture of call in local congregations. The following Sunday I happened to tune into First Baptist Church of Richmond’s Sunday morning service via live streaming after I got home from the early service in Pensacola.

The bulk of the sermon consisted of pastor Jim Somerville sharing his “call story.” Two thoughts converged as I listened:

First, Jim’s story is not at all like my story. Our stories are unique and personal. And second, highlighting more of these

unique call narratives may be a good way to encourage an ethos of call.

NF: In what ways are these call stories different and similar?

BH: I think all of the stories in this volume share a common theme: An individual senses a summons from God to serve in a pastoral role. For some that perception is intuitive, while for others it is more circumstantial.

Some joyfully welcome the call, while others resist at first before eventually embracing their calling. Therefore, each story represents a unique journey in how the divine summons is delivered, received, interpreted and eventually lived out.

NF: Many older ministers responded to a pastor’s public invitation to “full-time Christian service.” How have both the invitation and the service changed?

BH: Oh, I remember well those passionate invitations that cited multiple ways God could be calling us. In the church of my upbringing the pastor would include among the options during the invitation to come forward “if God is knocking at your heart’s door” to accept Christ; to rededicate your life; to join the church by transfer of letter; statement, or profession of faith and baptism; or to respond to God’s call to Christian service.

As a young pastor, I emulated those invitations. Through the years I gradually upgraded the language of the invitation, hoping to encourage a sustained commitment and not just an extemporaneous emotional response.

I also expanded the invitation to include a private response, offering the opportunity



(2019, Nurturing Faith)

for “sit down conversation” with a minister or counselor. But I continued to offer a public invitation “to follow Jesus or to unite with this body of believers.”

Occasionally, but not always, I would add, “or to respond to God’s call to serve in vocational ministry.” Looking back, I wish I had been more strategic and intentional about articulating “a call to serve” in vocational ministry.

NF: Pastorally, how do you help someone in sensing and interpreting his or her Christian calling?

BH: I think different pastors approach this process of clarity and affirmation in different ways. I tended to follow the way my pastor responded to me by affirming my willingness to consider my calling, letting me ask questions, and providing me

opportunities to teach and preach.

In recent years I have encouraged young men and women who are discerning their sense of calling to do three things:

- **Pray:** Pray for wisdom and to express willingness, such as “Here am I, send me.”
- **Dialogue:** Talk with three or four ministers in addition to your own pastor to glean insight.
- **Try it on:** Seize opportunities to minister, whether in a soup kitchen or in a pulpit to “try on” your calling and see how it fits and feels.

NF: Theological education and professional ministry today were unknown in biblical times. However, what light does the Bible shed on the idea of a divine calling as it relates to vocation?

BH: The Old Testament does indicate there were vocational priests in the ancient worshipping communities. And in the New Testament we find Paul being mentored after his conversion and then adopting a “tent-making” strategy, which we interpret as bi-vocational or bi-professional ministry.

I certainly think every minister needs a foundational theological education. But theological education is changing, and perhaps trending more toward mentoring and practicum than mere academic excellence.

To me, this is refreshing. With fewer churches able to sustain full-time ministers, a second trend is an emerging renaissance of “tent-making.” In the coming years we should expect and prepare for a growing number of bi-professional ministers.

NF: Church culture is changing dramatically. How does this factor impact one’s response to a Christian calling?

BH: Throughout my ministry I have been blessed to have extraordinary retired pastors in the congregations and communities I have served. These veteran ministers have encouraged me, mentored me and at times gently reprimanded me.

During my first several years in Pensacola I had breakfast once a month with two

pastoral giants: Jim Pleitz and Al Butler. These two are among the most effective pastors I have known.

However, the local culture and the church culture changed significantly during their tenures. They would often tell me how much they loved serving as a pastor, and then add, “But we wouldn’t deal with what you have to deal with now for any amount of money.”

My generation felt called to address the culture we found ourselves in, just as the generation before us. I share that story to underscore that the God who calls us also prepares us and equips us, though gradually, for the context we are in.

I am perplexed at times by many of the challenges and opportunities of the ever-changing church culture, yet I am confident that the God who is calling women and men to ministry today will also empower them to navigate this new and exciting season.

NF: What are the best lessons you learned from hearing these call stories and editing this book?

BH: Reggie McNeal, author of *Missional Renaissance*, proposes that “The Spirit is at work in the world and is up to something new. And it is the job of the church to get on the same page with the Spirit, and not the job of the Spirit to get on the same page as the church.”

These call stories provided a clear and much-needed reminder to me that the Spirit has been nudging, calling, and preparing men and women to lead out in ministry for years. Local churches are facing multiple challenges related to cultural changes, demographic factors, and a significant decline in institutional trust and loyalty.

As we address these challenges, we are discovering a world hungry for spiritual authenticity, vibrant community, and a meaningful sense of mission and purpose. And the Spirit is calling the next generation of effective ministers to run *to* the challenge, and not run *from* the challenge.

That gives me a hope and confidence that cannot be derived from old metrics. **NFJ**



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Worth Repeating

“He saw people locked up, and he decided to make a gesture, inspired by the Bible. He felt a calling to defend the most marginalized.”

Pierre Jacquand, who leads L’Arche’s facilities in France, on the charity’s founder, Jean Vanier, who died May 7 and whose work improved the lives of developmentally disabled persons in many countries (AP)

“We don’t talk about sin much in the public square anymore. But I don’t think one can grasp the full amplitude of racial injustice without invoking the darkest impulses of human nature.”

Columnist David Brooks (*New York Times*)

“The essence of sin is self-centeredness... Selfishness is a cancer that will destroy from within better than anything can destroy from without.”

Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, preaching to Harvest Assembly Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va.

“[White nationalism] is rotting the soul of the church in America... We can’t be silent about this anymore; it’s too dangerous.”

Pastor George Mason of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, in a sermon titled “Cross-Eyed”

“We found broad support from pretty much every demographic, from every state and every major religious group — even among the groups who are generally more conservative on these LGBT issues.”

Researcher Maxine Najle on a Public Religion Research Institute report showing strong majority support for LGBT nondiscrimination policies within all religious groups, including white evangelicals and Jehovah’s Witnesses (RNS)

“If the church doesn’t stand up and speak up and act in the way of Jesus, then I don’t know why the church continues to exist.”

Pastor Amy Butler of Riverside Church in NYC (RNS)

“Most ‘Bible-believing’ Christians are passage-believing Christians.”

Devon Bailey, director of youth ministry at First United Methodist Church of Austin, Texas (Twitter)

“This is what God’s kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there’s always room for more.”

Author Rachel Held Evans, who died May 4 at age 37, in *Searching for Sunday* (RNS)

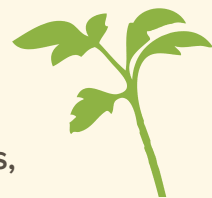
“There are a lot of different ways the Bible can be interpreted, and in the past it has been interpreted to harm people. And in many cases, the conservative Christians changed their minds on those issues. But, right now, they’re digging in their heels on LGBT inclusion.”

Mercer University Christian ethicist David Gushee on CNN (BNG)

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Don't stop believing, but ...

By John D. Pierce

Recently the song “Don't stop believin'” by Journey was playing on the radio — and stuck in my head for several hours. It is about “streetlight people living just to find emotion” — not about continuing one's affirmation of the divine presence.

However, when you're theologically inclined everything passes through that filter.

Believing in God — while believing very specific things about God — was considered of utmost importance in my religious upbringing. Serious, even ultimate consequences were at stake.

So a lot of attention was placed on the importance of proper belief in God — with nearly equal attention given to pointing out the eternal demise of those who did not believe or had misguided doctrinal beliefs according to our standards.

Today it is more common to hear someone comfortably confess they no longer believe in God — or at least in the divine being they once understood God to be. Even among the most faithful, belief in God can get rattled when expectations don't meet reality.

One of my favorite confessions in the Bible comes from the father who brings his ill son to Jesus who calls on him to believe. The honest response — that with Jesus' compassion is enough — is the less-than-bold affirmation: “Lord, I believe; help my

unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)

Belief, whether firm or unsettled, is a starting point not the end of Christian faith. It is with an affirmation of God's reality, presence and grace that we strike out on the journey of faith.

There must be a second verse to our spiritual call song: “Don't stop believing.” It is, “but don't stop *at* believing.” Following the Way of Christ is our calling.

Too often we have mistakenly made belief an initiation rite into the securing of God's favor — and then acting as if being just inside the door is far enough.

It is understandable how belief in Jesus can be seen as the end rather than the beginning. Bible verses abound with such pronouncements as “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shall be saved.”

That's the problem with building one's beliefs and faith practices on pick-and-choose, isolated verses. We tend to get just the part of the story we are seeking.

However, belief is more fully portrayed as the starting gate of Christian discipleship, not the finish line. The Bible warns in other places that belief is not enough.

James (2:19) reminds early followers and us that “the demons also believe,



and shudder.”

Perhaps we should be less concerned with wavering belief of the faithful in the face of life's realities than with the tendency to stop at the affirmation of belief. Overall, believing in God is far easier than following Jesus.

That which has long been called the Great Commission and what Jesus deemed the Great Commandment are not unrelated choices.

Jesus' parting challenge is both evangelistic and a call to continual discipleship: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20 NIV).

And Jesus is abundantly clear that “everything I have commanded you” is wrapped up in the all-encompassing, priority call to love God with all one's being and to love all of one's broadly defined neighbors as oneself (Matt. 22:37).

Belief is important, so don't stop believing. But don't stop *at* believing.

Let us keep moving into the many hard but redeeming ways of loving God and others more fully — by following in the Way of Christ. **NFJ**

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Remembering a a most remarkable woman

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

On Sunday morning, March 31, Dr. Virginia Boyd Connally of Abilene, Texas, died at age 106. Her legacy is both long and lasting.

Writing of her a few years ago, I referred to Virginia as a remarkable woman. I would add: a *most* remarkable woman.

This kind and generous Temple, Texas native was a true pioneer — attending LSU Medical School in the '30s following graduation from Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene.

Then, after her residency in New Orleans — where Catholic nuns impressed her with their concern for the poor and suffering — Dr. Connally returned to her college town in 1940 as the region's first female physician.

As I wrote in an earlier article: "She has broken more West Texas ground than a dozen plowshares."

It was good timing for her eye, ear, nose and throat practice since many male doctors were heading off to war. Someone once asked if there were patients who would not come to her because she was female.

Dr. Connally quipped: "I don't know; I didn't see them."

There was a sparkle in her eyes that came with such a quick wit and clear compassion. She spent her long life caring for others and advocating for the causes of missions and ministries.

Virginia and her husband Ed Connally owned interest in an airline company that allowed for both extensive travel and bringing missionaries to Abilene where she provided respite in the home next door.

Among the close relationships she established was one with Bertha Smith, the legendary missionary to China who lived to be nearly 100. She would visit "Miss

Bertha" at her South Carolina home as well, where the two would pray together.

"She was a precious thing; so devout," Virginia once told me.

Later Dr. Connally established an endowed chair and missions center at Hardin-Simmons University.

Ed Connally's involvement in Texas politics produced friendships with state and national leaders including President Lyndon B. Johnson and a longtime friendship with First Lady "Lady Bird" Johnson.



Virginia Connally (left) with Boo Sheppard

Always active, Dr. Connally assumed the presidency of Connally Oil Co. after her husband's death in 1975 — while continuing to serve as chief of staff at a local hospital. Dr. Connally continued her practice in Abilene until retirement in 1981.

My times with Dr. Connally were always delightful and memorable — whether discovering our Baptist roots in England, attending gatherings that promote faithfulness and freedom, or visiting alone in her Abilene home.

Virginia was well informed and insightful about a variety of topics outside her vocation by reading deeply and widely. As a young person she heeded a warning from her aunt: "Don't ever let me catch you without a book."

In 2013, *Baptists Today* (now *Nurtur-*

ing Faith) presented its annual Judson-Rice Award — that recognizes a leader who has demonstrated important leadership while maintaining the highest integrity — to Dr. Connally. It was the part of our publishing ministry's 30th anniversary celebration.

The larger story of her life is told in the book, *Virginia Connally, M.D.: Trailblazing Physician, Woman of Faith* by Loretta Fulton. I am pleased that the book references my feature story "Medicine & Missions: Groundbreaking physician's full life marked by service to others" (*Baptists Today*, October 2009).

In the book's introduction, Baptist leader Marv Knox tells how Virginia — at age 94 — was determined to attend the historic Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant that President Carter called together in Atlanta in early 2008. She knew that getting around the expansive convention center would require either wheels or stamina.

Virginia chose the latter. She moved her bedroom upstairs for this well-reasoned observation: "I figured climbing the stairs several times a day would build up my legs, and then getting around in Atlanta would be no problem."

It worked. Several of us were witnesses. It is but one example of the determination that fueled her long and productive life.

Older persons are often asked for their advice — and Virginia would offer insight beyond the science of her profession. One jewel she passed along as she neared the century mark: "Never tell people how old you are. I did, and they started treating me that way."

What so many of us will long remember, however, is how Dr. Connally treated us and everyone blessed by her presence.

Rest in peace, dear one. Your good life was a gift we will long cherish. **NFJ**

Denton Lotz leaves footprints of leadership, service among global Baptists

BY BOB TERRY

For Nurturing Faith Journal

News that Denton Lotz had died at his home in Forestdale, Mass., on April 23, did not come as a great surprise. About a month earlier, during the meeting of the Baptist World Alliance Executive Committee in Falls Church, Va., Baptist leaders from around the world spent time in prayer for Denton and his wife Janice.

After the meeting, a small delegation journeyed to Boston to assure the couple of their prayers and appreciation of his legacy of leadership among Baptists around the world.

Denton served as pastor, international missionary and seminary professor before spending almost 20 years as General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance (1988–2007). He was a champion for religious liberty, worked to expand theological education and promoted evangelism among Baptists everywhere.

His ministry took him to every part of the globe, into the poorest slums as well as presidential palaces. Denton was seldom awed by power or put off by want. He possessed the rare ability to focus on his purpose.

Like an Old Testament prophet, Denton confronted numerous political powers with the God-given right of religious liberty. He mediated schisms among Baptists. He challenged Baptists to move beyond parochial issues to concerns about Baptists everywhere. And he was always an evangelist.

In 1991 Denton convened the first Baptist International Conference on Theological Education, a program that continues with conferences every five years. In 2005 he unveiled an initiative called Living Water, a program to train local Baptists in evangelism and servant leadership. That program has trained thousands of key Baptist leaders from Cuba to Bangladesh.

Denton joked that he got “a German brain from his father and an Italian heart



from his mother.” Certainly, both learning and service marked his ministry.

Denton earned a BA from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, a degree in sacred theology from Harvard Divinity School, and a Doctor of Theology degree from the University of Hamburg in Germany. In between his theology degrees, Denton served as a lieutenant in the US Marine Corps and was stationed in Japan.

As an American Baptist missionary in Europe, Denton often traveled in communist-controlled countries. He worked closely with the European Baptist Federation (EBF) as a diplomatic representative to government officials in behalf of Baptists.

He preached extensively across the continent and taught missions and preaching at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Rüslikon, Switzerland. There he established a concentrated, short-term theological training program for Eastern European pastors and leaders.

When Gerhard Claas, leader of the EBF, was elected General Secretary of BWA in 1980, it was almost natural for him to invite Denton to serve alongside him as associate secretary overseeing evangelism, education, relief and development. After Claas’ tragic death in a car wreck, Denton was chosen general secretary.

Struggles within the Southern Baptist Convention spilled into the BWA during much of Denton’s leadership. There was a lot of “huffing and puffing” at various meetings.

Denton’s response was that of a Marine. He stiffened his spine and pointed

to the rules regarding membership and other issues. He could not be intimidated.

When Southern Baptists withdrew from the BWA in 2004, accusations of liberalism abounded. Some charges pointed toward Denton. He did not respond. Instead, he let his work be his answer.

Perhaps the clearest description of Denton’s work was offered at his 2007 retirement dinner. Anne Graham Lotz, whose late husband Dan was Denton’s brother, read a letter from her father Billy Graham, stating:

The Lord raised you up for such a time as we’ve been through. Your strong leadership and personal faith have been an inspiration and blessing to me. The fact that you are related through marriage, that you are a member of our board of directors [of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association] and because of our long-time association with the Baptist World Alliance, all give me a special reason to honor you on the occasion of your retirement. Not only will the Baptist World Alliance miss you, but your ecumenical leadership will be missed throughout the world church.

Sir David Coffee of England, BWA president from 2005–2010, said that Denton “leaves a massive footprint in the history of BWA. He was a missionary theologian, an inspiring preacher and evangelist, a champion for religion liberty, a Baptist ambassador, a Christian statesman and a brother unrivaled....”

Those of us privileged to work with Denton add our own “Amen!” **NFJ**

—Bob Terry is advisor to the president for faith networks at Samford University following his 2018 retirement after 23 years as editor of The Alabama Baptist.

Being Church

Thoughts about traditions, trends and changing times

In this series, *Nurturing Faith* Editor John Pierce raises questions with a variety of leaders about the future of congregational life. This third entry features responses from Bill Wilson, founding president of the Center for Healthy Churches.

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?

BW: This is a desperate need for churches to reconsider their metrics and what they measure/count. In the era of “churched culture,” counting nickels and noses was an adequate method of measuring success.

Today, in our post-Christian, post-church, post-denominational culture, we must learn to think about measuring rather than simply counting. Gil Rendle (*Doing the Math of Mission*) makes a strong case that a missional church must be able to assess and measure its impact in a way that reflects what its members have identified as important to their future.

I know of one church that decided to measure its impact on the divorce rate within one mile of its facility. That was one of its strategic initiatives, and its members recognized that counting people present in a Sunday school class on Sundays was no longer an adequate way to measure what they were called to do.

Missional metrics matter — and must be devised by each church in relationship to its context and identified goals. Sunday

school has been dying a slow death for 40 years, primarily due to sociological realities. It’s time to measure some other, more accurate ways of engaging people.

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

BW: A few come to mind: the rapidly escalating meth challenge, the pervasiveness of trauma as a life experience for a large percentage of our population, and food as a theological concern.

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

BW: Frequency of Attendance (FOA) is a significant factor in the declining weekly attendance figures traditional churches keep track of. Another key factor is that one in three persons in the American work force works on Sunday.

Thoughtful churches are doing several things as a result:

- Count the monthly average of people who attend, not weekly.
- Track the number of people on the property seven days a week.
- Find a way to identify every way members of a congregation add meaning to their lives / community / work places as disciples.
- Begin to celebrate and highlight those numbers, rather than Sunday morning numbers.

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 that reality? Is it enough to simply avoid hot topics as much as possible?

BW: I don’t think we can avoid the topic, but we must raise ourselves above the presenting symptoms of conflict and talk about living as an alternative community. It’s probably time to re-read Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon’s 1989 book, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*.

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

BW: Asset mapping is a relatively simple and well-known sociological tool that has been around many years. It’s time we adopted the idea that our assets are often overlooked and under-utilized. Those assets include human, financial, physical, relational, circles of influence, etc.

Going through an asset-mapping exercise is an invigorating and generative process. A good resource is *The Power of Asset Mapping* by Luther Snow.

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

BW: Big changes are upon us. Most congregations are going to experience a season of downsizing in the ’20s. Others need to realign their staffing model with a refreshed vision of their future.

Most of our staffing models come straight out of the modern era and assume a professional clergy who direct the work of less-gifted amateur laity. That dichotomy is no longer viable. Thriving churches are calling out laity to assume many tasks that were formerly the exclusive domain of clergy.

A great book on this topic is *Synergy: A Leadership Guide for Church Staff and Volunteers* by Ann Michel at Wesley Seminary. (See related article on page 16.)



Also, I'm intrigued by a movement to insist that paid staff spend at least 20–30 percent of their time off-campus working in the community with non-members. If that's a value for the church, then it must be for the staff as well.

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?

BW: Church historian Walter Shurden has warned us of the sin of "over-remembering," and this is the case with many congregations and clergy. Much of the success of the past was a product of culture more than the church.

I once served as pastor of a church that constantly pined for the days when so many students from the nearby college attended that "we had to bring in chairs every Sunday."

I finally talked to the pastor from that era — and he laughed hard: The college did not allow students to go home most weekends, and when they stayed on campus the dorm mother (who was a church member) marched them down the hill to the Baptist church.

They attended, but not by free choice. I felt much better after hearing that.

NF: Churches don't seem to be the socioeconomic 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?

BW: I'm not sure that's true, but there's no doubt that denominational loyalty and geographic loyalty are waning. "Big-tent churches" that attempt to minister to a wide swath of culture seem to be struggling, as new churches nearly always focus on a narrow part of the cultural spectrum.

I read recently that the current church in America is trying something never tried before: reaching six identifiable generational groups simultaneously. Ask the average person to plan a speech or music event for an audience that ranges from ages 8 to 98

Big changes are upon us. Most congregations are going to experience a season of downsizing in the '20s. Others need to realign their staffing model with a refreshed vision of their future.



and be relevant, and watch the look of terror on their face.

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

BW: It is the new normal. I think most churches should assume that whatever their donation income is now is their high-water mark (when adjusted for inflation) for the foreseeable future.

Most don't believe this, but I think it's true. It will mean fewer staff, alternative income streams (a church needs at least four: offerings, gifts for missions or other projects, endowed income, and revenue generated from property or skills), sharing space with other churches, sharing staff with other churches, pursuing grants, etc.

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

BW: When things get hard, some churches turn further inward and decompose. However, there are many who use their crisis as a healthy wake-up call to rethink their reason for being. That nearly always leads to a refocus upon essentials.

Alongside that, we're discovering that necessity breeds innovation. Thank goodness. We're starting to think like missionaries rather than entitled and

privileged churches.

We'll shed the ballast that we need to in order to marshal the limited resources we have to accomplish a clear missional vision. That engages people as a level of passion and not just duty — and good things result.

Greg Jones (*Christian Social Innovation*) has called us to a new season of innovation and entrepreneurship, and I see more and more people accepting that challenge. I see people getting over the whining and wishfulness that seem to be where we start, and buckling down to doing whatever it takes to be relevant to their city, and not just to their members.

That, more than anything else, it the key to a church's survival. Rebalancing our internal-external balance of ministry / budget / staff is a welcomed change.

It's no joke that one in three churches will effectively be out of business by 2030. But I'm increasingly encouraged by the adaptive leadership and entrepreneurial spirit that I see in churches.

The same goes for groups such as Fresh Expressions and MissionAlliance. They will soon replace denominations as the place where churches find their best help and encouragement. Those groups are growing, and people are flocking to them because they actually care about the local church. Thank God. **NFJ**

“Too often Christian individuals and institutions act as if general statements condemning bigotry and saccharine assertions of racial and ethnic equality are sufficient to combat white nationalism. They are not.”

Why white nationalism tempts white Christians

BY JEMAR TISBY

Religion News Service

Troublesome though it may be, Christians must contend with these twin facts: White nationalism is on the rise, and white Christians are susceptible to this ideology.

On Saturday, April 29, the last day of Passover, a shooter identified by authorities as a white nationalist entered the Chabad synagogue in Poway, Calif., armed with a semiautomatic rifle, and sprayed bullets into the congregation.

By the end, one woman, Lori Gilbert Kaye, lay dead and three other people were injured. One of them, Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, lost his index finger to injuries.

Unfortunately, this attack is only the latest in a rising tide of anti-Semitic and racist attacks.

Last year, a suspect identified as a white nationalist allegedly conducted the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in U.S. history when he entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and killed 11 worshippers.

The “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017 brought together 600 white nationalists to protest the removal of a Confederate monument, and one woman, Heather Heyer, was killed when a white supremacist rammed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters.

Recently, it came to light that the suspect in the attack on the Poway synagogue, John Earnest, was a member of an Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Escondido, Calif.

The OPC formed in 1936 in response to a theological dispute between “fundamentalists” and “modernists.” It purports to be the “orthodox” alternative to mainline Presbyterianism.



White supremacy demonstrators clash with counterdemonstrators at the entrance to Lee Park in Charlottesville, Va., on Aug. 12, 2017. (AP Photo/Steve Helber)

The approximately 30,000 members in their 300 congregations often gravitate toward the denomination because they believe the OPC represents careful exposition of Scripture, fidelity to theological documents such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, and preaching that covers the “whole counsel of God” by walking through entire books of the Bible verse-by-verse.

For any Christian denomination to find out a murderer was in its midst would come as a shock, but for those affiliated with the OPC, a denomination that makes such strong claims to biblical exposition, the news of Earnest’s membership in one of its churches should force some deep introspection that leads to concrete action.

“We are wounded to the core that such an evil could have gone out from our community,” the denomination said in a statement. “Such hatred has no place in any part of our beliefs or practices, for we seek to shape our whole lives according to the

love and gospel of Jesus Christ.”

But the OPC is handicapped in its effort to combat white nationalism by the application of the very theology it promotes.

Too often Christian individuals and institutions act as if general statements condemning bigotry and saccharine assertions of racial and ethnic equality are sufficient to combat white nationalism.

They are not. White nationalists engage in sustained and sophisticated recruiting and propaganda tactics to advance their agenda.

The Anti-Defamation League, which has been tracking the activities of hate groups since 1913, released a report called “New Hate and Old: The Changing Face of White Supremacy in the U.S.” The 2018 research noted that the latest manifestations of white supremacy, of which nationalism is an outgrowth, are “youth-oriented, overwhelmingly male and often tech-savvy.”

White nationalists take to the Internet on sites such as 4chan and 8chan to

form communities of hate. Earnest himself is believed to have published a white supremacist manifesto online to explain his motivations for terrorism. In addition, mass communication channels such as podcasts, videos and blogging sites have become tools to spread racist and anti-Semitic beliefs.

These groups have also taken their efforts into the real world through such actions as targeting college campuses to distribute flyers and recruit new members to their cause.

In the face of the potent propaganda apparatus of white nationalists, white churches have to take a stronger stand against hate — and to proactively teach their church members that such hate is antithetical.

Instead, pastors and other leaders in theologically Reformed — or “gospel”-centered — denominations such as the OPC often resist calls to become anti-racist.

Mika Edmondson, currently the OPC’s only self-identified African-American teaching elder (those ordained to preach and pastor local congregations), said in an interview that he saw the appeal of white nationalism among white Reformed Christians as related to controversies about social justice.

“Some Christians don’t believe it is the purview or jurisdiction of the church to speak into the concretized expressions of white nationalism. ... If they don’t think that racial justice falls within the purview of the church’s moral teaching then you leave people to their own devices,” Edmondson said.

When Edmondson took to Twitter, his concerns were quickly overwhelmed by people offering a defense of the OPC and the pastor of the Escondido church.

“Mourning the loss of Lori Gilbert Kaye, 60-year-old mother killed while shielding her Rabbi at Chabad synagogue yesterday,” Edmondson wrote. “I was horrified to learn that her murderer is a member of the OPC ... brainwashed by white nationalism in the very midst of a reformed congregation.”

The conversation then turned to a defense of the congregation’s minister.

“Do you think this (tweet) helps your fellow OPC church and minister? If you’re

so horrified, how do you flippantly (tweet) about it? Consider deleting this,” wrote one commentator.

Another chimed in, “So they are blaming a denomination for the actions of a 19-year-old who has access to the Internet?”

Far from a distant observer of these events, Edmondson explained that he lectured at Westminster Seminary’s student convocation, in the very chapel where the Escondido church also meets, just a month before and that he had spoken this week to the pastor, who expressed grief, humility and a willingness to learn from this tragedy.

If denominations such as the OPC wish to make their churches inhospitable to people who harbor white nationalist views — or to confront the sins of racism and white nationalism in hopes that church members will repent of them — then they’re going to have to offer unequivocal and direct teaching refuting the ideology.

White denominations, especially in the theologically Reformed branch of the church, should hold specific workshops, classes and special events explaining white nationalist beliefs and tactics so their members can guard against subversion.

White churches and leaders must bring members who express white nationalist views or sympathies under church discipline, with the ultimate goal of discipleship and restoration. In addition, white churches in Reformed traditions must probe exactly why people who hold white nationalist and other racist beliefs may find a comfortable home in their fellowships.

Perhaps it’s because pro-slavery theologians such as R.L. Dabney are still cited as positive examples of godly men. Maybe it’s because black liberation theologians such as James Cone are demonized and if they are read at all, it is merely to discount their viewpoints.

Perhaps it’s because of the almost unshakable loyalty of many white evangelicals to some government officials who express racist ideas. Maybe white racists and nationalists can sit comfortably in the pews of certain churches because whenever calls for social justice arise their leaders say that such issues are a “distraction” from the

gospel.

I absolutely do not believe that pastors in the OPC or any similar denomination are regularly spewing anti-Semitism and racism from the pulpit or on any other occasion.

But the rigid exclusion of discussions of racial injustice from the regular preaching and teaching in these churches means that white nationalists are seldom challenged in their beliefs.

As Edmondson put it, for some pastors “their gospel is too small.”

Their view of the gospel only focuses on issues of personal salvation and individual piety. It never touches broader matters of systemic and institutional injustice. It has little to say about white supremacy and its specific manifestations such as white nationalism and the alt-right.

The deadly actions of an alleged white nationalist cannot solely be attributed to what a church has done or said. But each congregation is a covenant community in which members have a responsibility to one another.

Instead of a reflexive defensiveness that denies the roles of church teaching and leadership in white nationalism, white Christians should ask themselves if a white nationalist’s beliefs would be specifically challenged in their churches.

Even though no church can control all the actions of individual members, it must be the case that people who hold anti-Semitic and racist beliefs should never feel comfortable in any congregation. They should know that such beliefs are sinful and antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If any lessons can come from a murderous hate crime, then perhaps it is this one: Sin in the form of white nationalism crouches at the door of every congregation. Its desire is contrary to the Christian message. But Christians must control it before it controls them (Gen. 4:7). [NFJ](#)

—*Jemar Tisby is president of The Witness: A Black Christian Collective, co-host of the podcast Pass The Mic and author of The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church’s Complicity in Racism.*

Congregational identity matters

BY LARRY HOVIS

Pastor John (not his real name) was called to serve First Baptist Church in a small city. The church had a long history of stability, occupying a central place geographically and socially in the community.

It was a “big tent” church with members holding diverse positions theologically and politically. Overall, everyone got along well. They had the usual power struggles and small conflicts from time to time, sometimes over seemingly trivial matters, but for the most part maintained a healthy diversity (in most ways other than race) and offered meaningful ministries to its members and community.

Pastor John was a good match. His theological orientation, education and skill-set were well suited for the way this church had functioned for decades. But attendance, like with many similar churches, was beginning to plateau and even decline. Pastor John and some key leaders were concerned. They had heard about other churches that were experiencing attendance growth by offering a second worship service in a more contemporary style.

Over a period of about a year, Pastor John educated the church about the need to reach unchurched people through the launching of a second service. There was some resistance, but eventually he got the support needed. The church redirected some resources, and many of the younger families switched their attendance to the new service.

Sure enough, the new service attracted people in the community who were not part of the church. Some were unchurched, or “de-churched,” but many simply moved from other churches where they were unhappy.

It didn't matter to Pastor John. He enjoyed the service and was pleased that total worship attendance at First Church was on the increase for the first time in more than a decade. But not everyone in the church was happy.

Some complained that it felt like they had two churches and lamented diminished attendance at the established service. Pastor John responded, “I understand your frustration but we are reaching new people for Christ. Surely you aren't unhappy about that, are you?”

Eventually, they stopped grumbling and supported their pastor because they loved their church and pastor.

After a few years some of the new people began to complain about Pastor John. They didn't agree with his interpretations of the Bible. Some accused him of being too “political” (either liberal or conservative, he heard it from both sides).

Others accused him of being “unfaithful to the gospel” for *not* addressing important moral issues of the day such as abortion, homosexuality and prayer in schools. Some even accused him of being a heretic because he suggested that God might have chosen to use evolution to guide the process of Creation.



Eventually these new people, who had grown in number, rose up, organized themselves, and garnered enough votes to have Pastor John dismissed. As he reflected on the process, John realized what went wrong.

In his effort to reach new people, he had failed to establish processes to teach them what it means to follow Jesus in the tradition of First Church. He had failed to imprint on them a Baptist identity consistent with the church's history and heritage.

Identity is critically important. In former times we could trust denominational programs to teach and reinforce identity. That is no longer the case.

In today's politically polarized, social media-saturated environment, the cultivation of congregational identity is more difficult and more vital than ever. What can

church leaders do to form identity faithful to their church's understanding of the gospel?

Offer regular classes on Baptist history and heritage. In teaching these topics, you will convey historic Baptist principles and how to practice faith and “do church” today.

Clarify your church's identity with those considering membership. Offer classes in which you communicate very clearly how your church views faith and congregational life. In some cases, it will be a blessing if folks *don't* join your church.

Discuss denominational matters in your church. Whether you approve or disapprove of what is happening in your larger faith body, talk about key issues freely. Explain what is happening in the Baptist world and how changes are consistent with (or in opposition to) your church's perspectives.

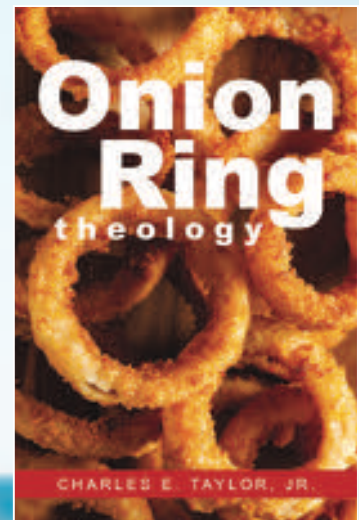
Expose your congregation to different Baptist voices. Invite missionaries, seminary professors, denominational staff and even ministers from other churches to preach or teach in your church. They can help educate your church on important matters and keep them rooted in their Baptist identity.

Subscribe to and distribute trusted Baptist periodicals, such as *Nurturing Faith*. These resources will educate your congregation about issues related to Baptists and, over time, help form or reinforce a healthy Baptist identity.

Cultural forces can undermine congregational health. A vital leadership practice today is to cultivate congregational identity. It must be an ongoing process. Identity matters. Your church and your ministry depend on it. **NFJ**

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

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“BEING
CHURCH IN
CHANGING
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Toward a compelling theology of lay ministry

BY ANN A. MICHEL

The number of lay persons with serious involvements in ministry, both professional and volunteer, has grown dramatically in recent decades. The lay empowerment movement, the growth of multi-staffed mega-churches, and the demand for specialized programmatic ministries are part of this trend.

In smaller congregations, particularly those that cannot support full-time clergy, laity assume many vital ministry functions. And in some denominations, most notably the Roman Catholic Church in America, a clergy shortage has resulted in a growing percentage of lay persons in the ecclesial workforce.

While the theology of pastoral identity is well established, many lay persons find themselves running afoul of deeply engrained cultural expectations — that ministry is the work of the clergy while laity are objects of ministry; that clergy attend to sacred matters while laity concern themselves with the secular world; that clergy are the experts while laity are amateurs.

This dualistic paradigm still lingers in the collective consciousness of church and society. It limits the practice of ministry at a time when the service of God requires more ministry, not less; and it can divide clergy and laity at a time when greater collaboration is needed.

Given the ways the Spirit is moving the church toward a more inclusive approach to ministry, there is a need to counter the vestiges of this division by articulating a robust and compelling theology of lay ministry.

Ministry: A theology of lay ministry begins with the clear understanding that ministry is the work of all Christians. The English word has its origin in the Greek work *diakonia* (in Latin, *ministerium*), which is best translated as “service.” It is the laying-on of hands in baptism, not ordination, that initiates a life of Christian service modeled after Jesus. Martin Luther’s insistence on “the priesthood of all believers” is an outgrowth of the biblical verity that God’s people are a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9), and the word laity (from the Greek *laos*) is properly defined as “people of God.”

Call: In the Bible, particularly the New Testament, calling is a central and dynamic theme that encompasses the life of faith itself. New ways of speaking about and listening for call can encourage all people who devote their energies to the church’s mission to hear the whispers of call in the events of their lives and the quiet of their hearts (Fox, *Called and Chosen*, 2005). Taking great care to address the issue of clerical calling within the larger context of God’s call to all Christians prevents lay persons from feeling that God’s call does not extend to them.

Community: Late 20th-century theology has reclaimed the doctrine of the Trinity, emphasizing God as an interdependent, dynamic, community of three equal, distinct, inherently interrelated persons. This relational, non-hierarchical image of the triune God provides a compelling model for collaborative ministry — a model for how laity and clergy can minister side-by-side in a relationship that is mutually affirming.

Christ: Paul’s poignant image of the church as the Body of Christ composed of a variety of interdependent, indispensable parts (1 Corinthians 12) is another potent model of collaborative ministry. As with the Trinity, this model has the advantage of allowing for the distinctness of various ministries, while reinforcing mutuality and mutual respect. It reminds us again and again that it is Christ who is the head of the Body (Col. 1:18) — not a particular category of ecclesial servants.

The New Testament is replete with examples of the openness of the invitation to ministry that make manifest the proclamation that “God’s Spirit is poured out on all flesh” (Acts 2:17). Efrain Agosto has observed that both Jesus and Paul “refused to work alone” (*Servant Leadership*, 2005). Their interactions with other disciples provide a compelling and tangible witness to the inclusivity of ministry.

These theological images and ideas require renewed emphasis as lay persons in ministry seek to articulate a clear theological identity. They are key components in the construction of a narrative that encompasses the diversity and fullness of God’s ministry.

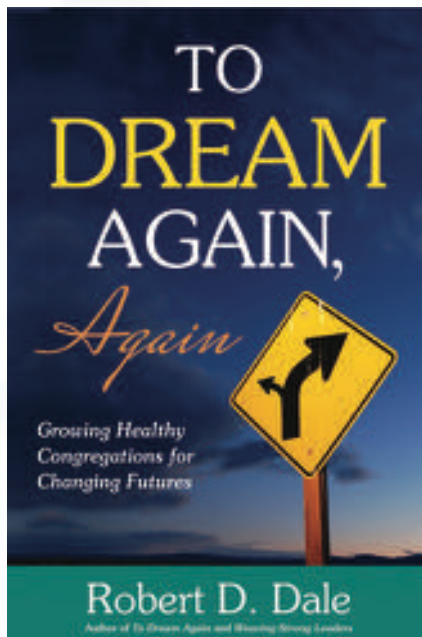
They can shape the ways lay persons testify about how God is at work in our lives. And they can reform our use of language to counteract exclusive and exclusionary understandings of call, ministry, and church leadership. They can empower us to move with the Spirit of God who is calling so many lay persons to ministry in this day. **NFJ**

—Ann A. Michel is associate director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary..



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Jesus the Life

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 Life.

To understand the significance of this claim, it is helpful to situate it in the context of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. From the perspective of trinitarian theology, God lives a life of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Hence, when Scripture says “God is love” (1 John 4:8), it points not simply to God’s feelings but to the actual life God lives and the actions in which God engages. Love is a verb. God is involved in the giving, receiving and sharing of love.

From the beginning and throughout all of eternity, Father, Son and Spirit are bound in the actions of love. This love provides a description of the inner life of God apart from any reference to creation.

God does not create human beings in order to finally (!) have someone to love. Creation is a reflection of the expansive love of God, whereby the Triune God brings into being another reality and establishes a covenantal relationship of love, grace and blessing — to draw creation into the divine life of love.

To participate in this relational fellowship of love *is* the Life. Jesus, as the unique Son of God, lives his eternal life in this reality, and invites all of humanity to participate in this life he has experienced with God and exemplifies in his earthly manifestation as Jesus of Nazareth.

This is the backdrop for Jesus’ assertion that those who follow him will have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

As we live in the ways taught, demonstrated and commanded by Jesus, we will know a quality of life that fills us with peace, love and joy. This does not mean our lives will be without difficulties, struggles and grief. Jesus experienced all of these. It does, however, offer the promise of deep fulfillment in the midst of the unpredictable vagaries of life.



The community of those who seek to follow Jesus in this way of life is intended to be a provisional demonstration of God’s will for our fellow humans. We are a people who participate in the eternal love of God and bear witness to it as a powerful alternative to the ways of division and hostility that have plagued life on earth and lead to violence and death.

The church is called to represent God in a fallen world through lives that reflect God’s own character. In short, the church is called to live God’s love.

The consequences are immense. For one, it changes the very nature of evangelism — how we share our faith in a pluralistic, relativistic world.

Recognizing that Jesus is the Life means that when we invite people to follow him, we’re not simply calling them to change their worldview or take up a new moral agenda. We’re inviting them into a relationship with God.

This is not an abstract, ethereal relationship, but rather a concrete fellowship of love with God that is expressed in community; a fellowship experienced here and now in the life of the church; a fellowship lived in anticipation of the climax of God’s work of new creation.

In this way we participate in the triune life of God in the giving, receiving and sharing of love. To be a follower of Jesus means to participate in life as he participated in the life of the Triune God. Scripture tells us that as we do this and love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is perfected in us (1 John 4:12).

From this perspective, the designation of Jesus as the Life is not primarily about ongoing life after death. Rather, the life referred to here is about the present; a way of life that makes a difference in the world; a way of life that changes the existing social order and transforms it into that which was intended by God in creation.

This way of life is not easy; it requires discipline, self-sacrifice and imagination. But it brings a harvest of righteousness to those who follow in its path.

The great South African missiologist David Bosch summed it up succinctly: Life in the way of Jesus is participation in his liberating mission “wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.” ^{NFJ}

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

**This way of life is not easy; it requires discipline, self-sacrifice and imagination.
But it brings a harvest of righteousness to those who follow in its path.**

Cleaning out the closets

BY: GINGER HUGHES

Our entryway closet greets us as we walk in the door. It's the perfect dropping-off spot for coats, shoes, umbrellas and book bags.

As soon as we walk inside, we can hang jackets on the provided hangers, put shoes on the provided shelves, hang bags on the provided hooks, and place umbrellas in the provided cubbies. Except often we don't — often this closet is a mess.

Some days as I open this closet, I take the time to straighten things up. Other days I open the door, look with disdain at the mess and shove the door firmly closed, hiding the mess from view. I don't want others to see it, and I don't really care to deal with it myself.



Like my closet, there are other things I often try to hide — things such as my heart. There are hurts there. There is fear and anxiety. Some days there may be bitterness or exhaustion.

There are so many messy things. It's worrisome and scary, and so much easier to simply close the door.

We tend to bury our brokenness in the deepest recesses of our soul. We cover it up with a bright smile or a pleasing personality, a strong work ethic or a big bank account. We use so much energy trying to keep all of the brokenness behind closed doors where others can't see and, even more, we often

hope to ignore it ourselves.

But just as my closet has to be opened at times, so does my heart. And once that door is cracked, all of the junk begins spilling out. All of the struggles I work so hard to conceal have a way of growing and multiplying when left unchecked, and as a result, they become harder to keep veiled.

The reality is this: the more I ignore my closet, the more the pile builds and the more the closet stinks. In like manner, the more we ignore our souls, the more worries fester, resentment builds and burdens grow.

Sometimes I have to pull everything out of the closet, into the light, and start over. I have to dump it all out and begin afresh.

When I do this, I often find things I can throw away. I also find shoes and jackets that don't fit anymore; these I can share with others. And of course, I find some things we can still use.

I only put back in what I know fits or helps us in some way. I work through the rest. We need to do the same with our heart.

We need honest evaluation, examining all the stuff inside even when it's painful, even when it's inconvenient. And we need God's help to do this.

Sometimes we hold onto things that are just junk. We need to recognize this, toss them out and not allow them to take up space in our soul. Some things inside are so burdensome that we need to share them. We need to pull them out into the light and allow someone else to help us carry the weight.

And some things we need to hold onto even if broken, because broken things, when healed, can indeed become beautiful.

My closet's a mess today, but it doesn't



have to stay this way. My heart may be a mess too, but it doesn't have to stay this way either. I can open the door and invite God in to take a look.

I can ask God to help me sort through all of the stuff, surrendering it all and trusting that God makes all things beautiful in time. It's painful, time-consuming and hard. But it's worth it.

For Jesus said: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). **NFJ**

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

May God bless you with a city

By Brett Younger

We were worshipping with a wonderful, lively congregation. The service was amazing except for one peculiar detail. The forests, rivers and mountains pictured on the screens at the front of the sanctuary looked nothing like the scenes we could see through the windows.

Inner city churches make a mistake when they suggest that God is more present in the woods than the metropolis. Sunsets are beautiful, but so are God's people.

God is in all places, but God has a special place in God's heart for cities. The Bible begins in a garden, but ends in a city. Jerusalem, the Holy City, is the shadow of the great city to come. Jesus calls us to live as a "city on a hill."

San Francisco speaks to the splendor that is possible when architects and engineers use the gifts God has given them — gorgeous Victorian homes and the monumental Golden Gate Bridge. God blesses us with beauty.

Washington, D.C. is a museum city of monuments and memorials that tell of the importance of remembering. God blesses us with the gift of memory.

Cynical people do not think of Los Angeles as a city of angels, but the variety of experiences there — Hollywood, Venice Beach, Santa Monica and Beverly Hills — suggests that God blesses us with possibilities.



Chicago offers blues clubs. The blues migrated to the Windy City from the Deep South because the need to bring our pain to God is universal. God blesses us by listening to our sorrows.

Jazz began in New Orleans. America's classical music makes us want to dance. God blesses us with hope that is deeper than the blues.

God offers special blessings for those who live in the city and pay attention. Nora Ephron writes, "I look out the window and I see the lights and the skyline and the people on the street rushing around looking for action, love, and the world's greatest chocolate chip cookie, and my heart does a little dance." God's heart does a little dance for New York.

After living here for three years, I am learning to appreciate the blessings of God who loves New York. I wake up in the morning and am glad to be in God's city.

New York has 257 skyscrapers. When you look up at trees in a forest you marvel at what God can do. When you look up at the Empire State Building you marvel at what God and people can do together. God blesses us with a sense of wonder.

New York has 41 Broadway theaters, the greatest dramas and musicals in the world — *Hamilton*, *Lion King* and *Wicked* — tales of triumph and defeat. God blesses us with stories of hope, joy and love.

New York has 83 museums — the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art, but also the Museum of the American Gangster, the Museum of Mathematics, the Museum of Food and Drink, the Houdini Museum, and the Morbid Anatomy Museum. God blesses us with curiosity.

New York has more than 2,000 bridges: 125,000 cars; 4,000 pedestrians; and 2,000 bicycles cross the Brooklyn Bridge each day. Along with the Manhattan Bridge, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, the Queensboro Bridge and the George Washington Bridge connect Manhattan to the other boroughs. God blesses us with connections and bridges to those we love.

New York has 31,982 restaurants — pizza in the West Village, chow mein in Chinatown, pretzels on the street corner, a smoke burger at Shake Shack. Enough restaurants for a different meal every meal forever. God blesses us with adventurous taste buds.

New York is a city of immigrants: 12 million people from all over the world came through Ellis Island — Puerto Ricans, Italians, West Indians, Chinese, Irish, Germans and Russians. 37 percent of the residents of New York were born in another country. New Yorkers think everyone needs to visit at least once. God blesses us with the gift of hospitality.

New Yorkers joke, "New York will be a great place if they ever finish it." God is not finished with New York. God is always doing something new.

God is not finished with any city — large or small. God wants to bless us all with the heart and head of a city dweller, learning to love life. **NFJ**

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

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

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 7, 2019

Luke 10:1-20

A Mission Trip to Remember

How do you keep your priorities in order? Success guru Stephen Covey made popular the mantra: “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing” – but what is that main thing? As believers, what is our main calling for service and mission?

Typically, when Jesus sent his followers out to do something, it was to share the gospel with others (cf. Matt. 28:19-20, Acts 1:8). All three synoptic gospels contain an account of Jesus sending out the twelve on a mission to proclaim the kingdom of God (Matt. 10:1-14, Mark 6:6b-13, Luke 9:1-6). Only Luke describes a second occasion when Jesus sent out 70 disciples for the same purpose. This is our text for today. 📖

Doing the main thing (vv. 1-2)

The sending of 70 persons may have symbolic significance. The earlier sending of the 12 disciples may have denoted Jesus’ mission to the 12 tribes of Israel. In sending the seventy, Jesus may have wanted to indicate that the good news would stretch beyond Israel. The seventy apparently did not travel far: the text says they were sent “ahead of him in pairs to every town and place

He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Luke 10:2)

where he himself intended to go” (v. 1) – and we recall that Jesus was traveling toward Jerusalem and the cross.

A Hebrew tradition held that the world consisted of 70 nations (cf. Genesis 10). Thus, it’s commonly thought that Jesus’ sending of 70 persons could represent his desire that the gospel be proclaimed to all the world. 📖

As his followers prepared to leave, Jesus reminded them of the task: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” Note that the instructions to “ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” were given to the very group Jesus was sending into the fields (v. 2). We are called to share the good news, not just pray for someone else to do it.

It is easy for us to forget the “main thing” and get caught up in other things. We live in such a consumer-oriented society that some people shop for churches like they shop for shampoo. What church offers the best value – happily meeting personal preferences, but costing the least? This puts churches in the position of competing with each other to see who can offer the most attractive programs. It is possible to get so enmeshed with keeping members happy that outreach opportunities get little more than lip service.

If Jesus were to show up and evaluate your church’s ministry, how

well would the congregation score on pursuing the main thing?

Going, trusting, reaching (vv. 3-9)

Many of us find it exceedingly difficult to practice personal evangelism. We’re afraid we might be rejected, or we assume that we’re just not gifted in that area. That’s why we need each other’s support.

Sending the emissaries in pairs not only provided mutual support: when they spoke to others, the testimony of two would be more credible and powerful than one.

Jesus assured the seventy that they would indeed be able to accomplish their mission, though it would be difficult and possibly frightening: “I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves,” he said (v. 3). While Jesus evidently expected the seventy to return without being eaten by wolves, Luke may have included the saying as a reference to persecution faced by the early church. 📖

While churches often prepare at great length before sending youth or adult teams on mission trips – and would be derided as irresponsible if they did not – Jesus told the seventy to go without a purse, a suitcase, or extra sandals. And, they were to go straight to their appointed destinations, not stopping to chat along the way (v. 4).

This indicated the urgency with which the witnesses were to go, with no time to pack or make advance reservations: They were to trust in others’ hospitality as they offered a blessing of Christ’s peace to those who were open to accept it (vv. 5-6).

Once they found a place to stay,

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they were to continue lodging there and eat whatever they were served so they could focus on spreading Jesus' message rather than looking for better accommodations or dining options (vv. 7-8).

Jesus empowered the messengers with authority to "cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'" (v. 9). Actions were to proceed words: the seventy were to demonstrate the love of Christ through service and healing, then explain that such ministry was a sign that God's kingdom had come near in Jesus. The way they lived, the way they served, and the way they spoke were all testimonies of the kingdom.

Can you imagine how nervous some of those early evangelists must have felt as they set out? Sometimes taking Jesus seriously may feel risky and uncertain, but that's where faith comes in. If we could rely totally on ourselves, we wouldn't need God.

Keeping on keeping on (vv. 10-16)

One of the risks we face is rejection. It's tempting to keep our faith under wraps and leave Jesus out of our conversations because we worry about how others will react. We could canvass the neighborhood and invite others to attend a special program at church, but what if someone should take offense? We could talk about faith with our friends at work, but what if they start avoiding us?

Jesus explained to the seventy that all people are responsible for their own behavior and their own decisions. There might be towns that did not welcome them, he said. In that case, he advised that they symbolically wipe the dust from their feet as they left town, still reminding its residents that the kingdom had come near (vv. 10-11).

The comparison to Sodom goes

back to the story in Genesis 19, in which Sodom was destroyed because its people acted hatefully toward two messengers sent from God, showing contempt rather than hospitality. 🇺🇸

The next few verses, which seem out of place, sound harsh: Jesus pronounced woes upon Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, all of which were Jewish villages (vv. 13-15). This implies that Jesus had proclaimed his message there in word and deed, but the residents had largely rejected him.

If the same "deeds of power" had been done in the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus said, "they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes." The judgment of those who rejected Jesus would be self-imposed.

The Gospels include several stories about Jesus' activities in Capernaum, which Jesus adopted as his home after he left Nazareth (Mark 2:1, Matt. 4:13). There he healed many and crowds swarmed about him, but he was also roundly criticized by the local synagogue leaders (Mark 2, Luke 4:31-44, 7:1-10). Like the neighboring towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida, Capernaum would face a hard judgment (v. 15). 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

We have a responsibility to proclaim the good news in love, but we cannot make someone else's decision for them. Our task is to love other people as Christ loved us and to share the good news with sensitivity and grace. Whether others accept us as persons or accept our message or accept our ministry is their responsibility. 🇺🇸

Are you troubled by Christians whose witness does the opposite? I don't hear people blaming drug addicts or thieves or racists for turning them away from Christ. But I have heard any number of people attribute their distance from church to the bad

behavior or unwelcoming attitudes of people they have met there. We are called to bring the kingdom near—not to push others away from it.

Making a difference (vv. 17-20)

Sometimes, after a frustrating week of work that feels less than effective, I look forward to getting out the push-mower and taking on our scruffy lawn. It is hard and sweaty work, but it offers a great sense of satisfaction, simply because when I'm cutting the grass, I can see where I've been. I know I've made a difference.

We may wonder if what we do for God really makes any difference; if our mundane ministry is worth the trouble. If we can take a clue from the return of the seventy, it could make more difference than we will ever know. When his followers returned from their mission, excited that "even the demons submit to us," Jesus said "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning" (vv. 17-18). They made a difference, and no power of evil could stop them. (See "The Hardest Question" online for more thoughts on vv. 19-20.)

We may go to meetings and fill out reports and do the ordinary work that's part of the everyday reality of the church. We suffer through the summer when attendance is low and people are tired and maybe we wish we were on vacation, too. We donate to the local food pantry (again) and visit the shut-ins (again) and expend huge efforts on Vacation Bible School (again). But while we may wonder if it's all worth the effort, perhaps Jesus still responds to our faithfulness with "I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning."

As we give of ourselves in serving Jesus, we may not see immediate or impressive results, but we can be sure we are making a difference. And that's good to know. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 14, 2019

Luke 10:25-37

A Wonder on the Road

Are you the kind of person who dares to make eye contact with a homeless person, or who stops to help someone whose car has broken down? Just how far should we go to help other people?

It's not an easy decision. If we give money to someone pacing at an intersection while holding up a cardboard sign asking for help, are we enabling their dependency when they might be working?

Who should we help, and how?

We are not the first to ask the question.

The story of the "Good Samaritan" is so familiar that we often forget it is the answer to a question posed by a man who wanted to know just how far the demands of love extended. "Who is my neighbor?" means "Who do I have to love?"

What's number one? (vv. 25-29)

In our last few studies, Luke has been recounting Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. Shortly after the triumphant return of the seventy from their pioneering mission trips, according to Luke's account, a curious scribe asked Jesus what he might do to inherit eternal life (v. 26).

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29)

Mark and Matthew include similar stories in other contexts (Matt. 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34). In their accounts, the scribe – also known as a lawyer, since scribes were experts in the Jewish law – asked Jesus to name the greatest commandment in the law, and Jesus gave the answer.

As Luke tells it, Jesus responded in typical rabbinic fashion by turning the question back on his inquisitor: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" (v. 26).

The lawyer responded by citing two Old Testament verses. The first was from Deut. 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Readers familiar with the text in Deuteronomy will note that "mind" is not there. Ancient Hebrews thought of the heart as the seat of decision-making as well as emotion, but Greek thought attributed choice to the mind. First-century Jews had long been influenced by Greek culture, so it became common to add "all your mind" to the command. ⚓

Greek thought had also influenced Jewish thinking in another way. The Hebrew word translated as "soul" in Deut. 6:5 is *nefesh*, used to describe the animating breath of God that made one a living being (Gen. 2:7). Animals also had a *nefesh* because they were alive. We might think of one's *nefesh* as the essence of one's being.

In Greek philosophy, body and soul were thought of as separate, with the soul as a spirit that inhabited the physical body and lived on after the body's demise. This concept had also become absorbed in Jewish thought.

The point of the Great Commandment is that one should recognize Israel's God (known as Yahweh) as the only God, and love God with all of one's emotional, mental, and physical capacity. ⚓

To fully appreciate this verse, we note that in this context the word "love" is not about emotional attachment or spiritual thrill, but *loyalty*. Much of Deuteronomy is similar to ancient suzerainty treaties in which a victorious invader would impose terms on his new subjects. Invariably, the new vassals were to "love" the conquering king. No one expected a vanquished people to feel warm emotions toward their conqueror, but they did expect loyalty.

We may not always feel emotionally connected or loving toward God, but we are always to remain loyal.

Those who understood the law recognized that we live among other people, and no amount of "love" for God means anything if we do not treat people with kindness. Thus, the Great Commandment was typically accompanied by an excerpt from Lev. 19:18, rendered by Luke as simply "and your neighbor as yourself." ⚓

Jesus declared it the right answer (v. 28), but the scribe wasn't entirely satisfied. He had a sneaking suspicion that Jesus' definition of "neighbor" might be different than his own.

Many readers are unaware that the "Second Commandment" is taken from the second half of the verse in

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Lev. 19:8, which reads in full: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”

Since the first part of the parallel structure speaks of “your people,” some argued that the second part applied only to fellow Hebrews. More legalistic rabbis defined “neighbor” even more narrowly, limiting the term to other Jews who scrupulously adhered to the law.

So, the scribe asked for a definition of terms. Perhaps he wanted to see how little love he could get away with and still count on his eternal inheritance. He wanted “to justify himself,” according to Luke. So, the man asked Jesus, “*And who is my neighbor?*” (v. 29).

Who’s my neighbor? (vv. 30-37)

Jesus responded by telling the man a story. It is one of the several parables that are found only in Luke’s gospel, which often places greater stress on the place of the poor and the down-trodden. 🇺🇸

The story Jesus told goes like this: “There once was a man who stopped at a pay phone by an abandoned convenience store on his way to Myrtle Beach. There he was attacked by robbers who stole his Camry and took all of his belongings – including his shirt – then beat him up and left him lying by the road, broken and bruised and looking half dead.

“A volunteer youth worker drove by and saw his battered body in the ditch, but she did not want to get involved, so she swiftly clicked her turn signal and moved to the left-hand lane. Shortly after, a local pastor came cruising down the road, but he was too busy doing God’s work to stop for someone who appeared to be a drunken bum. He

did, however, use his cellular phone to call 911 and report the vagrant.

“After these had passed by, a young man from Mexico with no documents came by in his employer’s rickety farm truck. When he saw the man in the ditch, he slowed to a quick stop and backed up. He put his own jacket beneath the victim’s head, then got a first aid kit from the truck and worked until he had stopped the bleeding. He helped the poor guy into a worn hoodie and boosted him into the truck. The young Latino then drove him to a local motel, where he bought the man a room for the night and left his cell phone number in case the man needed anything else.”

Well, that’s not *exactly* the way Jesus told the story, is it? But close enough. In Jesus’ story, two religious people ignored the poor victim, but a Samaritan – despised and unwanted in Jewish territory – stopped to help.

The story makes it clear that real love does not grow from meeting legalistic requirements, but from a compassionate heart.

And who should we love? Who is our neighbor? For those who follow Jesus, our neighbor is anyone who needs us. The Greek word for neighbor (*plēision*) literally refers to one who is nearby. The English word has a similar derivation: it comes from the Old English words *neah boor*. Some Southerners still pronounce “near” as “neah.” The word “boor” originally referred to anyone belonging to the peasant class. Jesus did not define the term geographically, however, but in terms of awareness and need.

We now live in what is sometimes called a “global village.” Having seen images of the earth from outer space, we recognize that we are all earthlings. Surely none of us would fail to feed a starving child who came to our doorstep: Should the needs of hungry

children in the Sudan or India or Haiti appeal to us any less? Are they also our neighbors?

Every day, we make decisions about whether we will love our neighbors or not. Some of our neighbors will reward us with the warm fuzzies of gratitude. Taking chicken soup to a recent surgery patient will rarely go unappreciated.

Not everyone will be in a hurry to thank us, however. Many of the folks who need our help may be angry over the bad hand life has dealt them, or they may lack the social skills or developmental ability to respond appropriately. Maybe their parents abused or misused them, and they have an inbred suspicion of people who want to get involved with their lives, even to make them better. Maybe they are so addicted to alcohol or some other drug that they can no longer think clearly.

Those who work in soup kitchens or in other programs for the homeless know that some recipients will show humble gratitude, others will come through the line with a blank expression on their face, while yet others will complain that the food is not hot enough, good enough, or served in sufficient quantities.

Are all of these persons our neighbors? Do believers have a responsibility to minister in Jesus’ name, even to those who do not understand or appreciate such love? Can the parable of the “Good Samaritan” be interpreted in any other way? 🇺🇸

As he often did, Jesus turned the scribe’s question around and gave it a deeper meaning. Instead of limiting his answer to a definition of neighbor, he raised the issue of how one truly obeys the law to love one’s neighbor. In Jesus’ teaching, the truest obedience is loving service. It is not so much “what will I *do*,” but “what will I *be*” – that is, a loving person. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 21, 2019

Luke 10:38-42

A Better Way to Go

Are you someone who prefers to “do,” or to “be,” especially when it relates to other people? Imagine that you have invited friends over for dinner. Are you more at ease in the kitchen putting final touches on the meal, or in the den carrying on a joyful conversation?

I confess that I’m often more comfortable in the role of the busy beaver than the meaningful conversationalist, and that carries into my spiritual life, too: I can write a Bible study about Jesus more easily than simply *being* with Jesus in contemplation and prayer.

That’s why, when I read this text, I have a sense that it’s poking its finger at me. Maybe you do, too.

Friends of Jesus (v. 38)

We recall, from our last several lessons, that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for the last time, having “set his face to go to Jerusalem” in 9:51. Today’s text is set in close proximity to the city, as Jesus stopped for a visit with Mary and Martha.

The Gospels portray Martha and Mary as close friends of Jesus, though we’re told nothing of when or how the friendship began. Today’s text is the


... there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:42)

first time in Luke that the two sisters enter the picture, but they appear to be old friends with Jesus.

The Fourth Gospel contains two additional stories about Mary and Martha. John 11 relates the story of how their brother Lazarus had grown so ill that they sent word to Jesus asking for help. Jesus delayed his arrival until several days after Lazarus had expired, then resurrected him from the dead. The closeness of their friendship in that text is emphasized by Jesus’ weeping over the family’s pain in the loss of Lazarus (John 11:35).

The two sisters also figure in John’s account of the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with oil (John 12:2-8). There Martha busied herself serving the guests dinner, while Mary knelt behind Jesus, pouring expensive perfume on his feet and wiping them with her hair.

While Luke speaks of Mary and Martha’s home as being in “a certain village,” the Fourth Gospel identifies it as Bethany (John 11:1). Bethany was located about two miles east of Jerusalem (John 11:8), not far beyond the Mount of Olives.


Perhaps because of its proximity to the city and to his friends, Jesus appears to have used Bethany as a place to spend the night when visiting Jerusalem (Matt. 21:17, Mark 11:11-12). 

The Gospels make it clear that when Jesus visited Mary and Martha, he felt at home. He was among friends.

Contrasting roles (vv. 39-40)

Lazarus does not appear in Luke. The narrative suggests that neither sister was married, though it’s possible at least one was a widow. Martha was probably the older sister and the owner of the house, since she assumed the authority to act as host and to invite Jesus “into her home.”

Ever the efficient homemaker and caregiver, Martha took charge of the dinner. Jesus could hardly have phoned ahead to let her know he was coming, so we can imagine how busy Martha was preparing both the house and a meal. She apparently had little help: her sister Mary latched onto Jesus as soon as he arrived, sitting at his feet and hanging on to his every word (v. 39).

We don’t know whether Jesus, Mary, and Martha were alone in the house during the discourse that follows.  Jesus normally traveled with his disciples, and it’s often assumed that they were present.

The text is unclear, however. Verse 38 begins with “as *they* went on their way,” but then says “*he* entered a certain village” where “Martha welcomed *him* into her home.” The ambiguity serves to focus the picture on Jesus and the two sisters. If the disciples had also been present, it might help explain why “Martha was distracted with her many tasks” (v. 40a).

Mary was focused only on Jesus. The NRSV says she “listened to what he was saying,” perhaps a smoother rendition but losing something from the Greek, which translated literally says she “listened to his words.”

Words are powerful things. With

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words we can bless others or we can curse them; we can speak truth or we can lie. Words can bring healing or hurt, pleasure or pain. They can show us the right way or point us into the darkness.

Don't you wish we knew what Jesus was saying that fascinated Mary so? Was he telling stories from the journey, teaching in parables, confounding visitors, or dropping hints about what lay ahead during his last days?

Luke does not say, and it doesn't matter. Jesus was talking, and Mary was listening.

But Martha.


Many readers can identify with Mary's hard-working sister, who was frustrated by the lack of help she received and complained to Jesus that Mary had left her to do all the work. "Many tasks" could also be rendered as "much service." The word is *diakonia*, the word later used to describe the work of deacons called to serve.

"Tell her then to help me," she insisted (v. 40b). Martha's willingness to speak so bluntly to Jesus is further testimony of their comfortable relationship. She was doing what she thought was important, and she assumed Mary should give it the same priority.



Mary and Martha were not the first to see things differently in terms of family roles, women's roles, or priorities in general. And they were not the last.

Today we hear differing views of what is important, whether in denominational bodies or local churches. Some people believe it's all about evangelism, while others focus on social justice issues. Like Martha, some are caught up in the work of maintaining the organization, feeding the poor, teaching the children, or building buildings. Others, like Mary, prioritize worship, focusing on Jesus' presence and words.

All of these are important. How

do we decide? How do we even know where our church's priorities are? 

The better way (vv. 41-42)

Jesus' response was all about focus. He responded to Martha's complaint with both understanding and insistence: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (vv. 41-42).  

In other words, Mary had chosen to be with Jesus, and Martha could not take her away. Jesus was not implying that Martha's activities were unimportant, but there is danger in being so distracted by important things that we fail to recognize what is paramount.

Martha's problem was not that her work was unimportant, but that she let it distract her from listening to Jesus.

Jesus was on the road to Jerusalem, where he had an appointment with a cross. The time available for him to spend with the sisters was limited. Housework was needful, but it could wait. The one thing that truly counted was the building of their relationship, learning more of God's way. That required concentration.

There is also danger in doing without listening. Sometimes we have all good intentions but get ahead of ourselves and potentially do more harm than good. Missionaries intent on saving the souls of isolated populations have sometimes brought diseases to which the locals had no immunity, killing the very people they came to save.

At other times, people offering simple aid with no attention to resource building have fostered dependency rather than self-sufficiency. Our doing should always be seasoned with listening.

Have you ever owned or tried

to puzzle out a "Magic Eye" picture? They can be found on posters or pages that appear to be covered with random dots or pictures that disguise a hidden image. To see it, you have to learn the trick of letting your eyes go out of focus from the surface picture. You can't allow your eyes to wander or your mind to be distracted. If you keep looking, and if you are lucky, the secret picture will pop into view. Once you blink or have your attention diverted, the image disappears.

Those who would truly see and understand the heart of Jesus must spend time with him. We must concentrate on understanding Jesus' teaching. We must think more deeply than the surface as we meditate on the meaning of discipleship. We must spend quality time in prayer and relationship building. In this way, Christ through his Spirit becomes a part of our lives. Then, when we go out on mission to do good things, we take Jesus with us.

All too often, we choose the opposite approach, working around the periphery but giving little attention to the center. Ultimately, trying to do good things in order to please Jesus can be like putting the cart before the horse. Those who think their many works will put them in God's good graces will find themselves alone, but those who give their hearts to Jesus and learn to live in his love are able to go out on mission without ever leaving Jesus' feet.

The story of Mary and Martha is not about women as much as it is about believers. It is not about pettiness as much as it is about devotion. Martha's problem was not the good and necessary things she was doing, but the way in which she allowed *good* things to distract her from the *best* thing. In our hectic society, we have need to heed this story. May we learn the lesson well. [NFJ](#)

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 28, 2019

Luke 11:1-13

A Good Way to Pray

What comes to mind when you think of prayer? Is it interceding for the sick or asking for some personal need? Do you pray for your favorite sports team to win a game, or for good weather during your vacation?

We may have much to learn about prayer. ↓

What to acknowledge (vv. 1-2)

Jesus' teaching about prayer began with the simple truth that prayer must be learned. Unfortunately, we can learn poor prayer habits as easily as good ones.

One obstacle to proper prayer is the inclination to pray only when in trouble. Prayer is not just for when we are scared or hurting. Nor should prayer be treated as a good luck charm, but sometimes the prayer Jesus taught is used in that way.

How often have we repeated the Lord's Prayer as a perfunctory ritual with little or no thought? You may remember reciting it in school or prior to sporting events. But turning the prayer into an institutional habit robs it of meaning. ↓

The most important word in the Lord's Prayer is the first one: "Father."

So I say to you, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." (Luke 11:9)

It establishes the parameters of prayer: we pray as a child to a parent. We talk to God in the same way and in the same relationship that a trusting child talks to a loving parent.

We recognize that God is beyond gender, yet tradition typically speaks of God in male-gendered language. Many are comfortable with this image, but others may find it difficult. People who have suffered from abusive parenting or from absent fathers may feel little affinity for the term "Father," though it is intended to convey the image of a present and loving parent.

The familiar words "hallowed be thy name" may seem curious. What can humans do to make God's name holy? Here, context is important: Jesus was talking to Jewish people who believed that certain behaviors such as offering sacrifices, eating only kosher foods, and maintaining ritual purity were all ways of sanctifying God's name, keeping it holy. ↓

Prayer, at the start, is an effort to recognize and live into a proper relationship with the Creator of all things, asking first that "your kingdom come." Luke's version does not include Matthew's "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," but it doesn't need to. To participate in God's kingdom is to seek God's will.

Praying as children who trust God to know what is best, we learn that the purpose of prayer is not to bend God's will to our will, but the other way

around. We don't pray so much until God hears *us*, but until we hear God.

To pray in Jesus' name is to pray as Jesus prayed – free to express our heart's desire, but also willing to accept God's desire for our lives.

That can be hard for us. There are so many things we want God to do, and we cannot always understand why – why the rain won't come so the crops will grow, or why the cancer will not stop growing. We don't know why that person who irritates us so much doesn't change or move away. Even the most effective prayer life does not give us all the answers, but it can give us the faith to live in spite of the answers.

The essence of prayer is to seek an open awareness of God's faithful presence and to ally ourselves with God's desire that we demonstrate the same kind of love and justice we see in Jesus. ↓

What to ask for (vv. 3-4)

Because we can look to God as a trusting child looks to a loving parent, we can be confident that God always has our best interests in mind and desires good for us. "Give us this day our daily bread" is not just a prayer for food, but a recognition that every blessing that makes our lives sustainable comes from God. ↓

Bad things may happen. All of us are subject to illness and accidents and the ugliness of unkind people, but God is not the source of our pain. When hard times come, God is present with us, ready to help us to muddle through as best we can.

I sometimes ask my divinity school students to share devotional testimonies,

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and I am often amazed at the struggles they have endured, and how they believe God has provided for them.

Prayer is not a matter of asking God to deliver us from every trouble, but of trusting in God to catch us when we stumble on our own or when someone else trips us up, trusting that God will lift us up and keep us going. 📌

Prayer acknowledges that we are all-too-prone to falling short of holiness and giving free rein to selfishness. In other words, we sin.

We sin when our actions – or our lack of actions – bring harm to others or to ourselves. We can wreck our own bodies through gluttony or sloth, failing to appreciate and care for our health. We can wreck other people, too, though more commonly in an emotional than a physical sense. Never underestimate the harm that can come from hot words or cold shoulders.

Sin puts distance between us and God, for the root of all sin lies in following *our* way rather than God's way.

If we dare ask God for anything, it should begin with forgiveness.

It's not that simple, though. Jesus minced no words: if we want to be forgiven, we must be willing to forgive. We can't be freed from the burden of our sin while we're still carrying the weight of grudges or ill feelings toward others.

A surface reading may lead some readers to conclude that the only issue is financial: the NRSV has "and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us" (v. 4a; Matt. 6:12 has "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors").

The language of indebtedness was a common idiom for any sort of offense that leaves another indebted to us, even if what they owe is an apology or an attempt to make things right. The NIV 11 and NET render it as "everyone who sins against us."

Jesus' use of "debts" in the prayer, however, could also have been a call to compassion toward the poor. There were no institutional banks in Jesus' day: people in desperate straits had to borrow money from individuals. Compassionate believers could forgive those debts.

The closing phrase, "and do not bring us to the time of trial," does not suggest that God leads people into temptation. It is an idiomatic way of asking God to steer us away from doing wrong. If we are serious about seeking God's way rather than our own, that will take care of itself.

If we can learn to pray as Jesus prayed, there will be a change in us. If we learn to pray as children who seek God's blessing in trust and openness, if we learn to pray with an awareness that we are co-workers in God's kingdom, if we learn to pray with an awareness of our need to forgive and be forgiven, not only will our prayer lives be enriched, but we will never be the same again.

The insistent friend (vv. 5-8)

Luke's account locates two brief parables in the context of the Lord's Prayer. This means that our understanding and interpretation of them must be shaped by the teaching of the prayer that precedes them. Luke presents them as part of Jesus' response to the request: "Teach us to pray."

Both parables emphasize God's response to human prayer. Also, both employ the strategy of moving from lesser to greater: if neighbors and fathers respond to our requests, how much more will God answer the prayers of those in need?

The first parable is usually called something like "The Parable of the Insistent Friend." 📌 It posits a situation in which a neighbor comes knocking late at night, asking to borrow three

loaves of bread to offer an unexpected visitor. Ancient "loaves" were typically round pieces of flat bread – closer to three slices of bread than what we normally think of as loaves.

Hospitality customs demanded that hosts offer food as well as shelter to guests, hence the neighbor's urgency and persistence. Even if the homeowner was uninclined to grant the bread out of friendship, he recognized his neighbor's need and met it.

The generous father (vv. 9-13)

Would not God be even more willing to respond to our needs when we pray with persistence? Those who ask, seek, and knock will find God to be receptive (vv. 9-11). These familiar verses, often misused by adherents to the heretical "prosperity gospel," do not promise that God will give us whatever we ask, or that wealth is a sign of God's favor.

They are written in the context of one who prays within the sphere of God's kingdom will, and who has been asked to meet a neighbor's very basic but urgent need.

Likewise, Jesus pointed out, parents can be trusted to provide good things for their children. They would never respond to a request for fish or eggs with a basket of snakes or scorpions.

If earthly parents can be so trusted, can we not trust God to provide what we need? In most cases, God has provided the physical ability for us to obtain what we need through our own labor. Through people who truly care for others, God can also provide for those who are unable to do anything for themselves.

Prayer is an essential aspect of the believer's life, not as a pathway to prosperity, but as a means of attuning our lives ever closer to God's desire for us. In doing so, we may become the answer to others' prayers. NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Aug. 4, 2019

Luke 12:13-21

An Investment Gone Bad

Wealth. We'd all like to have our fair share, wouldn't we? We'd like enough money to provide a pleasant home, healthful food, dependable cars, college for the kids. We want to pay the bills and enjoy a little recreation and lay something by for retirement. We'd like to have sufficient income to give something back by supporting our church, contributing to charities, or helping someone who's facing hard times.

Those are reasonable hopes, goals that everyone should have a shot at, but not all do.

Wealth inequality in America is greater now than at any time since before the Great Depression, and getting worse. 📉 Our text contains a strong warning for those who put their trust in material things, making money their *de facto* god.

We've been following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, the road leading to the cross, when every teaching focused on serious business, including wealth.

A greed-based question (vv. 13-15)

The text follows a series of confrontations with hostile critics whom Jesus charged with hypocrisy and warned

*And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."
(Luke 12:15)*

to be ready for the judgment (11:37–12:12). A large crowd had gathered to listen in on what Jesus was saying to his disciples (v. 1).

At some point, as Luke tells it, a man in the crowd felt emboldened enough to air a personal grievance. "Teacher," he said, "tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me" (v. 13). 📉

Jesus, looking toward the cross, had no time for greed-based family disputes that could be settled by a rabbi in the synagogue. Jesus responded "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator between you two?" (v. 14, NET). The NRSV glosses over Jesus' impatience by toning it down to "friend," but the Greek word is "man."

Jesus did not begrudge the man his inheritance, but he had bigger fish to fry. Perhaps he sensed from the man's attitude that his motivation was more mercenary than necessary. Having dismissed the supplicant, Jesus turned to address his disciples and the crowd gathered round them:

"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (v. 15). "All kinds of greed" could include a desire for power, sexual lust, seeking pleasure through chemical means, or covetousness of any sort. 📉

Here, though, Jesus' primary concern was with material things: a subject with which we are all familiar.

A greed-based story (vv. 16-19)

Jesus' encounter with the unhappy brother introduces a parable that is familiar to us, though it appears only in Luke. Jesus minced no words in telling the story, which is popularly known as "the parable of the rich fool."

The protagonist is a fortunate farmer, already wealthy, whose fields produced such bumper crops that he was astounded. 📈 While considering his good fortune, however, he failed to appreciate the source of it. Jesus made a point of saying that "the land of a rich man produced abundantly" (v. 16). The farmer did not produce the harvest: the land did. It was a gift to him from God's good earth.

The prosperous planter faced an unusual problem. He lacked room to store all that extra grain: what should he do with it? (v. 17). His poorer neighbors, no doubt, could have made helpful suggestions. The landowner could have shared his largesse with the laborers who did the actual work, and with widows and orphans who were often in need of aid.

But he didn't choose the course of generosity. He pondered only briefly before deciding what to do. Note that everything the man thought and said was self-directed: "And he thought to himself, 'What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?' Then he said, '*I* will do this: *I* will pull down *my* barns and build larger ones, and there *I* will store all *my* grain and *my* goods. And *I* will say to *my* soul, '*Soul*, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry'" (vv. 17-19). 📈

Storing grain for the future can be

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a wise choice. Joseph was regarded as a lifesaver because he advised Pharaoh to build huge storage facilities and store up bumper crops that he anticipated over seven years – but for the purpose of providing food during the seven lean years he expected to follow (Gen. 41:32-36).

Hebrew law decreed that farmers should leave their fields fallow every seventh year, requiring them to store up extra grain in the years preceding (Exod. 23:11).

But this man showed no concern for helping others or for keeping the law.

He never recognized the harvest as a blessing and never acknowledged God as his benefactor. He never considered that he could have used even a portion of the extravagant harvest to feed hungry neighbors or to aid poor farmers in danger of losing their ancestral land.

The rich man thought only of himself, and the only solution he considered was to ensure that his “ample goods” would be safe. He was a hoarder of the first magnitude. 📌

A greed-based warning (vv. 20-21)

While his wealth appeared to be safe and secure, the man himself was not. While failing to figure either God or others into his business equations, he also failed to consider his own mortality.

God knew something he didn't know, and God had a word for him: “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (v. 20). 📌

“Fool” is a strong word, and intended to be. The man had made extensive plans for a life of leisure, assuming that many years of life remained. Now all the grain and goods he had laid by for retirement would go to someone else: he wouldn't enjoy them after all.

We may recall an earlier question Jesus asked the disciples: “What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?” (Luke 9:25).

The parable should not be read as a case of divine capital punishment: God was not saying “Because you are greedy, I will kill you.” Rather, Jesus was pointing out that life is much more than possessions, and the wise (in contrast to the foolish) have a mature perspective that recognizes both their own mortality and their neighbors' needs. They understand that the guiding force in their life should be God, not greed.

A potentially better reading of v. 20 acknowledges that the verb is plural and active, suggesting that it was the man's ample goods that demanded his life: he had become possessed by his possessions. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more.)

Jesus' closing comment was brief: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God” (v. 21). 📌 How we live, and what guides our living, has consequences.

A greed-based lesson

This is a hard parable to love because most of us would secretly like to be rich, but none of us would like to be called a fool. Our culture idolizes having the newest, the biggest, the fastest, the nicest, the “coolest” of all things. We can have a hard time deciding where our primary allegiance goes, trying to focus on both God and wealth, despite Jesus' insistence that it cannot be done (Luke 16:13).

We don't have to be rich to be taken aback by this parable. Any of us who live in a home, drive a car, and have plenty to eat are rich by global standards. We are blessed beyond measure, but so often we fail to acknowledge the source of our blessings.

It's easy to become obsessed with the problem of how we can hold on to the most of what we have. Instead of building bigger barns, we're more likely to build larger retirement portfolios. We seek financial security to gain peace of mind, but there are larger issues to consider.

It is not unwise to prepare responsibly for the future, but it is foolish to live with no awareness of our own mortality and no sense of responsibility toward others. The parable of the rich fool reminds us that true security and peace are not found in worldly wealth, but in a generous spirit.

So, what *should* we give? How *should* we live? We often suggest that Christians should tithe – that we should contribute one tenth of our income to the work of God. Tithing is a good place to start, but it's really an Old Testament idea that falls far short of Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow him. All that we are and have comes from God and belongs to God. We are stewards not only of what we have, but also of what we are.

Psalm 14:1 uses a word that we've already run across: “The fool says in his heart there is no God.” Whether we say there is no God, or just live as if there is no God makes little difference. When we look at who we are and what we have, if all we can think of is self-benefit – if we acknowledge no transcendent, higher claim upon us and our possessions beyond our own comfort and pleasure – if we see no connection between resources and responsibilities, then we are living just like the fool who says in his heart “There is no God: the only one who matters is me.”

Jesus had no qualms about calling the totally self-centered rich man a fool. If he were to examine our lives and our living today, what word would he use to describe us? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 11, 2019

Luke 12:32-40

A Word to the Wise

Do you often feel anxious? We all experience anxiety in relation to specific things: the arrival of a baby, the learning curve of a new job, or the uncertainty associated with political elections. We may feel anxiety over our relationships, our future, or our finances – not to mention climate change, international conflicts, and mass shootings in public places.

What worries you the most? For some people, anxiety is a constant companion, a persistent prick that makes peace seem impossible.

Today's text begins with words of assurance designed to allay anxiety for those who follow Jesus – but they are followed by instructions that may leave some of us feeling even less comfortable.

That is by design. If we can read Luke's gospel without feeling some discomfort, we're not reading it carefully enough.

Permanent purses (vv. 32-34)

As we continue our three-month focus on Luke, and on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, the three short teachings in Luke 12:32-40 may seem to be an odd fit. They belong, for the most part, to material that is found in both Matthew

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32)

and Luke, but in different places. 📌

Luke has set the teachings in the context of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, where every step and story was fraught with significance as Jesus grew ever closer to the shadow of the cross.

Much of Luke 12 is concerned with the tension between living for Jesus and living for oneself. Most of us should be quite familiar with the friction of walking between idealism and practicality. We want to serve Jesus, but our families have needs, too. Where is the proper balance?

Jesus was at the height of his popularity, surrounded by a crowd of thousands who "trampled one another" in the effort to listen in on Jesus' conversation with his disciples (v. 1).

But how serious were these listeners? The message began with warnings against hypocrisy and covetousness (vv. 1-12) before Jesus was interrupted by a man who sought his help in getting his brother to distribute his inheritance (vv. 12-15), leading to the parable of the rich fool (vv. 13-21).

Jesus then encouraged his followers not to worry about having abundant food or fancy clothing, reminding them that the same God who fed scavenging ravens and clothed beautiful wildflowers could certainly care for them, too (vv. 22-30). "Instead," Jesus said, "strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well" (v. 31).

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, he was not talking about God's

heavenly abode, as we sometimes imagine, but of the rule of God breaking into the earth through the life and ministry – and coming death and resurrection – of Jesus.

There is a sense in which we "strive for the kingdom" in seeking to live by kingdom ideals, but Jesus stressed that our place in the kingdom is a gift: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (v. 32).

Jesus' reference to his followers as a "little flock" recalled the common image of God as a shepherd and Israel as God's flock. 📌 Rather than thinking of God as an angry judge who is out to get sinners, Jesus here pictured God as taking delight in extending the gift of kingdom living to those who would accept it.

Jesus pictured participation in the kingdom as such a rich experience that earthly goods would come to have little meaning beyond the joy of giving them away. "Sell your possessions, and give alms," Jesus said (v. 33).

Wait. What?

A verse like this makes us *more* anxious, not less.

Did Jesus expect his followers to immediately go, sell all they had, and give it away, trusting God to care for them like birds of the air or flowers in the field?


If we can't skip over this verse, how can we best understand it?

See "The Hardest Question" online for a fuller discussion, but at the very least, Jesus calls us to be more generous than acquisitive, more inclined to give than to hoard. Our most important investments are not those we put in our mutual funds, but those that build "an

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unfailing treasure in heaven,” “where no thief comes near and no moth destroys” (v. 33). Today we might add “and which is not subject to a stock market crash.”

The bottom line is found in the familiar words of v. 34: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” What holds first place in our hearts? Is our first loyalty to Christ, or to our bank account? If we are truly kingdom people, we will be generous people, too. 

Vigilant servants (vv. 35-38)

As Luke relates it, Jesus then switched from possessions to preparations. Jesus often spoke of the end times as being imminent, calling believers to be alert and ready. This is one of those times.

Jesus asked his hearers to imagine that they were slaves in a master’s household. Such language makes us uncomfortable at a time when the concept of slavery is distasteful and our history of slavery is shameful.

Yet, Jesus lived in a world where slavery was the status quo, and he taught within that context. We don’t have to endorse slavery to get the point of the teaching – which ultimately serves to undermine the difference between slaves and masters.


Jesus portrayed a situation in which a man who owned multiple slaves had gone out to attend a wedding banquet – probably not his own wedding, since he seems to be a person who is already settled in a substantial home rather than someone just starting out.

Wedding banquets typically ran late into the evening, and certainly well after dark. When the man returned from the banquet, no matter how late, he would expect one of his servants to answer the door and others to have lamps lighted and everything prepared for his arrival.

It wouldn’t be good for the staff if he returned to a dark house and slumbering slaves.

So, Jesus said, “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit” (v. 35). The underlying idiom (“let your loins be girded”) related to the practice of getting ready to run or to work by tucking the loose ends of one’s robe into a wide cloth belt and cinching it tight.

The most surprising part of this little sermon illustration is this: “Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them” (v. 37).

The tables would be turned: the master would be so pleased that he would tighten up his own belt (party clothes and all), order the slaves to sit down for a meal, and then he would serve them! 

Now we see the connection. Slaves are people who own no property – not even themselves – and yet these faithful slaves would find themselves being served by the master. Jesus’ followers, willing to follow as people who belong to Jesus and own no property, find themselves on the receiving end, as “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (v. 32).

Prepared people (vv. 39-40)

The emphasis on being prepared continues in vv. 39-40, but from a different perspective. Jesus first asked his followers to think of themselves as slaves who own nothing, but now switches the image to that of homeowners who have property and goods they want to protect.

“If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into” (v. 39).

The presumption is that thieves do not make appointments with their victims, who don’t suspect they are coming. A vigilant homeowner knows this and takes appropriate precautions.

The image of Jesus as thief would seem odd if it didn’t occur so often: Jesus’ return is compared to that of a thief in the night not only here and in the parallel text of Matt. 24:43, but also in 1 Thess. 5:2-4; 2 Pet. 3:10; and Rev. 3:3, 16:15.

Both stories emphasize the importance of being prepared for Jesus’ return. Even though the second story portrays Jesus’ coming as being like that of a thief, he is a thief we would gladly welcome into our homes – if we are ready for him. If we are not prepared to meet Jesus, we would prefer to keep him away. “You must also be ready,” Jesus said, “for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (v. 40).

Today’s text began with Jesus saying, “Don’t be afraid,” but ends with a warning to be prepared for Jesus to arrive as unexpectedly as a thief.

That could just raise our anxiety level again, unless we remember that the “thief” is not returning to steal or to harm, but to bless us. For God’s “little flock,” it is the Father’s good pleasure to grant the kingdom (v. 32). The late-returning master who finds his slaves alert and ready will happily serve them supper (v. 37).

Jesus’ return may be as surprising as an unexpected burglar, but he is not a thief: he is a caring shepherd. In another context, the Fourth Gospel reminds us of the difference: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

Abundant life is not found in preserving our possessions, but in serving the one who gave us life. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 18, 2019

Luke 12:49-56

A Really Sharp Word

Imagine a cloud that grows so heavy with moisture that raindrops form, become subject to the force of gravity, and begin to fall. Visualize two individual drops within the torrent as they begin their long descent. Close together, the raindrops gather speed, leaving the cloud behind, rushing toward the greenery below.

Thousands of feet beneath the clouds, in a lonely clearing atop the Eastern Continental Divide not far from Grandfather Mountain, a large sharp rock sits atop a bare mountain ridge. With every second a moment of crisis approaches for the falling raindrops; the moment of impact draws near. Finally, they land with tiny splashes not more than one inch apart, but on either side of the rocky cleft: one drop on the east side, and the other on the west.

The raindrops blend with thousands of others, forming tiny rivulets that snake their way down the slope through leaf and earth until they find a little cascading stream. The drop that landed on the western side makes its way into the Watauga River, which flows into Tennessee and ultimately into the Gulf of Mexico. The eastern drop joins a stream that empties into the Linville River, which winds its way southeast until it reaches the Atlantic Ocean. 📌

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You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? (Luke 12:56)

Christ and crisis (vv. 49-50)

Two raindrops wound up in separate oceans because when the moment of crisis came, they went different ways. We all face similar moments of crisis, times of decision when the response we make impacts everything that comes after.

We've been following Luke's account of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. When Jesus set his face toward that holy city, he knew that his own great moment of crisis was approaching. An ugly death on a wicked cross loomed like a heavy cloud, but Jesus knew the fate of the world could rest on the way he chose to face the crisis before him.

So it was that Jesus marched toward Jerusalem with the weight of the world on his shoulders but the love of God in his heart. He faced his crisis, made his decision, and the world is different because of it. But it wasn't easy.

If we can imagine ourselves on the road with Jesus that day, perhaps we can understand why he spoke some of the most forceful and troublesome words we find in the Gospels. "I came to bring fire to the earth," Jesus said, "and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" (vv. 49-50). 📌

In the Bible, fire is often a metaphor for judgment (Mal. 3:2-3), but also a symbol of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4). Jesus knew that he was about to endure the fire of judgment that humankind deserved. The author of 1 Peter put it this way: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds, you have been healed" (1 Pet. 2:24).

We also recall John the baptizer's insistence that one was coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16). Jesus knew that the fire of the Holy Spirit could not come upon the believers until his mission of death and resurrection was past.

It is no wonder that Jesus was under stress and anxious for the moment of crisis to pass, ready to get it over with. But Jesus' death and resurrection would not be a crisis moment for him alone: it would inaugurate a time of decision for the entire world. Through God in Christ, the kingdom of God was becoming manifest and decisions were called for. Jesus died for us, but we don't experience his grace until we choose to accept it. This becomes a moment of crisis for each one of us.

A crisis for all (vv. 51-53)

Jesus knew that some people would decide to trust in him and follow the narrow way. He also knew that others would put their trust in the broad way of the world. Furthermore, Jesus knew that conflict was inevitable in families where all did not make the same choice. Thus he asked, "Do you

think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” (v. 51).

Jesus did not desire to see families or communities dividing, but knew it was coming. “From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” (vv. 52-53).

Jesus came as the Prince of Peace, as the one through whom peace could be found, as the one who could calm others’ fears through the simple words “peace to you” (cf. Lk. 1:79; 2:14, 29; 7:50; 8:48; 19:38; 24:36).

But Jesus did not require that people choose his way: a forced peace is no peace at all. More than once, we have seen political dictators use loyalist armies to strong-arm different factions or ethnic groups into living side by side without constant fighting – but living in fear is not living in peace. When the dictator falls, civil war breaks out.

Jesus brought the possibility of peace with God, but that did not guarantee we would have peace with each other. Choosing to follow Jesus is radically different from choosing to follow the way of the world. If we take Jesus seriously, our lives will be different, and that can lead to conflict between friends or even within families. That doesn’t always happen, but it’s possible, and Jesus wanted his followers to know it.

We often see stories of young men or women from predominantly Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu cultures who were disowned by their families after trusting in Christ. That has to hurt. We may have observed stress that results when a husband or wife

decides to follow Jesus instead of their former lifestyle, leading to conflict between partners who no longer share the same values.

Jesus knew that the crisis brought about by his death and resurrection would last until he comes again. Every person who lives is faced with the personal decision of choosing to follow Jesus or not.

Signs of crisis (vv. 54-56)

The disciples who followed Jesus down the dusty road to Jerusalem were faced with a crisis of decision, and the interested bystanders and critics who moved in and out of the crowd were faced with the same choice. Jesus had strong words for them. He took issue with those who failed to recognize that the crisis was imminent: it was a time for decision.

To make his point, Jesus appealed to common wisdom regarding the weather: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens” (vv. 54-55).

Those who listened to Jesus had no TV forecasters or smart phones with weather apps, and they didn’t need them. They knew that a wind blowing dark clouds from the west would bring rain from the Mediterranean Sea, and they’d best seek shelter. They knew that a strong breeze from the south would bring scorching desert winds from the Negev.

The ancients knew how to interpret the signs and take appropriate action, even as current residents and visitors near the coasts or in lowland areas know the importance of making preparations when the storm warnings call for an approaching hurricane.

Some determined people inevitably ignore evacuation notices and stay put, even at the risk of their lives, while also putting the lives of would-be rescuers at risk. Similarly, there will always be people who see the signs that point toward a need for repentance and faith, yet they continue to ignore them.

Jesus had sharp words for those who ignored the signs: “You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (v. 56).

It can be difficult for believers to understand why others reject what Jesus offers. It may remind us of people who voluntarily put their lives in jeopardy. Perhaps you have known a person whose heavy smoking or undisciplined eating led to lung cancer or uncontrolled diabetes. Doctors and family members and friends may have pleaded with them to change their habits for the sake of their health, but they kept right on smoking or over-eating or refusing to exercise – and their lives were shorter because of it.

It’s hard to make sense of that, even as it is hard to look at the darkness of this world and understand why people do not choose to follow Jesus and the path of peace. 📌

We worship a god who understands the sickness of our world, and who offers us a way out. Raindrops do not have the ability to decide where they will land, but humans have both the capability and the responsibility to decide how they will respond to the God who lives among us, who gave himself for us, who calls to us. 📌

In our lives, each of us are falling, as it were, through both time and space, and we all know that one day we will come to the end of our journey. When that time comes, on which side of the rock will we land? NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 25, 2019

Luke 13:10-17

A Straight-up Answer

Take a minute to remember what it is like to be burdened by some obligation or duty or task, and to relive the joy that resulted from seeing it come to an end. Graduation ceremonies come to mind: after years of study and toil, writing papers and cramming for tests, living under the stress of deadlines and high expectations, there comes a day that feels like release from captivity.

Consider the weight of financial debts. Perhaps you can remember the joy of sending in a final car payment, or student loan payment, or mortgage payment. You may have celebrated the joy of being free of the debt.


Some of us have also known the oppression of pain due to deteriorating joints. I've had both hips replaced, nine years apart. As the cartilage lining the joints wore out, the constant pain of bone rubbing against raw bone made it difficult to walk, to sit, or to sleep. After each surgery, I felt liberated. The pain from the incision paled in comparison to what I had known before. I could stand up straight and walk gladly into a new day.


Today's text deals with a bent-over woman who was gifted with a straight-up life, and no surgery was required.

When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. (Luke 13:13)

A crooked spine (vv. 10-13)

We have been following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, in which the gospel writer Luke pulled together a variety of source materials, including some stories that appear in different places in the other gospels, as well as stories that don't appear elsewhere. This is one of those found only in Luke.

Our study text also begins a new section that stretches from Luke 13:10 to 14:35. 

The story involves an unnamed woman in an unnamed town, where Jesus was teaching in the local synagogue. During the first century, each village or town with a significant Jewish population had at least one synagogue, presided over by an *archisynagogos* – the “ruler/chief of the synagogue.” 

It was not unusual for visiting rabbis to speak during the service, and the statement that Jesus was teaching there suggests that the synagogue's leader had allowed it. He was not ready, however, for what happened next.

A woman in attendance stood out by standing low, with such a cramped posture that her pain was obvious to all. She had been that way for 18 years, Luke says, constantly bent over with “a spirit that had crippled her.” Later, Jesus would speak of her having been bound by Satan (v. 16).

As noted in previous lessons, ancient people typically attributed mental illnesses to demon possession,

and by Jesus' day the idea of Satan as the lord of the demons was widespread. Physical ailments could also be attributed to Satan and / or his minions, for everything harmful was thought to be related to evil that was so pervasive in the world.

So, it's not necessary to imagine that the woman had a psychological issue that caused her to hunch over: degenerative arthritis or ankylosing spondylitis that causes vertebrae to fuse in a bent position is a more likely candidate.

Whatever the cause, the woman was locked into a painful stooped posture, unable to look at the sky or even see straight ahead without considerable effort. For 18 years she had suffered, Luke wrote, until Jesus took note of her. She did not seek him, but he sought her. He called her to come over and said “Woman, you are set free from your ailment” (v. 12).

Jesus could heal with a word, but also used touch when he thought it would be helpful to the person's faith or as a way of showing his willingness to touch persons that others would shy away from.

He laid his hands on her, according to v. 13, and “immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.” Can you imagine the relief of finally standing erect after so many years of living with a hunched and aching back?

The woman praised God. Of course she did! And for good reason.

A crooked critique (v. 14)

How would others in the synagogue have reacted? Luke does not say, but surely friends and neighbors of the

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woman would have rejoiced with her, and no doubt other people who suffered from illness or physical handicaps would have surrounded Jesus, hoping they could be healed, too.

This would have created quite a ruckus amid the normally sedate service. The synagogue ruler angrily tried to bring it under control. As one who closely followed the law and encouraged others to do the same, he took offense at the idea of seeking to be healed on the Sabbath.

Trying to restore order, he did not address either the woman or Jesus, but “kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day’” (v. 14). This suggests that others had come forward, and he was shooing them away.

The Jews of Jesus’ day followed not only the written law in the Torah, but also an elaborate “oral law” developed by the rabbis. 📖 The Old Testament taught that Hebrews should keep the sabbath as holy to God by refraining from all work on that day (Exod. 20:8-11, Deut. 5:12-15) – but what is work?

The Mishnah defined 39 main classes of work in tractate *Shabbat* 7.2, but none of them directly involved healing. Some rabbis taught that it was permissible to help ill or injured persons if their lives were thought to be in danger, but only then: lesser ailments could wait for another day. One could eat or drink medicinal foods only if they were also considered normal foods, not as a treatment. Childbirth was one of the few exceptions because it couldn’t wait: a midwife could deliver a baby and tie the umbilical cord – but a healer could not set a broken bone unless the victim’s life depended on it.

The synagogue leader assumed

that other ailing folk could wait until the following day – but who could say if Jesus would still be around? Those who had suffered long wouldn’t have wanted to take the chance.

An upright response (vv. 15-17)

Jesus – whom Luke refers to as “the Lord” – responded sharply: “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” (vv. 15-16). 📖

Jesus used a typical “from the lesser to the greater” rabbinic argument to counteract the synagogue ruler’s criticism. It was common for village households to have domestic animals, which were often tethered rather than corralled in a fence. The oral law allowed one to untie such animals and lead them to water so long as the knot could be untied and retied with one hand, and the beast carried no burden. One could not pour water in a trough or ask someone else to do it, but if a Gentile had poured water for his or her own animals a Jew could also use it (*Mishnah Shabbat* 15:1, 16:8)

To give more consideration to a thirsty donkey than to a crippled daughter of Abraham was not only illogical, but hypocritical, and Jesus did not hesitate to label the ruler and his ilk as hypocrites for their legalistic and self-serving attitudes.

Jesus took pains to describe the woman as a fellow Jew who should be cherished and cared for. They had watched her struggle for 18 long years, faithfully dragging her complaining body to the synagogue every sabbath. Did they not have any compassion for her? Was a ritual rule more important

than a righteous woman’s health?

Jesus’ comment that she had been bound by Satan for those 18 years should not be taken as an endorsement that she had been singled out by a conscious evil entity. Rather, it reflected a common belief that all bad things were due to the power of evil in the world.

The crowd saw how Jesus demonstrated power over harmful things, and so they were “rejoicing greatly at all the wonderful things that he was doing” (v. 17), implying that he healed others, as well.

In contrast, the ruler of the synagogue and his allies opposing Jesus “were put to shame.” They could not see beyond the legalistic lens of tradition to recognize that Jesus had brought something new: the kingdom of God was breaking through as the blessing and hope of all people.

Perhaps this is why Luke has Jesus follow up with two short parables about the coming reign or realm of God. It is like a tiny mustard seed that grows large enough for birds to nest in it (vv. 18-19), or like a bit of yeast mixed into a large amount of flour that will ultimately work its way through the entire mass of dough (vv. 20-21). 📖

The kingdom had come in Jesus and was working its way through the world: those who claimed to be spiritually perceptive should have recognized that.

And what might this story suggest to us? The “bent-over woman” provides a metaphor for the plight of all people. Our tendency is to look after ourselves, focusing on what is in front of us rather than those around us, spiritually bent by the deforming power of sin and selfishness. Jesus’ liberation of the bent-over woman offers hope that we, too, will not only stand up straight, but also live a more upright life. **NFJ**

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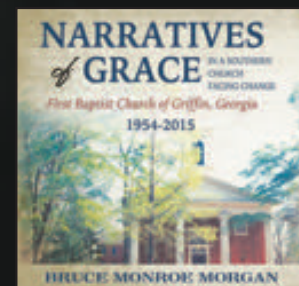
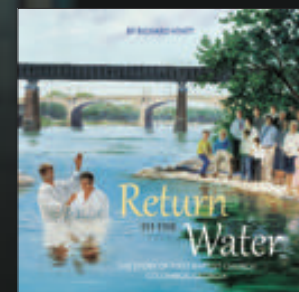
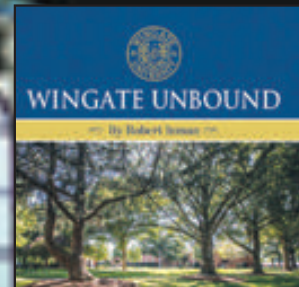
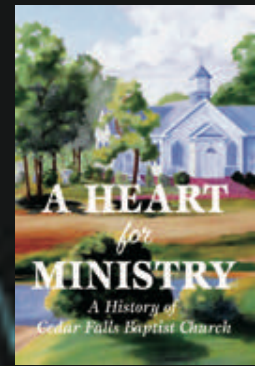
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Gospel choirs seek to build racial harmony through song

BY BILL MOTCHAN

Religion News Service

ST. LOUIS — Emi Belciak teaches third grade in a tough part of suburban St. Louis, where she says her students are exposed to more violence than any child should be.

The school is just three miles from the site in Ferguson, Mo., where Michael Brown was killed.

Five years have passed, but this part of north St. Louis County hasn't completely healed. Belciak wanted to do something to help — so she joined a choir.

The Community Gospel Choir of St. Louis is dedicated to bridging the black and white communities in a metropolitan area rarely associated with racial harmony. The diverse group aims to break down racial, cultural and economic barriers among its members and the community.

The 75-member choir opens its Monday night rehearsals with group prayer. Next, the choir preps for an upcoming performance or refines a new song. The idea is to get the lyrics and music memorized so the choir can improvise in front of an audience, just like a jazz or blues musician would.

At the core of the repertoire are message songs about gathering inner strength in the face of adversity.

Choir members often socialize outside of official choir activities, say group members. They go out to eat and sometimes belt out a rock anthem together at a karaoke bar. Most are Christian. For them, singing gospel music is a religious experience.

“What really attracted me was the choir’s endeavor to bring races together through African-American spirituals and gospel,” said Suzanne Palmer, the group’s musical director. “I thought, this is great, to try and bring the races together through the good news of Jesus. I thought, wow, that’s probably for me.”



The Community Gospel Choir of St. Louis bridges communities in the metropolitan area. RNS photo by Bill Motchan

The group also collaborates with other choral groups of different backgrounds. An early March concert matched the CGC with the New Sunny Mount Baptist Chancel Choir (which drew a primarily black audience) and the Ambassadors of Harmony, a barbershop-quartet-style group with a mostly white fan base.

The CGC is open to all comers, said Tom Ptacek, CGC president.

“We are diverse by race, economics and geography,” said Ptacek. “We made a conscious decision to include people from different economic backgrounds to be part of the choir.”

Up the Mississippi River a bit from St. Louis, the Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir in Minnesota has a similar mission. It seeks to bridge communities across racial, cultural and economic divides through its soulful interpretation of African-American gospel music.

The Twin Cities choir is now in its 26th year. Founder Robert Robinson started the choir at Metropolitan State University to create a diverse community on campus, said Laura Tueting Nelson, TCCGC president.

“Minnesota has a large chorale tradition, and interestingly enough, Scandi-

navians initially showed up to sing in the choir, so it started out being a lot of white people,” Tueting Nelson said. “Then Robert brought in more people of color and he started this group singing. Most of the Scandinavian white folks did not have any experience singing gospel music so he started from the beginning.”

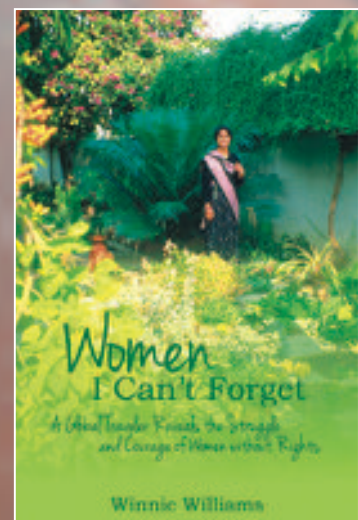
The TCCGC is 20 percent black, representative of its community’s diversity. The group rehearses weekly.

“It’s impressive to me that people are willing to give every Thursday of their lives, as well as performance dates, to sing with this choir,” said Tueting Nelson. “Anyone can join; you don’t have to go through a tryout. We assume they’ll be able to carry a tune.”

Back in St. Louis, Belciak says being part of the gospel choir has been “therapeutic.” She’s always loved singing and said that getting to know choir members has allowed her to meet people from different walks of life and to hear their stories.

“I’m definitely supportive of the mission of the choir,” Belciak said. “Seeing the kind of violence that my kids are exposed to and how it affects their self-esteem, I like to think I’m making a difference and playing a part in the solution.” **NFJ**

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Harry S. Truman (1945–1953)

By Bruce Gourley

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal ushered in an era of social justice in America likened, by Roosevelt, to Jesus' teachings. Conversely, many conservative American Christians with an affinity for Nazism, a German white nationalist ideology, condemned Roosevelt's liberal domestic policies, as well as efforts to intervene militarily against Nazi atrocities in Europe.

World War II, the early 1940s war primarily against Nazism, unified and lifted an ideologically divided America off the sidelines of isolation and transformed the nation into the world's leading military superpower. Following victory over Germany, the post-war years melded American Christianity to militarism, ironically giving rise to a domestic, warmongering nationalist movement in opposition to the same enemies as recently-defeated Nazism: Jews, communists, homosexuals and liberals.

Forgotten was the communistic Soviet Union's pivotal role in the defeat of Nazism. Post-war Soviet aggression abroad led to a "Red Scare," a reference to the red flag of communism, and "McCarthyism," a nod to demagogic U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin.

Christian nationalism provided the ideological foundation of the resulting anti-communist movement championed by a rising young evangelist named Billy Graham and cheered by tens of millions of white evangelicals.

DARK TIMES

Hearings conducted in 1952 by the United States Senate Homeland Security Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations distilled the dark times. That year



President Harry S. Truman is shown at his desk at the White House signing a proclamation declaring a national emergency.

the committee interrogated 124 people suspected of communist activities or sympathies. According to Jewish scholar Aviva Weingarten, 79 were Jews. All 124 invoked their Fifth Amendment rights.

The following year, 39 of 42 employees dismissed from the Fort Monmouth

Laboratories in New Jersey for suspected communist activities were Jews. Also, in 1953 an article published by McCarthy's research director titled "Reds in Our Churches" condemned liberal Protestant clergy as "the largest single group supporting the Communist apparatus in the United States."

This is the 33rd 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.

In addition, McCarthy linked homosexuality to communism in what became known as the “Lavender Scare.”

Straddling the widening chasm between the New Deal, isolationist 1930s and the warmongering Christian Nationalist 1950s, another prominent Baptist strove to accommodate both, a task that would prove impossible.

‘LIGHTFOOT BAPTIST’

Born in Lamar, Mo., in 1884 and the son of a farmer and livestock dealer, Harry S. Truman spent most of his youth in Independence, Mo. His early adult years were unexceptional. Failing to complete college, he worked at clerical jobs for a number of years prior to enlisting in the U.S. Army, serving in Europe during World War I, and achieving the rank of captain.

Growing up in Baptist churches, Truman received baptism in 1902 at the Benton Boulevard Baptist Church in Kansas City. His conversion was only partial.

Describing himself as a “lightfoot Baptist” in 1911, he complained to his future wife Bess Wallace, an Episcopalian, that Baptists “do not want a person to go to shows or dance or do anything for a good time. Well, I like to do all those things and play cards besides. So, you see I am not very strong as a Baptist. Anyhow, I don’t think any church on earth will take you to heaven if you’re not real anyway. I believe in people living what they believe and talking afterwards.”

In 1916 Truman joined the First Baptist Church of Grandview, Mo. Following World War I, he married Bess in 1919, subsequently started a business, and two years later declared bankruptcy.

Acquiring an interest in politics, from the mid-1920s through the early 1930s as a Democrat he held various local and state positions, becoming an insider within Missouri’s political machinery.

POLITICS

Truman’s persistence and steady ascension within Missouri politics finally paid off with his election to the U.S. Senate in 1934 amid the Great Depression. In office

he hewed to progressive New Deal ideals, voicing opposition to corporate greed and Wall Street speculators.

Reelected to the Senate in 1940 against the backdrop of mounting calls from Britain and France for increased U.S. military help in defeating Nazi Germany, Truman visited America’s military bases. Discovering evidence of waste, corruption and corporate profiteering from government military contracts, with the support of Roosevelt and in order to thwart Republican attempts to cut back military production, Truman chaired a congressional subcommittee investigation that put him in the national spotlight and led to a reduction of military contract abuses.

America’s entry into World War II in December 1941 placed foreign policy on the front burner of politicians and public alike. Deployment to North Africa and Europe of American military equipment and soldiers led to the defeat of German-allied Italy in 1943.

Military offensives against Germany followed, including the June 1944 “D-Day” amphibious assault on France’s German-occupied Normandy coast that turned the tide of the war against the Nazis.

The same year Roosevelt, seeking an unprecedented fourth term as president, tapped Truman as his vice-presidential running mate. More centrist than sitting Vice President Henry Wallace, Truman’s selection during a pivotal year assisted Roosevelt in capturing enough conservative to moderate voters to retain the White House in November 1944.

INSTANT PRESIDENCY

Events moved swiftly thereafter. Under assault by American, British and Soviet forces, Nazi Germany showed signs of collapse. At this critical juncture of the war, Roosevelt suddenly passed away, his death on April 12, 1945 shocking the nation. In an instant, Vice President Harry S. Truman, former New Deal-supporter and well-versed in military affairs, became the 33rd president of the United States.

Benefiting from feelings of national solidarity in the wake of Roosevelt’s death and amid widespread enthusiasm from

Allied successes in the war against Nazi Germany, President Truman inherited the task of bringing World War II to a close. Germany, already reeling, surrendered within weeks. Even so, Japan, the sole remaining belligerent nation, remained defiant.

On April 1 and prior to Roosevelt’s death, American forces invaded the Japanese island group of Okinawa, launching the largest amphibious assault in the Pacific Theater. Truman inherited the offensive.

In the face of overwhelming odds, most soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army in the spring and summer of 1945 chose death rather than surrendering. From desperation, Japan’s army placed teenage boys on the front lines of warfare. They were no match for American soldiers.

Following almost three months of fighting, American military forces defeated the Japanese and took control of Okinawa in late June. Victory seemed imminent. Truman’s presidential approval rating reached 87 percent, a figure that remains an all-time high in Gallup polling history.

Japan, however, refused to surrender. Reluctantly, Truman approved the deployment of the ultimate weapon. Having spent years secretly developing atomic weaponry, the world’s first arsenal of mass destruction, in August the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, obliterating Japan’s primary war-producing cities. In the wake of unprecedented death and devastation, Japan formally surrendered on September 2, ending World War II.

POST-WAR

Relief, pride and the euphoria of victory over Germany, tinged with the shock, awe and horror of the atomic assault on Japan, swept across America. President Truman signed the United Nations charter, joining a global effort to effect peace following the war.

Allies America, Britain, France and the Soviet Union divided Europe among themselves, the western portion of the continent largely reverting to pre-war status, while much of the eastern region remained under Soviet occupation.

Germany, the central instigator of the war, came primarily under control of the

U.S., Britain and France, with the Soviet Union occupying the portion that became known as East Germany. In Asia, the Soviets occupied North Korea, while the U.S. maintained troops in South Korea and Japan.

Quickly the U.S. set about the task of aiding a devastated Europe and Soviet Union, the latter in the form of a nationwide Russian Relief Program, whereby American organizations, citizens and churches collaborated to provide desperately-needed aid for starving Soviet families during the harsh winter of 1945–46.

COLD WAR

Nonetheless, suspicion of Soviet communism remained. Upon perceived Soviet aggression in Europe in 1947, American good will toward the former ally evaporated. Alarmed, Truman raised the specter of global communism and with the support of Congress opposed Soviet efforts, ushering in the Cold War.

Formalizing an alliance with European nations to advance democracy, the 1948 Marshall Plan, named after Secretary of State George C. Marshall, provided assistance for the redevelopment of areas devastated during World War II, while also fostering loyalties to counter Soviet influence in the region.

Even as President Truman evidenced a firm foreign policy hand in fighting the spread of communism, domestic troubles in the late 1940s weighed on his popularity, including a brief post-war economic recession in 1945–46 evidenced in a drop in Gross Domestic Product, an uptick in unemployment, rising inflation and labor strikes.

Most visibly, in January 1946 some 800,000 steel workers walked off the job in a labor dispute, the largest strike in American history. A rail strike followed. Truman's approval ratings slumped. Republicans in November reclaimed control of Congress for the first time since 1930. But in whipsaw fashion the recession soon gave way to a national economic recovery.

Seizing the moment in an expanding peacetime economy, Truman sought to capitalize on the social legacy of FDR. Hoping to win his first presidential election and return Congress to Democratic control,

the president proposed a raft of domestic legislation that soon became known as the "Fair Deal."

'FAIR DEAL'

In the name of fairness Truman proposed federal aid to education, national health insurance, expanded social security, a minimum wage increase, a large tax cut for lower-income workers, more robust public housing, aid for struggling farmers, enhanced protections for migrant Mexican laborers recruited to harvest crops, additional public works projects, and greater civil rights protections, including an anti-lynching law and the abolition of poll taxes.

Truman's Fair Deal irked Republicans. At the same time, his commitment to civil rights reform angered southern conservatives of both parties. An executive order by Truman eliminating racial discrimination in the armed forces in the summer of 1948 proved to be the final straw for many southern Democrats.

South Carolina Democratic U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond broke from his party. Resorting to language formerly deployed in defense of black slavery, Thurmond formed the States Rights Democratic Party (also known as the Dixie-

crats) in support of the status quo of white supremacy and racial segregation.

With a Republican Congress and a splintered Democratic Party, Truman's progressive policies stood little chance of passing. Trailing in the polls a month prior to the presidential election, the president remained confident that his progressive vision resonated with most voters.

In an October 1948 radio broadcast Truman trained his fire on Republicans' disinterest in the well-being of ordinary Americans:

Republicans approve of the American farmer, but they are willing to help him go broke. They stand four-square for the American home — but not for housing. They are strong for labor — but they are stronger for restricting labor's rights. They favor minimum wage — the smaller the minimum wage the better. They endorse educational opportunity for all — but they won't spend money for teachers or for schools. They think modern medical care and hospitals are fine — for people who can afford them. They approve of Social Security benefits — so



Poppy presentation to President Harry S. Truman, April 29, 1946. National Archives and Records Administration.

much so that they took them away from almost a million people... They think American standard of living is a fine thing — so long as it doesn't spread to all the people. And they admire the Government of the United States so much that they would like to buy it.

Truman's instincts prevailed. A growing middle class enjoying new cars, new homes and expanding bank accounts largely approved of the president's policies. Proving the polls wrong, Truman easily won the presidential election, claiming more popular and electoral votes than Republicans and Dixiecrats combined. Only South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana — southern states wherein black voters were largely disenfranchised — voted for the racist platform of Thurmond. The Senate and House of Representatives, meanwhile, flipped back to the Democrats.

Nonetheless, the new Congress opposed most of Truman's Fair Deal policies. The president's successes came in the form of a minimum wage raise, expanded Social Security coverage and benefits, and more public housing.

ATOMIC POWER

Then came Aug. 29, 1949, the day that forever changed the world as the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb at a test site in Kazakhstan. Suddenly, domestic policy again took a backseat to foreign affairs.

Achieving atomic military power equal to that of the U.S., the Soviet Union for the first time posed an existential threat to the world. A race for atomic superiority ensued. Signaling the beginning of the U.S. Military-Industrial Complex, Truman secretly called for the tripling of defense spending in order to build up military forces and develop a hydrogen bomb, far more deadly than the atomic bomb, for the purpose of containing global communism.

Fears of domestic communism spread like wildfire. From the West Coast to Montana to the East, in areas urban and rural, for decades the leftist Communist Party of the USA had resonated among

many farmers and working-class Americans and influenced labor movements. Now, the Soviet acquisition of atomic power cast a dark shadow over American communists.

In Los Angeles weeks following the Soviet's atomic test, Southern Baptist evangelist Billy Graham held his first large, multi-denominational and months-long crusade. Speaking to the fears of the hundreds of thousands in attendance and the millions following newspaper and radio coverage of the revivalist crusade, Graham changed the course of politics and religion.

"Western culture and its fruits had its foundations in the Bible, the Word of God, and in the revivals of the 17th and 18th centuries," the evangelist declared. "Communism, on the other hand, has decided against God, against Christ, against the Bible, and against all religion. Communism is not only an economic interpretation of life — communism is a religion that is inspired, directed, and motivated by the devil himself who has declared war against Almighty God."

GREATER POWER

Reverberating from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. and all points in between, Graham's words, on the heels of the Soviet atomic tests, ignited a national religious revival unlike any previous. Little matter that Graham incorrectly attributed Christianity to the nation's founding, thus denying his own Baptist heritage that contributed to America's establishment as a secular nation.

The godless Soviet communists now possessed the capability of destroying the U.S. at a moment's notice. The only power higher than nuclear was God, and to God Graham pointed America.

For two months Graham's Los Angeles crusade spread the message of godless communism and the need for a national religious awakening. Progressive religious leaders throughout America took notice.

Twenty mainstream religious groups, primarily Christian and including the interdenominational Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, joined the anti-communist chorus in a campaign of "Religion in American Life." Among participants, the Jewish Synagogue Council of

America hoped to soften widespread dislike of Jews.

Leaders of the campaign turned to a prominent but nominal Baptist who, like the late Episcopalian Franklin D. Roosevelt, infrequently attended church during his years of political leadership in the nation's capital.

"I'm a Baptist," Truman wrote the year of his ascension to the presidency, "because I think that sect gives the common man the shortest and most direct approach to God."

Cigars and drink were the late Roosevelt's indulgences. Truman's love of poker and bourbon reflected his absence of full devotion to accepted evangelical norms.

'TRUST IN GOD'

An unlikely national spokesperson for Religion in American Life, President Truman nonetheless enthusiastically embraced public religion. Echoing Billy Graham's misleading characterization of America's founding on religious principles, Truman falsely interpreted history in an Oct. 30, 1949 radio address.

"When the United States was established," the president declared to a national audience, "its coins bore witness to the American faith in a benevolent deity. The motto then was 'In God We Trust.' That is still our motto and we, as a people, still place our trust in God."

Nothing in Truman's statement was true. Early U.S. coins bore the inscriptions "United States of America" on one side, "Liberty" on the other. Never the motto of the U.S., the phrase "In God We Trust" first appeared on select American coins of the Civil War era, thereafter occasionally and intermittently stamped on some late 19th- and early 20th-century coins.

As to Americans historically placing their trust in God, majorities in the nation's early years and significant minorities in more recent times did not, while religious Americans throughout history had collectively worshiped a pantheon of gods, rather than a singular deity.

Truman concluded his remarks with words signaling the dawning of an exclusive Christian nationalism that effectively sidelined tens of millions of Americans:

Just as an active faith sustained and guided the pioneers in conquering the wilderness, so today an active faith will sustain and guide us as we work for a just peace, freedom for all, and a world where human life is truly held sacred. Religious faith and religious work must be our reliance as we strive to fulfill our destiny in the world.

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

In addition to the Soviets' acquisition of atomic weapons, parallel foreign events further stoked emerging Christian nationalism. In response to failed Soviet efforts to annex West Germany the year prior, democratic nations formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to help contain communism.

Meanwhile, during Billy Graham's Los Angeles crusade, China formally adopted communism, joining North Korea in advancing communism in Asia. Less than a year later, communist North Korea triggered a new war in June 1950 by attacking democratic South Korea. In response, the U.N. and the U.S. entered the Korean War on behalf of South Korea.

Creating a fake history of America and religion in the face of the "Red Scare" domestically and afar, Graham, Truman, Protestants conservative to liberal, and the Jewish Synagogue Council of America in the fall of 1950 opened the door to casting aside America's heritage of secular government and religion-state separation in order to restrain godless communism.

As Truman turned to religion to wage war on communism, he nonetheless vetoed the domestic Subversive Activities Control Act of 1950 (or the McCarran Act). Not persuaded, Congress overrode the veto. Empowered, Sen. Joseph McCarthy took the lead in using his political powers to aggressively ferret out communist sympathies among the American public.

"McCarthyism" consumed America for the remainder of Truman's presidency and beyond. Suspected communists, primarily liberals, Jews, homosexuals and other minorities, came under surveillance and scrutiny of the U.S. government.

While the president increasingly opposed the excesses of McCarthy's constitutional abuses, evangelist Billy Graham never wavered in his wholehearted support of the Wisconsin senator's "Christian" crusade.

REVISIONISM

Through the remainder of his White House years, Soviet aggression, the Korean War and the rise of conservative, anti-communist Christian nationalism provided the backdrop of Truman's presidency. As national currents moved ever further rightward, the Missouri native struggled to balance his support of ascendant Christian nationalism with a more inclusive worldview of social justice and human equality.

Frequently the president spoke to religious groups. Often he affirmed common Protestant, Catholic and Jewish values. Sometimes, as he did in an address to Baptist missionaries in 1950, he elevated Christian morality as the "only way."

Typically he incorrectly interpreted, as he did in a 1951 address at Washington's National City Christian Church, the nation's religious foundation as "social justice" for all and opposed to "discrimination based upon race, creed or national origin."

Co-mingling progressive religious ideals with conservative Christian demands, Truman's historical revisionism in advocacy of anti-communist Christian nationalism found vivid expression in his 1951 Washington address:

[The] keeping of our Republic depends upon keeping the deep religious convictions on which it was founded. From the worship and teachings of the synagogues and churches of our land, have come a moral integrity, a concern for justice and human welfare, a sense of human equality, a love of human freedom, and a practice of brotherhood which are necessary to the life of our national institutions.

America's imagined, inclusive religious heritage and convictions, in short, were the very opposite of godless and oppres-

sive communism. Conversely, the reality of centuries of white supremacy embodied in black slavery, racial and ethnic terrorism and apartheid, and systematic racial inequality remained unmentioned.

Addressing the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church the same year, President Truman summarized his commitment to Christian nationalism whitewashed of historical perspective and contrasted with the atrocities of anti-religious communism.

The "danger that threatens the world today is utterly and totally opposed to" the "religious principles upon which our Nation and our whole way of life are founded," he declared. "The international Communist movement is based on a fierce and terrible fanaticism. It denies the existence of God and, wherever it can, it stamps out the worship of God."

"Our religious faith," Truman continued, "gives us the answer to the false beliefs of communism. Our faith shows us the way to create a society where man can find his greatest happiness under God. Surely, we can follow that faith with the same devotion and determination the Communists give to their godless creed."

BAPTIST VOICE

Truman voiced a similar theme in an address to a Baptist World Alliance meeting in 1950:

Communism attacks our main basic values, our belief in God, our belief in the dignity of man and the value of human life, our belief in justice and freedom. It attacks the institutions that are based on these values. It attacks our churches, our guarantees of civil liberty, our courts, our democratic form of government. Communism claims that all these things are merely tools of self-interest and greed — that they are weapons used by one class to oppress another.

Sometimes Truman evoked Baptist history, as he did in his National City Christian Church speech:



President Harry S. Truman signs the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 establishing the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. Behind the president, left to right: Senators Tom Connally, Eugene D. Millikin, Edwin C. Johnson, Thomas C. Hart, Brien McMahon, Warren R. Austin, and Richard B. Russell.

[T]he makers of our Constitution believed in religious toleration. There was the highest type of religion, forbidding the use of coercion or force in matters of mind and spirit. Religious freedom was a part of their religious faith. And they received that from Roger Williams, a Baptist, from William Penn, a Quaker, and from Lord Baltimore, a Catholic. That's the reason for our constitutional approach to religious freedom.

On the other hand, Truman stopped far short of affirming his faith forebears' hallmark principle of separation of religion and state strongly affirmed in America's founding.

"Democracy is, first and foremost, a spiritual force," the president declared in a 1952 address to the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Alexandria, Va. American democracy "is built upon a spiritual basis — and on a belief in God and an observance of moral principles. And in the long run only the Church can provide that basis. Our founders knew this truth — and we will neglect it at our peril."

Intertwined as one, democracy and Christian belief in God stood as civilization's lone bulwark against communism. Judaism, by virtue of common belief in the biblical God, in the minds of some shared an affinity with Christianity.

Converted to Zionism during World War II, Truman immediately recognized Israel's May 14, 1948 declaration of nationhood that triggered the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and resulted in Jewish occupation of formerly Arab Palestine. Additionally, President Truman frequently spoke at the annual National Conference of Christians and Jews.

Islam, the third monotheistic and Abrahamic faith and practiced by the majority of Arabs, Truman largely ignored throughout his political career.

TERM LIMITS

An advocate of Christian nationalism inclusive of Jews and opposed to communism, yet critical of McCarthyism's unconstitutional excesses by 1952, Truman declined to seek reelection. His decision reflected controversies in his political and personal lives.

At odds with his Christian language, Truman's habitual poker playing and bourbon drinking, deemed unpresidential,

never proved popular with the Christian public. His limited policies toward racial equality angered white southerners. Staffing scandals in the latter years of his presidency also weighed on public perceptions.

In addition, the 1951 passage of the 22nd Amendment prohibiting third presidential terms and preventing future presidents from serving more than 10 years if assuming the presidency mid-term, created an unfavorable atmosphere for Truman. Above all, the ongoing Korean War and mounting American casualties damaged his favorability ratings.

Sagging polls, advancing age and declining health also contributed to Truman's decision not to seek reelection. Earlier having achieved the highest poll ratings in presidential history, in February 1952 Truman garnered the lowest Gallup presidential rating of all time: 22 percent.

Leaving office in 1953, Truman returned to Independence, Mo., and the house he and his wife Bess years earlier had shared with Bess' mother. Believing that accepting employment in the corporate world would diminish the integrity of the presidential office, Truman declined many opportunities.

High-minded but absent personal savings, the former failed businessman lived on his monthly Army pension of \$112.56 supplemented with income from the publication of his memoirs.

Remaining a supporter of Democratic presidential and senatorial candidates, Truman also raised funding to build his presidential library in Independence, establishing a practice later adopted by other former presidents.

In 1965 at the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Medicare bill and presented the first two Medicare cards to the Trumans.

Truman — hesitant Baptist, public Christian nationalist, anti-communist warrior and transitional U.S. president — died in 1972 at age 88 due to multiple organ failure. His private funeral took place at the Truman Library. Bess died 10 years later in 1982 amid the early years of a new, more powerful and increasingly dangerous incarnation of Christian nationalism. **NFJ**

Praying hard prayers

BY JESSICA MCDUGALD

A few years ago, while I was pregnant with Samuel, a baby that I had just learned would not live, I spent night after night sitting in the shower praying hard, angry prayers.

If being honest, I was yelling — yelling to God, yelling *at* God.

I recounted this in a small group maybe a year later. My hope was that, in sharing this, I would open the door for others to say, “I too have prayed hard prayers like this.”

But when I was done speaking, the room full of people blinked back at me silently, mouths open and eyes wide. That moment has stuck with me.

Perhaps I’d said something wrong. Was I incorrect in thinking I was allowed to speak angrily with God?

I’ve mulled over this instance for a while now. I suppose there *is* the issue of reverence that comes into question when one is admittedly yelling at God. Can one simultaneously fear and yell at God?

I guess it depends on one’s definition of “God-fearing.” To me, a God-fearing person is one who knows, always, that God is God and she is not.

In 1 Samuel, Hannah prayed for a son so fervently that Eli, a priest, mistook her for being drunk. Her response when being called out on this?

“I am a woman who is deeply troubled.

I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman: I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.”

Another example is found in Numbers 11. Here, Moses is in the desert with the rest of the Israelites, and they have complained nonstop. Moses gets fed up and cries out to God.

Hear what he says. Ahem:

“Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you, that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did *I* conceive all these people? Did *I* give them birth? Why do you tell *me* to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land *you* promised on oath to their ancestors? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, ‘give us meat to eat!’ I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me!”

Can’t you just see Moses, standing in the desert, pointing his index finger toward the sky and jabbing with each sentence?

“I’m not these people’s mama, God!

You were the one who promised them this land, not me! If this is the thanks I get for coming this far, go ahead and take me out.”

Bold prayers from two bold people who for sure were well aware that God was God.

Here’s what I know: God is very big and yet, God is also very close. God is both the creator of the entire universe — beyond what our small human brains have even figured out so far — and somehow still wildly in love with us.

We are so loved that God would leave 99 sheep to find the one missing from the flock — even if the one sat in the shower and poured out her soul, her grief and anguish and broken heart all wrapped into a few choice words.

If irreverence is failure to acknowledge that God is God, then by meeting God where God already is, bringing our pain to God we *do* acknowledge God as the one to whom are we praying.

God’s “God-ness” is in no way diminished by the flailing of my verbal fists. God is not threatened by, nor is God unable to handle, my questions, my doubts and my anger.

I feel OK saying God would much rather me bring my fear and complaints than to pretend I don’t have fear or complaints, or worse, assume that God is too lofty for them. After all, did Christ — fully human, fully divine — not put on our skin and feel our suffering?

God is near — inviting us into holy communion right now, just as we are. May we cast our cares in confidence that God cares for us and is big enough to handle those cares — anger and all. Thanks be to God. **NFJ**

—Jessica McDougald, a student at Campbell University Divinity School, lives in Raleigh, N.C., with her husband and daughter. Her “In My Defense” blogs are available at 1tojp.wordpress.com.



Grace & mercy

Kentucky ministry serves inmates seeking a fresh start

BY E.B. SELF

Christians believe in God's grace and mercy. We would like for God to be gracious toward us all the time, and we definitely wish for mercy at the last judgment.

There are those, however, who are concerned not only about receiving grace and mercy but also about extending these gifts to others.

Among the many people needing grace and mercy are women in the Christian County jail in Hopkinsville, Ky. They come from various places and have done some bad things.

Many are users of illegal drugs and often have sold them. These women may have engaged in theft and sometimes prostitution. And the women themselves have frequently been treated badly, at times by family members.

There are often issues of physical and mental health. While in jail, the women usually do not feel or look their best.

Yet each woman is someone's daughter, perhaps someone's sister or cousin. There are granddaughters and mothers. Since the women come from various places, they may not have anyone nearby to help them.

So, Joanna Mack goes to the jail three times a week — looking for those who wish to lead a better life. She is not always

encouraged but keeps searching for anyone she can help.

If you talk to Joanna you might think she has a British accent, but not quite. She is from New Zealand. Her father was Scottish, and her mother was Samoan.

Joanna and others started a program for the jailed women, and she became the director. Grace and Mercy is a Christian residential recovery program. Joanna gets permission from various judges for jailed women to enter the program.

The idea is for each selected woman to take an approved leave of absence from the jail, live in a special place and stay in the program for a year. Joanna's emphasis is the redeeming power of Jesus.

The women go to classes, including Bible study, personal development and job training. They try to find jobs while keeping up with their classes. Other women in the program are regarded as their sisters.

If they finish the year, they graduate. Sometimes their jail sentences are reduced or suspended. Not everyone is successful. Some return to jail. However, many women benefit from the program and show much progress.

Some work at Chick-fil-A and the YMCA. Others have been hired at a local mental health center and community college. Some clean houses; some attend college. Their grades have often been good.

Joanna has helped some of the women, after completing the program, to regain custody of their children.

To raise money and provide jobs, some of the women make and sell "Grace and Mercy Fudge" while others work in a "nearly new" store selling inexpensive furniture and clothes.

The Grace and Mercy program is housed on South Main Street in Hopkins-



Joanna Mack

ville, across the street from First Baptist Church. The big white house was a home for the church's pastor prior to the Civil War.

While the outside still looks like a small mansion of the Old South, the inside provides suitable housing for 20–25 hurting but recovering women.

Grace and Mercy has some professional staff but depends greatly on volunteers to help with cooking, transportation and other needs such as raising funds.

In her elegant accent, Joanna says she comes from the really deep South — the South Pacific. But it is in this Kentucky home that many are touched by the grace and mercy she and others extend to women seeking a fresh start in life. **NFJ**

—E.B. (Ben) Self of Hopkinsville, Ky., is a retired professor and pastor with degrees from Baylor, Yale and Vanderbilt universities. He is the author of *Ways of Thinking about God: The Bible, Philosophy, and Science (Nurturing Faith, 2013)*.



Persistent Compassion

A conversation with Judson-Rice honoree Wayne Smith

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — An early educator, advocate and ally for those impacted by HIV/AIDS, Baptist layman Wayne Smith was honored April 25 with the Judson-Rice Award from Nurturing Faith. He is the founding director of Knoxville-based Samaritan Ministry.

The dinner event was sponsored by the board of directors of Nurturing Faith Publishing and hosted by Central Baptist Church of Bearden, where Wayne and his wife Laura are members.

Fellow church member and Samaritan Ministry volunteer Bill McConnell, who serves on the Nurturing Faith board, paid tribute to Wayne's compassionate and effective ministry.

"Wayne was an educator, professionally," said Bill. "When he retired he continued to be an educator — telling the story of how to deal with the HIV and AIDS situation."

However, there is a deeply personal touch to Wayne's ministry, Bill noted. He told of delivering food to persons served by Samaritan Ministry and hearing repeatedly comments such as, "Wayne needs to know about this" or "I need to talk to Wayne."

Bill added: "This man has a ministry. He's really the pastor for many in this town who do not have a pastor."

The roots of the ministry founded in 1997 can be traced to the impact of Baptist leader Jimmy Allen's book, *Burden of a Secret*, on then-education minister Mack Bingham. Some Central Bearden members formed an HIV/AIDS educational program for Sunday school classes.

A mission statement grew out of that experience: "Our church should be a beacon of light and hope, by the way of Christ, to anyone who suffers from or has family or friends who suffer from this disease."



Well-deserved honor — Bill McConnell (left) calls his friend and Judson-Rice Award honoree Wayne Smith "the pastor for many in [Knoxville] who have no pastor."

Wayne Smith, along with Steve Humphreys, put the statement into action by visiting someone struggling with AIDS and the ministry was born.

Following the award presentation by Nurturing Faith Director Kelly Belcher, a hospice chaplain in Asheville, N.C., editor John Pierce conducted an interview with Wayne Smith. The following conversation is adapted from that discussion.

NF: Wayne, you're the 19th recipient of the Judson-Rice Award. The first one went to our friend Jimmy Allen who died this past year. Jimmy, like you, was an early compassionate Baptist voice for those impacted by HIV/AIDS, which took the lives of some of his own family members.

How do you remember Jimmy?

WS: Laura and I got to know Jimmy Allen at a [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship] meeting several years ago. I guess the first thing is he was kind. He was a gentle, kind person. He cared about other people.

I remember that he cried a lot. He was an easy crier. When he talked about the experience he had with HIV in his own family — with his son and his other son's wife and his grandchildren — he cried.

He was touched in very, very deep ways by what happened to his family. So, that's what I remember. I also remember him saying to Laura and me that, "Sometimes we have to let our love trump our theology." Those are words of wisdom.

NF: Starting a Baptist-led ministry to those impacted by HIV/AIDS must have created two public relations concerns: Inside the church there was the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, and outside the church there's the stigma associated with Baptists.

WS: Amen.

NF: How have you faced those dual challenges?

WS: The first word that comes to my mind is persistence. We just had to keep being out there and being present. We've gone to a lot of places where nobody expected Christians — especially Baptists — to be there. That has made an impression.

We're usually the odd man out. When we go to CBF meetings, we're the only ones talking about HIV. So, people do the thing where they'll come by and see HIV on our booth and then go over to the other side.

Whoever has the booth across from ours gets more business than they ever thought — because they get all the people who don't want to talk to us.

Then we go to a meeting like the U.S. Conference on AIDS and we're usually the only faith-based organization there. And we're certainly the only Baptist church in the room.

So, we get a lot of comments like, "Does your pastor know you're here?" That's my favorite one, and then, "What kind of Baptist are you?"

Years ago when we were getting started with this I went to a seminar at the Knox County Health Department and I was late. Some of you will not be surprised.

The woman running the meeting saw me come in the back and said, "Oh, there's Wayne Smith from Central Baptist Church of Bearden." There was a long period of sustained applause — and I didn't understand. I really wasn't sure what was going on.

So, I sat down and tried to hide. At the end of the meeting an elderly lady came up — she was probably younger than I am today — and hugged my neck and wept.

She said, "I've been waiting 20 years for the church to show up at one of these meetings."

Showing up is important. Sometimes you don't even have to say very much. You can show up and be the presence of Christ.

NF: Let's talk about Samaritan Ministry's evolution and expansion. What areas of ministry or what particular issues are being addressed today, and how are you doing that?

WS: We've certainly seen a lot of changes in the HIV world with the evolution of the disease. It's a manageable, chronic disease now for most people.

What we've seen is there's an intersection with the opioid crisis and the Hepatitis C epidemic that are in the news every day. They are all connected.

Most of the time when we're talking about HIV at a conference or some community meeting, it's linked up with those other two things. So, we've moved into those areas.

We do Hepatitis C testing. We work with the Helen Ross McNabb Center. We're trying to figure out how we keep there from being an HIV outbreak because of injection drug use. So those are areas we've moved into and tried to be proactive with.

NF: What do we need to know about HIV/AIDS today? What are the trends? What's happening now?

WS: Well, HIV has changed a lot, so people today are living long and healthy lives if they're on medication. We've learned that people who are on medication and do well with that are not going to infect anybody else.

That's something we didn't know a few years ago. So that's great news for people who are living with HIV and people they care about and love.

The other thing today is there's a medication people can take that will prevent them from becoming infected. That's something a lot of people don't know about and the word needs to get out.

It's called PrEP, and it's something people can take as a way to protect themselves from becoming infected with HIV. Those are some of the big things.

There's also a lot going on in research today about finding a cure. There's no

vaccine, and there's no cure. But there's an awful lot of work being done to try to bring some of those things about.

NF: Early on, this became known as "the gay disease." But the impact is much broader than on LGBTQ persons. What are the communities where we've seen a rise in HIV/AIDS?

WS: I always say to people that HIV can affect anybody. We see it in all ages, whether gay or straight. People who put themselves at risk, using a needle with HIV in it. It does affect all kinds of people.

You still see new HIV infections in gay and bisexual men; that's true. But in our ministry we work with a lot of women. We work with, fortunately, only a few children, but it can affect anybody.

The stigma, based on a false sort of ideas about a disease, gets in the way of education and compassion. We often use judgment when we ought to use love.

One of the things important to me is that I've gotten to know a lot of great people through this ministry — people I have worked with who walk around every day with HIV.

I've met wonderful people who — had this turn not been taken in my life — I never would have met. Many of those are gay men. And I have a burden for them — especially for those gay people who are friends of mine, who are Christians and find it hard to be part of the family of God.

NF: Did you discover by accident that you were what is called an ally?

WS: I did, I did. Laura and I were at a dinner in L.A. where I was receiving [the 2005 Ryan White Memorial HIV Education Award] from the National Education Association. We were in a room of educators, teachers from across the country.

At the end they asked all of the "allies" in the room to stand up, and Laura and I were just sitting there because we didn't know what they were talking about. The guy sitting next to me punches me and says, "That's you and your wife. You need to stand up."

In a room that was probably 75 percent gay people who are in education, teaching

“We often use judgment when we ought to use love... I’ve gotten to know a lot of great people through this ministry — people I have worked with who walk around every day with HIV.”



across this country, there was a smattering of straight couples like Laura and me. We were the allies.

We were the people who are willing to stand up and say what’s right and be a voice for our friends. That’s when I learned what an ally was.

NF: You collaborate really well. Where have you found good help and meaningful partners?

WS: It’s been surprising to me how much we’re able to partner with people outside the purview of the Christian community. We have great partners in government and in not-for-profits.

I mentioned the Helen Ross McNabb Center. That’s not a faith-based organization. It’s one of the large mental health organizations in our community.

We work with health departments and the government. It really does take a village to do the things that need to be done to make an impact on an epidemic like HIV

and Hepatitis C and the opioid crisis.

It’s been cool to see where those unlikely partnerships are. Now, that doesn’t mean we don’t like Christian partners, too. We have some great Christian partners like Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church and Central Baptist Church of Fountain City.

And, of course, the Tennessee Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has really been helping us for many years and continues to do that in so many ways.

It’s always been about being at the table because often people are surprised to see the faith community at the table. They’re expecting us to not be very nice. And I don’t get that. I really don’t. I hang out with a bunch of nice Christians, but that’s not how we’re known sometimes.

They expect us to want to take over and have the agenda — and that if they don’t play by our rules we will get up and leave. That’s sometimes the expectation.

So, it’s really nice to just go and sit and listen, and be a part of what’s happening in

the community. You’ll be surprised by the great friends and allies you can make just doing that.

NF: What’s next for Samaritan Ministry?

WS: Well, God hasn’t revealed that to me yet. I don’t know the answer to that question.

I know there are changes in what is needed in the fight against HIV. I find myself involved in more advocacy, more talking about the epidemic, and maybe less hands-on in some cases — although somebody gets sick and then that changes.

I think as the epidemic moves forward and we get closer and closer to ending the epidemic and bringing the rates of HIV down, that Samaritan Ministry ought to evolve with that. We don’t want to stay stuck in the same place.

HIV is not about death and dying. HIV is about living and celebrating — living a life and building family and building relationships, thinking about the future. That’s what it is. **NFJ**

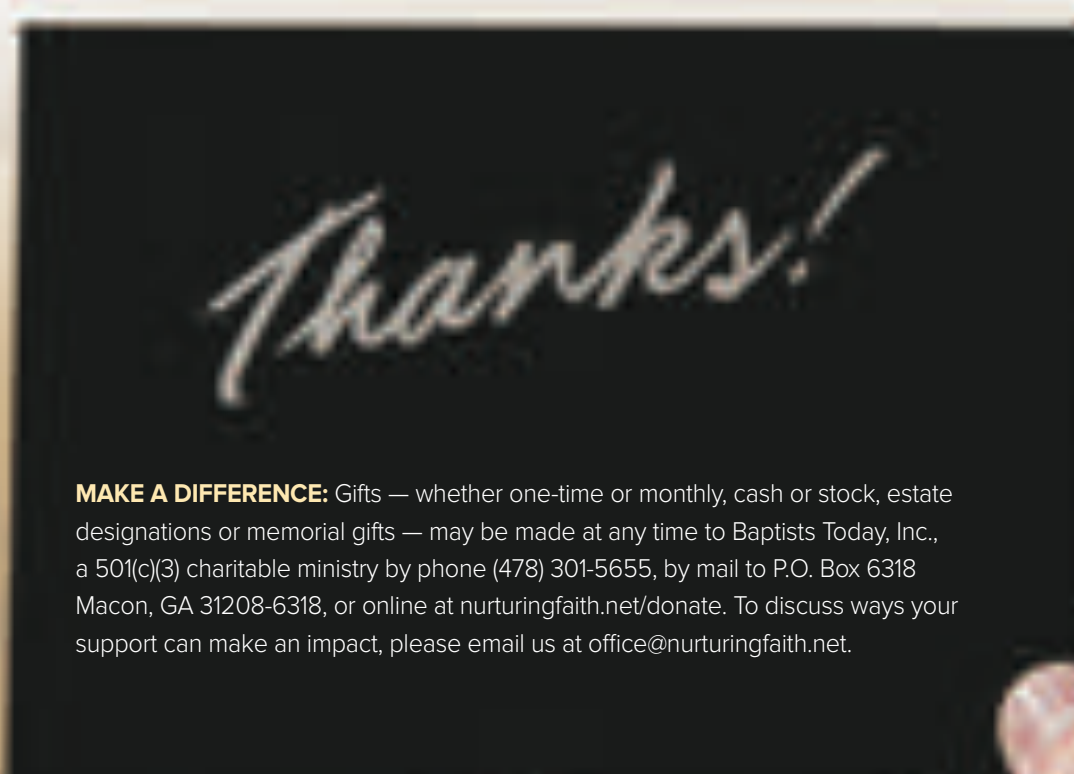
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GETTING THIS STORY OUT — Andy and Tina Plank with their son Sam on his 18th birthday. RNS photo courtesy of the Plank family.

‘LAST GIFT’

*With suicide rising, religious communities
move beyond condemnation to care*

BY ELIZABETH EVANS
Religion News Service

When Andy and Tina Plank discovered that their son Sam had killed himself, one of their first calls was to the minister of their church. As soon as he got the news, J.C. Austin dropped everything and met them at the hospital.

Newly installed as pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, Pa., Austin had only been working there for a few months, a relative newcomer who had arrived in the wake of a bitter internal feud over doctrine and practice that split the congregation.

Now he had to step in to bring comfort to a family at the worst moment of their lives.

In the midst of the shock and pain that often attends such unexpected deaths, it's crucial that clergy and congregants reach out to those left behind, offering a message of grace and hope rather than one of rejection and condemnation, Austin said.

“The church has to be right in the middle of offering pastoral care to those impacted,” he said.

Offering pastoral care included helping the Planks tell the story of their son's life and death.

A freshman at Kutztown University who had only been in college for a week, Sam Plank was 18 when he died. His story didn't have to be public. Many aren't. But his parents decided almost as soon as the tragedy occurred to talk candidly about how their son died.

“Part of my healing journey,” said Tina Plank, “is getting this story out there so that perhaps we can save another family.”

Numerous faith traditions have a history of criticizing suicide as a sin — and one that leads to damnation.

But some faith leaders are now working not only to offer those facing despair help in addressing the root causes of suicide but to remove the stigma that keeps so many suffering families quiet after the death of a loved one.

The fact is that across America, the suicide rate is on the rise, contributing to a drop in life expectancy. For Americans aged 10–34, it's the second-leading cause of death, a silent epidemic that has now begun to get sustained attention. And a survey of Protestant churchgoers found that

1 in 3 had a family member or friend who had committed suicide.

Even with access to multiple secular agencies that step in when there's a crisis, it's still often local clergy who are called to work with a family in the first throes of shock and grief.

Sam, a former tour guide at Hellertown, Pa.'s Lost River Caverns who had a profound love for nature, died on March 5, 2018.

As soon as they got the news, Andy Plank said, members of their fellowship gathering, known as a Koinonia group, sprang into action. "They were there that night and day, helping us get through it, organizing places for people to stay, praying and holding on to us."

A year later, he still recalls the details of that dark time with gratitude, including all the people who volunteered help with the reception — and helped them find a funeral home. He also credits the family's former congregation, Pluckemin Presbyterian in New Jersey, with rallying to their side.

A group for those grappling with anxiety or depression was already in the works at First Presbyterian when Sam died, according to Tina Plank. In the months that followed his death, the congregation also instituted a gathering for congregants who were grieving.

Sam's grandmother, Ellen Plank, also turned to her church — First Presbyterian Church in West Chester, Pa. — to help her grieve his death.

"If it wasn't for this church, I probably wouldn't be sitting here," she said. "They were such a comfort."

After a few months, she approached the church's associate pastor, Caroline Cupp, and asked: How can we talk about teen suicide here?

After giving it careful thought, the staff arranged two meetings with mental health professionals, many of whom happen to be members of the church. One was oriented toward adults, many of them parents and grandparents. The other was focused on young people closer to Sam's age, with the aim of assisting them to recognize signs of depression and how to reach out to adults.

The church also has volunteer Stephen

Ministers available for those who have suffered a loss.

"As a society, we don't do enough to address this issue openly," said Cupp, a former hospital chaplain. She noted that there's a lot of evidence that suicide is contagious, both in communities and in families, and faith groups can help stem that.

"Mental health needs to be talked about all the time," she said.

On the other hand, she said, it's their pastoral responsibility to respect the wishes of family members. "So, if a family says we don't want this spoken about, or doesn't authorize it, we can't talk about it. Our first allegiance is to respect the choices of that particular family."

While faith can be protective, it can, if handled the wrong way, said Cupp, be a negative factor in those with suicidal thoughts.

There's still often a stigma in talking about mental illness in faith groups.

"Churches, as well as schools and other organizations, really can help reduce the stigma" associated with open conversation about suicide, said Tracy Burke, a psychologist and member of First Presbyterian.

In the Jewish tradition, said Rabbi Lawrence Troster of West Chester's Keshet Israel synagogue, a suicide is handled like any other death, with no differences in burial or mourning practices.

"If you see (the underlying cause) as an illness, rather than putting in a special category, it helps a lot," he said.

At a time of profound loss, he said, it's not appropriate to offer facile explanations or theological discussions.

"One's presence is the most important thing," he said.

During mental and physical illness, Troster added, "God is there with us, to give us strength and love."

According to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, religious organizations offer a logical arena for efforts at addressing and preventing it.

"Spiritual beliefs and practices tend to help people experience greater hope and meaning in their lives. Faith communities can also provide opportunities for developing positive relationships with others

and can be an important source of support during difficult times," according to the center's website.

In the sermon he preached at Sam Plank's packed memorial service, now available on the church website, Austin described the feelings prompted by clinical depression and urged listeners affected by it to seek him or others out for help.

"Sam's family wants you to know the truth because that is a gift that Sam can still give by having his story told. Don't refuse Sam's last gift," he said.

The sermon itself was so widely distributed, said Ellen Plank, that eventually Austin was asked to turn it into a column for *USA Today*.

"What is God doing in the midst of all this?" Austin asked his listeners at the service. "First, God's heart was the first one to break when Sam died. And second, God has already made sure that illness and death do not get the last word in Sam's story. God has already made sure that this is not the ending to Sam's good beginning; that Sam's story does not end with grief, but with grace; not in darkness, but in the brightness of God's light." **NFJ**



Ellen Plank, grandmother of Sam Plank, at First Presbyterian Church of West Chester, Pa. RNS photo by Elizabeth Evans

Oneness in Christ

Daynette Snead helps churches cross cultural boundaries faithfully

BY RICK JORDAN

Daynette Snead is a force! Her call, character and confidence exude when she enters a room.

Daynette serves in multiple ministry roles including pastor of community outreach with First Chin Baptist Church of New Bern, N.C., and directing Diaspra that serves churches “to develop, embrace and execute platforms for community outreach and missional success towards diversity/inclusion.”

Also, she is a local disaster response coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) and serves on the racial reconciliation ministry team for CBF of North Carolina. Rick Jordan, church resources coordinator for CBFNC, asked Daynette about her varied ministry engagements.

RJ: How has God called and equipped you for your ministry?

DS: In 2011, God called me to ministry. As an entrepreneurial businesswoman, I felt inadequate to fill this calling.

In obedience to God, I understand my call to reach others for Christ and completed a Master of Divinity at Regent University in 2015 and a Doctor of Ministry from Gardner-Webb University this year.

The heart of my ministry is helping churches and church leadership embrace diversity and inclusion. Solutions to oneness in Christ begin first by understanding that cultural boundaries are man-made creations. While preserving our traditions, they also limit our oneness in Christ.

RJ: Most churches remain homogeneous, regardless of their ethnic background. You want to address that?

DS: The division is not in our genes but in the systems we embrace within our

individual cultures: family traditions, social expectations, and even worship and preaching styles are all examples of cultural divides to explore.

Crossing boundaries is how God uniquely designed my purpose and ministry. God is providing me opportunities to serve people in many cultures.

Through my ministry, God helps churches faced with opportunities for outreach, including growing immigrant populations, extended lifetimes, diverse ethnicities and widening societal gaps.

RJ: I sense there is a mission statement coming.

DS: Yes! My personal ministry mission is to serve communities seeking to make Christ known through belongingness, intercultural ministry, Christ-centered solutions and intentional discipleship outreach across cultural boundaries of ethnicity, gender, generation and class.

RJ: How did God prepare you for your ministry?

DS: Navigating culture and ethnicity became foundational building blocks in God’s plan to prepare me for this calling; to grow God’s kingdom beyond human boundaries.

My original “ideal” in ministry was — and is — to serve a variety of churches seeking oneness and discipleship in community across cultural boundaries. My training for ministry was planted during my years as an entrepreneurial businesswoman.

RJ: You are an African-American woman serving a church of refugees from Myanmar. How did that happen?

DS: I was a member of First Baptist of New Bern, where we enjoyed a faith partnership with a refugee congregation, First Chin

Baptist Church. When God led the refugee congregation into their own church facility, I was called to join them, actualizing both my mission and calling in intercultural ministry.

God led me to navigate another culture without knowledge of the language or culture. The refugee community accepted me to serve as associate pastor. Rev. Vanbawi Ven’s willingness to honor Christ and embrace me as pastor of community outreach speaks to the readiness of this leader and a congregation in understanding that inclusion is about change.

Each week my Hakha Chin vocabulary and cultural understanding are growing, and the obstacles I questioned are calmed by a loving congregation.

RJ: Were you ordained?

DS: Yes, I was the first woman of color to be ordained at First Baptist, New Bern. The ordination was a multi-cultural worship celebration honoring both cultures and sealed my call to intercultural ministry.

RJ: What are your roles at First Chin?

DS: In addition to my pastoral duties (preaching, teaching, etc.) I assist the congregation in accessing help for legal, domestic and social concerns.

RJ: How did you become connected with disaster relief ministry?

DS: I was contacted by CBF disaster relief coordinators Alan Williams and Rick Burnette, who learned I was a pastor at First Chin Baptist Church. It was shortly after their visit to New Bern that I accepted the position to serve as a local disaster response coordinator for the New Bern/Trenton area.

RJ: What did you do after the hurricanes, and what is happening now?

DS: To date, I have managed over 3,062 volunteer hours with 239 disaster response volunteers from CBF member churches from Georgia, Kentucky and North Carolina.

Before teams arrive I try to match skill levels to ministry sites, coordinate the ministry sites for teams, determine construction materials needed to complete the service time, ensure materials are paid for, and coordinate delivery of the materials to the home being served.

I am very grateful for the many persons who have generously volunteered construction expertise which have made our efforts successful. The teams have completed tasks from cleaning up flooded yards, new construction repairs and offering meals.

CBF Disaster Response efforts have been successful in helping families move toward recovery since last September.

In addition, CBF received an \$80,000 World Relief Grant for refugees in the New Bern area. I coordinate distribution of the funds through seven Myanmar congregations in New Bern. This grant provided funds to refugees for post-hurricane emergencies, auto and housing repairs, and counseling.

Lastly, I coordinate a pastor peer group in the Trenton, N.C., area to serve pastors with congregational trauma-induced care. The group meets every six weeks. As a response to Hurricane Florence, the pastor peer group has provided a supportive community with ministry leaders.

RJ: You are on the CBFNC Racial Reconciliation Ministry Team. What are your hopes for that team's work?

DS: Currently, we are engaged with the Racial Equity Institute, which educates leaders on systematic inequities in American society dating back to the 1700s. Our current goal is the completion of this training by 100 CBFNC leaders before the 2020 annual gathering.

We are well on the way. If churches are to embrace the whole body of Christ across ethnic boundaries, we must first understand privilege and systematic inequities before we can resolve issues of injustice in society today.



“Cultural boundaries are man-made creations. While preserving our traditions, they also limit our oneness in Christ.”

RJ: What is most challenging in ministry for you?

DS: The most challenging thing in ministry is convincing church leadership in homogeneous Christian communities to mentally and physically open doors with intentional actions actualizing diversity, inclusion and intercultural ministry. While the path is different for each community of Christ, we always begin with biblical understanding.

RJ: What advice would you give to a person considering ministry as a vocation?

DS: We can become too comfortable in the pews on Sunday morning. I would encourage anyone who is considering ministry as a vocation to seek discomfort in your ministry, reach outside your comfort zone, and intentionally embrace the wideness of God. Then, lead with the strengths you have received from God. **NFJ**

So now we know?

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

We are all familiar with the biblical story about how God rained down fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah, cities known for their cruel treatment of visitors.

The story is told in Genesis 19. Because of the citizens' wickedness, according to the story, God sent two angels into Sodom to warn Abraham's nephew Lot to take his family and get out of town before things heated up.

Lot is portrayed as a respected man in the city, since he was sitting at the gate where the elders gather when the strangers arrived. Thinking they were ordinary travelers, Lot invited the angels to lodge at his home, offering the kind of compassionate hospitality that his uncle Abraham had shown them in the previous chapter.

Then, in a story replete with hyperbole, all the men of the city surrounded Lot's house: "both young and old, all the people to the last man." They demanded that Lot turn over his guests so they could shame and disrespect the strangers by raping them — an ancient custom that was all about brutality and had nothing to do with homosexuality.

When Lot refused, the angels opened the door and blinded the men of the city before hustling Lot, his daughters, and his wife out of town.

Then, BOOM. Fire and brimstone and cities lying in total ruin.

Why mention this? Last November, archaeologists and scientists working at Tel el-Hammam in Jordan presented findings to the American Schools of Oriental Research meeting in Denver. The reports described evidence of an astrophysical event that may underlie the traditions preserved in the story of Sodom's destruction.

Tel el-Hammam, which some (but



Sodom and Gomorrah Afire, c. 1680. Jacob Jacobsz de Wet II, Wikimedia Commons

not all) archaeologists identify as ancient Sodom, was a major city in the ancient world, rivaling Jericho for its antiquity and boasting massive walls, gates and towers.

The city was occupied without interruption for thousands of years and was a major city-state during the Middle Bronze Age — the general time period when Abraham would have been around. Lead archaeologist Stephen Collins says the walls had been expanded by then to as much as 100 feet wide and 50 feet tall.

That was a sizeable city — until it wasn't. The city was suddenly and totally destroyed around 1650 BCE, and not just that city but everything around it for miles and miles. The destruction was so total that the area remained deserted for the next 600–700 years.

A roughly circular area surrounding Tel el-Hammam, about 15 miles across, is just north and east of the Dead Sea. It was known as the "Kikkar" or the "Middle Ghor," and during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages it was a particularly fertile and well-watered area due to natural springs, dependable rainfall, and seasonal flooding by the Jordan River, which brought new nutrients along with water.

When Abraham and Lot's flocks became crowded, Lot had chosen to move to that place because "the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the

garden of the LORD" (Gen. 13:10).

After 1650, the land became sterile and unable to grow any crops.

The area's destruction appears to have been caused by a meteor that exploded in the air, causing a massive shock wave that flattened everything beneath it, melted rocks together, turned some pottery into glass, and kicked up so much water and vapor from the Dead Sea that the region was showered with enough salt to make the ground 6 percent saline — way too much for wheat or barley to germinate. Nearly 200 square miles of arable land became useless and was abandoned for centuries.

Something similar happened in Tungusku, Siberia, back in 1908, and as recently as 2013 over Chelyabinsk, in southwestern Russia.

Scientists working with the archaeologists examined soil samples and discovered several similarities to the Tungusku and Chelyabinsk events. These included high platinum content, a high incidence of magnetic spherules, high levels of sulfates and salts, and "scoria-like objects" of melted silica.

According to an article at phys.org, researchers concluded that the airburst had the power of a 10-kiloton nuclear warhead when it exploded in the air about two-thirds of a mile northwest of the Dead Sea.

The shock wave would have had immense heat, kicking up all kinds of material from the ground, which would then fall (some of it flaming?) back to earth.

That's a lot of fire and brimstone — and as good an explanation as any for the tradition that arose concerning the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The biblical account gives the event a theological interpretation that suggests the meteor in question was a blazing fastball thrown by God. Whatever the cause, it took only one strike to get a big-time out. **NFJ**

Imposing our agenda on Jesus

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The harsh reality is that many who profess to be Christian hold a higher allegiance than to Christ. It is to a social ideology based on a highly selective manipulation of the Bible that downplays or ignores the life and teachings of Jesus.

This so-called “biblical worldview” actually turns holy writ into a twisted excuse for advocating for causes of self-preservation that produce and excuse injustice and the demeaning of many who are created in the image of God.

Recently, I was struck by the words (shared by a friend on social media) from John Dominic Crossan (*How To Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*): “Christ does not read the Bible, the New Testament, or the Gospel. He is the norm of the Bible, the criterion of the New Testament, the incarnation of the Gospel. That is how we Christians decide between a violent and nonviolent God...”

Imposing one’s so-called “biblical” views on Jesus has the order completely reversed, and the result is most damaging to the causes of Christ.

Therefore, the church has no greater challenge today than to rediscover Jesus as both savior and lord — the priority for

risky-loving, self-giving living that makes one humble and vulnerable.

The mistake many of us have made in seeking to counter this growing problem is to argue politics with politics or theology with theology. But the bigger issue is that Jesus is largely missing from American evangelicalism.

It is a matter of misplaced priorities that produce a false witness.

Often Jesus is received as savior of one’s soul but rejected as the lord of one’s life. Something has to be done about that.

It is staggering to imagine that “Christians” keep finding preferred priorities and ideologies to the way of Christ. But then Jesus said his way was narrow and hard.

It’s much easier to regurgitate the ugly words and thoughtless ideas of some loudmouthed political pundit or self-serving preacher than to extend grace and mercy across well-guarded social lines — knowing that such behaviors can lead to a cross.

As a result, much of American Christianity today is simply the advancement of a vaguely “biblical” political agenda that seeks to preserve one’s social comforts and influence at the expense of Christ himself.

Christ needs to be resurrected again. **NFJ**



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Questions Christians ask scientists

Do you think extraterrestrial life is out there, and if so, what is its theological significance? — MAXINE WILLIAMS, ATLANTA, GA.

Editor's note: This column was first published in July/August 2017.

The Christian tradition doesn't say much about extraterrestrial life. Well, actually, it says nothing at all about it.

But our faith does tell us about God, and one of God's attributes is creativity. It is in the nature of God to be endlessly inventive when it comes to life.

Genesis 1–3, Psalm 104, Job 38–41, and other passages describe the works of an innovative, imaginative, ingenious, and indefatigable Creator.

The author of Genesis is clear about the deliberate care God takes with the fish of the sea and beasts of the land. The psalmist overflows with praise in the presence of God's creations: the lion, the hyrax, the cedar, the stork.

Job is taken on a cosmic tour during which God praises the deer, the eagle, the vulture and the mountain goat, among other odd and remote creatures. Throughout scripture the living world provides evidence of God's creative nature.

Today we know more about the Earth's biodiversity than we did when the Bible was written. Even though there is much more for us to learn, we are sure of this: life is everywhere it can be. It thrives in the deepest trenches of the oceans and on the highest mountaintops and at the outer extremes of temperature and humidity.

In 2013 scientists reported that bacteria were found living a half-mile under the Antarctic ice. Life has also been found thousands of feet below the ocean floor,

BY PAUL WALLACE

itself 8,500 feet deep, off the northwestern coast of the United States.

Some creatures are miracles of hardiness. Tiny animals called tardigrades can withstand temperatures from -458 to $+300^{\circ}\text{F}$, radiation hundreds of times more intense than the lethal dose for humans, and the vacuum of outer space.

And there's more: "[Tardigrades] can go without food or water for more than 30 years, drying out to the point where they are 3 percent or less water, only to rehydrate, forage, and reproduce," says Wikipedia. They like moss and lichen a lot but live nearly everywhere, from the peaks of mountains to the floor of the sea, in deserts, in rainforests, on volcanoes, in Antarctica.

Tardigrades are just one example. Earth is wholly saturated with life: there are at least 10,000 bird species; 6,000 red algae species; 15,000 moss species; a million insect species; and the list goes on and on.

Life shows up and persists and diversifies everywhere it can. This is divine creativity, praised in scripture and revealed in the world around us: gratuitous, generous, extravagant, overflowing.

It seems that, given the endless forms of life with which God has blessed and filled every corner and fold of our home planet, the same rule might apply to the cosmos itself: out among the stars, perhaps life is everywhere it can be. Perhaps God's

creativity demands it.

So, is life really out there, intelligent or not?

We've been working on this question for decades. For many years this work was largely a hunt for radio communications from outer space, but recently it has focused on finding planets orbiting stars other than the sun. Thanks to the success of this effort, the search for extraterrestrial life is in a kind of golden age today.

When I first took astronomy in 1987 there were no planets known to exist outside our solar system, and by the time I started teaching the subject in 1997 we knew of only three such planets. Many more of these bodies, known as extrasolar planets or exoplanets, have been discovered in the decades since.

As I write there are 3,483 confirmed exoplanets and 4,496 exoplanet candidates. The study of these planets might give us clues about the origin, evolution, and fate of our own planet and solar system. But the true driver behind exoplanet research is the question: Are we alone?

Planets are important because not even tardigrades can survive for too long on a star or in outer space. Life as we know it requires liquid water, which can only exist in regions close to stars (so the water won't freeze) but not too close (so the water won't vaporize).

Planets like the earth, where water can exist as a liquid, are, we believe, the best possible candidate sites for life, and perhaps the only possible sites. Hence the great interest in studying exoplanets.

All of these thousands of exoplanets and exoplanet candidates are nearby, at least when measured on the scale of the Milky Way, our home galaxy. Current technol-



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ogy simply can't detect planets beyond our stellar neighborhood.

But if we assume that our neighborhood is not unusually rich in planets, and we have no reason to believe that it is, there must be at least 100 billion planets in the Milky Way alone. (And the Milky Way is only one of hundreds of billions of galaxies in the visible universe.)

With such an incomprehensibly vast number of planets to choose from, and keeping in mind God's apparent tendency to squeeze life into every possible cranny and fold, it is difficult to not believe that there's some kind of life out there, even intelligent life.

But if intelligent life is out there, we don't know about it, and that's odd.

Enrico Fermi, one of the great physicists of the 20th century, is known for many things: he developed the first nuclear reactor, worked on the Manhattan Project, and did important work in several branches of theoretical physics. But he is most widely known for the so-called "Fermi Paradox."

This paradox is simply stated: If life is

common in the galaxy, where is everybody? His argument is that if the galaxy hosts an abundance of life, we would know it.

If even one civilization had a million-year headstart on us — the briefest of times, cosmically speaking — then it should have colonized the Milky Way by now, and its presence would be obvious. But we have zero evidence for life, much less intelligent life, beyond our own fair planet.

So we have good reasons for thinking ET is out there, and good reasons for thinking it's not.

Which is it? Both possibilities are interesting, but only the former seems to challenge traditional Christian beliefs. The Bible was written, and Christianity was developed, under the assumption that human beings were the only intelligent corporeal beings in the cosmos. If this is not true then all kinds of questions follow.

For example, Genesis 3 says that somehow, some way, humanity has been wounded. Some call Adam and Eve's disobedience a crisis of pride, some call it a fall, some call it a coming of age. Whatever it

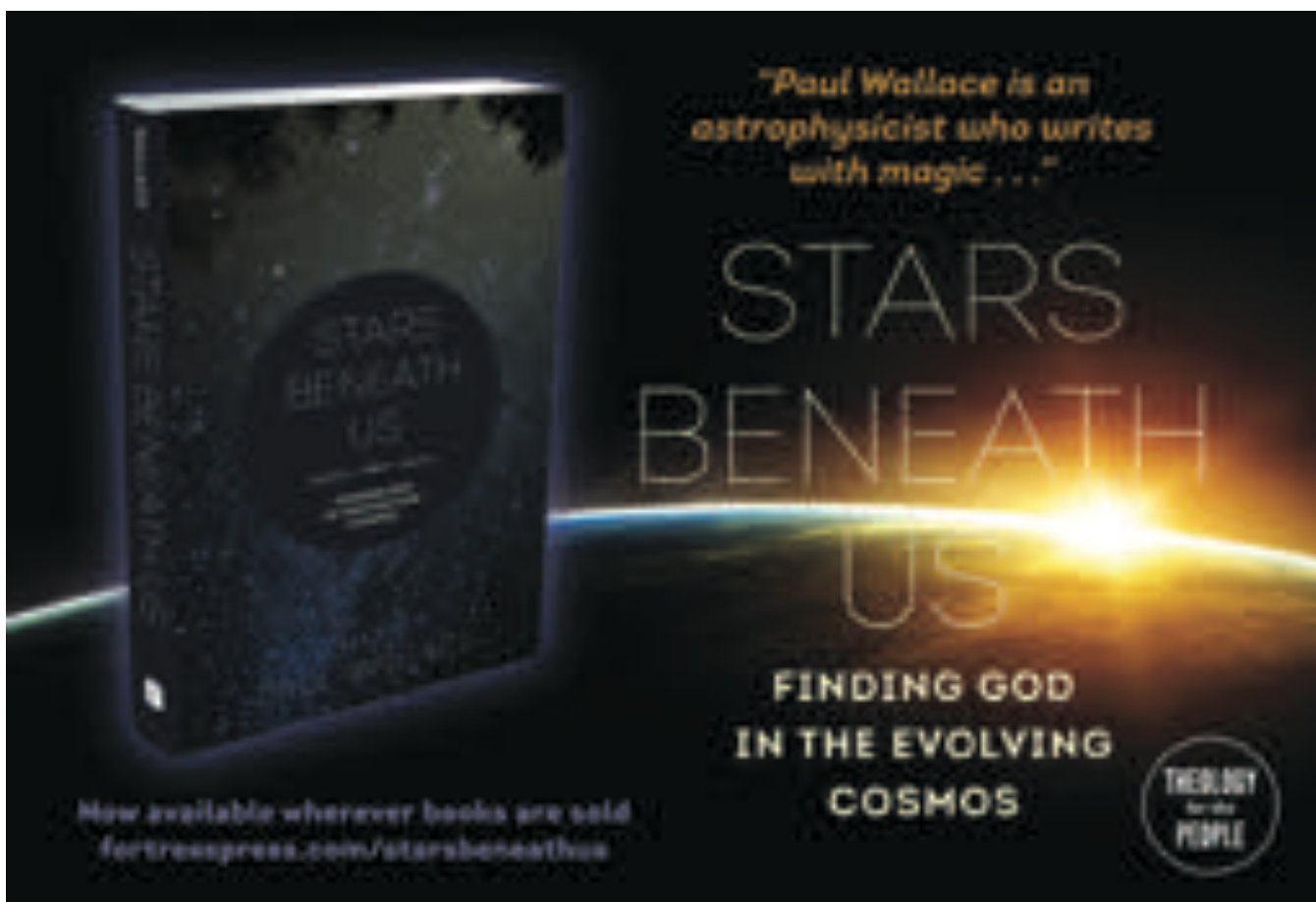
was, our eyes were opened. We saw our own nakedness and felt shame for the first time. We were wounded, changed forever.

This change is manifested (at least partly) in alienation from one another and from God and from creation. The incarnation of God in Jesus is a divine response to that problem, a way of reconciling us to one another, to God, and to creation, of drawing us back into communion. Jesus is God's way of healing our wounds.

So if extraterrestrial intelligence is out there we may fairly ask: Has ET been wounded? Is ET in need of God to become incarnate on its behalf? Is there a space alien equivalent of Jesus out there somewhere? And if ET has not been wounded, how have they avoided it?

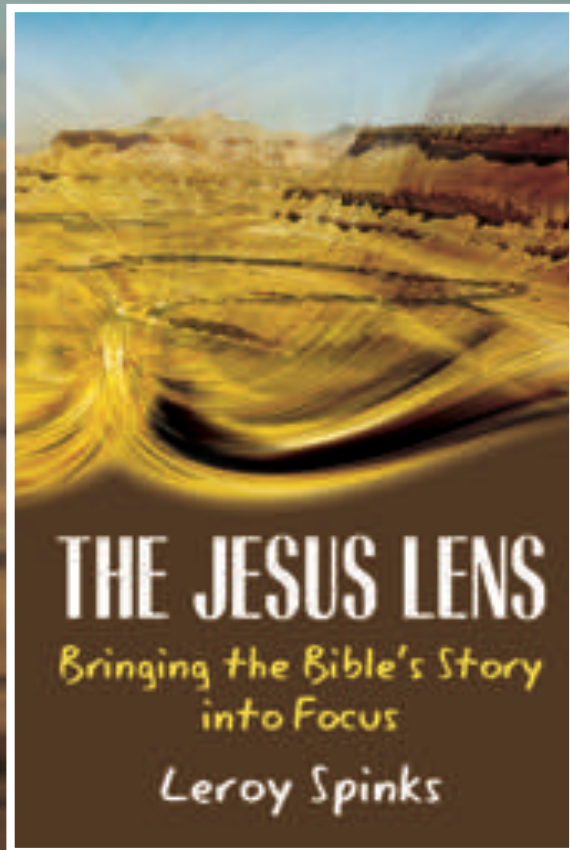
This is just one avenue of theological discussion that opens up when extraterrestrial life is taken seriously. And we as Christians should take it seriously.

Our God, after all, does not seem modest when it comes to the making of living things down here on Earth. And who are we to put limits on divine creativity? **NFJ**



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